REFRAMING THE NATION THROUGH A FEMALE DIASPORIC LENS: A STUDY OF THE SELECT FILMS OF MIRA NAIR AND DEEPA MEHTA

Thesis Submitted to the University of Calicut for the Award of the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in English Language and Literature

By

JEEJA GANGA

Research Supervisor

Dr. Anila Joseph, Retd. Head of the Dept. and Associate Professor of English

PG Department of English and Research Centre, Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur

Co-guide

Dr. Joycee O. J., Head of the Dept. and Associate Professor of English

PG Department of English and Research Centre, Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur

PG Department of English and Research Centre

Vimala College (Autonomous), Thrissur

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Declaration

I, Jeeja Ganga, hereby declare that the thesis titled “Reframing the Nation through a Female Diasporic Lens: A Study of the Select Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta” is a work of bona fide research carried out by me under the supervision and guidance of Dr. Anila Joseph and co-guidance of Dr. Joycee O. J. and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Place: Thrissur Jeeja Ganga

Date: 28-05-2018

Certificate

This is to certify that the thesis titled “Reframing the Nation through a Female Diasporic Lens: A Study of the Select Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta” submitted to the University of Calicut for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is a work of bona fide research carried out by Ms. Jeeja Ganga under our supervision and guidance and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, fellowship or any other similar title or recognition.

Dr. Anila Joseph

Research Supervisor

Dr. Joycee O. J.

Co-Guide

Place: Thrissur

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This is to certify that the board of adjudicators who evaluated the Ph D thesis titled "Reframing the Nation through a Female Diasporic Lens: A Study of the Select Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta" by Ms Jeeja Ganga, Research Scholar, PG Dept. of English and Research Centre, Vimala College, Thrissur has made no suggestions for revision or correction of the same. The thesis is therefore being submitted in its original version and format, without any change or revision.

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Dr. Anila Joseph

Research Supervisor

Thrissur,

Date: 20/02/2019

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Abbreviations Used

DDLJ	*Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*
HAHK	*Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*
MW	*Monsoon Wedding*
SB	*Salaam Bombay!*
Trilogy	*Elements Trilogy*

Contents

Preface

We need to think beyond the nation.

(Appadurai, *Modernity* 158)

The nation, which is an entity with the power of permeating and influencing individual lives, stirring up passion and creating upheavals, has inevitably become a part of our everyday consciousness and parlance. Though nation, nationality and nationalism are all important milestones in the progress of humanity and have contributed positively to human well being, we should not lose sight of the fact that these forces can assume dangerous proportions when they become rigid and monolithic entities that repress human lives.

The thesis *Reframing the Nation through a Female Daisporic Lens: A Study of the Select Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta*, is an attempt at eliciting the refractions and divergent possibilities of the nation when viewed through the composite and amalgamated lens of female diasporic cinema. The study condemns the repression that nations and nationalisms with rigid, monolithic attributes are capable of and advocates a more open and democratic approach that is evident in the conception of the cinematic nations of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta.

As the title suggests, the thesis in itself is an amalgamation of different entities and concepts – the nation, women, diaspora, cinema and the act of reframing or reconstituting. The chapters of the thesis attempt to do justice to the various aspects that constitute the title and theme of the thesis and at the same time strive to bring about a composite effect.

Chapter One, the introduction, places the nation in its theoretical moorings and examines the role of national cinema in imagining the nation into being. The specificities and peculiarities of India and its national cinema, Bollywood are contextualized, followed by a

brief study of how the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta disturb the national imaginings of cinema.

Chapter Two, titled “A Female Diasporic Reframing”, analyzes the analogous relationship between women and diaspora to the nation and makes a short survey of the features of women’s cinema and diasporic cinema, trying to identify the areas of convergence and amalgamation in them.

Chapter Three, “In a Frame: the Marginal and the Impure,” with the aim of countering the penchant for purity and elitism entertained by the nation and its cinema, studies select films of Mira Nair to find out how the nation’s margins and the nation’s impure are brought to the centre of cinematic focus in them.

Chapter Four, “Rigid Nationalisms, Everyday Transgressions” explores the select films of Deepa Mehta to make the point that everyday acts and the mundane realities in the lives of common folk and subjects of the nation have the potential to transgress the rigidity of nations and nationalisms.

Chapter Five, which is the conclusion, juxtaposes the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, analyzing them against the features of mainstream national cinema to identify points of convergence and divergence to make valid conclusions as to the reframing of the nation that happens in them.

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Dr. Anila Joseph

Research Supervisor

Thrissur,

Date: 20/02/2019

Chapter 1

Introduction

The Nation: A Theoretical Framing

Human life has always been organized around, patterned and determined by certain cultural systems and socio-political institutions. Religious community and the "dynastic realm" are two such institutions or cultural systems that have had an impact on human life in the ancient times (Anderson, *Imagined* 7). Nation and nationalism, which originated around the eighteenth century in Europe when the power of religion and dynasty started eroding in the wake of Enlightenment and rationalist secularism, have since then exerted a substantial role in shaping and determining human life and destiny (11) . Though nation and nationalism originated in Europe and the Western parts of the world, they spread to the non-Western parts too in the beginning of the twentieth century and are now endemic all over the globe and have an all-pervasive and deeply entrenched influence on the life of mankind. An analysis of the impact of nation, nationhood and nationalism on human life is imperative as they are not far-fetched or remote entities but forces that have a direct bearing on the fortunes and everyday realities of ordinary people.

The first step in this endeavour would be a study of how nationhood has been defined and constituted through various media from the past and how such a definition and constitution continues even today. Benedict Anderson's book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* has a pivotal role to play in any discussion of the concept of the nation. Anderson's proposition that the nation was *imagined* through the medium of print, especially through novels and newspapers and that a sense of solidarity or feeling of simultaneity was created among

fellow readers who were otherwise widely disparate and strangers to each other (*Imagined* 6-25) has not lost its significance in the post-national and globalized world. Though he was referring to the early stirrings in the life of post- enlightenment nations, when religion, language and dynasty were losing their adhesive power over communities and though in contemporary times there has been a transition to newer media like cinema and internet from the older version of the print media, his proposition about the *invented* solidarity and communion that go into the making of the nation is still valid.

Despite travel, migration and media redefining and redrawing the rigid contours of the nation and talks about the demise of the nation being rampant in current times, the theory about the abstract quality of the nation that is imagined and thought into being and which needs props and media for its existence still stands good. Apart from Anderson, many other thinkers and writers on nationalism have conceived of the nation as a *construct* of the mind. Homi Bhabha's reflection that "[n]ations like narratives lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize the horizons in the mind's eye" (*Nation* 1) is a re-affirmation of Anderson's view. So is Gellner's observation in *Nations and Nationalism,* that nationalism "invents nations where they do not exist" (55-56). Arjun Appadurai consolidates the views of various thinkers when he says that citizens "*imagine* themselves to belong to a national society" through the collective experiences of "print capitalism" and "electronic capitalism," (*Modernity* 161). Appadurai makes it clear that the nation-state is more a "quintessential cultural product, a product of the collective imagination" than a product of natural facts like language, blood, soil, and race (161). The nation that is thus conceived in the mind and imagination of the people needs the aid of media, both print and electronic, for its perpetuation. The present study looks at how nation and

nationhood are conceived and perpetuated or refuted and reframed in the cinematic medium, which necessitates an analysis of the core ideas of nation and nationhood and their relation to cinema.

Central to Anderson's conception of the imagined community and the imagining of the nation by various media is the creation of a sense of "simultaneity" in homogenous empty time, a condition that was facilitated in the earlier days of nation formation by the means of the news paper and the novel (Anderson, *Imagined* 23-24). Every morning the nation was witness to the "extraordinary mass ceremony" of the "simultaneous consumption ('imagining') of the news-paper-as-fiction" (35). Though this act, which was a kind of "substitute for morning prayers," was performed in "silent privacy," the performer was confident that it was being replicated simultaneously by thousands or millions of other anonymous people (35). The simultaneity and communion that print media could bring about in the initial phases of the origin of the nation is carried on today by novel electronic and digital media like cinema and the internet, in which are also inherent the qualities of privacy or anonymity and simultaneity. For instance, a person watching a film in the darkness of the theatre or in the privacy of his/her home also experiences both a sense of simultaneity or feeling of oneness with others watching the movie either in the same theatre/home or elsewhere and the anonymity or secrecy afforded by the darkness of the theatre or the privacy of his/her house. Since cinema now plays the same role that newspapers once did in the invention and perpetuation of the national sentiment, cinema's transaction of the idea of the nation and nationhood, the ideologies underlying such a transaction and the disruptions brought about in the simultaneity, synchronization and homogeneity that both nationhood and media create are points that merit serious pondering.

Any study of the construction or deconstruction of the nation in the medium of cinema has first to take into consideration the various aspects that go into the making of the nation. A brief survey of some theories and writings on the nation will be helpful in this regard. French historian Ernest Renan's definition of the nation in his 1882 lecture, "What is a nation?" is pertinent here as it throws light on the important attributes of the nation in a succinct way and provides the scholar with a comprehensive view of the same:

> A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage one has received in an undivided form…. A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those one is prepared to make in the future… [I]t is summarized, however in the present by a tangible fact, namely, consent, the clearly expressed desire to continue a common life. (19)

The first point that stands out in the definition is the spiritual quality of the nation as against its materiality. The second aspect to be noted is the role of the past and collective memory in constituting the nation. The role of memory in constituting the nation further underlines the abstract and imaginary quality of the nation since the fluidity of memory is analogous to the variability and flexibility of the imaginary, thereby making the past that the nation draws on to build its present a very malleable one. Another key element in the creation of the nation is variously described in Renan's words as the *will*, *desire* or *consent* to continue a common life and the

sacrifices to be made in this connection. All the factors mentioned by Renan -- the past that the nation draws on to construct itself in the present, the act of memory or selective memory that is resorted to for such a construction, the desire, will or consent to conceive and perpetuate the nation and the sacrifice or enforcement that is involved in the constitution of the nation – have a direct bearing on the everyday lives of people residing within the nation and the stories of its citizenry portrayed in various media including cinema. Aspects of the nation mentioned by Renan in his definition form the basis on which the study of the *reframing* of the nation in the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta will be made.

Given that the ancient past is the repository from which nations draw and that memories of the ancient past are instrumental in constituting the nation and that the conception and perpetuation of the nation is primarily facilitated by the recreation of "a sentiment of wholeness and continuity" with the past (Eriksen 105), it is essential to begin our investigations on the nation by considering its relation to the past. If the alienation and rupture caused due to the loss of agrarian roots at the coming of industrialization and modernization was an important reason for re-inventing the past in the Western world, in most other parts of the world, the recreation of the past and the development of a sense of pride in it were done to whip up national sentiments for overthrowing the colonial rule. *Re-invention* is a key word here as the nation's past and its ancient culture are not presented as they are, but are re-worked and manipulated upon to serve the present needs and the ideologies of those who are involved in the formation and perpetuation of the nation. Ernest Gellner exposes the agenda of re-invention that is inherent in the task of nation formation – a re-invention that uses ancient cultural forms and historical facts in a very selective way and a cultural revival wherein these cultural facts are radically transformed (*Nations and*

Nationalisms 56). The reinvention of the past, the selective use of history and the fabrication of suitable traditions and customs are some of the ways by which nations constitute themselves and continue to exist.

Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented traditions" introduced in the book *The Invention of Tradition*, co-authored with Terence Ranger and published in 1983, the same year as Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* came out, highlights the fabricated nature of the symbols, rituals and traditions that go into the making of the nation and shows how traditions, in spite of their claim to antiquity, are "quite recent in origin and sometimes invented" (1). Hobsbawm defines invented traditions as "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seeks to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1). The concept of invented tradition serves to deconstruct the argument that nation and national symbols are natural or organic entities "rooted in the remotest antiquity" (14). It reveals the concocted character of what is passed as the nation's authentic past and culture and highlights the importance of the repetition of norms and patterns of behavior that gain symbolic and ritualistic significance and an elevation to the status of rules. These values, norms, patterns and rules, with their roots in the past, have an all-pervasive influence on the everyday lives of the people of the nation and seeps into and shapes artistic and creative endeavours like literature and cinema.

If the past is the repository from which the nation draws, culture is the foundation on which the national edifice is imagined. Culture plays a crucial role in demarcating one nation from another, thereby making it imperative to keep a particular nation's culture pure and intact. The first step in this direction is the

homogenization of culture which amounts to the imposing of certain elite standards of culture on citizens and the marginalization of forms that fall below the elite standards. The state is used for bringing about the cultural unification of a group of people who are dissimilar in many significant variables including those of class, race, religion and region. Nations sustain themselves by resorting to an erasure of differences and by upholding the principle of homogeneity. Gellner, in *Nations and Nationalism*, points out two agents or catalysts that are instrumental in the formation and maintenance of groups – will, loyalty or solidarity on the one hand and fear, compulsion or coercion on the other (53). Both these agents are used in varying proportions in the formation and maintenance of the nation, but very often, we see compulsion and coercion gaining the upper hand. Renan speaks of the *violence* and *brutality* underlying all political formations and the nation, which is one such political formation, acts as a moral conscience "demand[ing] the abdication of the individual will to the advantage of the community" (Renan 20).

The factors that go into the formation and sustenance of the nation – inventiveness and imagination, community feeling and solidarity, recourse to past memories, homogenization of culture, compulsion and coercion and the dominance of community interests over individual will and preferences – all influence, in varying degrees, the lives of the people of the nation. They are also reflected in national cinema, a cinema that embraces and reflects these nationalistic tendencies and ideologies and pays allegiance to the institutions and entities cherished by the nation like family, marriage, religion, culture, traditional values, rituals and ceremonies. Working from the presumption that Hindi cinema, currently designated as Bollywood cinema, is the national cinema of India, the thesis titled "Reframing the Nation through a Female Diasporic Lens: A Study of the Select Films of Mira Nair and Deepa

Mehta" probes into how the female diasporic cinema of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta brings about a reframing of the nation. The study is concerned more with the banal aspects of nationalism which are present in subtle and naturalized ways in the everyday lives and realities of the citizenry and scrutinizes how these banal, everyday aspects of nationalism that surface in cinema are reframed from a female diasporic perspective.

Since the focus of the study is on the micro aspects of nationalism, Michael Billig's discussion of the impact and reach of nationalism in the everyday lives of the citizenry has special significance. Billig, in his book *Banal Nationalism*, debunks the notion that national ideologies and behavioral patterns are domains only of extreme right-wing politics and radical groups and that nationalism is a phenomenon that strikes the nation only on special occasions like a national day or war (5). If the usual practice was to restrict nationalism to the "exotic and passionate" and overlook its "routine and familiar forms" (8), Billig's concept of banal nationalism stretches nationalism to accommodate its "daily reproduction…[as] a whole complex of beliefs, assumptions, habits, representations and practices" that are reproduced in the lives of citizens in banal and mundane ways (6). The expression *banal nationalism* indicates the routine enacting or *flagging* of nationalism in the life of the citizenry, thereby making it an "endemic condition" (Billig 6). The most effective way in which homogeneity seeps into and prevails in the life of citizenry, according to Jyoti Puri, is through the "lived practice" of nationalism or through "banal quotidian aspects" which include the reproduction and representation of nationalism in aspects of everyday life through literature, film, social and familial norms and customs, matters of sexuality, sports events and nationalist rituals like hoisting the national flag or singing the national anthem (*Encountering* 67). Nationalism is a form of power that operates not

just in times of crisis but also at mundane moments by shaping beliefs and practices. It acts as the edifice on which our relations and social institutions are framed and is as powerful as factors like ethnicity, religion, sexuality, race or the family in regulating our social functioning and patterning. Or in other words, "nations and nationalisms are woven through the fabric of everyday life" (Puri, *Encountering* 210).

Banal nationalism or the routine creation of nationalism is facilitated by the aid of national symbols which are embedded in the practices of daily life and which play an important role in fostering a sense of collective identity. National symbols perform the important function of "fus[ing] the *nation*, as a cultural, historical, and ideological construct, to the *state* as an empirical reality" (Geisler 112) and giving "concrete meaning and visibility to the abstractions of nationalism" (Smith, *The Nation in History* 125). They include not only the usual things that enter the list like flags, anthems, parades, coinage, capital cities, museums, folklore or war memorials but also "those distinctive customs, mores, styles and ways of acting and feeling that are shared by the members of a community of historical culture" (Smith, *National Identity* 77). According to Michael E. Geisler, national symbols are invested with "intense affective energy" and have a sacred and hallowed place in the national psyche as they fill the "historical vacuum" created by religion. The intellectual elites who shaped the nation knew that the nationalist project would succeed only if it were "imbued with the same kind of spirituality that had hitherto been reserved" for religious symbols and therefore "adopted elements of religious symbolism, recombining them with the symbolic register of nationalism" (Geisler 115, 116). When religion lost its place as the most powerful ideological force and purveyor of collective identity in the secular world created by Enlightenment, science and Industrialization, its vacuum was filled in by a more "secular competitor", the nation. (Geisler 115). There is little wonder

then that the nation exerts the same power and grip over the masses as religion once did and nationalism is regarded as a "civil religion" of sorts (Bellah 1-21). The sacredness and reverence with which the nation and national symbols are held make their *reframing* in female diasporic cinema equivalent to acts of violation, desecration or blasphemy, acts that elicit condemnation by devotees and adherents of nation and nationalism.

Like nations and nationalisms, national symbols also are not natural or organic but entities that are invented and which are of a recent origin. More importantly, these symbols are also banal in nature, given their prevalence in everyday life. They are so prevalent in our mundane existence that we hardly notice them. Geisler uses the term "overdetermination" (120) to express the level of banality that is brought about by the redundant and repetitious expression of the same ideas and values by public and cultural institutions, thereby creating an all-encompassing network of signification in which all members of a community are implicated. National symbols and ideologies are reinforced and repeated by schools, movies, newspapers, statements made by politicians, religious preachers and so on thereby creating a cumulative effect (Geisler 120-21). As a result of "overdetermination", national symbols "persuade us to accept the ideological, social, economic, and political realities of the state in which the 'accident of birth' has placed us as the only possible order…. and the only 'natural' way of life" (Geisler 121). National symbols have become so much a part of our lives and of national cinema that we take them for granted. The thesis engages in the task of unearthing the cultural referents and national symbols embedded in the quotidian and everyday aspects of the life of citizens as reflected in cinema. This involves a probe for such symbols and referents -- either in their altered or reframed form or in their unaltered and uncorrupt form -- in quotidian domains like marriage and family life,

religious practices, caste and class divisions, gender hierarchies and norms of sexuality.

The intrusion of nationalism and its values and ideologies into the realm of the common man's everyday existence is all the more grave and dangerous given that these values and ideologies can be "institutionally exercised" (Puri, *Encountering* 9). We increasingly witness how the elite ideologies of nation and nationalism determine and define people who rightfully belong to the nation and who do not and stir strong feelings against those who do not conform to its criteria:

> That nationalism can move people to act in certain ways, give pleasure, fuel retribution against others, create and enforce social laws, govern who has the right to enter and exit national boundaries and who is entitled to the benefits of citizenship, gives us some measure of the expansive scope of nationalism spanning interpersonal and institutional realms. Its institutional forms lend force to the inequalities between individual people. (Puri, *Encountering* 9)

Since female diasporic filmmakers are marginalized individuals in the increasingly masculine and nationalistic world of mainstream commercial cinema, the thesis, among other things, traverses the lines of demarcation set by nation and nationhood and takes account of the people who dwell in the fringes or margins of nationhood and national discourse and of people who do not conform to the criteria set by the nation. The shift from an elite view to a more marginalized one is linked with the female diasporic auteur's altered or reframed perspective that vouches for a nation that is more expansive, inclusive and tolerant to deviation and difference.

The Indian Context: A Brief Historical Reading

Since the study centers on the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta who are prominent women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora and since the films selected for the study are set exclusively in India as against the other movies in the oeuvre of these filmmakers that have a transnational bearing and are set in foreign lands, it is essential to consider the peculiarities of nation and nationalism in the Indian context, including the historical ramifications of nation formation in India and the role of Indian cinema in consolidating and reinforcing the ideologies and values of the nation that were conceived during its formation and which persist to date. Historians differentiate between the circumstances of the origins and growth of nations in the West and nations in Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America and Africa. In the West, the framework of the nation existed even before the rise of nationalism in the eighteenth century and the nation only had to build up on this foundation or framework. The growth of Western nations was unplanned and spontaneous whereas in other parts of the world, the creation of nations was a more deliberate consequence of the rampant growth of strong feelings of nationalism that worked to counter colonial rule and power. In the words of Anthony D. Smith, "[t]he West acquired nations almost by accident; in other parts of the globe nations were created by design" (*National Identity* 100). We can therefore assume that national identity and characteristics varied from nation to nation depending on "the pre-existing local ethnic configuration" and "the nature and activities of the preceding political system and institutions" (Smith, *National Identity* 101). It is therefore crucial to consider in-depth, the historical background of nation formation and other specificities of the nation in the Indian context. The *design* that led to the birth of the nation in the Indian context was none other than the ouster of the colonial masters by forging a sense of oneness among the

people and by instilling pride in their unique culture and past.

The attributes of the nation postulated by the Western theoreticians already discussed in the previous section namely, the imagined quality, the investment on an ancient culture and its reinvention, the enforcement of homogeneity and an elite culture and the banal and endemic nature of nationalism, are all applicable in the case of India, a subcontinent with an area of 3,287,240 square kilo meters, a landscape that is highly variegated and a population that is endowed with a plethora of cultural, racial, linguistic and religious forms. This vastness and immense variety posed a challenge to the task of fostering a sense of unity and oneness in the subcontinent during colonial times. Pre-colonial India was a region that was only loosely connected or not connected at all and the conversion of this region into a nation was a difficult proposition. Investigating into the factors that led to the creation of India, Sunil Khilnani writes,

> For all its magnificent antiquity and historical depth, contemporary India is unequivocally a creation of the modern world. The fundamental agencies and ideas of modernity – European colonial expansion, the state, nationalism, democracy, economic development – all have shaped it. The possibility that India could be united into a single political community was the wager of India's modern, educated, urban elite…. It was a wager on *an idea: the idea of India*. (5; emphasis added)

In spite of the cultural binding that existed in the subcontinent from ancient times, India, the nation did not exist. It was the colonial rulers with their administrative and military technologies, their urgency to rule over a precise territory and their determination to initiate social reforms, who introduced the concept of the state in

India (Khilnani 20- 21). To be more explicit, "[i]t was the British interest in determining geographical boundaries that by an Act of Parliament in 1899 converted 'India' from the name of a cultural region into a precise, pink territory" (Khilnani 155).

Ironically, if in the first place, India was imagined, unified and formally accorded the status of nation as an expediency of colonial rule, later on such an invention and unification became inevitable for the evocation of nationalist sentiments to ouster that very colonial rule. The nationalist movement, which mostly comprised of the educated elite of India, was anxious to solve the "puzzle of India's unity and of Indianness" (Khilnani 153). The most crucial step in this direction was the writing of India's history by the educated class of people to counter the versions of British historians. The main aim of such historical fabrication was "to reverse the presumptions of their masters' historical voice, to dispute its validity, and to substitute their own stories, which recounted the adventures of a common 'we'" (Khilnani 159). Interestingly, many intellectuals actively took to *writing* India's history which sometimes was a highly fabricated and fantastic one: "This quandary – the tantalizing possibility of a principle of unity but its evident empirical lack – led some to summon up a common historical past through explicit fantasy" (Khilnani 157). The fact that India's educated class consciously took to writing India's history in order to unite the disparate elements that existed here is a pointer to the role of fabrication, fantasy and personal versions in a nation's construction. Such subjective writings, narrations and imaginings of the nation are carried on even today in various guises and in various media including cinema.

The nationalist movement invented *Indian* traditions to distinguish India and

her ways from the traditions and culture of the white colonizer. Like other anti-imperialist struggles, Indian nationalism adapted an *ancient* culture and tradition into the modern concept of the nation (Virdi 28). The ancestral base or the past from which the nationalists drew/draw sustenance, in the Indian context, is clearly a Hindu one. Partha Chatterjee, in the book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, explains how Hindu religion was "enmeshed" with the project of nationalism:

> In the Indian case, unlike that of many countries in central and southern Europe, neither language nor racial distinctiveness was a suitable criterion for defining national solidarity. Rather, within this thematic and problematic, two elements combined to identify Hinduism as a likely candidate which could provide Indian nationalism with a viable cultural foundation of nationhood: first the possibility of a large popular basis, and second, the very identification by modern Orientalist scholarship of the great spiritual qualities of classical Hinduism. (75)

As early as the colonial times, attempts were made to equalize the Hindu and the Indian, to overlook the compelling diversities within Hinduism itself and to amplify it as a religion which had a "shared culture based on Sanskritic languages and 'common laws and rites'" (Khilnani 16).

Gandhiji's vision of an eclectic religion and Nehru's secular leanings had prevented religiosity from taking the upper hand as a national marker in the first few decades following Independence. After the Nehruvian era, several factors started working which gradually brought back the religious fervor into the national imaginary and by the 1990s, the penchant for *constructing* the Hindu nation resurfaced with renewed vigor and has ever since been rampant. As Ratna Kapur rightly

observes, religion has become a "central attribute of nationalism and national identity… and Hindu nationalism is emerging as the new nationalism of the Indian state" (121). Religion and religious fervor in the formation and sustenance of the nation and the notions of Hindutva and the Hindu nation are all factors tied up with the national cinema of India and are hence points of interest in the present study.

Like religion, culture is another factor that was and is instrumental in conceiving India as a nation. Here nation formation was and is facilitated by a revitalization of Indian culture by defining it as a sacred arena to be protected from the decadence of alien culture. In *The Nation and its Fragments*, Partha Chatterjee elaborates on how a halo of purity was imparted to Indian culture by the nationalists who started off by dividing social institutions and its practices into two domains -- the material one, which encompassed the outer world or the West and the spiritual one, which was more internal and with which India could identify. The inner spiritual domain according to Chatterjee was related to the cultural identity of the nation and it was the domain to which women were relegated as opposed to the outer material domain which was inhabited by men (117-22). It was imperative to preserve this distinctive spiritual culture and nationalists were fiercely resistant to any attempt to intrude into this sanctum of national culture. The nationalist discourse of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, it is evident, was increasingly obsessed with the "discourse of the purity of the nation and the preservation of Indian womanhood" (Ratna Kapur 124-25).

Women were assigned the crucial task of maintaining spiritual purity, thereby making the family their rightful place and making them the stake holder's of the family's and the nation's honour. As Partha Chatterjee observes in *The Nation and its*

Fragments, "The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility for protecting and nurturing this quality" (126). Therefore the new woman, who emerged during the nationalistic period, had to nevertheless display signs of national tradition and spiritual virtue and be essentially different from the Western woman (Chatterjee, *The Nation* 9). Right from the colonial times, women were regarded as "sites on which various versions of scripture/ tradition/ law are elaborated and contested" (Mani 115). The gendered imagination of the nation that began in the colonial times persists even today and films continue the legacy of regarding women as upholders of national culture and honour. Accordingly, "Indian womanhood gradually became the embodiment of nationalism, as the nation came to be constructed as a divine mother and as mother India" (Kapur 121). Even a superficial study of Indian cinema attests to the fact that it is deeply grounded on the discourse of purity which pertains mostly to the bodies of women. The discourse on purity also permeates the other domains of national life like family, marriage, sexuality, religion, caste and race. Cinema, like the nation, marginalizes anything that does not fit into these parameters of purity. The movies of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta attempt to reframe the nation mainly by transcending and deconstructing the parameters of purity set by nationhood and national cinema.

Indian Cinema and the Imagined Nation

Mass media had played a significant role in perpetrating and perpetuating the *idea* of a pure and homogenous nation in the volatile eras of the colonial rule, the National Movement and the birth of the new nation after Independence. Cultural homogeneity which was regarded as an essential condition of nationhood was imparted through mass media. If in the earlier times, such an ideological insemination

and homogenization happened mainly through print media, by the time the Nationalist Movement had reached its pinnacle, print media was supplemented by other advanced media capable of creating a stir in the thoughts of people. Cinema was easily made an ally, first, by the colonizers and later, by the rulers of the newly independent nations to promote their respective ideologies among the masses.

The capacity of mass media including cinema to mould the populace and influence its way of thinking had become the chief concern of the colonial rulers who followed a strict policy of censorship to curb the different media of communication in India. This mechanism of censorship was instrumental in deeply entrenching certain modes of thought and moral values on the national psyche through cinema. Someswar Bhowmik in his book, *Cinema and Censorship: The Politics of Control in India* relates how the film censorship machinery in pre-independent India acting under the aegis of the colonial master was chiefly concerned about three matters: preventing the crystallization of the nationalist paradigm in Indian cinema, denying the Indian audience access to communist or socialist ideals reflected in Soviet cinema and ensuring that the spirit of freedom and independence that was spreading all over the world did not reach the Indian audience. The colonial government was smart enough to "camouflage" their real political intention under their anxiety about the safety and moral well-being of the audience (Bhowmik 66-67). Though the Indian Cinematograph Act of 1952 is regarded as the Bible of film censorship in India, the seeds of censorship were sown here in the colonial times itself. Various acts were initiated to curb and limit the media, including the Cinematographic Act of 1918 which came into effect from 1 August 1920, "inaugurating film censorship in India" (Bhowmik 40). If cinema is a legacy of the colonial rule in India, so are the machinery of censorship and the compliance of the members of the film industry to the dictates of

the censoring authority.

After Independence, "the governing and cultural elite" of the newly-formed nation (Jarvie 81) undertook the task of moulding the nation and its citizens according to certain norms and standards. Cinema came to their aid and "contribut[ed] to the project of nation-building" by bringing the "inchoate masses to accept the sense of nation and culture possessed by the elites" (Jarvie 80). An important task that national cinema undertook in this respect was to keep the newly emancipated populations away from radicalism and to make them conform to the "*mores*, outlook, and continuing hegemony of the governing and cultural elite" (Jarvie 81). Anxious to mould the nascent nation along the lines of the propriety and moral ethos that prevailed during the time of the colonial struggle, the leaders of the newly independent India, like the colonial rulers before them, insisted on the moral and educative value of films. From the earliest of times, cinema had tried to adhere as much as possible to certain *innocuous* patterns and forms like mythologies that drew copiously from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, devotional films based on the spirituality of saints, historicals based on the legends, anecdotes and chronicles of the medieval period and stunt films that were unabashed imitations of American adventure films (Bhowmik 48). Even the so-called social films of the time like *Achhut Kannya* (1936), *Balayogini* (1936) or *Roti* (1942), aiming at wider consumption and freedom from censorship, followed a diluted pattern that divested them of any real social significance (Bhowmik 50).

The origin of Bollywood film's well-known commercial formula can be traced to the period beginning from the 1950s when Hindi cinema started emerging as a pan-Indian phenomenon. Hindi cinema evolved a formula in keeping with the moral

standards that were acceptable in the newly-born nation and regional films started falling in tow. With almost "schizophrenic tendencies," the leaders of Indian film industry tended to "play safe" by following the well-established and approved formula of Indian cinema which used certain ingredients and followed certain rules and conventions unintelligently and slavishly (Bhowmik 47). Producers were interested in "recycling" this accepted structure or formula which demanded "little intellectual challenge" on the part of the audience and appealed "primarily to their instincts, emotional stimuli and responses" (103). Eventually, the audience got accustomed to "the habit of uncritical viewing … [and] eventual addiction" bereft of "any democratic option or space" (Bhowmik 103).

India, a multilingual land, abounds in regional films made in manifold languages, with features and concerns particular to specific regions and states and therefore incomprehensible to Indians from other regions. Hindi being the official language of India and a language spoken in major parts of India and comprehensible to majority of Indians, Hindi film has acted as national film and has been instrumental in creating a pan-Indian ethos. Most scholars of Indian cinema have attested to and granted Hindi cinema the status of national cinema. Meena T. Pillai, noted scholar of Film Studies speaks of how Hindi cinema, despite its entertainment value, was thought of as Indian cinema or national cinema which "shaped a national imaginary and was, in turn, shaped by it" (43). Though cinema from various regions of India were also involved in their own "regional constructions of national identity," Hindi cinema had a way of positioning "other national/ethnic/socio-religious identities" and regional identities "in stereotypical ways under an overarching north Indian, majoritarian Hindu identity" (Vasudevan 132). Karen Gabriel also observes how the "problem of a 'quintessential' Indian identity" (235) is resolved by settling on "the

dominant identity of middle/upper class, upper caste, heterosexual, and sometimes North Indian" individual (230). National cinema, as far as India is concerned, is thus conflated with the ideals and practices of Hindi cinema which include the primacy of kinship and family, the use of melodrama and coincidence, the prevailing of the moral order over the psychological, Hollywood codes of continuity editing and the presence of elements like song, dance and spectacle (Vasudevan 131).

Bollywood, which is the term used to designate Hindi cinema from the early 1990s, can be regarded as a more globalised version of the older Hindi cinema. Bollywood cinema became an "unofficial ideological apparatus" that projected a particular image of India at home and abroad (R. Mehta "Bollywood" 2). The penchant for holding on to India's ancient culture and tradition that began during the colonial times had not waned but reappeared with renewed vigour and in a new guise in the postcolonial and globalised era. Hindi cinema or Bollywood cinema became a keen promoter of the traditional values and the ideologies of the bourgeois classes:

> Hindi cinema became a medium of reconciling concerns of modernization with the compulsions of tradition. The pivots upon which this reconciliation moved were provided by middle-class notions of gender, sexuality, caste, region and religion. All these had to be knit into themes acceptable to the bourgeois … or else *the nation, as the political form and cultural emblem of bourgeois hegemony*, would disintegrate. (R. Mehta and Pandharipande 97, 101; emphasis added)

The economic liberalization of the 1990s and the bourgeois consumerist culture that emerged during the time went hand in hand with the rise of Hindu nationalism or the Hindutva movement. This considerably "transformed the socio-cultural fabric of the

Indian state…. [and] altered the collective imaginary of nationhood" (M. Sen 146). An off shoot of the nexus between nationalism, religiosity, bourgeois values and consumerism was the importance given in cinema and in real life to the feudal Hindu family with its intricate rituals and practices.

Speaking about the centrality of the family in films, Jyotika Virdi, in her book *Cinematic ImagiNation*, equates Indian cinema to the imagined nation and regards the family as the "most important trope" or metaphor used by Hindi cinema to convey the idea of the nation. Karen Gabriel also dwells on the importance of the family in imagining the nation both cinematically and otherwise and opines that "[t]he imagined community of the nation rests on an *imagined family* … fuelling the insight that the family is fundamental to and recuperated by (cinematic) narrations of nation" (229-30). The centrality and sanctity of the family in Indian society and its cinema can be traced back to the onus placed on the family in representing the nation and its culture in pre-independent India. The family was regarded as the spiritual and cultural sphere that was to be protected from the outer world, just as the nation was the site to be protected from the influence of the world at large.

Since the family is on par with the nation, maintaining family values, which are on par with national values, is of top priority in the real world of the nation as well as in the cinematic world. Preserving the honour of the family and the nation becomes the onerous task at hand and in the anxiety to keep the family and national values intact, what is most at stake is the private aspirations and individuality of its members. The members of the family were to set aside personal preferences and safeguard the stability and integrity of the family. Resolving the conflicts arising out of the jeopardy to family/national values is the main thrust of the feudal family romance which traces

the "linear progression from patriarchal status quo to a definite or indefinite rebellion/conflict and then finally to a resolution where patriarchal authority is restored with minor diachronic change" (R. Mehta 8). In the words of Jyotika Virdi, "Hindi cinema [acts as] a catalyst in the nation's homogenizing mission" and "narrate[s] the "nation and/as family" troubled by conflicts yet repeatedly rescued by adopting a devotional stance to the fiction called nation" (32-34). The rebellion or conflict in the patriarchal status quo surfaces mostly with respect to the romantic couple formation which is the central concern of Bollywood cinema and which causes ruffles in the family, "an alternative locus of power" (Gopal 24). The feudal family romance has a "conservative conclusion whereby the couple … [are] to be incorporated into the governing ideology of the *khandaan* or extended feudal family…. [which] usually took the narrative form of reconciliation between the hero and the patriarch" (Gopal 20).

The family thus becomes the arena where the Indian ideal of sacrifice is played out and where the characters give up their individuality for the common good of the family. Since the family and the nation are patriarchal institutions on which hierarchies of gender inequalities are sharply etched out, the heroine and the other women characters are the ones who always make sacrifices for family well being. They are conceived as ideal Indian women who are feminine, gentle, sacrificing and uncomplaining and who keep intact the values of the family and the nation. Closely tied with the representation of the ideal Indian woman in cinema is the imagining of the binaries of the East and the West that had started during the pre-independence era and that continued after Independence especially in Bollywood cinema, binaries that demarcated the good woman from the bad and the moral from the immoral. In this conception, *the West* was not necessarily "a geographical presence …. [but] was

effective and powerful enough as a vague cultural signifier. The 'bad women' in popular films have frequently been 'Westernized vamps,' for example: the signifying markers being short hair, consumption of cigarettes and alcohol, revealing Western attire etc" (R. Mehta 7-8).

Nationhood is constantly produced and reproduced in several ways by certain visible symbols which are rooted in the nation's ancient culture and which are reflected in the life of the patriarchal joint family. These symbols or referents of Indian culture include the ambience of the Indian family itself and the manifold rituals and ceremonies that punctuate every aspect of Indian family life. Bollywood cinema, which is a rich display of these predominantly Hindu symbols and referents, gains the status of national cinema as it is instrumental in "inheriting and circulating notions of national identity … and constructing a collective consciousness of nationhood through special referents" (Virdi 7). The Hindu rituals, the elaborate costumes, the paraphernalia of wedding, the splendid song and dance numbers of Bollywood -- are all *special referents* for nationhood in that they showcase and stage "culture as spectacle" (Gopal 19). These *special referents* that are used in abundance in Bollywood cinema to showcase Indian culture are the national symbols that the theoreticians of the nation were speaking of, symbols that are treated with reverence and are an intrinsic part of the national psyche.

In addition to these cultural referents, ideas of morality and purity, specifically with respect to sexuality and the woman's body, are etched out on the Indian psyche and have a primacy of place in the Indian family and in Indian cinema. It is a paradox that India, the land of the *Kamasutra* and the Khajuraho sculptures, also happened to be a land whose people nursed "near-primal fear[s]" about the dangers of sexuality

(Kakar, *Indians* 85). Sexual love was regarded by the Hindu psyche as a hindrance to spirituality and as something that had to be controlled and suppressed. Colonial rule, the impact of Christian missionaries and Victorian morality served to accentuate the severity and conservative outlook of Indians on matters of body and sexuality. Even today the Indian psyche is not fully liberated from these fears and reservations and Indian cinema mirrors this uneasiness. Instead of having a healthy, open and mature attitude towards sexuality, Indian cinema and the Indian viewer are stuck in the "vulgar" erotics of song sequences, which along with the other "absurdities" in Indian cinema relegate the Indian viewer to an "infantilized 'natural' state" (Gehlawat 2-4). As a result, when violence or rape is passed as normal by the censor board, issues of morality, sexuality and politics in cinema create much stir and controversy here.

An offshoot of the overt manifestation of the sense of morality of Indian cinema is evident in its use of songs to render service to the ethos and morals of the Indian joint family and the nation. The informal ban on kissing in Indian films is related to the socio-religious conviction that kissing in public is a transgression of morality and all expressions of intimacy are to be done in a highly covert and restricted fashion (Prasad 90, 93). In place of scenes of physical intimacy between romantic pairs, Indian cinema inserts in the narrative a number of songs depicting the love between them. The lovers lip-synch already recorded songs and often there are dance numbers within resplendent interior spaces or against backdrops of natural beauty or urban elegance. As Rini Bhattacharya Mehta observes, the "extra-diegetic song enhances the suggestive yet minimal physicality of the 'love scenes' with poetic innuendos, but also ultimately sterilizes them; because ultimately nothing happens in full view….the suppression or the sublimation of desire [and] the stylization … is Bollywood's gift to World Cinema" (11-12). Such stylized versions of life presented in

Bollywood and other varieties of Indian cinema render these categories of cinema artificial, immature and far removed from reality.

It would be apt, at this point, to consider Teshome H. Gabriel's division of the history of postcolonial cinema into three phases in his essay "Towards a Critical Theory of Third World Films" as it provides us with an evaluation of the role of cinema in postcolonial society. Gabriel describes the first phase as one of "unqualified assimilation" wherein Hollywood models and films were imitated. The period witnessed films "with escapist themes of romance, musicals, comedy, etc" which created a "spectacle" and was "counter to Third World needs for a serious social art". The second period is one of "indigenization" and return to "the Third World's source of strength, i.e., culture and history", the danger here being "uncritical acceptance or undue romanticization". The third period termed as the "combative phase" witnesses "a cinema of mass participation". It is marked by the maturity of the filmmaker and the use of film as an "ideological tool" (71-75). Reviewing Indian cinema against these phases, Simon Featherstone opines that much of Indian cinema "remains locked into that 'first phase' of the model" (101). The need of the hour is films that treat serious social issues and are ideologically inclined.

Even a cursory glance at the national cinema of India makes us conclude that the cause for its inherent weakness lies in its rather limited conception of the nation and in its inability to think *beyond* the nation. These flaws are linked to the rather limited scope of the nationalist project that draws the nation as a "finite and limited space, inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off to other identities besides national identity" (Higson 66). Cinema has to surmount the limits set by notions of a pure national culture or identity by accommodating the diversities that

exist within the porous boundaries of the nation as well as the differences that exist outside the nation's borders. Taking her cue from thinkers like Homi Bhabha, Paul Virilio and Julia Kristeva, Susan Hayward suggests that national cinema should foreground "the margins of the nation-space" ("Framing" 94) and "problematise" the nation "by exposing its masquerade of unity" (101).

Foregrounding the margins of the nation and problematizing its homogeneity calls for an inclusion of alternative perspectives on cinema and the nation. Such alternative perspectives have the ability to challenge and unsettle the usual presumptions of national cinema and its sacrosanct values and notions. We can have a vast and varied range of alternative perspectives coming from different sections of people who are usually relegated to the margins of society and the nation. The thesis "Reframing the Nation through a Female Diasporic Lens: A Study of the Select Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta" focuses on the alternative perspectives of the female diasporic filmmakers, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta. The *nation*, as it is studied in this thesis, may be defined as an entity that has much to do with the imaginings of the people who constitute it. The values endorsed by the nation are usually those of the elite and the nation strives for a homogeneity that obliterates the manifold voices from less privileged and marginalized spaces. The *reframing* refers to the change or shift that happens to these nationalistic parameters and imaginings in the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta. The thesis aims to examine the shift, change or *reframing* of the national framework, keeping in mind that the *reframing* could vary in degrees and intensity and be substantial, nominal or even at times absent.

The word *reframe* has several definitions, all converging on the same idea. The five definitions of the word reframe that have appeared in *Collins Dictionary* are listed

here. The first definition is a literal one -- "to support (a picture, photograph, etc) in a new or different frame". The other four definitions of the word reframe are: 1. "to change the plans or basic details of (a policy, idea, etc)," 2. "to look at, present, or think of (beliefs, ideas, relationships, etc) in a new or different way," 3. "to change the focus or perspective of (a view) through a lens," and 4. "to say (something) in a different way" ("Reframe"). The word *reframe*, linked as it is to visual arts and media signifies the different perspective or angle from which something is viewed. *Reframing*, as used in the title of the thesis, suggests the change of perspective of the nation that occurs in the cinema of Nair and Mehta due to their female diasporic situation. The prefix *re-* is filled with subversive potential and in this case, reframing, rewriting, representing or rearticulating are largely influenced by the political ramifications of being female and diasporic and this calls for a probe into the workings of women's cinema and diasporic cinema, which falls under the rubric of alternative cinema. The duality of perspective and double vision that can be attributed to the diaspora is also characteristic of women, thereby making them on par with each other. A detailed study of the female and diasporic condition apropos the nation is done in the consecutive chapter.

When we analyze the features of the female diasporic cinema, we have to look at it from the vantage point of alternative cinema or counter cinema which according to Susan Hayward is a cinema that "questions and subverts existing cinematic codes and conventions … is oppositional, exposes hegemonic practices, unfixes – renders unstable – stereotypes, makes visible what has been normalized or invisibilized" (*Key* 75-76). Undoubtedly, women's cinema and diasporic cinema fall under the rubric of alternative or counter cinema and indicate a swerving from the features and of mainstream national cinema. But a very important feature of counter cinema is a

"formalist and materialist" approach that impairs and deconstructs "spatial and temporal contiguity" (Hayward, *Key* 75). This results in the audience being "intentionally distanced" from the film, making them question rather than identify with what is shown (75-76). While the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta definitely belong to the category of counter cinema as far as political ideology, themes and practices are concerned, they do not fully diverge from the realistic mode and assume the stringent practices of European counter cinema and feminist cinema that completely undermine narrative coherence. Their cinema is more of a hybrid variety that fuses elements from a variety of cinematic practices spanning continents, genres and ideologies. Rather than creating a distance and non-identification in the audience, this kind of cinema draws the audiences into its vortex, making them feel and experience its nuances and meanings. An analysis of female diasporic cinema with respect to counter cinema, feminist cinema and the avant-garde which is attempted in Chapter Two will prove the point.

Life and Works of the Filmmakers

The Auteur theory of cinema, that foregrounds the role of the *auteur* or the film's author in the creation of a film, forms the basis on which this thesis is grounded. The auteur or director, whose mark, signature and distinctive style are left on the film, is regarded as the true creator of the film. Despite the collaborative nature of filmmaking wherein an assortment of creative people including the actor, the set designer, the script writer, the editor and the music composer work together, a film gains its meaning and significance predominantly from the auteur's unifying influence and creative control. Moreover, an auteur's oeuvre exhibits certain common thematic and stylistic patterns which can be regarded as his or her *signature.* A film is an

auteur's means of self-expression and a reflection of world views and value systems that may or may not be connected with his or her personal characteristics and biographical details (Gerstner 3-25; Nelmes 195-01). The present investigation works on the assumption that the female and diasporic identities of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta have significantly influenced their work, world views and value systems. It becomes imperative to consider the biographical and female diasporic inscriptions of these filmmakers on their works because as Hamid Naficy says, diasporic or accented filmmakers are on literal or figurative journeys from their places of origin either by force or by choice requiring "displacements and emplacements so profound, personal, and tramsformative as to shape not only the authors themselves and their films but also the question of authorship" (*An Accented* 34).

Renowned filmmakers of Indian origin, who had spent their childhood and early formative years in India before moving abroad, where they have since then been based, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are in the forefront of those diasporic filmmakers who stride different cultures and make films that pertain to and address different worlds. Their work is imbued with a transcultural and transnational quality and their themes exhibit remarkable variety and range. The transcultural or diasporic identities and experiences of the filmmakers make them soar above the boundaries of the nation and view it from a broader perspective. At the same time, they are bound to India, their homeland, which has acted not only as a locale for many of their films but also as a constant source of inspiration for their work and a great influence on their vision as filmmakers. There is a sense of duality that imbues the psyche and identities of the filmmakers, a duality that sometimes amounts to a state of being *no-where.* For instance, in the episode, "Mira Nair Master Class" which was part of *The Fabulous Picture Show* conducted by Amanda Palmer for Al Jazeera T.V.,Nair jokingly admits

that she has always been a misfit and an outsider: “a weird novelty” at home in India and “a complete novelty” abroad (“Mira” 00:09:29-35). Deepa Mehta also expresses her sense of displacement when she says, “I’ve never felt Canadian. I used to be upset about being called a visible minority … I used to come to India and was called an NRI here. The problem was not about belonging anywhere; it was a dislike for labels” (Ramchandani).

Born on 15 October 1957 in Rourkela, Odisha, Mira Nair was the third child of Amrit Nair, an officer in the Indian Administrative Service and Praveen Nayyar, a lady who was interested in social work. Nair must have inherited her interest in art to her father’s love for poetry and “her social conscience … to the sterling example” set by her mother (Muir 22, 23). She lived with her parents and elder brothers in small town Bhubaneswar till she was eleven after which she moved to Delhi, consequent to her father’s transfer. Her zest for life and her irrepressible energy were evident even in those days. She was sent to Loreto Convent Tara Hall, a school in Shimla where she developed an infatuation for English literature that later helped her as a filmmaker. She majored in Sociology at Miranda House at Delhi University, but wanted to widen her horizons and so applied to Universities abroad and accepted a full scholarship to Harvard University, where she continued her studies in Sociology. She had an interest in theatre, particularly in political street theatre, and became involved in acting during her student days in India (Muir 24). But once in Harvard, she started focusing on documentary filmmaking and her career as a filmmaker started with documentaries and the cinema verite.

Mira Nair’s life, career and filmography are true to a sentiment she expressed in the “Mira Nair Master Class”: “I refuse to accept boundaries myself” (“Mira”

00:02:06). Throughout her childhood and youth, she is seen crossing borders in terms of educational institutions, academic preferences and options, and places of residence. This pattern of constant shifting and remaining unfixed to a particular location continued into her adulthood. Nair was initially married to Mitch Epstein, who was an instructor in a photography course that she had enrolled in at Harvard and who later became director of photography of the films *India Cabaret*, *Salaam Bombay*! and *Mississippi Masala*. They divorced in 1987 and Nair married Mahmood Mamdani whom she had met in Uganda while working for the film *Mississippi Masala*. Both Nair and Mamdani teach at Columbia University and reside in New York, where Mirabai Films, her production company is located. True to the diasporic and transcultural ethos, Nair has always been on the move, travelling to Uganda to look after their land and garden and to coordinate the activities of Maisha, a film laboratory she had set up for aspiring young African filmmakers in Kampala and to India to meet her family or to make a movie. The straddling of cultures and the lack of permanent moorings has had a definite bearing on her outlook and her work. As Hilda van Lill puts it, "She is a citizen of the world, having lived in India, New York, Uganda and South Africa respectively… she has developed something like a multi-cultural voice, making films about relocation, immigration and multiple national identities and gradually amassing a vast range of experience" (23).

In addition to her diasporic and multi-national leanings, an important trait that is evident in Nair's repertoire is her commitment to social issues, her take on social evils and her empathy with outsiders and those in the margins of society. The documentary films she made at the onset of her career were experiments in Sociology (Muir 28) and reveal her social consciousness. In her first documentary, *Jama Masjid Street Journal*, an eighteen minute black and white film shot and edited in 1978 and

1979 as a thesis film for her M.A., she recorded the sights she saw around Jama Masjid in Delhi with a hand held camera. The second documentary, *So Far from India* was about a transcontinental marriage, with the Indian husband working as a newspaper dealer in the subway of New York and his pregnant wife who awaited his return home and the problems in their marriage. *India Cabaret*, the third documentary shot in 1984 portrayed the life of strippers in a night club called the Meghraj in Bombay. The documentary was a milestone in her career and set the tone for many of her upcoming projects by taking up questions like female chastity and double standards of society and patriarchy. *Children of a Desired Sex* (1987), her last documentary was about the practice of amniocentesis or sex determination of the foetus followed by female foeticide. The principles of cinema verite that she imbibed from masters like D.A. Pennebaker (who later became her mentor) and Richard Leacock induced her to use a bare minimum of equipment, record live sound, deploy a hand-held camera and capture life as it unfolded, with as little trickery and movie magic as possible (Muir 28). The realism and simplicity of the documentary style was followed by Nair in her first feature film, *Salaam Bombay!* and in many other films of the fictional variety including *Monsoon Wedding.*

Hilda van Lill gives us a good assessment of the works of Nair when she says, "Starting out as a documentary filmmaker at Harvard University, she gradually moved on to 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" (23-24). Nair's need to reach out to a wide audience prompted her to turn to feature films, the first one being *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) dealing with the children living on the streets of Bombay. Co-written by her friend Sooni Taraporewala, with whom she collaborated in her future projects including *Mississippi Masala*, the film

used real children and authentic backgrounds to give the audience an alternative reality of the nation than is given in an average Bollywood film. Though it did not become a box office hit, the film won twenty three international awards, including two prestigious awards at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988 and a nomintion for the Best Foreign Language Film in 1989 at the Academy Awards. The film *Mississippi Masala* tells the tale of a cross-cultural love affair between an African American boy and a Ugandan Indian girl living in Mississipi with her family after eviction from Uganda during Idi Amin's rule. Featuring Denzel Washington, Roshan Seth, Sarita Choudhary and Sharmila Tagore, the film deals with issues like exile, nostalgia, loss and racial prejudice and won awards at the Venice Film Festival. *Monsoon Wedding*, that was written by Sabrina Dhawan and released in 2001, was about a Punjabi wedding in the city of Delhi. The film was a box office hit worldwide and won her the Golden Lion award at the Venice Film Festival.

The films in Nair's oeuvre consists of a mixing of local and global elements, themes and methods and variously capture her deep empathy for her fellow human beings caught in moments of crises, her true concern for the marginalized and the dispossessed, her admiration for tenacious women who overcome barriers and excel in hitherto forbidden fields of activity and her conviction in the persistence of the human will that soars above rigid structures and parochial tendencies. All this can be witnessed in her cinematic creations ranging from *The Perez Family* (1995), a tale of love and human solidarity told against the backdrop of the Muriel boatlift an event which witnessed the release and repatriation of thousands of political prisoners and criminals by Fidel Castro, *My Own Country* (1998), based on Dr. Abraham Verghese's memoir about a young immigrant doctor's work among the AIDS patients in and around Tennessee and the resultant problems in his married life, *Kamasutra: A Tale of*

Love, a period piece set in sixteenth century and inspired by the ancient Indian treatise on sexuality, *Kamasutra*, *The Namesake* (2006) based on Jhumpa Lahiri's Pulitzer prize winning novel of the same title, which tells the endearing tale of an immigrant Bengali couple's life in America and their relation with their Americanized children, *Amelia* (2009), a biopic on Amelia Mary Earheart, the American aviator who was the first female aviator to fly solo across the Atlantic, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), based on Moshin Hamid's novel of the same title that examines how the September 11 attacks impact the life of a young and aspiring Pakistani immigrant and *Queen of Katwe* released in 2016 which tells the real life story of the Ugandan chess prodigy Phiona Mutesi.

A discussion of Nair's repertoire would be incomplete without a mention of her poignant short films that deal with pressing issues of the time. She was among the eleven renowned filmmakers who were invited to contribute segments that were of length eleven minutes and nine seconds each to the film titled *11'09"01 September 11*, registering their varied reactions to the September eleven attacks in 2001. Nair's segment, titled "India", deals with the Hamdanis, a Pakistani family in America and the branding of its younger member as a collaborator with Al Qaeda when in fact he had really lost his life while he was on a rescue mission on the spot of attack. Other short films include "How Can it Be?," a segment in the anthology film *8*, which is a feminist take on a woman's decision of leaving her husband and child to live with the man of her choice and *Migration*, which deals with AIDS. She has also contributed to *New York, I Love You*, a romantic anthology consisting of eleven segments by different directors and to *Words with Gods*, a Mexican American Anthology film. The illustrious director has won innumerable awards and nominations for her work, which would indeed be a long list to mention. She was awarded the India Abroad Person of

the Year-2007 and the Padma Bhushan in 2012 by the President of India.

Deepa Mehta, "herself a border-crosser" who makes "in-between cinema that transcends national and generic boundaries" (Khorana) was born in 1950 into a Punjabi family in Amritsar, on the Indo-Pak border, a city that had become the refuge of many Hindus and Sikhs who had fled Pakistan during the Partition of 1947. She grew up listening to the stories of the brutalities that occurred on either side of the border during Partition and that later became the impetus for her Partition-based film, *Earth* (Levitin 274). In fact, her father himself was originally from Lahore in Pakistan and had arrived in Amritsar during the Partition. He was a film distributor who owned movie theatres which showed Hindi movies and from an early age Mehta was influenced by this (Levitin 274) and grew up with "a very healthy dose of Indian commercial cinema" (Khorana). She graduated in Philosophy from the University of Delhi and during her university days, she was exposed to non-Hindi cinema, Japanese cinema and to directors like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Truffaut, Godard and so on (Khorana). After her graduation, she worked for a company which produced documentaries for the government of India, thereby getting a footing on the various techniques of filmmaking like editing, sound, camera work and story compilation. Her career in films started with the direction of a short documentary about a girl who was getting married at the age of fourteen and who despite her fear was excited about the new clothes.

Mehta met her future husband, the Canadian, Paul Saltzman during the direction of another of her documentaries and followed him to Canada where they founded a film production company called, Sunrise Films (Levitin 274). In Canada she pursued her interest in films by making documentaries. *At 99: A Portrait of Louise*

Tandy Murch (1975), a short film on an energetic elderly feminist celebrating life at the age of ninety nine, won Mehta an award for the best short documentary. This was followed by a television documentary in 1986, on her photojournalist brother, *Travelling Light: the Photojournalism of Dileep Mehta*, which was nominated for three Gemini Awards. Mehta made her debut in feature films with *Sam and Me* in 1991. The film portrays the immigrant's story in Canada through Nik, a young Indian in Canada who lands up in the job of a caretaker to an elderly Jewish gentleman (played by Om Puri) and highlights the bond that develops between the duo. The film won Mehta an honourable mention in Camera d'or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1991for the first feature category (Levitin 275). This was followed by an offer to direct two episodes – *Benares, 1992* and *Travels with Father* – for George Lucas's television series, *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles.* The road movie that came out in 1994, *Camilla*, was about a cross-generational friendship between an elderly woman escaping her son and a young woman whose morale is boosted under the old woman's tutelage (Levitin 276).

The *Elements Trilogy*, that goes deep into the heart of Indian society, bringing to surface the fault lines that it is ridden with, remains the most significant work of Mehta till date. The *Elements Trilogy*, as she told Kass Banning in an interview, was born out of her commitment to the issues of the homeland and the realization that in spite of being "a hybrid person who can move from continent to continent", her real interest "happened to be in India" (qtd. in Levitin 277). Such a realization prompted Mehta to pursue her project, *Fire* in India, exposing herself to the danger of being denied funding by the Canadian government. *Fire* (1996), the first film in the *Trilogy*, which portrayed the lesbian relationship between two Indian women, created a huge controversy in India and invited the ire of Hindu fundamentalists. The next film in the

trilogy, *Earth* (1998), based on the Pakistani Parsee writer Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India* originally published as *Ice Candy Man*, looked at the violence that had erupted on both sides of the border in the wake of Independence and Partition in 1947 shattering the lives and dreams of ordinary folk. The third film in the trilogy, *Water*, which told the story of the widows of the ashrams of Varanasi in pre-independent India was completed with much difficulty in 2005 in a location in Sri Lanka after the attempts to produce it in 2000 in Varanasi were thwarted by Hindu fundamentalists on the ground that Mehta was trying to defame Hindu religion through the film. The film was later made into a novel by Bapsi Sidhwa.

The other important works of Mehta include *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002), a light-hearted, hilarious, family entertainer that ridicules Indian stereotypes and Bollywood conventions, *The Republic of Love* (2003), a romantic comedy-drama film, *Heaven on Earth* (2008) a film about the marital abuse suffered by a Punjabi immigrant woman in Canada, *Midnight's Children* (2012), based on Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel that traces India's transition from colonial rule to Independence and *Beeba Boys* (2015), loosely based on the true story of a Sikh Canadian gang in Vancouver. Mehta produced *The Forgotten Woman* (2008), a documentary on the widows of India, directed by her brother, Dileep Mehta. Another film she has produced with her brother as director is *Cooking with Stella* (2009). Throughout her career, Mehta has won several awards for her films including the Governor General's Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement in May 2012.

Mehta's career has always been one punctuated with criticism, detractions and controversies and underlying all her achievements are the courage and resolve that

enabled her to persevere and withstand. If she had to face "professional alienation…in Canada" (Levitin 281), she had to face the worst form of rejection in her homeland India, not just because of the contentious nature of her films but also because of her class, British education and Canadian citizenship. One factor that enabled her to overcome the darkest patches in her career was the unstinting support given to her by her associates -- the actors and crew members whose respect and friendship she had won (Levitin 281). The memoir, *Shooting Water: A Mother-Daughter Journey and the Making of a Film*, by her daughter, Devyani Saltzman, traces the travails faced by Mehta and her crew when their attempts to shoot *Water* in Varanasi in 2000 was thwarted and the hardships put up by them for the successful completion of the film in Sri Lanka five years later, in what can be seen as exemplary lessons in human endurance and courage, teamwork and solidarity.

There are many other celebrated filmmakers of Indian origin in the arena of diasporic cinema including Gurinder Chadha, who was born in Kenya and grew up in London, famous for movies like *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) or the Canada based Srinivas Krishna known for his film *Masala* (1991). These filmmakers have also been influenced by their land of origin but their movies do not explore India with the same passion and persistence as do the movies of Nair and Mehta. Their films deal more with the nuances in the lives of Indians living abroad, England in the case of Chadda and Canada in the case of Krishna. For Nair and Mehta, on the other hand, the homeland has not just been a place to visit during their holidays, but a place, the issues and dynamics of which trigger creativity and inspire serious contemplation. Diasporic filmmakers and writers maintain links with their homelands, sometimes celebrating and sometimes critiquing the homeland, but always narrating it. As Hamid Naficy, author of the book, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic*

Filmmaking puts it, exilic and diasporic filmmakers have a special relationship

> … with their countries and cultures of origin and with the sight, sound, taste, and feel of an originary experience, of an elsewhere at other times … [They] tend to want to define, at least during the liminal period of displacement, all things in their lives not only in relationship to the homeland but also in strictly political terms. As a result, in their early films they tend to represent their homelands and people more than themselves. (*Accented* 12)

From the vast repertoire of films by the two directors, the present study restricts itself to three works each by either of them – *Salaam Bombay!*, *Kamasutra* and *Monsoon Wedding* by Nair and *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water* of the *Elements Trilogy* by Mehta. The thesis looks at how these films abound with sensory experiences from India and at the same time put forth strong critiques of the socio-political, cultural and religious institutions of the homeland.

The films selected for the study have exclusively Indian backdrops, in contrast to the other movies by these transnational directors that are set in different locales around the globe. It is a known fact in today's porous world that a nation need not necessarily be situated within fixed geographical boundaries or limits and that nations exceed territorial boundaries. Films like Mira Nair's *Namesake* and Deepa Mehta's *Heaven on Earth* prove how the nation can be re-enacted or recreated in foreign lands beyond national and territorial boundaries. But the present investigation aims at examining how far the nation that is placed within rigid geographical boundaries and that subscribes to equally rigid principles and ideals remains tainted or untainted by female diasporic renderings. A study of the interventions and fluctuations brought about by female and diasporic perspectives on hitherto untainted national narratives

necessitates the consideration of the nation in its most rigid form, with all its cultural, traditional, racial, religious and even geographical or territorial attributes and peculiarities intact. Hence the delimiting of the thesis to the six movies that are set in different places in India -- *Salaam Bombay!* set in the city of Bombay with its slums and red light areas, *Monsoon Wedding* that has the capital city of Delhi as backdrop, *Water* that takes us to the holy town of Varanasi in pre-Independent India, *Earth* that outlines the turmoil of the Partition in Lahore, *Kamasutra* that depicts life in some unnamed kingdom in ancient India and *Fire*, the events of which happen in a North Indian town.

The life outlined in the movies and the nation portrayed therein pertain more to the Northern parts of India, given the North Indian origins of the filmmakers and the North Indian locales and backdrops used. The only exception to this is the film, *Salaam Bombay!*, which is set in Bombay, the metropolitan city on the Western coast of India. Despite the North Indian ethos of the films, they have a pan Indian impact since the same principles and norms of nationhood and its auxiliary constituents including patriarchy, religion and caste and class hierarchies are applicable all over India. The North Indian has so far subsumed or stood for the nation as a whole and hence the thesis takes up the reframing of this North Indian ideal, an ideal that pertains to the other parts of the nation as well. Since the primary aim of the thesis is an investigation of how far the female diasporic films of Nair and Mehta coalesce with or deviate from the entity of the nation, stress is laid on mapping the contours of the nation that emerge in the films. Overlooking regional differences or geographical variations within India, the study takes up the concept of the nation that has been framed in national cinema and that is being reframed in female diasporic cinema. This involves an examination of the extent to which the films uphold or disown the ideal of

the nation which is an imagined community, constituted by feelings of solidarity, simultaneity and commonality, by acts of sacrifice and loyalty or by acts of coercion that come in the guise of enforced laws and by mundane everyday practices and codes of conduct that are enmeshed with culture and tradition. The fact that there is ample scope in the films for exploring these constituents and elements of nationhood minimizes the relevance of the geographical location of the films.

Having mapped the contours of the nation and its bearing on cinema in the introductory chapter, the thesis proceeds to examine the *reframing* of the nation brought about in the films as a result of the female diasporic perspective of the filmmakers. The second chapter titled, "A Female Diasporic Reframing", which is more theoretical, looks at the status of women and diasporic people apropos the nation, identifying points of intersection between the female and the diasporic condition and treating them as fused and composite, followed by a study of the features of women's cinema and diasporic cinema. Chapter Three and Chapter Four titled, "In a Frame: The Marginal and the Impure" and "Rigid Nationalisms, Everyday Transgressions" examine the select movies of Nair and Mehta respectively to discover the ways in which they reframe the nation. Though the chapter on Mira Nair has been named, "In a Frame: the Marginal and the Impure" and the chapter on Deepa Mehta, "Rigid Nationalisms, Everyday Transgressions," the titles of the chapters are interchangeable and applicable in the case of either of the filmmakers since both of them focus on the *marginal* and the *impure* and portray the *everyday transgressions* of *rigid nationalisms* in their films. Chapter Three and Four undertake a detailed thematic analysis of the movies and take us through the nuances of the life of the characters who inhabit the nation and who are influenced by it. The concluding chapter of the thesis juxtaposes the movies of Nair and Mehta setting them against the

peculiarities of nation and nationhood and the features of mainstream national cinema to assess how far they swerve from the standards, norms and formulae of this cinema in the reframing of the nation. This encompasses a study of the diasporic motifs and traits in the films as well as the ways in which the films affect public opinion and become correctives to the parochial tendencies of nation and nationalism.

Chapter 2

A Female Diasporic Reframing

The nation, it is increasingly evident, has the potential to turn into a regressive entity that limits the lives of its citizens by endorsing the principle of collectivity over individual preferences, by a process of homogenization and the wiping out of differences and aspirations and by enforcing and perpetuating national ideals by repressive and coercive measures. The *reframing* of the nation that happens in the female diasporic cinema of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and the revamping of the national discourse in them are to be seen as attempts to strongly resist and react against these regressive tendencies. Apart from subverting hierarchies and notions of belonging and rightful control of the nation, the narratives of the nation available in the films of Nair and Mehta construe it as a liminal space marked by "the heterogeneous histories of contending people" (Bhabha, *Location* 212) and thwart the tendency of the nation to exclude histories, narratives and voices of certain sections of people.

The present study interrogates the *reframing* of the nation that happens in the narratives of two groups of people who come within the nation's liminal space -- the

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The present study interrogates the *reframing* of the nation that happens in the narratives of two groups of people who come within the nation's liminal space -- the

diaspora, which exists outside the territorial confines of the nation state and yet has moorings within it, and the women of the nation, who despite being conceived of as symbolic of the nation's ethos and values, are subjugated and marginalized within it. Such an interrogation is imperative as both the aspects, the female as well as the diasporic, have substantially influenced the vision and craft of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta -- sometimes, one element outweighing the other, and sometimes, both of them working in unison to make their films what they are. Since Nair and Mehta speak of/as the marginal woman and the diasporic subject, who occupy the liminal space of the nation, their films are potent enough to defy the homogenizing and totalitarian impulses of the nation and become counter narratives. The chapter makes a detailed study of the nuances of diaspora and women in connection with the nation to trace the common factors in the female and the diasporic condition apropos the nation, factors that permit the consideration of the female diasporic identity of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta as composite and fused. This includes an assessment of the locus of women and diaspora with respect to the nation, followed by an evaluation of the attempts made by diaspora and by women to narrate the nation which coalesces with a study of women's cinema and diasporic cinema, an endeavour taken up in the latter part of this chapter.

While it may be easily granted that women are placed in the forefront of the long list indicating the nation's *others* and it's marginalized, objections may be raised about the diaspora's position in such a list as the diaspora's relation with the nation is complicated and fraught with ambiguity and contradictions, which must be clarified and explained. The first opposition to regarding the diaspora as the nation's *other* stems from the legendary proclivity that the diaspora is said to have for the homeland and the identification with and glorification of the homeland that the diaspora is involved in, literally and figuratively. This is especially true in the older readings of

the diaspora which evoked a history of exile, persecution, angst and victimization. The chief proponent of this classic version of the diaspora is William Safran, who provides a defining model of the diaspora in his essay titled "Diaspora in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," which appeared in the first issue of the journal *Diaspora*. In the words of Safran, the diasporas are "expatriate minority communities … dispersed from a specific original 'center' to two or more 'peripheral,' or foreign, regions" and who maintain a "collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland" (83). Since the diasporic people believe that they can never be fully accepted by their host country, they nurture the dream of returning to their ancestral homeland and are committed to its maintenance and restoration (Safran 83-84). James Clifford summarizes the features of the diaspora as derived from the classical view as, "a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad host?) country, desire for eventual return, *ongoing support of the homeland*, and a collective identity importantly defined by this relationship" (305; emphasis added).

While there are several groups of people who can be classified as diaspora, including Armenian, Turkish, Maghrebi, Palastinian, Cuban, Greek, Chinese or the Polish, none of them "fully conforms to the 'ideal type' of Jewish diaspora" (Safran 84). There has always been a tendency to associate *diaspora* with the unpropitious Jewish tradition mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible, a catastrophic tradition that implies forcible dispersion and scattering of people, who had forsaken the righteous path, to alien lands as punishment. Having lost the Promised Land, the Jews were condemned to forced detention in Babylon. As a result, the Babylonian exile became the trope of "the negative, victim, diaspora tradition, emphasizing in particular the experience of enslavement, exile and displacement" (Cohen 507) and *Babylon* "became a code-word among Jews (and, later, Africans) for the afflictions,

isolation and insecurity of living in a foreign place, set adrift, cut off from their roots and their sense of identity, oppressed by an alien ruling class" (Cohen 508).

The classical version of diaspora, therefore, is based on the diaspora's pining for the homeland amidst the afflictions in a foreign land. When the homeland becomes a place that is held dear and is longed for by the diasporic people in the midst of the tribulations of the host country, an unprejudiced assessment of the former becomes a remote possibility. Oftentimes, the diaspora's devotion to the homeland and longing for authenticity and tradition are carried to such extremes that the diaspora is drawn into the nation's "absolutist logic" and made to "function in tandem with different national agendas" (Gopinath 7-8). Moreover, the nation attempts to court its wealthy diasporic population scattered abroad and the nation and the diaspora "function together in the interests of corporate capital and globalization" (7). An example would be the Hindu nationalist organizations in India which "effectively mobilize and harness diasporic longing for authenticity and *tradition* and convert this longing into material linkages between the diaspora and (home) nation" (7). Floya Anthias in "Evaluating Diaspora" shares the concern that the diaspora "may assume a heavy sense of guilt and overcompensation, a ritualistic and symbolic fervor often found in the attempt to retain the old ethnic ingredients (leaving groups in a type of time-warp)" (565). The diasporic people abroad very often emerge as fierce propagators of cultural nationalism and upholders of nationalism in its most stringent forms. When the sense of attachment that the diasporic people have towards their nation is carried to such extreme proportions, nationalistic fervor may assume hues of fundamentalism.

Even as we grant that the diasporic people are party to the trends of global

capital and may exhibit nationalistic fervor disproportionately, we should not lose sight of the "traditionally hierarchical relation between nation and diaspora, where the latter is seen as merely an impoverished imitation of an original national culture…the abjected and disavowed Other to the nation" (Gopinath 7). This perception, which is an offshoot of the nation's inclination to regard anything external and foreign as an impurity, threat or anomaly, is stronger in older notions of the nation and diaspora, where any contact with the exterior world was regarded as a kind of pollution: "distance and dispersion from the homeland …were incompatible with the normal existence of the nation; the scattering of a whole people was a terrible curse, while dispersed life was seen as a provisory situation until return to the land could occur" (Dufoix 1365). At the same time, any external contact that was beneficial to the nation like colonization, domination and adding of territories to the nation was encouraged. For other kinds of emigration, links to the host country were most of the time, subordinated to the existence of a "spirit of return" to the homeland, as though "physical and temporal distance from the home territory was tantamount to affective distance from the nation itself and to the probable weakening of the allegiance to the state" (Dufoix 1364). The "national reluctance concerning distance" resulted in the denial to emigrants of most of the rights and duties of citizenship, like the right to vote, thereby making them second rank citizens (Dufoix 1364-65).

Globalization and advance in means of communication and travel has resulted in a shift in the way diaspora has been perceived recently. In comparison with the older version of diaspora, the newer one is a more positive one, where a "de-territorialized logic" replaces the "territorial logic of the nation" and facilitates a "vision of a nation that is no longer confined to territorial limits" (Dufoix 1366). In the past, being away in space also meant being away in time, since living in a different

country meant living in a different time zone also as each country had its own national time. The contemporary period that witnessed the rise of electronic communication and information technology is characterized by the dwindling of the distance between space and time, whereby a person who is at a spatial distance from the homeland need not be distant from it temporally. Modern technology has made it possible for migrants to instantaneously communicate with and live in the present time of their homeland from a distance, a development that Benedict Anderson had termed "long distance nationalism" (*Spectre* 74). So today instead of the condition of "double absence" which meant being neither here nor there, the diaspora can be in a situation of "double presence", being both here and there (Dufoix 1369-70).The change in the attitude of nations towards expatriates from the 1960s, evidenced in the policy of granting dual nationality, external voting and political representation also reinforced the possibility of de-territorialized nations. It is in these newer and positive contexts of diasporic existence and experience that Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and their works are placed.

Though it appears that the diaspora has been able to surmount the victim tradition only very recently, evidence suggests that diasporic people have enjoyed the fruits of exile and benefitted from them from very ancient times. Robin Cohen stresses the need for a "revisionist view of 'Babylon'" that highlights how the first group of exiled Judeans and their immediate descendants profited from their "integration into a rich and diverse alien culture" which endowed them with "a new creative energy in a challenging, pluralistic context outside the natal homeland" (Cohen 509). Such positive developments were evident even in the modern period of Enlightenment and nation-formation among Jews scattered in places like Berlin, Budapest, Vienna and Paris, who made "notable contributions to the professions and to intellectual, literary

and artistic life" (510). According to Cohen, the intellectual and spiritual achievements of the Jews, the material and political success of the Armenians and Irish people in the United States or the contributions made by the descendants of African diaspora in the field of performing arts, music, painting, sculpture and literature would not have been possible without their exposure to alien cultures and the difficulties of exile and diasporic existence (513). The enriching and creative aspects of exile were enjoyed by all categories of victim diaspora and the benefits outnumbered the difficulties faced. The shift in approach from the victim tradition of diaspora is the need of the hour as this shift in emphasis from *victim* to *victor* and *roots* to *routes* is paradigmatic of the contemporary transnational times.

Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, who have become formidable forces to reckon with in the transnational arena of filmmaking due to their abundant creative energy and success, belong to the *victor* rather than the *victim* tradition of diaspora. The victor tradition enables them to make the best of their diasporic condition, to be free of pining, angst or nostalgia for the homeland and to assess it in an unprejudiced way. The lack of diasporic angst and the international stature, success and reputation of these diasporic filmmakers would result in their being deemed as belonging to an elite class cut off from the lives and realities of the unprivileged sections of people both in the host and home countries. But a close look at their concerns and themes as filmmakers prove that they have always championed the cause of the unprivileged and marginalized sections of people in the home and host countries through their cinema and have raised their voices against regressive tendencies around them. More importantly, their films have always attempted to counter and transcend the strictures and limits imposed by nations and nationalism. The broad vision and perspectives of the filmmakers that soar above parochial tendencies can partly be attributed to the

peculiarities of the diasporic condition

Scholars, writers and thinkers are struck by and comment on the enormous potential in the diaspora to counter regressive, parochial tendencies, including the parochial leanings of nations and nationalisms. Weighing the pros and cons of the diasporic condition, we can conclude that though the migrant condition evokes the pain of loss and being rootless, it also enables one to "live in a world of immense possibility with the realization that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed … knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity" (McLeod 215). Scholar after scholar has thrown light on the liberal and syncretic aspects of the diaspora. Floya Anthias, who has researched extensively, among other things, on trans-nationalism, migration theory and diaspora, looks at the diasporic condition as a "privileged knowledge space" which "produces differential forms of cultural accommodation and syncretism" (561, 565). According to her, "the transgressive potential of the diaspora" makes them "less essentialist and nationalistic…than those who still remain within their original homeland or nation state borders" (567). While Ien Ang, another scholar on diaspora speaks of "the transnational diasporic imaginary" as a "liberating force" and the global diaspora as "a triumph over the shackles of the nation-state and national identity" (3-4), Paul Gilroy goes to the extent of bestowing *anti-national* attributes to the diasporic condition: "Consciousness of diaspora affiliation stands opposed to the distinctively modern structures and modes of power orchestrated by the institutional complexity of nation states. With the idea of valuing diaspora more highly than the coercive unanimity of the nation, the concept becomes explicitly anti-national" (124).

Professor K.Tololyan, founder of the journal *Diaspora* speaks of globalization

as the "transnational moment" when the nation state is eroded and diaspora becomes "the paradigmatic Other of the nation-state" ("The Nation" 5). Following this line of thought, Ien Ang is struck by the "liberating force" of the diasporic populations which she regards as "key socio-cultural formations capable of *overcoming* the constrictions of national boundaries – the means through which people can imagine and align themselves *beyond* the nation" (3). As she points out,

> Much contemporary work on diaspora, both scholarly and popular, represents this transnational diasporic imaginary as a liberating force. Simply put, the nation-state is cast as the limiting, homogenizing , assimilating power structure, which is now, finally, being deconstructed from within by those groups who used to be marginalized within its borders but are now bursting out of them through their diasporic transnational connections…. Global diaspora, in this context signifies triumph over the shackles of the nation-state and national identity. (Ang 4)

The diasporic status of women filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta causes their film narratives to have a transnational touch which enables them to re-articulate/dis-articulate both the gender and national scripts that greatly pervade the national cinema of Bollywood. Such a re-articulation and reframing is enabled due to the diasporic individual's capability to transgress the closed spaces and borders of the nation state. If the *transgression of borders* is the first step in the dynamics of re-writing the nation, the diaspora becomes the most likely candidate to undertake such an onerous task given the diaspora's "transgressive potential" (Anthias 567). Nair and Mehta, as diasporic subjects, have transgressed the borders of the nation literally and figuratively, and this also includes a transgression of the gendered

construction of the nation in cinema and otherwise. If the undermining of nationalist narratives, the deconstruction of the enforced ideals and homogeneity of the nation and the placing of the diasporic condition as being superior to that of nationhood are *anti-national*, as Gilroy called them (124), Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are culpable of these *charges.*

The concept of border is closely associated with diaspora and it is essential to go through the nuances of border for a better comprehension of the diasporic condition. Borders are arbitrary dividing lines that demarcate the *other* from *us* and create zones of *mine*, *yours* or *theirs*. Borders are instrumental in demarcating territories that are to be "patrolled" against *the outsider*, *the alien* and *the other*. But these very acts of demarcation and prohibition inscribe transgression, an act that the diaspora is implicated in (Brah, "Diaspora" 625). A border is more than a geographical division and has spiritual, emotional and cultural dimensions attached to it. If a border is a "division between two cultures and two memories," migration is the act of crossing cultural boundaries and assimilating another culture, resulting in the internal transformation of the border crosser (Tastsoglou 201). Gloria Anzaldua's theorization of the border as a "metaphor for psychological, sexual, spiritual, cultural, class and racialized boundaries" (qtd. in Tatsoglou 202) and Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space as a cultural and psychic one (*Cartographies* 205) suggest the inevitability of internal transformation that boundary crossing brings to bear upon the individual.

The diasporic individual is best described as a *translated* person, given that the diaspora space is a site where different cultures and perceptions mix and merge, creating new combinations and hybrid forms that trigger creativity. All discourses on

diaspora must acknowledge and take into account the translation or the change in identity and the shifts in perception that the blurring of boundaries and the complexity of multiple senses of belonging and multiple ideas of home bring about in the diaspora. The multiple positioning, hybridity and translation of the diasporic condition places diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta on an advantageous plane. Their films also become sites of syncretism and reflect both at the thematic and technical level, the liberal and syncretic values that inform the diasporic artists. The films are replete with liminal borders and boundaries of all kinds – cultural, spiritual, moral, sexual and psychic, not to mention the structural and technical borders and boundaries of cinema of different lands and cultures. In addition to this, Nair and Mehta, who have transcended boundaries themselves, proliferate their films with characters who are empowered as a result of being border crossers and transgressors of cultural, social, sexual and moral boundaries and limits.

Closely related to the idea of border-crossing is the sense of *elsewhere* that is brought to bear upon the diasporic condition and the strain of maintaining a relationship with this *elsewhere.* It is this element of connection with *elsewhere* that gives diasporic people their unique identity and way of perception. The *elsewhere* could be a place that diasporic people often return to and are in constant communication with; it could also be a place that exists only in memory or it could be a mythic homeland. The *elsewhere*, whether mythic or real, is important in shaping the diasporic individual's perception as it is a space that "is replete with ideas, culture, a framework for seeing the world and one's relationship to it, religion, social and family relationships – a recipe for living and being; a culture and an identity" (Berns-McGown 8). Rather than creating a sense of alienation, the *elsewhere* space is immensely beneficial to the diasporic people as it enables them to balance "two

vectors of connections … [and] what results from being connected to two or more places, worldviews, and recipes for life" (Berns-McGown 9-10). The concept of *elsewhere* is also taken up by the feminist film critic Teresa de Lauretis and described as a space in the interstices or margins of hegemonic discourses, thereby making it encompass both the diasporic and female/feminist experience of life and praxis of cinema. The *elsewhere* is a compelling presence in the frames of Nair and Mehta and manifests itself primarily in the form of longing, desire and memory of the characters for an absent ideal, situation or past status and also in the form of the frames depicting alternative realities, characters and spaces that are usually *othered*, marginalized and rendered *elsewhere* in mainstream cinema.

The elsewhere spaces, the translation, mixture and the poetics of dislocation are all the more potent in the case of the women diaspora who set out to (re)narrate the nation. Given that any kind of narration of the nation by a woman in itself is regarded with misgiving, the diasporic status of the woman narrator/filmmaker further compounds and complicates the situation. The convergence of the female and the diasporic is hinted at by Floya Anthias in her essay, "Evaluating Diaspora", where she expresses concern over the pitfalls in the conception of the diaspora in academic circles. The chief among the pitfalls in understanding or conceiving diaspora, according to Anthias, is the overlooking of gender and class trajectories. She stresses the need for "Gendering the Diaspora" (571), a highly political act that would yield invaluable results:

> The issue of gendering the diaspora can be understood at two different levels. At the first level of analysis, it requires a consideration of the ways in which men and women of the diaspora are inserted into the social relations of the

> country of settlement, within their own self-defined 'diaspora communities' and within the transnational networks of the diaspora across national borders …. [We should] address the extent to which the cultural and structural shifts involved for such women produce more emancipating and liberating experiences, and it may help to fight entrenched systems of gender subordination (or not). (Anthias 572)

Since women undergo a different configuration than men within and without the nation, the permutation of the woman diaspora will also be different from that of her male counterparts. Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky, stress the need for a "feminist analysis of migration", given the "unequal social, cultural, political and economic relations of women as compared to men" both in terms of migration and citizenship (18). While migration offers both men and women "the opportunity to transgress gender roles", this is more so in the case of women because "[b]y transgressing, immigrant women may contest and re-negotiate not only gender roles, but also women's citizenship limits" (Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky 23). This difference in trajectories makes it imperative to examine diaspora, nation and nationalism in correspondence to gender. Without doubt, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, as diasporic filmmakers, gain empowerment from transcending the limits of citizenship and the restrictions of patriarchy. This empowerment and transcendence pervade their films and their female protagonists and characters, who are also emancipated as a result of being figuratively diasporic and crossing figurative borders.

The politics of gendering the nation and studying the importance of women in the nation are as imperative as the act of gendering the diaspora. Though gender is of paramount importance in the construction of nationhood, earlier scholarship on the

nation either ignored the fact or was oblivious of it. Leading male theorists of the nation such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony Smith failed to address the relationship between gender and nation and considered the nation as "a male-constructed space … a male terrain,[and] a masculine enterprise" (Boehmer 22-23). Benedict Anderson's *imagined community*, which was thought of as a fraternity and a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (*Imagined* 7), could not fully accommodate women in it, given its strong masculine overtones. The nation, especially in the earlier stages was a masculine project within which women had only subordinate roles and were denied full citizenship rights like the right of franchise and the right to hold property. With only limited access to education and occupation, the nationality and political identity of women were linked to that of their fathers or husbands to such an extent that it seemed that "their very political being was circumscribed by their social position vis-à-vis men" (K. See 446-47). The *historic invisibility* of women and other marginalized sections in the production and sustenance of the nation and *the uneven terms* on which women experience the formation, consolidation and continuance of the nation-state are now being increasingly taken note of. As Joane Nagel puts it, "The idea of the nation and the history of nationalism are intertwined with the idea of manhood and the history of manliness…. nationalist scripts historically have been written primarily by men, for men, and about men" (900). Cinema, that audio-visually imagines the nation into being, is also a masculine project that relegates women to the margins. Nair and Mehta deconstruct the masculine script of the nation and the ideas of manhood inherent in cinema by highlighting the stories of women rather than of men and by creating women-centric frames.

Ironically, the masculine construct of the nation is very often symbolized and

represented as a woman and predominantly as a mother. Maternal images and icons of the nation abound world over, Bharat Mata in India, Bangamata in Bangladesh, Marianne in France and the Statue of Liberty in America, being a few outstanding examples. The masculine nation assigns women roles "as mothers of the nation, as vessels for reproducing the nation, as teachers passing the national culture to new members, and as national housekeepers maintaining home and hearth for the nation's men who are out and about on important official business" (Nagel 900). In the imagination of the nation as the fatherland are embedded the notion of a brotherhood or a fraternity, but there is little scope in the evocation of the motherland for a similar sisterhood. As Zillah Eisenstein rightly argues, "Nationalism reduces women to their motherhood. Nowhere in the iconography of nations is there space for women as sisters, as a sisterhood" (41). The project of envisaging the nation in maternal terms or "uterine nationalism" (Heng and Devan 349) has certain ideological bearings which cannot be overlooked. The abstraction of women in the familial order and the symbolization of the nation as the mother reduce women to a metaphorical level wherein they lose their identities and "become static and unchanging like the constructions of timeless motherhood" (Eisenstein 43).

Such a symbolic abstraction of a woman as a mother places her on a higher plane of morality and purity, wherein she is "desexualized" and "regulated" and "the boundaries of her body" come to represent safety and purity. Real, actual women who do not abide by the dictates of purity prescribed by the masculine nation pose a problem to it (Eisenstein 43). National symbolic boundaries, like moral boundaries, become "sites for the creation and enforcement of the rules of citizenship; the surveillance, apprehension, and punishment of national deviants or "traitors"; and the formation of revised or new definitions of loyalty to the nation" (Nagel 909). In such a

scheme of things, women who break the rules of purity and propriety are susceptible to being designated as deviants or traitors. If both sexual and cultural purity are attributes enforced on the women of the nation, the example of diasporic women and their narratives become a challenge to such enforcements. Diasporic women become impure by transgressing the physical boundaries of the nation and imbibing a foreign culture. Women who leave their nation to live in a distant land and get tainted by its alien culture are *doubly* imbued with the "transgressive potential" of the diaspora that Floya Anthias speaks of (567). The transgression, impurity, deviance and disloyalty that the female diasporic filmmaker is charged with seep into her cinematic renderings as well and become the defining principle of the themes, characters, styles and techniques of her frames.

Given that the concept of diaspora brings to mind a plethora of readings on impurity and transgression which challenge the concept of nationalism, it can be argued that the narratives coming from diasporic women are potent enough to defy the nation's dictates of purity. The impure and tainted films of diasporic filmmakers like Nair and Mehta deconstruct the masculine representations of the nation and oust traces of the male or masculine principle in cinema, thereby making the space of the cinematic nation more women-centred. Apart from this, they defy the tendency of the nation and national cinema to entrap women in static metaphoric and symbolic constructions of purity, motherhood or family. The pet concepts of the nation and the stereotyped images and symbolic constructions that women are caught in all undergo a reframing in the films of Nair and Mehta. Their women characters transgress the ideals of purity set by the nation, a transgression that happens in terms of sexuality, marriage, family, religion, class and caste, thereby making them liberated and emancipated beings. It would a useful exercise to examine how far the *tainted* quality

of the diasporic and female condition is reflected in the work of the filmmakers, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, how far this *tainted* quality makes their films *impure anomalies* when set against India's commercial mainstream cinema and how far their *doubly tainted* films challenge the usual imaginings of the nation and concepts of womanhood and purity that Bollywood films have engaged in so far. Such an inquiry would prove that the films of Nair and Mehta, first and foremost, celebrate the sexually impure woman and the principle of impurity, thereby combating mainstream cinema's obsession with the notion that women are containers of sexual purity and national and familial honour.

Jyoti Puri in her book, *Women, Body, Desire in Postcolonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality* gives us an insight into the ability of women in general and diasporic women in particular to transgress the limits of the nation. According to her, though the bodies of middle and upper class women are regarded as *sites* where "cultural notions of normality and … social respectability are contested" (*Women* 2), these bodies have enough potential to challenge and transcend the dictates of purity enforced on them by the nation:

> Collectively and individually, middle- and upper-class women are expected to embody national cultural identity…. [Their bodies] are also the sites where fear of loss of national tradition [is] expressed. Cultural beliefs that middle- and upper-class women embody a changing, modernizing national cultural identity are frequently offset by concerns that these women are being corrupted by the influences of modernization, especially, "westernization." Viewed in this way, at the very least, these women's narratives on gender and sexuality are hyphenated – neither one nor the other, at most, they challenge what it

means to be "Indian" (Puri, *Women* 3)

Women's narratives, cinematic and other-wise are hyphenated and offer a different perspective of the nation as do the narratives of the diaspora. Significantly, while bringing out the role of the postcolonial nation in "generating discourses that shape and constrain" women's narratives, Puri also highlights the liberating influence that "transnational, globalizing discourses" have on women. According to her, "transnational hegemonic effects on gender and sexuality … destabilize the boundaries of the state, rewrite national scripts, and call into question whether nation-states are adequate as units of analysis for understanding the lives of women in various parts of the world" (Puri, *Women* 13). Without doubt, transnational, global phenomena like the diasporic condition have a vital part to play in rewriting national narratives and liberating women from the strictures dictated by the nation.

The impact of the films of the female diasporic filmmakers on the nation can thus be fully evaluated only by considering the *double marginalization* or *dual outsider* status they experience within the nation, firstly, as women and secondly, as members of the diaspora. The diaspora, having physically and culturally transcended the rigid borders of the nation, is the *other* of the person who is physically and culturally within the nation and her/his hybrid identity estranges her/him from the cultural purity that the nation cherishes. The diaspora as well as the *Others* of the nation are by this token, in a way, effeminized and accorded only a secondary status in the nation. In her book, *Captive Gender: Ethnic Stereotypes and Cultural Boundaries*, Rada Ivekovic finds an analogy between the nation's *othering* of the enemy nation in times of war and its *othering* of its own woman folk:

In this process the enemy, the other nation, is made the Other, as is the Female

> within the unequal gender regime… and the 'Other' is attributed 'feminine' characteristics…. The symbolic system of nationalism, in fact, needs the construction of 'the Other' as an indirect means for its domination; 'the Other' is thus its constituent part, painted in the negative and associated with values considered to be feminine. (*Captive* 5-6)

The nation is in a perpetual state of war against anything that threatens its stability, integrity and coherence, its sacred notions of selfhood and its well-grounded belief systems and in this war waged for safeguarding its cultural purity, the diasporic individual who has left the nation's territorial confines to become *tainted* with foreign influence is regarded as the nation's *other* or enemy and is cast in a negative light and given feminine attributes. The *othering* of the diaspora and of the woman is an important aspect to be considered in the study of Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair, given that women writers, artists and filmmakers have always been looked at askance in the patriarchal world of art and culture, just as the works of diasporic writers and artists have been received with misgivings as to their authenticity and authority in depicting the homeland. The acts of censorship and the controversial events surrounding the films of Nair and Mehta are indicative of the rancour and hostility with which the films of the female diasporic filmmakers are regarded.

Like diasporic people, women also experience a sense of duality or *double bind* within the nation, the situation of belonging to the nation and at the same time, being outsiders. Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov outline the duality and *double bind* of women who are "held responsible for the continuance of the nation, [but] are in some way, always suspect; they are a symbol of the purity of the nation [*sic*], but always vulnerable to contamination; they embody the homeland, but are always a

potential stranger [*sic*] , "both of and not of the nation"" (*From Gender* 13-14). The dual and precarious situation of women who are "potential stranger[s]" and "both of and not of the nation" is very much similar to that of the diaspora (Ivekovic and Mostov 14). The precariousness of her situation increases when she steps into the zone of impropriety of role, behavior or articulation. To quote Ivekovic and Mostov,

> [T]he nation doesn't trust its women (and resents their vulnerability to seduction/invasion). The regulatory policies of the national-state define the terms of belonging – acceptance of proper roles in the national hierarchy and the dynamic of patriarchy – as well as the conditions of exclusion. Trapped within the boundaries of the state as insider, the 'disloyal' or questionable Other (woman/ethnic minority) is an outsider, and risks the normative and legal consequences of this status. Thus, women's attachment to the nation is based as much on penalties of exclusion, as well as national myths of inclusion. (*From Gender* 18).

Disloyalty is a highly loaded term, as far as women and the diaspora are concerned and any kind of swerving from the principles of propriety or cultural purity endorsed by the nation becomes an act that calls for censoring and penalizing by the nation. Both women and diasporic people, by the very nature of their mixed and impure identities, have a high propensity to be charged with disloyalty resulting in their exclusion from mainstream national discourses. If most of the women characters in the films of Nair and Mehta are portrayed as disloyal and deviating from the decorum demanded by the nation, the filmmakers themselves are charged with such grievous faults and undergo resistance and hardships as a result. The unseemly events surrounding the release of Deepa Mehta's *Fire*, the pre-production obstacles faced by

Water and the legal and censorship issues that Mira Nair's *Kamasutra* got embroiled in indicate the pressures faced by female diasporic filmmakers who alter the status quo and attempt to narrate the nation in a different way. Such films are examples of "cultural productions that begin in India, but end up cast as foreign/ Western/Other" (R. Kapur 64).

A notable point of similarity between women and diaspora is their ability to accommodate and assimilate *the other* in its various manifestations and forms as opposed to the nation's strong urge to marginalize *the other*. Rada Ivekovic's observations about the ability of women to acclimatize themselves to new situations and accept *the other* ascertain women's knack for syncretism and synthesis and further accentuates our conviction about women's parity with the diaspora:

> Women are traditionally accustomed and expected, both corporeally and through their socialization, to incorporate the other, accustomed to accepting the 'other' within themselves, as evidenced in intercourse and childbearing…. Traditionally, women also adapt to different cultures more easily, giving up their origins more often than men when marrying into another community…. Women symbolically represent, certainly for historical and social reasons, more than men, a space of mixture and meeting – *metissage*, *brassage*. It is this metissage, which women accept, create and represent.… Creation, both in the cultural and the biological sense, occurs in mixture; hence the wish to appropriate it and the necessity of controlling women as its symbol and embodiment. (*Captive* 9-12)

Woman's receptiveness to the *Other* and her penchant for mixing and merging happen not only at the sexual and biological level, but also at the cultural level, thereby

making her abundantly creative. The diaspora is also a locus where different cultures mix and merge, creating new combinations, this mixture and merging, this kind of hybridity being a trigger for creativity**.** Both women and diaspora are open to the *Other*, to the *elsewhere* and the impure and to spaces of fusion that have the potency to counter notions of fixity, purity and homogeneity that are cherished by the nation. The compelling presence of marginalized characters and economically and socially underprivileged and morally questionable people in the films of Nair and Mehta and the highlighting of alternate spaces and the unpalatable realities of the nation that happens in them are pointers to the female diasporic filmmakers' embracing of the *other*, the *elsewhere* and the impure in their films.

The mixing and merging and the impurity that the female diasporic condition is imbued with, call for an examination of the dynamics of female diasporic cinema against the framework of Avtar Brah's concept of the *diaspora space* which best encapsulates the intersection and confluence of the female diasporic condition. Encompassing economic, political, cultural and psychic processes, the *diaspora space* is a place where

> … multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where *the permitted and prohibited* perpetually interrogate; and where *the accepted and transgressive* [emphasis added] imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition…. Diaspora space is the point at which the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested.…[and] is 'inhabited' not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as

> indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'. The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native*. (Brah, *Cartographies* 205; emphasis in original)

Of special interest in Brah's conception of the diaspora space is the invocation of the psychic dimension, in addition to the political, economic and cultural dimensions, as it highlights the inner workings of the diasporic mind, the memories and other psychological compulsions of the characters that are all examined in the coming chapters. The delineation of the diaspora space as a site where *the permitted and the prohibited*, *the accepted and the transgressive* trespass, mingle and interrogate, thereby shaking notions of what is pure is of relevance as far as the films of Nair and Mehta are concerned. The confluence and confrontation of the pure and the impure epitomize the female diasporic condition and is intrinsic to the films studied in the thesis as they deal with the confluence and intermingling of the pure and the impure in terms of theme, characterization, technique and style. Brah's blurring of the boundaries between the native and the diaspora is also significant, as studies on diaspora usually tend to regard the diaspora and the native as binaries and dichotomies. Realising and granting the presence of native aspects in the diasporic and diasporic aspects in the native is a productive exercise while analysing films made by female diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta on the home ground on themes and concerns that pertain both to native and international audiences.

The confluence of the diasporic and the native in the diaspora space is analogous to the confluence of the ideas of *reframing* and *returning.* The word *reframe* of the title of the thesis is to be read in association with the word *return* which

signifies the diasporic act of returning to the native place or the homeland. Today, the idea of exile is no longer connected to agony just as the idea of return has been freed of the earlier pinings and longings associated with it. The home is thus more than a material reality, it is also a concept, just as the return home need not be "a physical return, but rather a re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and/or reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin through memory, written or visual texts, travels, gifts and assistance, et cetera" (Tololyan, "Rethinking" 14-15). As *re-turn* is also a cerebral and interior happening writ large with the fluidity of memory, imagination and distance, both spatial and temporal, *re-turn* involves a *re-writing*, *re-presentation* or *re-articulation* of the home. We should remember that *re-* is a prefix filled with subversive potential and in this case, reframing, rewriting, representing or rearticulating are largely influenced by the political ramifications of being diasporic and female and calls for a probe into the workings of women's cinema and diasporic cinema, which fall under the rubric of alternative cinema.

Diasporic cinema and its nuances are examined in the thesis mainly on the basis of the studies made by three important scholars -- Hamid Naficy and his idea of accented cinema introduced in the book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Laura U Marks's concept of inter-cultural cinema and haptic visuality discussed in the book, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses* and Jigna Desai's observations on South Asian diasporic cinema in the book, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Cinema*. The different nomenclatures used -- accented cinema, diasporic cinema or intercultural cinema -- suggest the slight variations these cinematic forms may have, but the similarities they share in terms of their innovative forms and structures, their location in interstitial spaces, their political intent and the challenges they pose to dominant

discourses facilitate their being substituted by one another. However, the expression diasporic cinema has been used for purpose of convenience since *diaspora* is a broader term that implies and accommodates both the *accented* and the *intercultural.*

Accented cinema, an expression used by Naficy to designate films made by exilic and diasporic people is "by no means an established or cohesive cinema" and has emerged in "disparate and dispersed pockets across the globe" (Naficy, *An Accented* 4). As differentiated from dominant cinema that is without accent, diasporic and exilic cinema has an accent that "emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of filmmakers and their artisanal production modes" (Naficy, *An Accented* 4). Accented filmmakers occupy interstitial spaces and their situation and identities are strongly inscribed in their films: "[Accented filmmakers] are also empirical subjects, situated in the interstices of cultures and film practices [and] exist outside and prior to their films" (4).The films are writ large with the peculiarities of the diasporic condition, the interstitial positioning of the filmmakers and "inscription[s] of [their] biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location" (4). By foregrounding the filmmakers' biographical and social inscriptions on cinema Naficy was actually "putting the author back into authorship" and countering a "prevalent postmodernist tendency" that deemed the author insignificant (Naficy, *An Accented* 4). This approach of upholding the auteur theory of filmmaking correlates the work of filmmakers with their personal lives, beliefs and circumstances and forms the main premise of this study.

Accented films are marked by the same duality, ambivalence and interstitial positioning of the diasporic filmmaker in terms of social formations and cinematic practices. As a result of the duality and accent, the films "are simultaneously *local and*

glocal, and … resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that they benefit from them" (Naficy, *An Accented* 5; emphasis added). This duality of the accented mode of cinema makes it dependant and autonomous at the same time: "Dependence and autonomy, therefore, are the dual, differentially torqued engines of the alternative mode…. [T]he exilic mode is driven not only by the limitations and constraints that dependence poses but also by the freedom and enablement that interstitial autonomy promises" (Naficy, *Home* 130). The condition of being dependent and autonomous at the same time is manifest both in financial matters and in the cinematic techniques and practices of the accented filmmakers. Diasporic cinema at times, deviates from mainstream cinema in themes and practices, at other times, it converges with those very techniques and practices, thereby becoming a kind of hybrid and interstitial cinema To some extent, we could attribute the limitations of accented cinema, namely "its smallness, imperfection, amateurishness, and lack of cinematic gloss" (Naficy, *Home* 131) to the interstitial position it occupies.

It is noteworthy that accented cinema, diasporic cinema or exilic cinema belongs to the postindustrial mode of film production as against the industrial mode of production. If the industrial mode of production was marked by centralized control of production, distribution and exhibition, mass production of standardized products and manipulation of mass public and taste cultures (Naficy, *Home* 126), the post industrial mode of cinema is driven "by the fragmentation of nation-states and other social formations, and the scattering, often violent and involuntary, of an increasingly large number of people from their homelands and places of residence – all of which are driven by divergence not convergence" (Naficy, *Home* 127). This tendency for divergence makes diasporic or accented cinema critique existing cinematic practices

"by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers" (Naficy, *An Accented* 5). The political and ideological edge of the films results from the interstitial position they occupy and their criticism of dominant forms and practices:

> [I]t involves inserting politics at the point of the films origination, as well as of its reception, … [and] a powerful criticism of dominant film practices…. Exilic filmmakers are multiply positioned to act critically and to make (un)popular films, thereby becoming minor: ontologically, by living at a tangent to the world and to the industry they inhabit; structurally, by opting for an alternative and interstitial mode of production; and thematically and narratologically, by ignoring or critiquing dominant cinema's conventions and cultural values and experimenting with new ones. (Naficy, *Home* 131-- 132)

Filmmaking for the accented or diasporic filmmaker is not an easy task, given the controversial nature of the work undertaken. The length of time it may take to make, distribute and exhibit exilic films, the small audiences, the court battles and controversies, the "split reception" … [and] a combination of political and commercial forms of censorship" are characteristic of exilic filmmakers from the third world (Naficy, *Home* 140). Accented films receive "bifurcated responses" and "split reception" and "exilic politics *contaminates* the entire film process – whether it is the politics of nations and nationality, patriarchy, gender, class, ethnicity, race, or religiosity" (Naficy, *Home* 140; emphasis added).The exilic filmmakers are mostly seen in a state of anguish and have only a "meager output" as a result of "the antagonistic state-artist relations" and because "their liminality and interstitiality … must constantly be checked against the realities of state encroachment and free market

competition" (Naficy, *Home* 142). Diasporic filmmakers are artists who "inhabit a realm of incredible tension and agony" as a result of "mak[ing] distressing and dystopian films" (142). Filmmaking has not been an easy task for Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and their careers as filmmakers have been punctuated with most of the difficulties mentioned above. The distress, anguish and antagonism evoked by diasporic filmmaking and the strained relationship of the filmmakers with the state and certain sections of society are perceptible in the controversies and hostility elicited by Mehta's *Fire* and *Water* and Nair's *Kamasutra*.

Given that Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are members of the South Asian diaspora of Indian origin on whom Bollywood has made deep impact, Jigna Desai's book, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, which provides us with invaluable insights into the cultural politics and multiplicity of diasporic cinema, is of utmost importance to this study. Desai, like Naficy, highlights the interstitial and hybrid quality of these films and maintains that South Asian diasporic cinema is "[s]uspended between and conversant with" the "two giant cinemas" of Hollywood and Bollywood (vi). Rather than being fully pruned of Bollywood as the word *beyond* in the title suggests, South Asian diasporic cinema is a hybrid entity that incorporates elements of Bollywood like "comedy, (melo)drama, action, romance and music… [and] the elaborate and often extradiegetic song and dance numbers" (J. Desai, *Beyond* 39). Though the films are said to be "beyond" the frame work of Bollywood or other dominant modes of cinema, they "are not always oppositional … [but] employ repetition with a difference" (J. Desai, *Beyond* 41) and redefine and reproduce the styles of social realism from dominant Western cinema or melodrama from Indian cinema. In short, "[d]iasporic cinema and its categories of inquiry are fluid and heterogenous rather than fixed and unitary" (41). Re-defintion is

the key word here -- whether it is a redefinition of styles of cinema or the redefinition of the nation in diasporic cinema and we may say that the films of Nair and Mehta are hybrid forms that *redefine* and *reframe* the thematic and stylistic elements of both Bollywood and Western practices of cinema.

Like Hamid Naficy, Jigna Desai also gives us a better perspective of South Asian diasporic cinema's capability to critique the nation and go against the status quo. South Asian diasporic cinema is incorporated into "national paradigms through the logic of multiculturalism and cultural nationalism or through nationalist forms of nostalgia," and when films such as *Fire* "do not conform to these expectations, they are rendered illegible or primitive in dominant national and international discourses" (J.Desai, *Beyond* 34). Very often, these films challenge dominant ideologies by their heterogeneity and interstitial position and by the qualities of polyvocality and heteroglossia:

> It is the interstitiality of these films that prevents full co-optation and incorporation into institutionally privileged canons. These films often (but not always) "disidentify" with dominant ideologies…. Although many of these films are read as Hollywood, British, or even Bollywood films, their disjunctures, heterogeneity, and hybridity belie this attempt to define texts by their relation to these dominant cinemas…. [they] are intertextually related to each other and to other minor cinemas with which they align themselves; they may also respond to, mimic, and otherwise engage dominant cinemas. In this manner, many films are characterized by polyvocality or in Bakhtinian terms *heteroglossia* in that they contain multiple speech and language types. (J.Desai, *Beyond* 34)

Diasporic cinema is both within and beyond dominant cinema just as diaspora is both within and without the nation. The qualities of *polyvocality* and *heteroglossia* inherent in the diasporic films studied in the thesis lend them extra mileage, making them strong critiques of the homogenizing impulses of the nation and its cinema and taking them beyond their narrow confines.

Accented cinema and diasporic cinema should also be examined alongside what Laura U. Marks calls intercultural cinema in her book, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Intercultural cinema, according to Laura U Marks, is "an elusive and exciting body of work" which comes "from the new cultural formations of Western metropolitan centers, which in turn have resulted from global flows of immigration, exile and diaspora…. [and is] produced whenever people of different cultural backgrounds live together in the power-inflected spaces of diaspora, (post- or neo-) colonialism, and cultural apartheid" (1). Like accented cinema and diasporic cinema, intercultural cinema is marked by a strong urge to critique and dismantle official histories and lies. This dismantling is done by resorting to a reinvention or reconstitution of established discourses and a moving "backward and forward in time, inventing histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences, and lies of official histories" (24). For this, the artists "must first dismantle the official record of their communities, and then search for ways to reconstitute their history, often through fiction, myth, or ritual" (24-25). Marks emphasizes the importance of *dismantling* official discourses before allowing minority stories to be told because of the "alliance" that exists "between dominant narrative form and official history" (25-26).

The best possible way of dismantling official discourses and dominant

narratives is by using experimental styles and techniques in the films. An important step in this direction is the evocation of "other forms of memory that slip from both official history and audiovisual record: namely, memories encoded in senses other than the auditory and the visual" (Marks 26). Marks introduces the expression "haptic, or tactile, visuality" to stress the importance of "nonaudiovisual sense experiences" and suggest how "an appeal to nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experiences of the senses, such as touch, smell, and taste" can also be evoked through an audiovisual medium like cinema (2). The concept of haptic visuality has a bearing on the cinema of both women and diaspora and is experimental and syncretic in nature:

> Intercultural cinema is characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge … [which] cause a disjunction in notions of truth. Intercultural films and videos offer a variety of ways of knowing and representing the world…. Formal experimentation is thus not incidental but integral to these works. Intercultural cinema draws from many cultural traditions, many ways of representing memory and experience, and synthesizes them with contemporary Western cinematic practices (1-2).

Intercultural cinema is thus characterized by experimental styles, novel ways of representing memory and experience and a synthesis of different cultural traditions and cinematic practices. In addition to all this, intercultural cinema falls under the rubric of what Julio Garcia Espinosa called "imperfect cinema" (Espinosa 28-33). Hamid Naficy also regards accented cinema as a *minor cinema* because of "its smallness, imperfection, amateurishness and lack of cinematic gloss" (*Home* 131).

Another important feature of intercultural cinema that Marks stresses is the fusion of an "aesthetic and political legacy" (10), a legacy and a fusion that is all too evident in the oeuvre of Nair and Mehta that integrates the pleasurable with the political. Though formal cinematic experimentation is absent in the films of Nair and Mehta, they become sites of hybridity and syncretism and capture diasporic and intercultural experience through vibrant frames that pulsate with haptic visuality.

Women's cinema, which also works against dominant discourses, is political like diasporic cinema. But we have to be very cautious here because women's cinema need not always have a feminist edge and the sharpness of its political edge may vary. Even so, given that women have always been in the margins of a highly masculine and patriarchal arena like cinema and filmmaking, any attempt made by women to make her presence felt there, let alone use it as a tool to challenge the norms, becomes a political and hence a feminist act. This in itself warrants a probe into the nuances and history of feminist cinema or women's cinema. The earliest approach in feminist film studies known as the *Images of Women* approach happened to be in the early 1970s and was centered around the first feminist film journal *Women and Film*, founded by a California-based collective. The first books on feminist film criticism, all emerging from the US, Marjorie Rosen's *Popcorn Venus* (1973), Joan Mellen's *Women and their Sexuality in the New Film* (1974) and Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape* (1974), were an integral part of the *Images of Women* approach. Following a sociological approach in their analyses of cinema, this school of criticism was concerned about the false images of women perpetuated in mainstream cinema and the trend of casting women characters as stereotypes or in positive or negative roles.

British feminist film theorists including Claire Johnston, who published her

first work, *Notes on Women'sCinema* in 1973, rejected the American critics' sociological approach to cinema, which considered only the superficial elements of story and character, ignoring how elements like lighting, editing and camera movement work together with story and character to create hidden structures or subtexts of meaning. British theorists like Claire Johnston, Annette Kuhn and Pam Cook deviated from the American trend and used a range of theories like psychoanalysis, French structuralism, semiotics and drew, apart from Freud, on thinkers like Lacan, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, the anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, the film theorist Christain Metz and the semioticians Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes (Shohini Chaudhuri 8). These theoretical approaches enable us to ponder not just over the thematic aspects of cinema, but also on the techniques and methods applied. Though the above mentioned schools of feminist film theory have not been applied in an in-depth or thorough way in the select films, they surely have influenced and figured in the textual analysis of the films in minor and unobtrusive ways. Rather than using any of these theories, the select films are read more on the basis of theories of nation and nationality, postcolonialism and diaspora. Again, though no study of women's cinema is complete without the aid of Laura Mulvey's views on voyeurism, scopophilia or spectatrix, the present study is more in line with the idea of feminist social vision propagated by Teresa de Lauretis.

Despite the differences in methodologies used, all the various theories converge on the idea that women's cinema is a kind of counter cinema that works to "challenge and subvert the operations of dominant cinema" (Kuhn 152). The specific task of feminist counter cinema is to deconstruct "dominant forms [which] are embedded in bourgeois and patriarchal ideology" (Kuhn 153) and to bring about "a transformation in spectator-text relations from the passive receptivity or unthinking

suspension of disbelief fostered by dominant modes of address to a more active and questioning position" (155). But the challenging of dominant ideology can be done in various ways and to various degrees and several categories of films can be realized according to the way in which they deconstruct the dominant forms. Some films are thoroughly imbued with the dominant ideology in form and content, while some others counter the ideological representation both in form and content. Another set of films may have revolutionary content, but their form may not be quite radical. Yet another kind of films may not be political in content, but may have an innovative structure (Bergstrom 80-81). Bergstrom observes how Claire Johnston's outline of "a potential feminist counter-cinema" in *Notes on Counter Cinema* can be compared to the concept of "progressive classical film" discussed by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni in the editorial to the October 1969 issue of *Cahiers du Cinema* (Bergstrom 80). Later published in Bill Nicholas' *Movies and Methods*, this editorial by Comolli and Narboni entitled "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism" describes progressive classical cinema as a kind of cinema that "seem[s] at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous way…. If one reads the film obliquely, looking for symptoms, if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks" (Comolli and Narboni 27). Johnston in her *Notes*, called for a feminist film practice that did away with barriers that existed between political and entertainment cinema thereby diluting the requisite that feminist films should be fully free from the dominant modes. The films of Nair and Mehta reflect the ambiguity mentioned by Comolli and Narboni and bring about a fusion of the elements of political and entertainment films.

The innovations that Laura Mulvey's theories brought to bear on feminist film

theory and practice are a stark contrast to the mild stance of mediation and fusion upheld by Johnston and the other critics mentioned above. Mulvey's ground-breaking essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", written in1973 and published in 1975, took feminist film criticism from the narrow confines of sociological approach to new readings in psychology and spectatrix. Woman in mainstream cinema, Mulvey argues, is "tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" and becomes an object that affords erotic pleasure to both male and female spectators (7). One of the most important pleasures offered by narrative cinema is that of scopophilia, which amounts to considering "other people as objects [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 8). The gaze is often one that is imbued with erotic pleasure when it is turned to women in cinema. In the words of Mulvey, scopophilic pleasure arises in using "another person as an object of sexual satisfaction through sight" (10). Scopophilia is closely linked to voyeurism, which is the "surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim" (9). The "conditions of screening and narrative conventions" especially the darkness in the auditorium and the "brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen.… give the spectator the illusion of looking in on a private world" (9). Mulvey's deliberation on the sexual politics of gaze in cinema throws much light on the machinations of mainstream cinema which underplays the role of women and makes her a fetish:

> In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as

> sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle….The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation…. Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (11-12)

It is only the female character who is thus objectified and made a fetish, "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (Mulvey 12). Instead, he has the active role of "forwarding the story [and] making things happen" (12). The spectator "identifies with the main male protagonist … so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (12). The spectator's identification with the male protagonist amounts to "gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis" (13). The female spectator has no choice but to regress into the pre-oedipal phallic phase mentioned by Freud in relation to what she observes on screen or rather adopt a *transvestite* position, alternating between genders. As already stated, the theories propounded by Mulvey regarding gaze, eroticism, voyeurism and the active and passive roles of male and female characters can be used to analyze the films of Nair and Mehta, but Mulvey's advocating of a radical *avant garde* cinema that destroys narrative pleasure and formal coherence is generally met with dubiousness and resistance.

Mulvey's aim at the time of writing "Visual Pleasure" was to destroy

narrative pleasure by moulding a feminist cinema "along the lines of radical modernist practice, with its strategies of self-reflexivity, disruption and defamiliarization" (Chaudhuri 39). Mulvey dwelt on the need for challenging the pleasure provided by dominant narrative cinema and the inevitability of using deconstructive techniques in the text to counter the psychic manipulation of films. This was evident both in her theoretical writings and practices as co-director of the film, *Riddles of the Sphnix*. Many critics endorsed the deconstructive and formal techniques advocated by Mulvey at the cost of spectatorial pleasure on the grounds that it created a critical attitude and a questioning position in spectators as opposed to "the passive receptivity or unthinking suspension of disbelief fostered by dominant modes of address" (Kuhn 155). Critics compared deconstructive cinema with Bertolt Brecht's *epic theatre* which results in a kind of distancing rather than involvement or identification of the spectator with the events of the play. Claire Johnston believed that the deeply flawed tendency of cinema to make women into myths and stereotypes and "ahistorical and eternal" beings ("Women's"23) can be rectified only by making women disrupt male-dominated cinema: "[T]he 'truth' of our oppression cannot be 'captured' on celluloid with the 'innocence' of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film" (Johnston, "Women's"29).

If on the one hand, disrupting or deconstructing the textual fabric of male cinema was regarded to be an important step in the creation of feminist film praxis, on the other, there have been reservations about the use of avant-garde techniques and the consequent hampering of the linearity, coherence, pleasure and entertainment value of films. Paul Willeman questions Laura Mulvey's attempt to link "feminist politics to an avant-garde orthodoxy" and points out that purging cinema altogether of scopophilia

and voyeuristic pleasure is like abolishing cinema itself. What matters more is the positioning of the subject in relation to such pleasure (44-45). Teresa de Lauretis is also against the idea that the project of feminist cinema is "to destroy vision altogether" and destroy "all representational coherence" (De Lauretis, *Alice* 67, 68). She warns us about the dangers involved in destroying coherence and pleasure in women's cinema by using the strategies of avant garde cinema:

> The minimalist strategies of materialist avant-garde cinema – its blanket condemnation of narrative and illusionism, its reductive economy of repetition, its production of the spectator as the locus of a certain 'randomness of energy' to counter the unity of subject vision – are predicated on, even as they work against, the (transcendental) male subject…. All of this suggests that narrative and visual pleasure need and should not be thought of as the exclusive property of dominant codes, serving solely the purposes of 'oppression' (De Lauretis, *Alice* 68).

De Lauretis proves her point by analyzing Lizzie Borden's film, *Working Girls* (1986), in which the female body is freed from being "a site of sexuality" and an object of male gaze and thereby "de-glamourized", "de-sexualized", "de-fetishized" and "de-voyeurized" ("Geurilla" 12). Set in a middle-class brothel, the filmmakes the audience see the female body through the eyes of the female character herself rather than through the eyes of a male character or through the eyes of one who wields the camera as is usual practice. But, as De Lauretis points out, the film's didactic project and women-centred sexual politics *displeased* the audience. As the film was fully "purged of desire" ("Geurilla" 14), it appealed neither to the male nor to the female spectators and therefore could be classified neither as mainstream nor as women's

cinema. It may categorically be stated that the elements of radical and avant garde films are conspicuous by their absence not just in the select films, but in the entire oeuvre of Nair and Mehta, which is meant to please as much as to critique or educate the audience.

What De Lauretis concludes after considering the kind of reception that *Working Girls* received is a valuable insight as to what women's film should be like: "both the critical and the erotic dimensions seem to be necessary: lacking the former, the film would offer no critique of representation, cinema or society, and so lose its connection to feminism: lacking the latter, it would remain didactic, fail to engage the spectator's desire, and so relinquish its capacity for 'entertainment'" (De Lauretis, "Guerilla" 14). She upholds the importance of both critique and pleasure in films: "contrary to what was perceived to be the common project of radical, independent, or avant-garde cinema in the sixties and seventies – namely, the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure… feminist work in film should not be anti-narrative or anti-oedipal but quite the opposite" (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 108). Even Claire Johnston who called for the construction and manufacture of truth by disrupting the tenets of male bourgeois cinema concedes that we cannot fully do away with pleasure in cinema. She prefers the use of a strategy that looks at film both as a political tool and a source of entertainment:

> Ideas derived from the entertainment film, then, should inform the political film, and political ideas should inform the entertainment cinema: a two way process. Finally, a repressive, moralistic assertion that women's cinema is collective film-making is misleading and unnecessary; we should seek to operate at all levels: within the male-dominated cinema and outside it.

(Johnston "Women's"32-33)

In addition to the fusing of pleasure and politics, critics are aware of the need for foregrounding factors like spectator-text relationship, principles of production and reception and so on. As Annette Kuhn puts it, "The question of feminist counter-cinema is by no means exhausted by a discussion of feminist or feminine film texts: it has, in the final instance, to be considered also in terms of its institutional conditions of production and reception" (171). Rather than dwelling at length on the institutional conditions of production and reception, the thesis is concerned with the fluid and syncretic approach in which pleasure and politics go hand in hand and in which the elements of dominant cinema are not fully forfeited but are made use of judiciously.

The position taken by Teresa de Lauretis regarding form and pleasure would be more appropriate for this study as it is a more flexible and logical one. Rather than straitjacketing women's cinema into the rigid terrain of avant garde or didactic cinema, De Lauretis champions the pleasure principle in women's cinema. More important, she recognizes the scope and potential of cinema in creating a social vision. Cinema, according to her is "social technology" capable of "the production and counter production of social vision" and "the production of a feminist social vision" (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 134). Without doubt, Nair and Mehta have fully tapped this potential of cinema to produce a feminist social vision. Topmost in the agenda of creating a social vision is the counter production of gender. Gender, according to De Lauretis, is something that is constructed and sustained by various "social technologies" including cinema and it is crucial to envision and reconstruct gender by walking out of male frames of reference. If the effort and challenge of women's

cinema, is not a complete destruction or disruption of a man-centered vision, but "effect[ing] another vision" (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 135), this is the very task that the films of Nair and Mehta have taken up and *reframing* refers to this counter or alternative vision that challenges male frames.

In its attempt to reframe the masculine world, feminism and feminist cinema engage in an ongoing effort "to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective – a view from "elsewhere"" (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 25). By "elsewhere", De Lauretis does not mean "some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: [but] the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations…. spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati" (*Technologies* 25). She further describes "elsewhere" as "a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them" (*Technologies* 26). An expression that is akin to *elsewhere* is *space-off*, a term borrowed from film theory which means "the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible" (*Technologies* 26). If in classical and commercial cinema, the space-off is erased by the rules of narrativization, in avant-garde cinema, space-off exists "concurrently and alongside the represented space" and includes both the camera, the point from which the image is constructed and the spectator, "the point where the image is received, re-constructed, and re-produced in/as subjectivity" (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 26).

If *elsewhere*, a concept that also figured in the discussion of diasporic cinema, stands for the hitherto unrepresented spaces including the interstitial and marginal, the

concept of *space off* accommodates elements likely to be eluded in cinema like the camera, the filmmaker and the spectator. The reframing of the nation initiated by the female diasporic filmmakers can be carried on to fruition with the aid of the techniques of the camera and filmmaking and by the reception and reaction of the spectators. Both 'elsewhere' and 'space-off' carry the weight of what it means to be female or diasporic individuals in the nation and what it is like to reframe the nation as female diasporic filmmakers. Though De Lauretis used the terms in the context of women's cinema, they equally epitomize and contextualize the diasporic situation and diasporic cinema and refer to the new frames created by female diasporic filmmakers, frames which are inclusive of what have been hitherto ignored, frames which reframe what already is present and frames which make valid both the creator of the frames and the audiences, frames that go beyond themselves and make a difference and cause a stir. "Reframing" makes possible "a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses", such a movement being fraught with "the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy" (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 26).

The forthcoming chapters explore how Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta effect a reframing of the nation from the position of the *elsewhere*, integrating in all possible ways, the advantages of the *space-off* and the tensions and contradictions inherent thereof. The idea of *elsewhere* or *space off* signifies the marginal spaces inhabited by women and diasporic people and represents their discourses and accommodates their characters and concerns in literature and cinema. These concepts encompass the interstitial position of the female diasporic filmmakers, their counter-hegemonic discourses and practices and the alternative realities/ possibilities of the nation explored in their films. The *female diasporic*, like the *elsewhere*, has a direct bearing

on the works of the filmmakers discussed in the thesis, as it is the *female diasporic perspective* and the *frames from elsewhere* that reframe the nation. These *elsewhere frames* of the select films foreground the stories of the marginalized and the impure and bring out the everyday transgressions of the rigid nationalisms present therein.

Chapter 3

In a Frame: the Marginal and the Impure

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Chapter 3

In a Frame: the Marginal and the Impure

In an interview published in the book, *Calling the Shots: Profiles of Women Filmmakers*, Mira Nair had said, "My job is to provoke you into something, into re-examining something, or looking at something differently. I may provoke you into being shocked or being moved in some other way" (Nair 151). Nair's strategy of provoking and shocking her audience by providing alternative perspectives of the nation has much to do with her female diasporic identity and outlook. Alpana Sharma categorically states that Nair's politics of provocation is grounded in a diasporic space that brings with it certain privileges of impiety and non-conformity and that hers is a reinvented, playful discourse that plays fast and loose with the rules (95). If the diasporic space in which Nair is situated triggers impiety, non-conformity, provocation and re-framing, the same can be said about the female or feminist space that she occupies. Nair's feminist identity informs her diasporic perspective resulting in her reframing of the nation from the vantage point of *elsewhere*, a position that subsumes elements that had hitherto been disregarded in cinematic narratives of the nation.

Of the elite standards that go into the traditional *imaginings* or narratives of the nation, notions of purity, including purity of race, culture, sexuality and religiosity, have a primacy of place. Mira Nair's avowed purpose of reframing the nation in her films clashes first and foremost with these notions of elitism and purity. The female diasporic lens zooms in on the impure and the marginal that are usually left out in the narratives of the nation and draws them into the centre of her cinematic focus. The woman's body becomes the site where most notions and expectations of purity converge, making her symbolic of the nation. The subversion of the notions of purity and chastity facilitates a debunking of the customary equation of the pure woman with the nation and the imagination of national culture "through a discourse of sexual purity" (Oza 57). So too, the centralization of the less privileged in her films enables

Nair to do away with the bourgeois values that nation and national cinema are ridden with and the homage paid by national cinema to the elite classes. Standing on the vantage point of exclusion or *elsewhere* herself as a female diasporic artist, Nair reaches out to those suffering "the penalties of exclusion" within the nation (Ivekovic and Mostov, *From Gender* 18).

Though as a feminist filmmaker, Nair's main aim is to affect another vision than the one facilitated by patriarchy, her mission does not stop there. Hers is a broader kind of feminism that embraces the subaltern and the dispossessed as much as it endorses women. In her book, *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations*, Lorraine Code had spoken of an "empathetic knowing" that infuses and inflects feminism (142). According to Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, Mira Nair's brand of feminism is influenced by such an empathy and comprehensive vision:

> Nair's penchant for championing the underprivileged classes and, in particular, economically deprivileged women is consistently a centre of her film projects…. Nair operates from a postcolonial feminist rhetorical space, one that speaks for the dislocated exiles of inequality towards class, gender, race, ability, nationality, age, and sexual orientation. Her feminist rhetoric is not limited to addressing women's circumstances alone, and her ethos is one of "empathetic knowing"…which is an important concept to talk about within the current debates about who can speak for whom. Empathetic knowledge fosters border crossings and 'resists closure, invites conversation, and fosters and requires second-person relations' (Code 126). Above all, empathetic knowledge can be a tool for rupturing hegemonically perceived power/knowledge relationships, especially those defined by outmoded terms

> such as 'Third World' and 'First World,' for example. (Foster 115; parenthesis in original)

It is this empathetic knowing of Mira Nair that imbues her feminism with a broader perspective and enables an embracing within its fold, the marginalized sections of the nation. It is this very ethos that causes the *representation* or *re-presentation* of the subaltern by an educated, upper class diasporic filmmaker to be free from any kind of patronizing. Again, it is this empathetic vision that exalts her work and makes it rise above a cringing *Third World* inferiority complex. This empathy is related to the liberal and accommodating views and syncretic outlook attributed to the diaspora and enables the diasporic filmmaker to see her characters as not "passively oppressed or full of hidden virtues" but as real people with human qualities (Shah 24).

If we grant that empathetic knowing and the reframing of national codes that restrict women are the foremost impulses in Nair's work, we can safely say that *India Cabaret*, her first documentary has a very important place in her oeuvre and sets the tone for most of her ensuing films. This applies to films that come under the purvey of this study, namely *Salaam Bombay!*, *Kamasutra* and *Monsoon Wedding*, which are all movies that uphold the less privileged and challenge the norms of chastity and purity enforced on Indian women as symbols of the nation. *India Cabaret*, a documentary about the strippers in a night club in Bombay effects a deconstruction of notions of the ideal heroine of Bollywood cinema and the notion of the protagonist itself as it delves into the lives of supposedly unchaste and morally dubious women. By giving us glimpses into the lives and minds of the female strippers, Nair foregrounds them and removes any stigma attached to their persona. This centralization of the supposedly fallen women was made possible when the filmmaker ceased to be the *voyeur*

observing them from behind the sanctity of the camera, but become one among them, living in their apartments and partaking of their lives and experiences. Nair's approach of empathizing with the strippers attracted criticism from various quarters, the most vehement disapproval coming from her own father who condemned her for living with "scum" (Nair "India" 62). Such criticism only served to fuel and give momentum to Nair's project of elevating the strippers from the position of fallen women to that of empowered ones.

Apart from exposing the double standards of society which lay down different rules for fallen women and their male clients, the film registers the difference between the prostitute and the married woman, who despite being *honourable* lacks the same degree of freedom and empowerment of the former. Central to the documentary is the strip tease dancer Rekha's feminist revision and rendering of the fable of the death god, Yamaraj's encounter with three dead women. Of the three women who confront Yamaraj and confess their sins on earth, the one who confesses that she left her lover to marry another man is given a silver key; the one who confesses that she loved and married the same man and was loyal to him after marriage is given the golden key. The third woman, who confesses that she gave pleasure, ecstasy and happiness to all men is given the key to Yamaraj's room itself, indicating the empowerment and superiority of dancing women when compared to their married counterparts. Gwendolyn Audrey Foster describes how Rekha, the strip tease dancer is involved in the "self-affirming" act of "remaking" herself from the status of slut to a mythic Goddess of privilege as she narrates the story:

> Rekha is aware of her commodification, in a system that sees her as a 'polluted' *raat ki raani* by night…. Yet Rekha refuses to be invisible, refuses

> to be objectified by an ethnographic gaze. Her knowledge is distinctively bodied and underscored by the presence of her body language. She tells us the fable as she glares at us, smoking, laughing, gesturing, refusing the mantle of the polluted subaltern" (114).

The confidence and self-assurance of the stripper challenges and annuls the objectionable status usually conferred on impure and unchaste women and Nair's act of according visibility to the subalterns and to polluted women sets this documentary apart from films upholding the national values of elitism and purity. Like *India Cabaret*, all the three films analyzed in this chapter are peopled with subalterns and *impure* women who strive with various levels of success to discard the stigma and stamp of being unfit members of the nation. The very act of presenting and re-presenting the marginalized and the impure in cinema goes a long way in reorienting the usual configurations of the nation in cinema.

Nair's first feature film, *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), as the title suggests, is a *salaam* or an act of respectful obeisance to Bombay, a city that has had a very significant role in shaping Indian ethos and culture. Firstly, Bombay is the wealthiest city in India, housing the largest number of millionaires and billionaires. Bombay, the gateway of India, has attracted traders and invaders from foreign lands for centuries, not to mention the immigration of Indians from other states, resulting in its assuming a unique cosmopolitan culture. The city houses important financial institutions like the Reserve Bank of India and the Bombay Stock Exchange as well as premier scientific and nuclear institutions like Bhabha Atomic Research Centre. It is the birthplace of Indian cinema and has a distinct film culture characterized by what has come to be called Bollywood cinema. Ironically, Nair's act of *salaam* is directed not towards the

glorious track record of Bombay described above, but towards the more deplorable elements of the city – the orphaned children who eke out a living on the streets of Bombay, the travails of women forced into prostitution in the red light zones, drug dealers and peddlers, the bleak circumstances of the notorious *chiller rooms* or remand homes for children and youngsters and so on. Ignoring the glories of a great city like Bombay, Nair depicts the seamier side of the city and tells the story of "the flowers that never bloom … [and] the dust that lies beneath your feet"[1] (*Salaam Bombay!* 01:21:32-46).

The protagonist of the film is a young boy named Krishna better known as *Chaipau*. The name *Chaipau* being a portmanteau word coined from *chai* and *pau* meaning tea and soft bread respectively, signifies the work that Krishna does in the city of Bombay – that of selling tea to the people in and around the red light areas and slums. In the scene in which he approaches a letter writer for help to write a letter to his mother, Krishna categorically tells him to inform his mother of his new designation, *Chaipau*, signifying that the new name and the nonentity it denotes has become an inseparable part of his identity, consciousness and existence. Nilakshi Roy points out how the name *Chaipau* "is affixed usually to an utterly dispensable fellow, someone who is not counted while playing a game for serious turns" (18). Like Chaipau, most of the children in the film are not counted, are without identity or individuality and are known either by the work they do or for some other attribute. For instance, the young prostitute brought to the brothel is known as *Solasaal* meaning Sweet Sixteen and we never get to know her real name or her past. Similarly, Chaipau's friend who is a drug dealer is called *Chillum*, meaning hash pipe, and the name is naturally conferred on the boy who succeeds him after his death. Generic names are far too common for the characters in the film – *Baba* for the powerful pimp

and drug dealer of the area, *Insect* and *Evil Eye* for two other kids on the street, being examples (Roy 18). The erasure of names and identities serves the purpose of highlighting the smallness and insignificance of these people in a huge metropolis like Bombay.

Krishna alias Chaipau, who has been separated from his family, works first in a travelling circus as an errand boy and later in the streets of Bombay serving tea. We never get to meet his family and what little we know about his family is gathered from what he tells his friends – he has a mother and an elder brother who works as a mechanic. Enraged by the accusations and ill treatment of his domineering brother, Chaipau sets fire to the bike belonging to the former's client. After this incident, his mother leaves him in a circus telling him to come home after earning a sum of Rupees Five hundred as compensation. Bearing the burden of having to earn a huge sum of money at a tender age and being denied the warmth of home and family, the life of this young boy is filled with sadness and insecurity. The transitory quality of street life has a parallel in the transitory nature of the travelling circus. The opening sequence of the film portrays the circus packing up to leave its current place of performance to move on to its next destination. Krishna is sent to buy pan masala for his circus boss but when he comes back from the shop which is a considerable distance away, the troop has already packed and left. Chaipau's life is imbued with the same transitory and rootless quality of the travelling circus. As Nilakshi Roy points out, "[h]is body, his life and identity are totally unaccounted for, and the transitional nature of his life is thus established…. His body can only occupy transitional spaces" (Roy 18). The only option left before him after being disowned by the circus troop is to take a train ticket to some big city where he could try to work and earn some money. The man behind the counter at the railway station seals his future by giving him a ticket to Bombay,

with the words – "Go, go to Bombay and come back a great film star!" (*SB* 00:03:50-53).

Bombay being the city where Bollywood cinema originated and flourished, traces of this cinema are to be seen everywhere in *Salaam Bombay!* – be in it the songs played on television in railway stations, in the huge billboards displayed in the city and in the everyday lives of the characters. Though the diasporic filmmaker deviates from the principles of Bollywood cinema on many counts, she nevertheless alludes to it and exposes its shortcomings at several points. The dichotomy worked out between the stark reality in the lives of the street kids and the illusory world of Bollywood films that they consume in their leisure time is also a scathing criticism of the artifice and superficiality of Bollywood cinema. The very purpose of introducing the cinema hall scene where the children watch the science fiction thriller and high-grossing film, *Mr India*, featuring Anil Kapoor who dons the role of an orphan-turned-protector of orphan kids, is to bring out the paradoxical situation in the lives of these orphaned kids. They are shown enjoying the popular number "Hawa Hawaii" that has the glamour queen of the time, Late Sridevi doing a dance number in a splendid night club. John Kenneth Muir observes how in spite of the entertainment and enjoyment afforded by such films, the life being *sold* in them has no connection to reality (68). The glitter and gloss of Bollywood films and the highly improbable and unbelievable elements in them create an illusory world that is far away from the realities of the lives of these children who have to struggle hard to make both end meet and worry about where to sleep at night and where to get their next meal from (Muir 68). The *film within the film* device used by Nair makes us perceive the difference between the stark realities of India being depicted in her film and the falsity and artifice of mainstream national cinema's depiction of the nation.

The haunting image of Krishna/Chaipau who circumvents the seamier locales of Bombay's streets like the brothels or the drug dens connects him to "any modern homeless urban figure" (Foster 116). It is through him that we view the vicissitudes of the streets, thereby making him a thread that links the various hapless souls inhabiting the slums and streets of Bombay. As Gwendolyn Audrey Foster observes, "[Chaipau's] gaze demands a multiplicity of viewing positions, and Nair repeatedly cross-identifies him with oppressed women (prostitutes and children) through eye-matches and gazes that lead the viewer (whether from New York City, Bombay, or London) to involve themselves in the embodied subjectivities of the fictional constructs" (116). It is through Chaipau's gaze that we get involved in the lives of the prostitute, Rekha (Anita Kanwar)[1] who is forced to live with Baba (Nana Patekar), the influential local drug dealer and pimp, Rekha's child Manju (Hansa Vithal), who spends most of her time with the other street kids, Chillum (Raghubir Yadav), who works as drug seller for Baba and loses his life to drugs, the young girl from Nepal named Solasaal or Sweet Sixteen, brought as a price-catch to the brothel, the madam and the sex workers there, the children in the remand house as well as the many other nameless street kids who cross Chaipau's life. We are presented with a cross section of the most *uncouth* segment of the nation and with its most *unpalatable* realities, realities that the nation would rather camouflage than project through its cinema.

Salaam Bombay! has none of the gloss and glamour of Bollywood cinema and presents the harsh realities of street life in the most authentic way. Chaipau and the other street kids live in the most deplorable of circumstances and remind us of a film like *Pixote* by Babenco, *which* "focusses on the existence of street children, orphans without home or hearth, eking out an existence amidst the blind eye of shop owners, commuters, and even tourists" (Foster 61). Though street children inhabit the space of

the nation, they are excluded from the benefits that other citizens enjoy. Deprived of home and hearth, their lives are fraught with danger and insecurity. Of the many perils faced by the street kids, that of getting involved with the drug mafia and the problem of drug addiction are very serious ones. The pathetic life and death of Chillum, the young man who wastes away his life by selling drugs for the drug dealer Baba, brings out "the commodification of individuals involved in the drug trade [that] has important specificity with regard to the city of Bombay" (Foster 117). An addict himself, Chillum loses his job after getting into the bad books of Baba. Cashless and unable to procure drugs to which he has become an addict, he is seen cringing and begging for money from Chaipau. He deteriorates physically and mentally and finally succumbs to death.

Another danger awaiting the street children is the remand home which is notoriously known as the chiller room. This state-run institution for children which is meant to rehabilitate street kids and young offenders does little to reduce their plight, but becomes oppressive and worse than a prison. Chaipau too has a taste of the remand home when he is taken into custody and put there by the police on the ground that he had stolen *samosas* from a wedding feast where he had worked as caterer. Murtaza, the boy in the chiller room, who befriends Chaipau and later helps him escape, tells him that he has been in the reformatory for five years, but did not know the reason for his confinement. He points out to another boy who was confined there for the paltry offence of urinating in the street, proving that children are confined on flimsy grounds. The dismal life in the remand home is based on rigorous disciplining of the children and we see the newly-arrived Chaipau donning a uniform and joining the group of assembled boys as they chant a hymn that acknowledges the authority of a benevolent God and protector. The benevolent God of the hymn can be very well

substituted by an equally benevolent but oppressive state. The lines of the song ring with irony and underscore the destitution of the children and their total dependence on the state:

> You are my father!
>
> You are my mother!
>
> You are my kin!
>
> You are my all!
>
> We are the flowers that never bloom,
>
> We are the dust that lies beneath your feet --
>
> Always look upon us with mercy in your eyes! (01:21:12-54)

In addition to the repressive measures of the authorities in the chiller room, the boys are subjected to constant bullying by the more powerful of their peers. The claustrophobia of the chiller room makes the perils of the street seem more palatable for Chaipau. Unwilling to submit to any kind of authority, benevolent or not, he decides to run away from there. Chaipau's escape from the chiller room with its high walls and barbed wire fencing and his sprint down the streets to freedom have been portrayed in a masterly way by Nair and indicate the boy's reluctance to succumb his will and individuality to any such oppressive institution.

Shot against the starkness and perils of street life, *Salaam Bombay!* deviates from mainstream cinema which often centers around a family or families, the family in itself being a miniature nation. Instead of the standard family based on marriage, kinship or blood relationships depicted in national cinema, we have here alternate

families created among the unprivileged sections like street kids or prostitutes. One such family is constituted by the solidarity among street kids that brings them together and enables them to face and surmount the difficulties of street life -- whether it is by finding work or means of entertainment or by standing up for each other in times of crisis or even resorting to offences like robbery as a means of sustenance. Despite the absence of the family, the motif and trope of *home* is compellingly used in this film about homeless children, mainly through the character of Chaipau who nurses the dream of returning home to his mother one day. The intensity of his desire for home is shown when he approaches the professional letter writer on the street for help to write a letter to his mother. In another instance, as he lies on the ground writhing in pain after being beaten up by the street boys for questioning them about his vanished money, the words he utters are: "I want to go home!" (01:14:51-53). Gradually Chaipau is drawn into the vortex of street life and the street becomes a home of sorts for him.

The role of Chillum in making Chaipau feel at home in the streets is considerable. The young drug peddler takes Chaipau on as his protégé, giving him the much needed comfort and consolation and acts as an educator initiating him into the ways of street life. This includes an initiation into the world of drugs. The scene where Chaipau is seen relaxing with Chillum in a graveyard at night indicates how he transcends, for a short while, his desire for *home* in the company of the older boy and by his usage of drugs. Chillum advises him: "Forget everyone – mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, friends, lovers, Sola Saal. Useless bloody lot!" (00:27:42-51). Starved as they are of familial love and care, the youngsters draw comfort and warmth from their physical proximity with each other. The intimacy Chaipau feels for the older boy borders on the homoerotic and the relief brought to him by drugs makes him

feel he is in Paradise. This scene gently puts forth the idea that *home* is *now and here* and *in present company* and not somewhere far away and among blood relations, an idea that has a diasporic resonance.

The only family we see in the movie is that of Baba, the pimp, Rekha, the prostitute and their daughter Manju. But this is a family that is very much unlike the families usually celebrated in national cinema. In the first place the woman of the family is in no way the vessel of purity and chastity symbolic of the nation and the man who is a pimp and a womanizer also deviates from standards of respectability expected of the male head of the family. Baba proudly tells the American girl who comes to interview him: "Baba's current woman used to work in the streets here. I rescued her from the gutter. She lives with me now" (00:43:31-38). In spite of the love he professes to have for Rekha and Manju, the mercenary instincts that tie him to Rekha who earns money as a prostitute is clear. Chillum's remark that Baba is a "[b]loody pimp, living off women" (01:00:41-45) stands true. Baba sets out on the task of *taming* Solasaal when the madam of the brothel promises to give him a share of the profit made through the virginal girl. In this family consisting of a mother who is a prostitute and a father who is a pimp, the daughter is often neglected and is seen living and sleeping on the streets with the other street children until she is taken into the care of a state-run institution.

In a film set in the city of Bombay notorious for its red light area, Mira Nair, the champion of the underprivileged has dedicated a lot of space to depict the lives of prostitutes. This can be seen as an outcome of her empathy for the fallen woman that was witnessed in her documentary, *India Cabaret* and it is a gesture that will be witnessed again in many of her later movies. Nair's first feature film zooms out of the

confines of the Indian family into the streets and captures the lives and travails of the most underprivileged women of the nation, the sex workers who live in red light areas. *Salaam Bombay!* therefore becomes a film bereft of any of the ideal women of chastity and feminine virtues celebrated by national cinema. Nair champions the cause of sex workers without any reservations and inhibitions:

> Nair is unafraid to speak for the women who work in the flesh business. The commodification of women is underscored in *Salaam Bombay!* by the always watching gaze of the young Chaipau, who records what happens to the women around him. Even though the main narrative of the film would seem to be Chaipau's fall and degradation as a tea-boy,… the film's metanarrative is the struggle of women, from girlhood to enslavement. (Foster 117-18)

The characters of Manju, Sweet Sixteen and Rekha represent various phases of the entrapment of women. Rekha, the oldest among the trio is a full blown prostitute whereas Sweet Sixteen is the fresh girl in the brothel who is to be initiated into the profession. Manju, who is taken into the state's protection as she is the child of a prostitute, loses the capacity to speak and express her desire to go back to the streets and to her mother. But her life in the streets is in no way safe and there is every chance of her being caught in the vicious circle of prostitution like the older women.

The most poignant portrayal of the prostitute could be that of the *prostitute as mother* as exemplified in the case of Rekha. Nair has movingly portrayed the tenderness and intimacy between Rekha and her daughter, Manju and the former's sorrow at her inability to assure her daughter's protection from the insecurities of life in the streets. Some of the most endearing scenes in the film come from the moments spent together by this mother-daughter duo, as they sing and dance and make stories to

match the shadows of animal made with their fingers on the walls of Rekha's dingy apartment. Chaipau, also has the fortune to be embraced in Rekha's motherly benevolence, thereby making her one of the few people he is close with. Rekha is seen snatching a towel to dry the boy's wet hair when he comes into her room, drenched in rain and including him in the small and joyous family circle consisting of herself and her daughter. Rekha is the only person to whom Chaipau can turn to in times of crisis as for instance to borrow money to buy medicines for the ailing Chillum. The motherly instincts of Rekha, no doubt, serve to bring out the basic humanity of the *fallen woman* despised by the nation. Better still, these scenes could be used to counter all those images of pristine pure motherhood in safe and clean environs of the middleclass home highlighted in Bollywood cinema. Nair's camera captures and records glimpses of motherhood in the most unlikely areas – in the red light streets, where prostitutes are worried about the safety of their girl children, while they continue with their business of flesh trade.

Rekha is seen struggling to keep her roles as mother and prostitute intact. Here is a woman torn between her twin roles, a mother who has to cut short her moments of intimacy with her daughter and command her to "disappear" (00:31:40) when it is time to cater to the sexual needs of Baba, the pimp. The image of Manju abandoned outside Rekha's room, looking in through the glass door and continually scratching and clawing at the closed door to attract the attention of her mother while she entertains her customers, haunts us and constantly reminds us of the plight of the children of sex workers. We agree with Foster's comment that the young girl's "acceptance and understanding of her mother's position is hampered by her youth" (117). Rekha is forced to take Manju with her on her visit to her clients' houses and we witness the resignation and understanding of the little girl as she waits outside in

the parlour as her mother caters to her client inside. After Manju is confined in the state-run care home for children, Rekha decides to leave the house where Baba had put her up. When Baba implores her not to leave their home, her reaction is: "It's not home without Manju!"(01:40:24-26), a remark that brings out the predominant instinct of motherhood in her.

Despite Rekha's better off position compared to that of other prostitutes and despite her attempts to protect her daughter from the insecurities of street life, the girl is drawn into its current until she is finally taken away by state authorities and put up in a care centre. The attitude of the authorities and the state to women like Rekha reflects the nation's downright condemnation of and inhumanity towards unchaste and impure women. The complacent female official at the care home tries to explain to Rekha the inadvisability of sending back the child with "women like [her]" (01:29:29). She reads out from an official report on child: "Due to the fact that the mother is a prostitute, the state has decided that in the interests of the child, she must be kept under state care until she is of age" (01:29:42-54). The official goes on to advise Rekha to give Manju a good life by "let[ting] her be adopted by a good family" (01:30:10-13). Rekha holds her ground with the words, "My daughter is all I have in the world! … How can the state be her mother?" (01:30:25-34). Through Rekha, Nair projects the idea of the impure mother as opposed to the pure and morally upright mother who stands for the nation. The child of the fallen woman or prostitute is confiscated by the state, but the fact that she loses her capacity for speech in the state-run care home points to the lack of efficacy of such institutions in bringing about any relief to children like her.

Rekha's questioning of the officials and her questioning of Baba's false

promises and the guts that enable her to tell the pimp that he is just "[a]nother customer" (00:54:48-50) to her are instances of her ability to resist authority and oppression. Her defiance of Baba is similar to Sweet Sixteen's repugnance to the business of flesh trade and her strong resistance to the attempts of the brothel authorities to bring her around. Being a Nepali who didn't know Hindi, her resistance is shown in non-verbal acts like smashing the glass tumbler in which the sympathetic Chaipau had offered her tea. Later, she cooperates with Chaipau's aborted attempt to save her from the well-guarded brothel by setting fire to her bed and running away. As Alpana Sharma puts it, "Sweet Sixteen, the older prostitute Rekha, and Rekha's daughter in *Salaam Bombay!*; the cabaret dancers in *India Cabaret*: all accede to varying levels of representation and agency, from virtual silence to covert resistance to exuberant assertion of selfhood. Many of these characters make the journey from the margins of society to the centre of Nair's films" (99). The red light zone of Bombay is shown as an inevitable trap from which women cannot escape and Sweet Sixteen, despite her initial protests is absorbed into its fold. When she refuses to cooperate, the task of *taming* her without her virginity being lost is assigned to Baba by the brothel's madam. The picture of Goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth that hangs on the wall of the young girl's dingy room suggests the high price and monetary value associated with a virgin like her. She is finally initiated into the ways of flesh trade by Baba and we see in her another hapless victim of the commoditization and slavery of women. When Chaipau comes to her after his stint at the Chiller Room, he sees a fully transformed and *tamed* Sweet Sixteen, dressed resplendently and being taken away for her *deflowering* by a rich client.

The story of Solasaal or Sweet Sixteen, the beautiful virgin girl brought to the brothel from Nepal and the stories of Rekha and her daughter follow a certain pattern

and are linked together by Chaipau's involvement with them. He becomes a protector of sorts for the women in the film -- whether it is the mother and daughter or the young girl from Nepal. In the words of Foster, Chaipau's "recognition of the commodification of women transcends cultural borders and questions around [the] definition of 'First/Third' world" (117). It is significant that he becomes the murderer of Baba, the sadist and misogynist pimp who perpetuates the commoditization and imprisonment of women through prostitution. Baba is seen taunting Rekha for her decision to leave him and become a holy *Mother India*, washing her sins in River Ganga (01:41:34-36). He bars her way to the stairs leading downwards, tries to cajole her and hands over a knife to her jestingly, asking her to kill him before leaving. Chaipau who comes from behind the pimp, takes the knife thrown down by Rekha and stabs him, thereby doing his bit to stop the evil of commoditization of women. The young boy becomes instrumental in destroying the principle of aggressive masculinity embodied in the film through the persona of Baba. His mission of rescuing imprisoned women which had failed in the case of Solasaal is successful and like the redeemer in Bollywood films, he is seen leading Rekha out of her *prison* over the lifeless body of pimp and into the streets of Bombay, teeming with the festive crowds and processions of Ganesh Chathurthi.

Rekha's merging with the procession of Lord Ganesha, the Hindu diety of auspicious beginnings and the remover of *vighnas* or obstacles as she is freed from hostage and supposedly enters a new life has loaded significance. Ganesha, the elephant-headed hybrid God and the God of the masses, conjoins the pure and the impure, the elite and the lowly. But very often celebrations in the name of religion are divorced from humane and human values and assume dangerous and fanatical overtones. Though the theme of religious fundamentalism is not fully developed by

Nair, we have hints about the inefficacy of religious rituals to ease the problems of the needy. The crowds of Ganesha Chathurthi, in which Chaipau and Rekha are immersed highlight their anonymity and lack of identity and visibility in a vast city like Bombay. Here are two dispossessed souls – an impure woman and a homeless boy – lost in the frenzy of excessive religious fervor that marks the city of Bombay. The nation marches forward with its religious processions and festivities with no time to stop and accommodate bruised souls or dispossessed people like Rekha or Krishna:

> [T]he frentic motion of *Salaam Bombay!* reaches its fever pitch as their escape attempt coincides with an oncoming tide of human flesh, the Ganapati festival and street parade. Inexorably moving forward with the weight of thousands of people behind it, this parade spirals out of control, and the hand-held, shaky camera work focuses squarely on Krishna and Rekha as they are jostled by the undulating life and physical momentum all around them. Figures rush by, speed across the frame, bump into Krishna, fight, and never recognize his presence, again pointing to his invisibility in the larger society. (Muir 65)

Life goes on in the great city of Bombay, the nation surges forward with the same blindness and ritualistic fervor of the crowds of Ganesha festival, a surge in which the marginalized remain marginalized, a surge in which they are disposed off like the Ganapati statues that are dumped in the river after the procession. Krishna holds on to Rekha's hands in the mad rush, but the two are severed apart and lose track of each other and in the final shot of the film we see Krishna, after the turmoil, sitting alone in the verandah of a building with his only possession, a wooden top. Though Rekha has finally gained freedom from Baba, the pimp, there is no guarantee that she would be absorbed into mainstream society and rehabilitated into normal life. So too, the

hardships in the life of Chaipau/Krishna has only aggravated, given the fact that he is now culpable of murder.

The frenzy and motion that we witness in the last scenes with the Ganesha festival processions informs the movie as a whole. The music of L. Subramaniam, the music composer augments the intensity of these scenes and builds up a sense of pace and momentum. For instance, "drumbeat like pulses that quicken" are used as background to Krishna's escape from the chiller room and "full-blown, fast-paced chase music" which creates a sense of tension is inserted as Krishna dashes down the avenue (Muir 64). The accentuated motion of these scenes suddenly tones down and culminates in absolute stillness at the very last scene of the movie as Krishna who has been ripped apart from Rekha in the procession, leaves the parade, slows down and sits down on the verandah of some building and weeps as he takes out his top, a toy that "like Krishna himself, spins and spins but never goes anywhere" (Muir 67). The camera that had been darting about to keep pace with the ever-moving Krishna now makes a "slow, deliberate, and intimate move" (67) towards the lonely and abandoned boy who finally weeps:

> The contrast between the previous motion and this still deliberate coda is one of the elements that renders this scene so powerful. A film of near-constant motion has suddenly stopped and we see Krishna alone in the frame for one of the few times in the film. His suffering goes unseen by others, but now this choice of staging and composition makes us see it without the filter of constant motion. The boy's pain is inescapable and it is on this note that the film ends.... A very realistic film suddenly transforms. It becomes very formalistic, very theatrical. The camera is no longer merely recording life with a sense of

reality, but is vividly expressing the pain of the protagonist. (Muir 66)

The final frame dedicated to the agonized boy is Nair's *salaam* to him. Here is a boy who had put up a brave fight against his circumstances and had faced utter defeat. Being robbed off his hard-earned cash, witnessing the deterioration and death of his bosom pal and being separated from the only people he loved, are all blows too heavy for his frail frame to bear. But this young boy becomes the Bombay and India Nair projects in her film and the nation she upholds.

Undoubtedly, Mira Nair, like all diasporic artists speaking about the homeland would be charged with vices of elitism, voyeurism and the selling of the nation's misery at the international market. These charges can be summarily dismissed when we consider that far from being a voyeur or an ivory tower artist, Nair chose a modus operandi that called for a close interaction with the characters and situations depicted in her films. Influenced by her experience in making documentaries, she employed real life figures in the role of street kids along with a few professional actors and shot her films against the real background of Bombay's teeming streets, slum and red light zones. Mira Nair and the co-writer of the screenplay, Sooni Taraporevala virtually lived on the streets of Bombay for days, "meeting and interviewing two hundred street children, visiting jails and so-called chiller rooms, where many of the delinquent youths ended up as wards of the state" (Muir 37). The close shave with the realities of the Bombay streets should have helped Nair impart a spirit of authenticity to the film and helped her accomplish her task of giving a voice to the lowest sections of India, a voice that is not often heard in Indian movies.

The movie casting child actors picked from the streets and the real settings of Bombay's teeming slums and red light areas is a far cry from the star-studded movies

of Bollywood with their artificial and glamorous sets. Krishna alias Chaipau, the protagonist of the film jars against the Indian viewers' expectations of the hero of Bollywood films, in terms of character, appearance and casting. Shafiq Syed, who dons the role of Krishna alias Chaipau sans the trappings of a Bollywood film hero lends credibility to the character. The role of most of the street kids are done by real life characters, Hansa Vitahal in the role of Manju, Chaipau's friend, being a case in point. Barry John who led the workshop observes that the street children made great actors since they were fearless, shameless and ruthlessly honest and "because of having been exposed to life in all its rawness" (qtd. in Muir 48). The use of real locations for shooting – teeming streets, brothels, railway stations, markets, detention homes, the processions of Ganesh Pooja and real life characters like the madams of the brothel, for instance imparted genuineness to the film. Very often, the filmmaker and her crew had to make on the spot decisions and alterations to meet unpredictable circumstances that arose from working in real locations and tackling real life people (Muir 62). The sound was also synchronized and "recorded on location" (51), adding to the film's veracity. All this happened at a time when Bollywood films were still for the most part shot in studio locations and were highly artificial in terms of location, actors and story lines.

The workshop organized by Nair to hone the skills of the street children and give them the discipline required for a feature film was led by none other than Barry John, the internationally acclaimed actor, director and teacher and founder-director of Theatre Action Group (1973-1999) based in Delhi, a group that was instrumental in moulding many successful personalities including Siddharth Basu, Mira Nair, Pamela Rooks and Sharukh Khan. Barry John recollects how he and Nair went about their task by designing for the children a fully packed program consisting of "physical exercises,

movement and free dance, mime, voice exercises, singing, theatre games and team games … beach gymnastics, beach plays, jokes, songs and mass dancing" (qtd. in Muir 45). Nair bestowed attention to minute details like involving a child psychologist to help the children with the hectic schedule of the workshop, deciding the diet of the children and getting to know them personally by making them narrate their own life stories, experiences and expectations. The workshop also had full-fledged discussions and debates between the children and the filmmakers making it a "non-formal education site" (Muir 47) not just for the children but also for the organizers. Nair's genuine concern for the welfare of the children prompted her to start the Salaam Balak Trust, an organization that was then administered by her mother for the welfare of destitute children from the streets. The trust, with centers in various parts of India, is still actively engaged in aiding street kids realize their potential and come up in life.

Nair's twin agenda of deconstructing the codes of purity set by the nation for women and the centralization of the downtrodden is carried on in a more evolved and sophisticated way in her fourth feature film, *Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* (1997) that was released nine years after *Salaam Bombay!.* Naming her film after the ancient Indian treatise on love, *Kamasutra*, supposedly written by Vatsyayana, Nair deviates from the realistic mode used in *Salaam Bombay!* to weave a fictional tale of love and sexuality set in sixteenth century India where kingly rule, feudalism and the rigidity of caste made life oppressive for the underdog. But unlike *Salaam Bombay!*, where the impure and the marginalized are shown to be hapless and doomed to defeat, in *Kamasutra* they emerge more empowered and triumphant, cease to be mere victims or casualties and become agents who determine their own destiny.

Kamasutra is, first and foremost, a film that validates impurity by celebrating

sexuality and removing the stigma associated with its depiction in mainstream Indian cinema. The purpose behind Nair's setting the film in the sixteenth century is "an obvious attempt to predate British colonialism, which ushered in the era of sexual taboos" (Sharma, "Body" 100) and depict "love and sexuality before it was messed up with shame and 'honour'" (Patel 79). India, before the colonial rule, was more open to sexuality and there are vestiges from ancient times to prove this. As Shweta Kothari notes, "repressing sexuality is a relatively recent phenomenon in India, sexuality was not a taboo always! The first literature on the science of sexuality, the nude artistry in Ajanta caves in South India and the erotic 9th century Hindu temples, are profound evidence in favour of sexual expression, found in both sculptures and scriptures of India" (Kothari). British rule ushered in sexual taboos and an excessive sense of morality on Indian society, putting an end to the sexually liberal ethos that prevailed here. The prudery that surrounds Bollywood cinema, which is a hangover of the colonial era's tendency for moral policing, often warps and distorts the depiction of sexuality by making it puerile, artificial and stylized to certain set standards and formulae, taking away its genuineness and openness. A film like *Kamasutra* that is candid in its depiction of sexuality is a bold step in the removal of any stigma attached to this intrinsic human need. The candid and bold expression of sexuality in film defies the codes and formulae of mainstream Indian cinema that is riddled with stringent measures of censorship and moral policing, thereby enabling a rewriting of the codes of purity set by the nation.

Questions may arise as to the aptness in Mira Nair's use of an ancient Sanskrit text presumably composed by Vatsyayana, which assumes an authoritative masculine voice throughout, to tell her female-oriented tale. Such misgivings are dispelled by the scholar, Wendy Doniger who prepared a new translation of the text of *Kamasutra* with

Sudhir Kakar in 2002. Doniger is struck by "the text's surprisingly modern ideas about gender and unexpectedly subtle stereotypes of feminine and masculine natures" (18). According to Doniger, the text

> … reveals relatively liberal attitudes to women's education and sexual freedom, and far more complex views of homosexual acts than are suggested by other texts of this period…. It is a book about the art of living – about finding a partner, about maintaining power in a marriage, committing adultery, living as or with a courtesan, using drugs—and also about the positions in sexual intercourse…. As for power, it is almost unique in classical Sanskrit literature in its almost total disregard of class and caste, though of course power relations of many kinds—gender, wealth, political position, as well as caste -- are implicit throughout the text. And it seems … to be *as much about the control of men as about the control of women*, in very subtle ways. (18, 20; emphasis added)

We also learn from Doniger that Vatsyayana was a "strong advocate for women's sexual pleasure" who acknowledged "woman's active agency and challenge[d] her stereotyped gender role" (29). The *Kamasutra*, therefore becomes an ideal subtext for a movie that speaks about a woman's journey to empowerment through the use of her body and sexuality.

Set in some unnamed kingdom of sixteenth century India, *Kamasutra* is peopled with kings, queens, courtesans, ministers, courtiers and the ordinary folk and has an exotic quality about it. The ancient edifices like old palaces, forts, temples and stone sculptures that form the backdrop of the film accentuate the exotic quality of the film. It is a costume drama or a periodic play, exotic not just to the foreign eye and

taste but also to the Indian. Added to all this is the exoticism of a text like *Kamasutra*, that is used as a subtext in the film. Nair's use of the exotic to highlight the erotic and her exoticization of the erotic are not without an inherent politics. Alpana Sharma notes how the status of the exotic in Nair's *oeuvre*, "especially and problematically" in *Kamasutra* (101), rises above becoming a merely fetishistic or colonial construction of fixity:

> [W]e may understand Nair's species of exoticization as part of the materializing process by which bodies come to matter.… Nair's exotic is on display not as an occasion for mindless consumption of bodies but as an invitation to re-examine the obvious…. [I]f in Vatsyayana'stime the erotic was treated as part of the everyday, the mundane, the banal, then Nair's political point is to represent this very banality such that our relationship to the immediate present – not only to the past -- undergoes a productive reassessment; as we are estranged from the erotic past of Vatsayana's*Kama Sutra* …we also look anew at our present moment in which the erotic has grown exotic and Other, taboo, secret, furtive, private. The erotic is accessed via the exotic; there is no way to look at the past except through the lens of the present. (101-102)

When the erotic is viewed via the exotic in a modern visual medium like cinema, it comes to have a politics that is binding on the present and contemporary times. Nair's main purpose is to remove the exoticism, otherness and secretiveness that sexuality is invested with in the national psyche and national cinema. Nair chooses to deconstruct the nation's pet notions about purity and to debunk the nation's tendency to exoticize the erotic, by the act of splurging her screen with exotic and erotic visuals and by

tracing the everyday quality of sexuality.

The fusion of the exotic and the erotic is brought about by the strategy of making a courtesan, the central character in her film. The courtesans of the past when represented in a modern medium like cinema embody the power of the erotic and have an aura of exoticism surrounding them. Courtesans were better off than ordinary prostitutes given their association with royalty and the rich and upper class clientele and all over the world, courtesans had a place of privilege in the courts where they dwelt and roles that often went beyond providing sexual pleasure to the kings or the other distinguished clients. They were often well educated, independent women, well-versed in dancing, singing and poetry, whose company and entertainment were sought after and regarded as a mark of status by a wealthy clientele. The status of the courtesans of India was no different and records show that there were esteemed scholars, historians and poets among them. Studies trace the existence of courtesans in India from the times of Rig Veda. In the book, *Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema*, Indubala Singh unearths the life that courtesans of India had in the past. Courtesans were a class apart and association with them "conferred status, which signified sophistication, wealth and cultural finesse in the lifestyle of the patron. The courtesans were considered unique among women of their times and were even educated, charming, wealthy and politically powerful too" (Singh 72).

There was no stigma associated with the sexuality of the courtesan, on the other hand it became an asset like her other accomplishments. By making Maya (Indira Varma), the courtesan in her film benefit from the sophisticated lessons of love and sexuality of *Kamasutra*, under the tutelage of an esteemed erstwhile courtesan, Rasadevi (mesmerizingly played by Rekha, the Bollywood heroine of yesteryears),

Nair removes the grossness and vulgarity associated with sexuality and elevates it to the status of an art to be mastered and as something sacred. The woman, instead of becoming a mere body used for sexual pleasure, becomes the chief player in the act of sex, and a powerful agent of sex sought after by the male. Nair subverts the paradigm of purity enforced on the woman's body, by celebrating the impure woman and the power of female sexuality. As in *Salaam Bombay!*, *Kamasutra* also undertakes a foregrounding of women deemed impure by the nation, but the latter film goes a few steps forward by delving deeper into questions of female desire and sexuality and the politics involved therein, aspects which were not examined or developed in *Salaam Bombay!*. The agency of Maya, the courtesan in *Kamasutra* to resist the desire and advances of the King, whose courtesan she is and desire instead the sculptor, Jai Kumar is indicative of the intricacies of female desire and the deflation of class hierarchies.

Kamasutra is a bold statement about the agency of the body and foregrounds the pleasures afforded by the body and the politics involved therein. This centralization of the body is evident in the opening shot that portrays the bodies of two young girls, Princess Tara (Sarita Choudhuri) and her maid, Maya tossing and tangling underneath the pool of water on the surface of which float red flower petals. Two pairs of little hands reach out to each other underneath the pool and caress each others' bodies. The two little bodies entangle and intertwine in a tender bond of friendship and care, setting the tone for the film as a whole. The centrality of the body to the film is established in this opening shot and throughout the power and agency of human bodies are highlighted. As the two girls of the opening shot, Princess Tara and Maya grow up into young women, the emphasis is still on their bodies and their victories and failures in life are tied up to the use and abuse of their bodies, whether it be in matter

of clothes, dance or sexuality. Alpana Sharma in her essay, "Body Matters: The Politics of Provocation in the Films of Mira Nair's Films", speaks about the politics of transgression that permeates Nair's depiction of sexuality and body in her films:

> Nair's politics of provocation are wedded to a belief in the agency of the body as this body materializes itself in a set of regulatory practices that at once define the body and set the body free…. Bodily pleasures are indulged, not wholly, but guardedly, with an eye on their transgressive powers … it is in the performance of the transgressive act – not before or after it – that political critique is embodied. … This performance takes as its site the spectacle of the body as its excesses of pleasure and pain call attention to the social codes of normativity *at the same time* as these codes are transgressed. (92)

It is mainly through the body of Maya, the maid of Tara who later becomes a sought after courtesan that the theme of transgression or the subverting of societal rules and morality is accomplished. If Rasa Devi, the courtesan is heard speaking about the ways of using the body for love, Maya proves that it can be used not just for the purpose of love or for transgressing moral codes, but also for transcending the power structures and status quo of society. Young Maya's act of excelling Princess Tara in dance, a performance of the body during childhood is an instance of how she masters her body to transcend power structures and hierarchies early on in life. Later, she masters her body to excel the Princess in love and in sexuality too, thereby subverting and transgressing the code of subservience enforced on a woman of unprivileged birth, social class and status.

The *empathetic knowing* of Mira Nair that was witnessed in *Salaam Bombay!* is applied in *Kamasutra* through the story of Maya. In fact, the journey of Maya from

her position as the maid/companion of Princess Tara during her childhood and adolescence to the position of power and privilege as courtesan is an arduous one. Nair, with her empathetic knowing, goes deep into the psyche of the servant girl and brings to surface her determination to shatter barriers of class and gain self-fulfillment. A motherless child, she is brought up by her *Maasi* or aunt, who had breastfed Princess Tara and Prince Bikram. This leads to the close proximity between the Princess and Maya and they become bosom pals and grow up playing together. Maya is lucky enough to undergo the same education and training as the princess and outshines her in talent. But she is constantly pulled down to earth and reminded of her position in society by those around her, including the princess. Tara's taunting reminder that comes every now and then -- "But you're a servant girl, Maya!" (00:02:18) – hurts her and fills her with resentment. The inevitable hierarchy in society that ordains the roles and positions of its various members leaves scars on the young girl's psyche and strengthens her resolve to soar above such divisions and oppressions. Deeply ambitious and not the one to be cowed down easily, she decides early on in life that she "want[s] to know everything [Tara] knows" (00:05:21), a step essential to being on par with her.

Maya had always been the questioning type, a girl who questioned all established norms and would not easily give in to the status quo, an attribute she retains even as she grows up into womanhood. Her sense of self-worth and dignity clashed with the customs and practices of the time, steeped as they were in class and caste divisions and hierarchies. A very humiliating custom that Maya, as the maid, invariably had to face was that of wearing the old clothes of her mistress, Tara. When the young Maya painfully reflects, "Why do I always have to use Tara's old clothes when she never has to use mine?" (00:04:22-24), her aunt reprimands her with the

words, “So what if they let you play with Tara? That doesn’t mean you can become a Maharani yourself!” (00:04:30-39). The disgrace of being subservient and secondary haunts her even as she blooms into womanhood. Tara’s father, the King, pleased with Maya’s excellent performance at dance presents her with new clothes, making her feel exhilarated. Tara in a pang of jealousy, cruelly hampers her elation and says, “Looks like leftovers! You can wear it at my wedding.… I’m going to be married to the great Raj Singh!” (00:08:14-19, 00:08:23-25). The disgrace that Maya has to suffer reaches its peak when Tara spits at her in public for being eyed by King Raj Singh (Naveen Andrews), Tara’s fiancé during the customary bride-seeing ceremony, a day before the wedding. This supreme act of insult propels Maya to take revenge on Tara by using the agency of her body. She goes to Raj Singh’s bedchamber on the eve of the wedding and entices him to make love with her, a seduction that makes his royal bride insignificant to him after the wedding. As Tara leaves for her husband’s kingdom after the wedding, Maya triumphantly whispers into her ears, “All my life I had lived with your used things. Now, something I have used is yours forever” (00:19:05-18). Maya’s rejoinder to the injustices and servitude imposed on her by society is echoed in the act of Chamki, a character in a short story named “Utran” or “Hand Me Downs” by Wajida Tabassum. In this story Chamki, the servant girl who had a neglected childhood and is forced to wear the used clothes of her mistress, retorts in a similar way by seducing her mistress’s future husband. Such rebellious acts by subaltern women subvert hierarchies of class, rules of matrimony and the ideals of female sexuality.

Maya turns out to be one of Mira Nair’s headstrong female protagonists who is not given to compromises or placated by shortcuts, not to mention, having her future determined by someone else. When Tara’s hunch backed brother, Prince Bikram,

smitten by love tells her when she was still a girl, "One day I will be King and you will be Queen and my slave" (00:05:07-12), she proudly retorts, "I'm no one's slave!" (00:05:16). Soon after Tara's wedding the infatuated Prince Bikram sends the Queen Mother with a proposal of marriage and Maya's aunt is seen coaxing her to accept it. Her sense of dignity prompts Maya to strongly resist this move that might have improved her position in the social ladder: "Am I supposed to say yes to everything -- to Tara's clothes, to her used dowry and now to her brother?" (00:20:30-36). When Maasi reminds her that subservience is their destiny, she retorts, "I'll make my own destiny, Maasi" (00:20:44-46), which she does, as we later see. When Maya's act of betrayal and seduction of Raj Singh is made known by the spiteful Bikram, she is banished from the kingdom and herein starts her journey of self-discovery and survival. She emerges as one of Mira Nair's strong female characters who would never accept defeat in the face of adverse circumstances, travelling all alone in search of fulfillment. The motif of the lone female traveler/wanderer counters the image of the family woman bound within the household that mainstream cinema is used to. Her meeting with Jai Kumar (Ramon Tikaram), the kind royal sculptor of Raj Singh's court is a turning point in her life as it is he who introduces her to Rasa Devi, the instructor in *Kamasutra* and it is through his sculpture of Padmini modeled on her that she is discovered once again by King Raj Singh. Maya and Jai Kumar fall in love with each other, but a temporary setback in their relationship drives her to accept the tutelage of Rasa Devi who had earlier told her, "You have it in you to be a great courtesan" (00:36:48-50). She learns the rules of love from Rasa Devi and is elevated to the position of chief courtesan by King Raj Singh.

Given that the vocation of the courtesan in ancient times, as already mentioned, was looked upon with reverence and awe and the rank of the chief

courtesan was a coveted one, Maya's, the maid's elevation to such a position is a moment of triumph for her. Courtesans, who were women outside the family order, were unhampered by the restrictions and norms the wife had to encounter and comply with. Their skills in music, dance, literature and poetry and their wealth put them in a far better position than women entering matrimony. The persona of Rasa Devi, the instructor of *Kamasutra* and the erstwhile courtesan of King Raj Singh's father, that exudes confidence and dignity, is a case in point. She conducts herself with pride and grace and imparts her profession of instructing women in the *Kamasutra* with such élan that she has a respectable position in society. Her mission is to impart to women the art of using their bodies to entice men and overpower them. Such an education in sexuality elevates the courtesan from being mere commodities to people having power and dignity.

Rasa Devi recounts to Maya the privileges she had enjoyed as the chief courtesan of Raj Singh's father. When the King went on a war, the queen as the dutiful wife would wash his feet and drink that holy water everyday till he returned from the battlefield. The King, on the other hand, would ride straight to Rasa Devi's chamber on his return from war. The courtesans were often more sought after than the queens, who, hemmed in by the constraints of matrimony, were less empowered than the former. The example of Princess Tara who had failed to please her husband on her wedding night and was completely ignored by him thereafter proves the point. The first night of Raj Singh and Tara indicate how women of the royalty were not free from patriarchy and were regarded as mere property. "One day you are your father's property, next day you are your husband's property – must be difficult!" (00:25:16-25), says Raj Singh to the newly-married Princess. As Tara cuts a sorry picture in the art of love, Raj Singh, who was still under the spell of Maya, whom he

had encountered the previous night, inadvertently utters her name. When Tara questions him ever so slightly, he flares up with the words – "Did they not prepare you? Did they not tell you never to question your husband? Get me the chief courtesan!" (00:27:56-00:28:01). Losing her husband to his huge circle of courtesans and being deprived of his love, takes its toll on Tara. Witnessing her erstwhile maid and rival, Maya become Raj Singh's chief courtesan is a further evidence of her succumbing to failure, a defeat that becomes an instance of the triumph of the servant over the mistress. The maid who was slighted at every instance by her mistress has now gained a position of power -- Maya can now reject the old clothes that Queen Tara thrusts on her and demand new ones in the presence of the Queen Mother who looks on indulgently at the new courtesan who has caught her son's fancy. Maya's privileged position proves that the words of Jai Kumar, "a servant is a master in disguise" (00:33:03-05) are true. Here is a woman belonging to the servant class who works her way up the social ladder and becomes indispensable to none other than the King.

If Laura Mulvey had lamented about the passive role of women versus the active status of men in cinema, *Kamasutra* is a film where women move the plot forward. The King here is not portrayed as a man of action or awe-inspiring and incredible deeds, but as a man losing ground as King because of his addiction to opium and women. He confides to Jai Kumar, "People say I think too much about women. What is there more important to think about?" (01:09:19-25). Raj Singh is so smitten by Maya that he further tells Jai Kumar, the sculptor, "I want you to carve her across the roof of my room. But if I was God, I would carve her across the bright blue sky" (01:10:54-01:11:01). Helena Kriel, who wrote the screen play for the film along with Mira Nair comments: "it's actually the female energy that embodies the power of

sexuality… and the male needs to allow the force of the feminine and sometimes the force of the female to direct the sexual route" (qtd. in Muir 118). As Raj Singh loses interest in matters of the state and deteriorates day by day, he is increasingly drawn to Maya for consolation and love. Maya, on the other hand, proves to be a courtesan of a different rank, a courtesan who is never subservient. Though she has surrendered her body to the King, she refuses to surrender her heart to him as she has reserved that for Jai Kumar, the sculptor. King Raj painfully senses that the coldness that Maya has for him is due to her devotion to Jay Kumar, the sculptor and orders his execution in the valley of stones. When Raj Singh pleads for Maya's love: "I want your heart" (01:44:19), she denies him his request and puts forth a condition: "If you free him!" (01:44:27). She has always been a person who has stood up against all forms of authoritarianism and she carries forward her stance even as the courtesan. It is her sense of dignity and pride that enables her to reprimand the King with the words, "I serviced you. That's all. You have no power over me. Go. Go now" (01:24:44–01:25:00). Raj Singh acknowledges his lack of authority over Maya: "Beautiful women are a law unto themselves. I no longer have any authority over her" (01:25:57–01:26:05).

The courtesan's preference for Jai Kumar, the sculptor is a bold act on her part and denotes her unwillingness to forsake her personal desires and choices at any cost. Both Maya and Jai Kumar are from disadvantaged backgrounds and rise up to their current positions of privilege by their own efforts and will power. There is an aura of sadness surrounding Jai Kumar, who himself is the orphaned son of courtesan. When they are first introduced to each other, he tells Maya the touching story of a courtesan from a nearby kingdom, who delivered a baby boy at the same time that the queen gave birth to a girl. Fearing the safety of her new-born son, who would be considered

as a threat to the throne, the courtesan had to part with the baby and make arrangements for his upbringing in some secret place. Every few years, the boy would be smuggled into the harem cross-dressed as a girl and would spend some time with his mother. The mother dies after some time and like Maya, the boy who is actually Jai Kumar has to work his way up in life. The two of them are inevitably drawn to each other and after their initial estrangement and reconciliation, a strong bond develops between them. Unfortunately the reconciliation happens after Maya has been made chief courtesan. Nevertheless, she defies the King and her position in the palace to pursue her love for Jai Kumar, an act that proves detrimental for both of them.

The life of Jai Kumar, the orphaned son of a courtesan highlights the flip side to the story of courtesans, who in spite of their superior talents and finesse were nevertheless embroiled in the patriarchal order and system of societal hierarchy and were bonded and subservient to the rulers and upper classes. Used as commodities by men of the royal class, they had to put up with the stigma and had to face many tribulations that their status and role entailed. King Raj Singh's mother is seen consoling her daughter-in-law, Tara with the words: "There are courtesans and then there are wives. There are dozens like her, but you are Queen!" (01:05:21-31). Indubala Singh throws light on the ambiguous position of courtesans:

> They were respected, but were not respectable in the sense in which wives were considered. Strangely in a patriarchal society, wives and courtesans are kind of mirror images of each other. Wives were the means by which patrilineage established links with other families and thereby affirmed its social status. The courtesan, on the other hand, addressed the aesthetic and erotic needs of their patrons. The courtesans, thus, are not different from their

> respectable sisters. They are not different because they share the same ambiguity of status as well as the ideological circumscribing of their persons and roles. (73)

But we have to grant that the "alleged promiscuity" of the courtesan and her status of being "outside the proscriptive periphery of stereotypical role models of mother, wife and daughter" (Singh 73) enabled her to transcend and subvert the roles imposed on women by patriarchy. So too, the courtesan's illegitimacy enabled her to subvert the "unscrupulous purity" that is supposed to be "the predetermined feature of womanhood in the patriarchal cultural ideology" and set her free from the parameters of purity set for womanhood by men (Singh 73).

It is her courage that enables Maya to endure the paradoxes inherent in her life as a courtesan and to survive the worst things including the death of her lover Jai Kumar. She witnesses Jai Kumar's being taken away as prisoner in chains, bleeding to the valley of stones, where he is murdered in a gruesome way, shattering her dreams of starting a new life with him. Jai Kumar and Maya are victims of the system of feudalism and class hierarchy prevalent in society, but they transcend their circumstances just as their love transcends death. The last scene of the movie that comes soon after the execution of Jai Kumar, shows Maya continue her journey through a stony terrain with the horizon looming large before her, leaving behind the palace where her beloved was executed. Muir describes the scene aptly: "Our last views of Maya see her bundled up, bracing against a harsh, dusty wind, … walking *against* the winds of war as troops storm Raj's palace and she heads in the opposite direction… marching alone against a superior force, her society, but not being blown down by it" (134-135). It is as though the destruction of Jai Kumar's corporal frame

has not destroyed his spirit which is mingled with nature. Jai Kumar who had worked on stone to bring out the life that throbbed within it had taught Maya about the life and spirit that existed in every aspect of nature including "waterfall, stone, grass" (00:37:30-36). The two of them in their happier days of togetherness had spent most of their time strolling across hilly terrains, bathing in mountain pools and merging with nature, that was free of the hierarchies and rules of human society and enjoying the divinity of love in its pristine pure form. At the end of the movie, as Maya walks away from Raj Singh's palace, bald and barefoot after Jai Kumar's death, her thoughts ring out in the form of a voice-over: "Knowing love, I will allow all things to come and go. To be supple as the wind and take everything that comes with great courage. As Rasa would say to me, 'Life is right in any case.' My heart is as open as the sky" (01:49:12-29).These lines and the feel that we have of her blending with the landscape and with nature impress upon us her independent and unassailable quality. At the same time, they suggest that her love for Jai Kumar has transformed her and that she carries this love within her even after his body ceases to exist in what can be seen as a transcending of the body. The wandering body of Maya that we see in the last frame of the movie, apart from signaling a diasporic logic, also underscores the idea of the woman wanderer as against the woman within the family/home and the idea of the woman who is free in an external space in contrast to the woman trapped in interior spaces.

Before embarking on her journey, Maya imparts her spirit of resilience and power of survival to her rival cum friend, Queen Tara. Desperate over her husband, Raj Singh's continued neglect of her, Tara finally attempts suicide by cutting her veins and immersing it in a pool of water. Maya, who had come in search of Tara apparently to plead for the safety of Jai Kumar who has been arrested by the King's guards, finds

her thus and saves her life. The childhood friends reconcile and Maya instills confidence in Tara by teaching her the lessons of love, whereby she can charm the King. The scene that has explicitly lesbian overtones reverts to the title scene which had portrayed Maya and Tara as young girls entwined in the pool filled with red rose petals. That the re-union of the estranged friends happens by the pool which was reddened by the blood dripping from Tara's wrist is more than a coincidence. What John Kenneth Muir says about the opening shot is significant: "the entire frame is alive with activity and texture, and here the image is both a pleasing and affecting one. The two figures holding hands are little girls, a princess and a servant, but in this palace – and under the soft-lapping waves – those societal constructs don't matter" (131). The sacredness of this childhood bond, severed with the passage of time and the influence of societal codes and hierarchies is finally restored when the courtesan teaches the principles of love to the Queen and equips her to confront the King. Maya tells the Queen, "I survived you. I wanted to live. Now you better survive me and your husband" (01:31:46-54). It is these lessons in survival that finally enables Tara to scoff at her husband with the words, "I do not love you enough to hate you" (01:38:40-44) and later to bravely face the doom of the Kingdom wrought by her husband, who is reduced to nothing but a cringing human being. Both Maya and Tara transcend the limits imposed on their bodies by their gender and by their circumstances and emerge victorious as the movie ends.

Kamasutra should be analyzed alongside the quintessential film of the courtesan genre, *Umrao Jaan*. Based on the Urdu novel by Mira Mohammed Hadi Ruswa (1857-1931) and directed by Muzaffar Ali in the year 1981, the film portrays the life of the "legendary mid-19th century courtesan *Umrao Jan Ada*, who lived during the times of the zenith of Avadh culture and the moment of its disintegration"

(Singh 70). Like Maya in *Kamasutra*, Umrao Jaan also transcends adverse circumstances and "matures into a highly cultured human being, an accomplished poetess in her own right…[who] sings and dances for the pleasure of Lucknow's fabled connoisseurs of art and music" (Singh 70). In spite of her laudable position, she suffers many setbacks in life including her short-lived romance with a Nawab that ends when he marries the girl of his choice. Her days of glory are punctuated with acute sorrow like that caused by being rejected outright by her own brother during a chance encounter at her home town. The last scene of the film portrays the desolate courtesan with a "battered psyche" who has to "chart out the journey of her life, all over again" (Singh 84). This last scene can be compared to the last scene in *Kamasutra* on many counts. Maya has lost her lover to death, she has forsaken her position as chief courtesan to the King and is embarking on a journey all by herself. But Maya's journey is a journey into the ambience of nature with the elements caressing her, it is the journey of an empowered woman, strengthened by the travails of her life and we have a sense of hope and optimism there. On the other hand, Umrao Jaan cuts a pathetic figure as she returns to her abode to restart her life all over again and instead of an empowered individual we confront a woman, who has been thoroughly bruised by life. Maya, the courtesan soars above her circumstances and stands for the triumph of the impure woman and the marginalized individual over the strictures of the nation and national cinema. Another point of contrast is that while *Umrao Jan* brims with song, poetry and dance, which is the forte of the *tawaif* or Muslim courtesan of Lucknow and which highlights culture and refinement, *Kamasutra* is not much embellished with such marks of culture and refinement. *Kamasutra* highlights the body of the courtesan and her obstinate and self-willed nature as against the splendidly attired, but demure and cultured persona of the

courtesan in the other movie. If the body represents nature and song or poetry represents culture and civilization, *Kamasutra*, in which the body is highlighted sans any stigma, can be said to be more natural.

Monsoon Wedding, which was released in 2001, differs from *India Cabaret*, *Salaam Bombay!* and *Kamasutra* for several reasons, the most important one being the centrality and triumph of the joint family as opposed to the failure or non-existence of the family in the previous three movies. Since nations "are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space" (McClintock 357), it is essential to examine how the familial space is reframed by the female diasporic filmmaker. Shot with a hand-held movie camera, the *Monsoon Wedding* has all the trappings of a Bollywood film and belongs to the genre of the wedding film that usually has great success in Bollywood as well as in other parts of the world. *Monsoon Wedding* is a hybrid film that "eschews the glossy patina of blockbuster Bollywood films in favour of a documentary cinematic style by shooting with a handheld Super 16 camera, … merg[ing] the realism of American independent filmmaking with Bollywood's narrative style" (Sharpe 61). The film also comes up as a fine example of the comedy of manners that does a humorous take on the manners of people belonging to the upper middle classes of Delhi.

The film offers us glimpses from the happenings in a Punjabi family in Delhi, the affluent Verma clan, several members of whom belong to the Indian diaspora scattered in different parts of the globe, getting together to celebrate the marriage of a daughter, Aditi (Vasundhara Das). The marriage motif makes it on par with other classic Bollywood movies of the wedding genre like *Hum Aapke Hai Koun..!* and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayengi*, abbreviated as HAHK and DDLJ respectively, against

which it should be compared. Jenny Sharpe speaks of the indebtedness of *Monsoon Wedding* to the wedding genre in

> … its integration of song-and-dance sequences into the storyline, its indulgence in the rich culture of Punjabi weddings, and its tribute to the extended joint family. In addition, through the shared knowledge its characters have of songs from popular Hindi films, Nair's film dramatizes how a commercialized, hybridized and low cultural form such as Bombay cinema operates as the site of a collective Indian identity throughout the diaspora. (61)

But there is much more to *Monsoon Wedding* than we can expect from a Bollywood film of the wedding genre in that it deviates from the Bollywood standards in many ways, parodies these standards and gets the better of them by challenging them.

An analysis of the wedding films, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* and *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayengi* show how they play to the tunes of the nation and avidly espouse the nation's cherished ideals like family solidarity and supremacy and female chastity and sacrifice. These films are set in the 1990s when globalization had ushered in western life styles enabled by the accumulation of wealth. The urban Indian families and those belonging to the Indian diaspora portrayed in the films are prone to Western styles but at the same time are steeped in traditional Hindu values. There were in these family melodramas, the "strong assertion of a Hindustani identity… [that] can be considered a response to the crisis in national identity produced by an embracing of values that were previously rejected" (Sharpe 63). Both the films that belong to the wedding genre, afford glimpses into the patriarchal Indian family with its paraphernalia of wedding customs and rituals. *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, especially, tries to subsume the Indian into the Hindu, by making the married couple in the film,

Rajesh and Pooja and Rajesh's brother, Prem correspond to the mythological husband-wife and brother trio of Ram, Sita and Lakshman, whose relationship is based on "the notion of 'sacrifice' and dharma which is the core value that *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun!* projects" (R. Sen 161).

Projecting the family as a site imbued with religious and mythological values reinforces the idea of the family as representing the nation that endorses these values or 'dharmas' at the macro level. Since it is the women of the family who are supposed to be the carriers and performers of these values, family films are peopled with ideal daughters, daughters-in-law or wives dedicated to the welfare of the family and "willingly submitting to the notion of patriarchy with her head covered, feeding, cooking, knitting and finally delivering a baby" (R. Sen 164). The heroine of HAHK is the dutiful daughter who was willing to sacrifice her love for Prem and marry his widowed brother who was also her late sister's husband for the sake of their baby. Such a suppression of women's personal preferences also happens in the case of Simran, the heroine of DDLJ. Simran, a Non Resident Indian girl, who lives in London, has to submit to her father's choice of bridegroom, in spite of her love for Raj, another NRI she meets during her trip to Europe. This sense of duty and sacrifice of personal preferences by female characters was central to the theme of family films, especially to those belonging to the wedding genre. According to Ritu Sen, "Patriarchy lies at the heart of the joint family and by extension, the wedding genre. Through patriarchy, the subjugation of female desire and will is 'jointly' imposed at two levels, the family and then society" (164). The sense of duty and honour sometimes binds the male protagonists also. For instance, Raj, the hero of DDLJ, plays the honourable gentleman who uses techniques to win around Simran's father and make him accept their union rather than marry the girl against his will. The film

places a lot of importance on values like family honour, obedience to elders, female submissiveness and chastity. The film also brings out the contrast between 'Indian-ness' of the bride as against the 'western' ways of the groom, Raj, who is given to smoking, drinking and flirting (R. Sen 165).

Monsoon Wedding diverges from the above two wedding films in several ways and manifests Mira Nair's inclination for being shocking and provocative. If the two films mentioned above "appropriate[] feminist values in the service of tradition, … a diasporic film such as *Monsoon Wedding* expands the heteronormative female sexual desire into the family melodrama formula in order to explode it" (Sharpe 64). Such an explosion happens in the film by the shock value created in relation to its conception of the traditional Hindu bride. Unlike the Indian brides who are portrayed as chaste and demure in HAHK and DDLJ, we have in *Monsoon Wedding*, a would-be bride, who has a secret affair with a married man and whose passion leads her to have sexual intercourse with him a day before the wedding. An impure and unchaste bride is a trope that is unthinkable in Bollywood cinema preoccupied as it is with "a remapping of the nation's boundaries through a politics of gender which centers around conflicts over the preservation of the purity of women's sexuality" (Sharpe 62). *Monsoon Wedding* does not take any moral stance against this *transgression* of the would-be-bride and the nation conceived therein is not overtly concerned with the preservation of women's sexual purity. On the other hand, the film is peopled with women invested with asexual attributes like self-respect, courage, and candor, thereby making them more human and freeing them from the limited role of being symbolic of family honour and national purity through their chastity.

The world of *Monsoon Wedding* deviates from "the moral world of

commercial Indian cinema" where an overbearing sense of duty, loyalty to the nation and familial bonds gain the upper hand over personal desires (Sharpe 64). Comparing DDLJ with *Monsoon Wedding*, Jenny Sharpe notes that there is a shift in setting from "the golden mustard fields of rural Punjab with its pastoral harmony of joint family life [to] the suburban sprawl of New Delhi with its high-rises and carefully manicured golf course" (70).The cosmopolitan city of Delhi is shown as a place where "[s]exual frankness is not simply a western import", but a part and parcel of everyday discourse (70). The T.V.talk show Delhi.com that is shown in the beginning of the film lampoons the overbearing moralistic pose of society with a panelist expressing his anxiety about the erosion of traditional Indian values and culture when a female dubbist of films is invited to the show and made to simulate the sounds of love making (Sharpe 70). The family to which Aditi, the bride of *Monsoon Wedding* belongs reflects the mood of the city and is more relaxed and permissive when compared to the Non Resident Indian family in DDLJ. The London-based family of DDLJ is extremely patriarchal and hierarchy-based and the father of the bride is a rigid dictatorial figure, who dictates terms on both his wife and his daughters, takes decisions for them and is bent on bringing them up according to Indian values. The father in *Monsoon Wedding*, Lalit Verma (Naseeruddin Shah), is more democratic and flexible – a father, who dotes on his daughter and is lovingly reprimanded and teased by his wife. The family gatherings are very relaxed and filled with fun and frolic, not to mention the coarse jokes doing their rounds on such occasions. Allusions to sexuality and the body were part of the conversation and jokes of even its younger members and physical attraction and love affairs among the younger generation developed with an ease and quickness that was foreign to Indian cinema.

The liberal family Aditi lives in as well as the liberal social atmosphere she is

exposed to causes her to be more independent, carefree and less tradition-bound than an average Indian bride depicted in Indian cinema. An avid reader of *Cosmopolitan*, the magazine on fashion and sex, Aditi sports short hair, moves around the city freely and has a mind of her own. Soon after the opening shot in the lawns of the Verma household, where the preparations and hustle and bustle of the wedding go on, we are introduced to the would-be bride who is on a visit to the TV station where her married lover Vikram Singh hosts the talk show called Delhi.com. As the lovers meet, the audience is "confronted with an extreme close-up, over-the-shoulder shot of her face as her lover kisses her in a scene that self-consciously thumbs its nose at the Indian prohibition of on-screen kissing" (Sharpe 71). The degree of sexual freedom and agency that Aditi enjoys makes her different from a typical Indian girl and we agree with Jenny Sharpe that *Monsoon Wedding* is unlike an average Indian commercial film whose "moral universe is maintained … through the symbolic functioning of the heroine as that which defines the boundaries of "Indianness"" (64). This difference is notable even in Aditi's attitude towards life in a joint family. She is a person who prices her privacy and often finds the presence of relatives and the festivities of the wedding cloying to the point of seeking escape routes. "Let me have some bloody privacy in my own house!" (00:26:06-08), she is seen blurting out during the pre-wedding bustle. If her rendezvous with her married lover, Vikram is one of her ways out of the middle class *khandhan* or family, so is her marriage to Texas-based Hemant, which she tells him, will take her away from India with its claustrophobic customs and traditions to a distant land. Though she draws solace from the family after her affair with Vikram fails and settles for the groom chosen for her by her father, we come to know she that does not hold the family as something sacrosanct and ultimate like the heroines of commercial Indian cinema.

Aditi's affair with Vikram and her sexual encounter with him a day before the wedding subverts the ideals of Bollywood cinema in general and the wedding movie in particular. Unlike the coy and sexually innocent virgin bride of the wedding genre, we have here a bride who sneaks out in the night, when the family is asleep, for a tryst with her married lover. The *mehendi* on her hand, one of the chief decorations and auspicious marks of the Indian bride, is visible as she makes love with her illicit lover in his car. There is a heavy downpour of rain outside and a *ghazal* or a poetic song expressing romantic sentiments plays softly in the background. Her *bliss* has a rough ending as their vehicle is raided by policemen who force them out to be questioned. When Vikram appears more concerned about convincing his wife who calls him at that moment on his mobile phone than about protecting Aditi from the jeers of the policemen, he proves where his loyalty lies. Ritu Sen points out the irony in the use of the ghazal "Aaj jaane ki zid na karo"[1] for this scene with respect to the chastity of the Indian woman and the purity and moral ethos of the nation, given that the ghazal is "attributed to the mujra, or salon performance by courtesans" and speaks about "illicit love and hard heartedness of the lover amongst other things":

> [I]n the diagesis of the scene, the *gazal* [*sic*] sets the tone, not just in foreshadowing the unsympathetic attitude of Vikram, Aditi's lover, but also by labeling Aditi's expression of sexual desire indecorous, by linking it with the salon performance enacted by courtesans. Eventually, the scene works as a trope for the nation state as the patriarchal figure as it catches Aditi and Vikram being accosted by the 'moral brigade' of the police who threaten to arrest them on charges of indecency. Thus though on one level the song announces the end of the 'virgin' bride by showing the unrepressed sexuality of the female, on the other it represses the desire forcefully through the

authority of the state. (169)

Mira Nair does away with the conception of the *virgin bride* in the most casual manner, sans any qualm or judgment. She even adds a touch of the hilarious and the comic to the subversion of the trope of the virgin bride as we witness the would-be-bride driving away in her lover's car, leaving the worthless man to confront the ire of the police in the pouring rain. Analyzing her portrayal of the *impure women* in this family film of the wedding genre, we sense the distance Nair has travelled from the other three movies already discussed. The so called impure women of *Monsoon Wedding* are not marginalized souls lingering in the forsaken places of society, but privileged individuals born into upper middle class families. By placing impure women within the fold of the traditional Indian family and absolving them of their immorality and impurity, Nair subverts notions related not only to women's chastity, but also to two institutions central to the nation -- the family and marriage.

The nonchalance with which Aditi realizes the futility of wasting her hopes and passion on a self-centred person like Vikram and the buoyancy with which Aditi comes out of her affair is not riddled with any kind of moral upbraiding or entanglement. Her act of confessing her transgression to Hemant (Parvin Dabas), the would-be groom is more an evidence of her personal integrity and honesty than an offshoot of any moral positioning or sense of guilt. She tells her cousin, Ria (Shefali Shah), that she doesn't want to "start something new based on lies and deceit. It's just so wrong" (*MW* 01:04:24-29). Hemant, who is an IT professional based in Texas, USA had apparently expected his bride to be the typical Indian girl and is initially disturbed by the knowledge that she is not a virgin. This subverted trope of the violated bride versus the virgin groom "turn[s] the table on the audience which has

been accustomed to Bollywood cinema portraits of demure Indian brides and decadent westernized diasporic males" (Rajgopal 174). In another subversion of patriarchal expectations about the bride, the groom quickly overcomes his initial disquiet and starts appreciating Aditi's honesty --"That honesty means a lot to me!" (*MW* 01:14:12-13). When Hemant confesses that he too had suffered from the heart aches of a failed love affair, the groom and bride are on par with each other, thereby redefining the essential ingredients of marriage from sexual purity and chastity to mutual frankness and understanding. As Kenneth Muir puts it, "Aditi conducts an affair with a married man, which is shocking one supposes to India's traditionalist. Even more shocking, it would follow, is Hemant's reconciliation with Aditi. This is a bold acknowledgement that tradition and such concepts of premarital sex and a bride's virginity-- no longer carry the currency they once did" (186). Aditi and Hemant decide to go forward with the marriage with mutual trust and understanding rather than with the usual moral requisites or patriarchal prescriptions imposed on marriage by society. Hemant has a more open outlook that enables him to take into account the "risks" (*MW* 01:14:18) involved in a marriage instead of treating marriage as something decisive or sacred. Rather than striking the usual conservative and moralistic pose regarding the infidelity of the prospective bride, the film treats the issue in a balanced and mature way, thereby defying the parameters of the wedding genre spelt out in such films as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, or *Dilwale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*.

A notable deviation that Mira Nair takes from the *wedding film* or Bollywood film is in her presentation of the patriarchal joint family as a fallible entity rather than as an unquestionable and flawless unit that has to be revered on all counts. No doubt, *Monsoon Wedding* is very much a family movie unlike the other two movies studied here, namely, *Salaam Bombay!* and *Kamasutra*, in that it celebrates the joys of

togetherness and the security a family affords. In fact, Mira Nair has on several occasions upheld the importance of her Punjabi family and this film casts some of her own family members in important roles. In spite of this, it is laudable that the filmmaker does not take the family at its face value but searches for fault lines that the family is ridden with. As Sanjukta Dasgupta rightfully observes,

> *Monsoon Wedding* in a different mode tries to cut through the veneer of silence, secrecy, hypocrisy within the deeply valorized Indian family system. It is a sort of reverse gaze, a self-introspective analysis of tradition, change and transforming value system and the discovering of self, identity and the cultural paradigm shifts…. *Monsoon Wedding* enshrines the exotic extravaganza of the Indian wedding with family members playing a crucial role in the observance of customs and rituals….But the traditional, conservative and conventional are not only part of the Indian family life. Nair's text explores the conflicts, cruelties, expectations, double standards and even through a series of exposures also foregrounds taboo subjects among the urban affluent middle classes such as marital infidelity, paedophilia, sexual advances and malicious gossip, which after all are deeply meshed within the Indian family life. (147)

The unveiling of the heroic and respected uncle of the family who turns out to be a pedophile fits well into Mira Nair's scheme of busting the inviolability of the patriarchal joint family of India, the indecorous realities and truths of which are usually kept under cover. Mr. Tejpuri (Rajat Kapoor), who is based in the United States, is married to the sister of Lalit Verma, the bride's father. Lalit leaves no stone unturned in expressing the family's indebtedness to Tejpuri for having been the pillar of support for the family after the death of the former's elder brother. Lalit also hints

that his family's indebtedness to the Tejpuri family dates back to the Partition of India when the Verma family was uprooted from Pakistan to India and was assisted by the Tejpuri family. Tejpuri, who is ever forthcoming in his assistance to the Verma clan, has of late made two irresistible promises – that of helping Lalit in any way possible for his daughter's wedding and of funding the education of Lalit's late brother's daughter, Ria, in America. But there is a major setback to Tejpuri's stature when Ria confronts him on the eve of Aditi's wedding for having molested her sexually when she was a child. This outburst and revelation from Ria, who had been silent about this episode so far, occurs when she realizes that her young cousin Alia has become the target of Tejpuri's perversion at present.

Ria throws away all consideration of family decorum and takes it upon her to prevent Tejpuri from doing to Alia what he had done to her long ago. In the midst of the celebrations, when she sees him taking Alia for a drive, she blocks his car and shouts, "Just let her go!" (*MW* 01:31:31). The shell-shocked family looks on as she tears down Tejpuri's mask: "It wasn't enough that he touched me when I was a little girl! That wasn't enough that you have to teach Alia how older people kiss! …. What do you get out of it? I didn't even have breasts, you sick man!" (01:31:47-56). Confronting and challenging a formidable male relative at an important family function and accusing him of having sexually violated her is indeed a brave thing for a fatherless and dependent girl like Ria to do, given the adulation with which the former is held in the family and the risk of dishonor that awaits a spinster like her. When the members of the family including Lalit find it quite difficult to take in what they have just heard from Ria, she leaves the family amidst the pre-wedding celebrations saying she cannot be *part* of it anymore: "You don't want to believe me? Then fine, I'm not a part of this, I'm not a part of you" (01:32:19-28). A major way in which the film

deviates from other mainstream films is that the molested girl is brought back into the fold of the family and the molester is ousted from it. The first thing Lalit does on the morning of his daughter's wedding is to visit Ria and plead with her to return to the family and take part in the wedding celebrations. The next daring act he does is to confront the family benefactor-turned- child-molester and ask him downright to leave with his wife: "I don't even want you here…. Both of you just leave my home and my family and go….These are my children and I will protect them from myself if I have to" (01:41:51-01:42:24). Jenny Sharpe's observations on this scene are valid and worth quoting:

> Tej's ejection from the wedding involves a symbolic removal of the traditional Punjabi turban he is wearing for the wedding. While posing for the formal wedding photo, Ria is made to sit at the feet of Uncle Tej, who is seated in a chair next to the bride in reference to his status as the extended family patriarch. In the scene in which Lalit asks Tej to leave the wedding, the camera pans across the female family members to emphasize that the father is making his choice out of respect for them over his obligations to an elder male relative. The film's dramatization of Tej removing his turban before leaving the Verma home makes explicit the superficiality of locating traditional values in appearances. Lalit's decision demonstrates that the strength of the Indian family lies in a male head of household who respects all of its members' needs over his own desire to save face in public. (72)

The embracing of the sexually molested daughter into the family fold and the ouster of a prominent patriarch of the family who is a paedophile, a theme not much trodden upon in mainstream cinema, is an audacious twist that Mira Nair gives to her wedding

film. The wedding genre that had hitherto been overridden by its concern about the chastity of the bride and the feminine grooming of its daughters gets a facelift by Nair's assertion of the acceptability of the sexually assaulted daughter into the family and in matrimony. As Jigna Desai argues

> [T]he primary discourse around the sexually violated women in commercial Indian cinema is the impossibility of their recuperation. This turn in the film is opposed to the possibility of banishing or disposing the victim of sexual abuse as the marker of shame and contamination. The strength of the heteronormative romance narrative is suggested by its ability to overwrite the gender normative narrative in which the raped woman of popular Indian cinema must die. (*Beyond* 214)

As the movie ends, there are indications that Ria, who is in her late twenties is being sought after as a bride for Umang, one of the eligible bachelors in the family. Here is a film belonging to the wedding genre that categorically divorces itself from the strict code of virginity and purity imposed on the bride by promoting characters like Aditi and Ria.

Like the younger women of the family, Pimmi, the bride's mother and Lalit's wife, is also portrayed in an interesting way. Pimmi (Lillete Dubey), the loving mother who fondly makes preparations for her daughter's wedding and dotes on and is indulgent to her son is also the vociferous and assertive woman who can confront her husband, reprimand him and express her views on all matters of the family including the education of her son. She is not one among the demure, self-effacing and shadowy mothers that Bollywood films are used to, women who are subservient to their husbands and have no voice of their own. At the same time, she shares a very tender

relationship with her husband and becomes the source of his strength and comfort when he faces major crises and blows like the one relating to Ria's revelation about Tejpuri. He is seen crying hard and telling her: "Take care of me, Pimmi, I'm falling to pieces" (*MW* 01:34:49). She is in fact stronger than the man of the family and provides him with the much needed consolation. Pimmi has her share of transgression of the rules of ideal Indian womanhood like the younger ones of the family, albeit in a different way. She is often seen smoking in the privacy of her bathroom even as she is busy with the preparations of her daughter's marriage and using room freshener to hide the smell, an act for which she is teased by her husband. Pimmi, with such transgressive traits in her, stands as a foil to the stereotyped mothers of Indian cinema.

The sub plot of the film which involves the touching romance of Dubey (Vijay Raaz), the wedding planner and tent contractor and Alice (Tillotama Shome), the live-in maid of the Verma household becomes a parody of Bollywood cinema, which is known for portraying in a detailed and chronological way the blooming and maturing of romance of the hero and heroine, the obstacles faced in their romance and the surmounting of these obstacles, culminating in the union of the pair. The heroine, Aditi and her romance with the married man has a dismal end and there are a few romantic moments that she shares with Hemant after her confession and reconciliation with him, but they do not stand a match to Nair's portrayal of the poignant romance of the unprivileged individuals in the movie, the maid and the wedding tent maker. Jenny Sharpe opines, "Although *Monsoon Wedding* abandons the traditional Bollywood heroine in Aditi, she is reconstituted in Alice, who appears as a pure and virginal object of desire" (73). The romance of Dubey and Alice fulfils the parameters of any love story in Bollywood cinema -- the innocence of the girl, unimaginable coincidences that bring them together, the initial reticence and shyness of the lovers,

their gradual opening up, the misunderstanding, the patching up and the happy union in the end. Their meetings are flavoured all through with old Bollywood romantic numbers which impart pathos to their story and enhance its appeal and beauty. In the words of Sanjukta Dasgupta, "the romantic foreplay of Alice and Dubey parodies the romantic sequences of songs, dances, love-lorn pensiveness, the invariable formula of many blockbuster Bollywood films" (148).

Like Dubey, Alice, the maid is expected to serve the members of the family and answer to their beck and call and yet remain relegated to the margins. She is always seen isolated in the hustle and bustle and joys of the huge and festive Verma mansion where a marriage is fast approaching and where guests and relatives are pouring in from various corners of the world. Rose Capp beautifully captures the essence of this character:

> Alice is an equally intriguing character. Her silent but resentful presence throughout the riotous wedding preparations gives Nair's film its strongest and most eloquent expression of class divisions. A classic example of the marginalized figures Nair has so often 'championed', Alice is forever hovering on the edges of the group of female family members. By virtue of her sex, she is both a part of them, but as a servant, definitively apart from them. (Capp)

Alice is bound to be another of those subaltern figures who goes unnoticed in movies. But Nair's camera zooms in on her and brings to surface her submerged desires and whims. In one such move, the camera catches her trying on the ornaments of her employers left on the dressing table and preening before the mirror. The audience becomes voyeurs along with the Dubey and his workers, who watch her from outside the glass window. This is a moment that Nair uses to bring out the hidden desires of

this forsaken and shadowy figure, her desire to be well-dressed and appealing like any other girl. If Dubey's act of secretly watching Alice is writ large with the tenderness and admiration he has for her, the other male looks on a female servant trying on the jewels of her mistress are judgmental and indicting. Dubey reprimands his co-workers for their act and they seek her forgiveness at the earliest. The scene that follows this is the one in which Hemant gets reconciled to Aditi and asks her forgiveness after initially reeling under the shock of her affair with Vikram and expressing his resentment to her. There is embodied in the world of Monsoon Wedding, a very soft and respectful stance towards women, whether it is to Aditi, Ria or Alice.

The subplot of the film consisting of the love story of Dubey and Alice is in scheme with Nair's empathy for the subaltern and her purpose of foregrounding them. Individuals belonging to the servant class usually remain in the margins and shadows of the rich families shown in Bollywood movies and are often portrayed as comic figures affording base comedy. P.K. Dubey, the wedding planner in *Monsoon Wedding* is the cause of much comedy in the film, but instead of debasing his persona to that of a purely comic one, Nair's empathy brings out his human side and weaves a beautiful story of romance around him. The Christian, working class identity of Alice has been problematized by Jenny Sharpe. According to her, Alice does not "embody the perfect vision of upper-caste Hindu femininity that Bollywood cinema has created, as Nair avoids using the soft lens designed to make the heroine emit an aura of beauty. Rather, she operates as a figure of working-class authenticity" (73). Moreover, Nair's act of making a Christian take the place of the pure Indian woman "undermines the Hindutva identification of the nation with the chaste, upper-caste Hindu woman and a Bollywood stereotyping of Indian Christians as mini-skirted, sexually loose women" (Sharpe 74).

The characterization of Dubey is also of much interest. He is a representative of the upwardly mobile lower middle class worker who is tech-savvy and smart enough to outwit the imperious and condescending tendencies of Lalit, the master of the house whose, contract he has accepted. Dubey claims to be running a web based event management programme for functions such as weddings and constantly relies on various electronic devices like cell phone, wristwatch calculator or pager. Lalit is seen dismissing his wife Pimmi's coaxing that he should start doing his calculations on computer by saying that he is too old to learn using them. In contrast, Dubey uses the modern electronic gadgets with much ease and felicity and even Alice, the maid shares this felicity and knowledge about modern technology as is evident in her awareness of what an email is. Sabrina Dhawan, who has written the screen play for the film, notes that the technical knowhow and upward mobility of Dubey gives him a sense of pride and confidence: "He's someone who isn't apologetic for who he is" and does not act "in a servile way to the people who belong to a higher class" (qtd. in Muir 184). Practical, assertive and ambitious, Dubey is nevertheless a romantic to the core. At several points in the movie, we see him lost in dreams about Alice and at one point, he is seen sadly ruminating that in spite of having conducted marriages for many others throughout his life, he still remained unmarried. There is a lot of pathos in the depiction of both Alice and Dubey and Nair pays tribute to these forsaken souls by weaving a beautiful love story around them.

The Marigold flower which form an important part of marriage decorations in Indian marriages and which Dubey uses amply in Aditi's marriage tent becomes a motif that links the two lovers. Dubey, in a comical way, is prone to eating marigold flowers and Alice too is seen doing the same at certain moments. Towards the close of the movie, as the marriage celebrations reach their zenith in the Verma household,

Dubey come to the kitchen door with a heart made of marigold flowers to meet his forlorn and lonely sweetheart and ask for her hand. In a beautiful scene, he kneels down on a flower mat decked with lamps and extends his marigold heart to Alice, who accepts it. The workers jubilate and have a parallel celebration of the union of their boss, Dubey and Alice. Sanjukta Dasgupta's words bring out the significance of the love story of Alice and Dubey in the film:

> Nair's irony seems to penetrate the veneer of culture, education and sophistication by telling the viewer that love as a mysterious and innocuous romantic concept beyond sexual desire probably survives among the less privileged social groups….Their mutual attraction, shy expressions of love, distress and eventual happiness have been subtly introduced in the film as a counter-discourse that also distributes attention to the diverse economic classes and multiple regional cultures of India. (148)

The movie comes to a close when Dubey and his bride are taken into the fold of the Verma family and merge with the dancing and revelry of Aditi's wedding with the rain drenching the whole lot of them. Lalit, the bride's father, obviously happy and contented at having extended his support to his wronged niece Ria now embraces the newly married Dubey with whom he had been at loggerheads so far. The last moments of the film, where the marginalized merge with their elite masters in a rapturous dance, are in keeping with "the film's utopian desire for an egalitarian nation" (Sharpe 74) and Nair's project of foregrounding and elevating the position of the underprivileged.

In fact *Monsoon Wedding* is a film where lots of fusion and merging takes place, the merging of the privileged and underprivileged being only one instance. The

title of the movie suggests the merging of a wedding with monsoon, a merging that is ambivalent. The rain is usually dreaded during weddings as it may play the spoil sport and mar the celebrations. However the rain in all cultures is regarded as an auspicious harbinger of fertility and prosperity. The rain that drenches Aditi's wedding comes as a respite after the tense moments in the family and the surmounting of two major crises within the family – Aditi's illicit affair and the exposure of the paedophilic uncle. Yet another hitch in the plot, Dubey's unrevealed love for Alice is also resolved as his proposal is accepted and they get married. With the arrival of cousin Umang in the midst of the celebrations, marriage becomes highly probable for Ria, who was sexually abused as a child and who had remained a spinster so far. The rain comes as a blessing to all the couples, dispelling all apprehensions and ratifying their unions.

If *Monsoon Wedding* ends with the confluence of the privileged and the underprivileged sections of society and the validation of the impure and the unchaste in the sacred ceremony of a wedding that is blessed by the rain, such a confluence of the privileged and the marginal and the pure and the impure is endemic to all the three films discussed here and happens mostly as the films end. Soon after Rekha is liberated from Baba, the pimp's captivity in the last few frames of *Salaam Bombay!*, she steps into the streets teeming with the festive crowds of *Ganesh Chathurthi* and the huge statues of Lord Ganesh. It is as if the prostitute's liberation is being presided over by the benign Hindu deity. Similarly, Maya, the courtesan and maid in *Kamasutra*, transcends and triumphs over the inhibitions and hierarchies set by the society of her times and the last frame of the film suggests her merging with nature, an entity that disregards the hierarchies of class or dichotomies of purity and impurity. Nature in the film is imbued with a spiritual and transcendental ethos and Maya's merging with it suggests the integration of the body and the spirit, the impure and the

pure. In short, we can say that Mira Nair's reframing of the nation happens by giving prominence to the unprivileged and the destitute, the impure and the unchaste and drawing them into the vortex of the action rather than making them marginalized figures. It is a reframing that deconstructs the principles of elitism and purity as well as many other pet notions that go into the construction of the nation.

Chapter 4

Rigid Nationalisms, Everyday Transgressions

On the basis of a public interview conducted by Kass Banning with Deepa Mehta at the Women Filmmakers: Refocussing Conference held in Vancouver on 27 March 1999, Jacqueline Levitin, one of the editors of the book, *Women Filmmakers: Refocussing*, succinctly describes her as a filmmaker with the "ability to manipulate content, aesthetics, and perhaps, controversy … a transnational filmmaker attuned to the cinematic traditions of two very dissimilar societies, [and] a feminist with a distaste of rigid nationalisms and oppressive power relations" (Levitin 274). While all the attributes mentioned by Levitin have left their mark on the work of Deepa Mehta, the last one – her distaste for rigid nationalisms – forms the core of her *Elements Trilogy* comprising the movies *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water.* In an interview given to Maya Churi in *IndieWire* Mehta has stated that *Fire*, the first film in the *Trilogy* deals with the politics of passion or sexuality, *Earth* with the politics of nationalism and *Water* with the politics of religion. Nevertheless, we cannot make a clear cut demarcation, as all these aspects – that of sexuality, gender, nationality and religion -- merge and exist in an intertwined fashion in the films, enabling an exploration of the different facets of the nation and providing a heterogeneous range of perspectives that contest the nation's usual narratives and representations in cinema.

A strong undercurrent that links the markedly different themes, backdrops, locales and time frames of the films in the *Elements Trilogy* is without doubt, the politics of sexuality and gender and its interconnection with the nation. The nation, as

it is seen in the *Trilogy*, is a broad and multi-faceted entity that seeps into the banal aspects of everyday life, thereby proving how nationalism collaborates with the mundane and the everyday to fashion the lives of women. The everyday aspects of women's lives that the *Trilogy* encompasses and problematizes have "interconnections among social, cultural, political and economic systems which govern societies and construct women's identity under particular historical, cultural and social conditions" (Madhuri 124). The *Elements Trilogy* becomes a critique of "the cultural nationalist and religious definitions of tradition, family, marriage, home, sense of belonging, culture, history, sexuality, and identity in the Indian context " and enables the audiences "to make sense of the evolution of feminist politics in India through the narratives of film" (22, 23). Patriarchal nationalism, by using the props of religion, tradition, culture or family tries to construct a unified and homogeneous image for women, an image that seriously hampers her real identity, sexuality and agency. In the case of India, it is the patriarchal Hindu nationalist ideology that strives to construct such a uniform and homogeneous identity. Mehta's films "disrupt the ideologies" that enact "systematic oppression" and control over women's bodies and explore the avenues of agency and empowerment possible for them (Madhuri 123).

What is remarkable about the *Trilogy* is that the disruption of the ideologies of patriarchal nationalism was not contained within the films, but grew beyond them and permeated the wider public domain, attracting media attention and creating a stir and controversy in the national and international front. In addition to opening up public debates on the various issues that were hitherto regarded as anathema such as lesbianism, the controversy brought to the fore issues of freedom of expression and artistic license. The diasporic identity and status of the filmmaker raised questions as to her authenticity and authority in making subversive depictions of the nation. This

dubious attitude towards diasporic perspectives and narratives on the nation stems from the idea of the impurity of the diaspora that counters the notions of purity upheld by patriarchal nationalism and religion. The patriarchal Hindu nationalist ideology that was incipient in India in the 1990s and is on the rise at present fanned the flame of the controversies surrounding films like *Fire* and *Water*. The female diasporic distortion of the image of the ideal Indian woman or *Bharatiya Nari*, the pure being who reflected the sanctity of the family and the nation, only aggravated the resistance and violence of the forces of religious fundamentalism and patriarchal nationalism.

The first film in the trilogy, *Fire*, provoked the ire of the guardians of morality and propriety by challenging the powerful institution of the Indian joint family. Given that the family is the microcosm of the nation, Deepa Mehta's take on the family goes hand in hand with her deconstruction of the nation, a feat accomplished by challenging the hetero-normative order that is the central axle on which the family and thereby the nation rotates. Mehta's act of "depicting a romance between two Hindu women … automatically disrupt[ed] Hindu fundamentalist narratives, narratives that [saw] women solely as reproducers of the nation and bearers of tradition" (Barron 68). Such a depiction was of paramount importance to Mehta because desire between two women living within the same family "infects the Hindu household, and by extension the Hindu nation" and becomes "a powerful critique of Hindu fundamentalism by challenging constructions of idealized Hindu womanhood" (68-69). Moreover, texts like *Fire* "critique nationalist homophobia and challenge fundamentalist discourses as they rewrite nationalist imaginings of women and contest notions of citizenship based on heterosexual reproduction" (Barron 90).

While *Fire* won many international awards when it was released in Europe and

the US in 1996, it underwent stringent censorship when it was released in India in 1998. Religious groups and extremely right wing Hindu organizations in India, including the Bombay-based Shiv Sena led by Bal Thackeray reacted violently to the film, vandalizing theatres where it was played and stopping the screening of the film. The reason for the fury of the protestors was that the film was a slur to Indian culture and "would spoil Indian women and would lead to the collapse of marriage as an institution" (Kumaramkandath). The protestors wanted the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) to reconsider the clean chit that was given to the film. There was a counter wave, with activists, civil rights groups, women's organizations and actors or filmmakers rallying in support of the film. A controversy whose rumblings were heard in the two Houses of Parliament, it attracted much media attention and initiated debates on issues of freedom of expression and the artistic license. Equating the events to the controversies surrounding Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and M. F. Hussain's portrayal of Hindu deities in nude, Rajeev Kumaramkandath observes, "The *Fire* controversy forms part of a chain of similar instances during this period where the limits of creativity are often brought into question mainly on grounds of religion" (Kumaramkandath). One condition on which the protestors would allow the film to be screened was by changing the Hindu names of the protagonists, Sita and Radha to that of Muslim names, a proposition that had a clear communal agenda.

Sita, one of the protagonists of the film, hits the nail on the head when she tells her female lover, Radha, "there's no word in our language that can describe what we are, how we feel for each other" (*Fire* 01:33:13-17). This statement indicates the invisibility and non-representational quality of people of a different sexual orientation in national, cultural, religious and familial spaces. The controversy sparked by the film brought the issue of lesbianism from the screen into the streets and the public

sphere, with lesbians coming out of the closets in defense of the film and making their presence felt for the first time. This was a gesture that refuted the fundamentalists who claimed that lesbianism is not a part of Indian culture, a claim that was blind to the evidence in *Kamasutra* and the other ancient texts of the prevalence of acts of deviant sexuality in the past. Mehta's act of imbuing her women lovers with pronounced features of Indian-ness, like being clad in saris, observing Hindu rituals and fulfilling the duties of married women, served to underscore the point that lesbianism can be a part of Indian culture and can occur within the confines of a traditional Indian family. This becomes a strong contestation of the usual representation of sexual deviance as foreign to Indian ethos.

Deepa Mehta, however came up with the explanation that the film is more about the "choices" women can make than about lesbianism (qtd. in Levitin 288). She made it clear that, "[she] can't have [her] film hijacked by any one organization. It is not about lesbianism. It's about loneliness, about choices" (qtd. in M. Jain and Raval 80). Mehta's stance elicited criticism on the ground that it diluted the prominence of the film's homosexual nuance. Again, the fact that the women in the film are drawn to each other due to lack of fulfillment of marital and heterosexual love also came under censure, a charge that also holds good in the case of "Lihaaf", the controversial short story by Ismat Chugtai, on which *Fire* is loosely based. Like the protagonists in *Fire* who become lesbian as an offshoot of the absence of love in marriage, in "Lihaaf", the protagonist Begum Jan is seen developing a lesbian relationship with her maid servant, Rabbo when her husband, the Nawab neglects her and shows preference for young boys (Chugtai 5-12). The argument put forth by critics was that lesbianism is an instinctive and inborn tendency and has nothing to do with circumstances in which those initiated into it live. This is an accusation, the veracity of which can be

challenged since the sexual orientation or habits of people are very much influenced by the social-cultural landscape they inhabit and the circumstances in which they live. Moreover, as Senthorun Raj points out, reading Radha and Sita's intimacy as an offshoot of their "dissatisfaction with a middle class heterosexual lifestyle, obscures their *erotic agency*. These characters become *desiring subjects, rather than desired objects*…neither character seeks a relationship with a male character, as a way of satiating their sexual frustration" (par. 17; emphasis added).

The opening sequence of the film, which is one of exceptional visual charm, portrays a family of three – a father, a mother and a daughter – relaxing in a mustard field with yellow flowers, swaying rhythmically to the breeze. Unlike mothers in most conventional movies, the mother in this picture perfect scene goads her daughter to adopt alternate ways of seeing, to see the impossible and unattainable with her eyes closed. The mother narrates the fable of the mountain folk, who had never seen the ocean and were advised by a wise old woman to "see without looking" and see "what you can't see" (*Fire* 00:00:54-55, 00:00:49-51). The little girl grows up to be Radha (Shabana Azmi), the protagonist of the film, and this scene in the mustard field comes repeatedly to her in her reveries later in life, reminding her of the need to have an alternate view and perspective of things when her marriage and her life in the joint family become unbearable. The scene of reverie in the mustard field, portrayed in an open space that stretches far and wide, is a contrast to the cloistered and claustrophobic space of the apartment where the joint family resides. The emphasis of the importance of the instinctive act of *seeing* over the more purposeful act of *looking*, that Radha's mother insists on, brings about a shift in the positioning of women as objects *to be looked at* either for their erotic value or for their worth as containers of tradition. As against the designed *look* that cinema and societal and cultural norms

have always endorsed and practiced, the process of intuitive *seeing* that alters these norms elevates women to a position of empowerment and agency.

It is notable that in *Fire*, the act of *seeing* from a different perspective happens within the domestic space itself, a space that has always regulated codes of gender and sexuality and erased "the possibilities of queer desires and agencies" (Raj, par. 20). The Hindu household or any household, for that matter has been a space that has managed and restricted women's bodies and their way of life and conduct. The family is a site where women are trained and moulded to be the repositories of heterosexual tradition and morality. Mehta's camera delves into the everyday life of the members of a middle class joint family in urban Delhi to prove the inefficacy of the twin institutions of marriage and family. Contrary to Bollywood cinema that centralizes marriage and the family as the chief end of life and upholds the sanctity of both these institutions, *Fire* brings out their fault lines and portrays them in a poor light. Mehta's act of *seeing* homoeroticism or queerness as a possibility in the traditional middle class Hindu household subverts pet notions and definitions of the family and nation:

> Radha and Sita, as queer subjects, do not seek to immediately escape the 'home' as a repressive space. Rather, they rework notions of the 'home' within the interstices of 'queered' domestic spaces…. [and] seek to transform the essentialising and ahistorical logic of the 'home' that defines them. In doing so, they challenge the assumption behind hegemonic forms of Indian nationalism that suggest that the queer subject is alien, inauthentic or outside the community. (Raj, par. 22)

Starved of love and care in their heterosexual marriages and fuelled by a need for touch and sharing, the homoeroticism of Radha and Sita (Nandita Das) is unleashed in

everyday acts within the space of the family itself – Radha's act of applying oil to Sita's hair in the privacy of her room or Sita's act of pressing Radha's feet at the park during a family picnic, being examples. Homo-eroticism therefore finds entry into the family space as "acts that fall within the orbit of filial relationships" (J. Jain 62). The couple has a way of transforming even the most repressive spaces of the family into interstitial and liminal spaces of homoeroticism. For instance, the sisters-in-law discuss the relationship between spices and sexuality in the feminine and oppressive space of the kitchen, with Radha jestingly explaining that black pepper is given in abundance to newly married husbands as it provides energy and that green cardamoms make the breath fragrant (*Fire* 01:09:23-44). Similarly, the terrace which is a place where the women enact feminine duties like putting the clothes to dry also becomes the space of their rendezvous, desire and love (Madhuri 118).

The dream-like sequence in the mustard field of Radha's childhood that opens the film is significantly followed by the shot at Taj Mahal in Agra, where the newly married Jatin and Sita are supposed to be honeymooning. Given that Taj Mahal is a monument that presumably celebrates the undying love of an emperor for his dead wife and embodies the glory of conjugal love, Mehta's use of paradox is obvious. Jatin and Sita's marriage from the very beginning is devoid of the warmth and romance that this monument of "everlasting love" (*Fire* 00:02:45-46) is supposed to inspire. As Jayita Sengupta points out, "there is a subtlety at work here which Deepa Mehta very artfully presents through the motif of the Taj Mahal…[which] echoes ironically an elegiac note; it does not signify a thriving, blossoming romance, which a newly-wed couple is expected to enjoy on their honeymoon" (104). In an ironic twist to the tale of romance of an ancient emperor, the tourist guide at Taj Mahal who elaborates on the history of the monument, refers to the cruelty of the emperor that prompted him to cut

off the hands of the architect, a fact that underscores the bloody and darker side of Taj Mahal, the monument of conjugal love. Such insinuations set the tone of the movie from the very beginning and prepare the ground for a narrative on the dismal failure of the institution of marriage.

Fire of the movie's title has a lot of significance as far as Indian marriages are concerned. In the first place, *agni* or fire, like water, is crucial to most Hindu rituals and ceremonies including those connected with marriage. Fire is regarded as something sacred and auspicious and is considered by many religions to be the element that brings about purification. By this token, Hindu marriages that are performed with fire as witness are supposed to be invested with its sanctity and purity. So too, fire stands for passion, an essential ingredient in successful marriages. *Fire*, the film, plays with these notions of purity, sacredness and passion and contests their validity and existence or non-existence in the hetero-normative space of marriage. The film does so by exposing the failure of the institution of marriage in a Hindu family living in Delhi in the 1990s – the family of the bed-ridden matriarch, Biji and her two sons, Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) and Jatin (Javed Jaffrey) and their wives Radha and Sita respectively. The film reveals "the incompatibility of the newly-wedded Jatin and Sita and then the painful realities of Radha and Ashok's marriage…. One embraces celibacy, the other a mistress" (Sengupta 105). Jatin's devotion is for a Chinese girl named Julie who runs a beauty parlour and resides in India with her parents. He carries on with his affair even after marriage, neglecting Sita and returning home late in the night, his other passion being his video shop where he has a secret store of porn videos doled out to special customers like the bunch of school boys who drop in once in a while. Ashok, who exclaims from time to time that he is "lucky to have such a good family" (00:58:01-04) and plays the contented patriarch presiding

over his family is actually a hypocrite turning a blind eye to his failures as a husband. He has found his escape route from the family – his devotion to a religious man, the Swamiji and the time he spends in the *ashram* or the abode of the holy man, neglecting the needs of his wife.

Mehta has the knack of using irony, paradox and wry humour to bring out the contradictions in the lives of her characters. The scene where Jatin devotedly caresses and kisses the feet of Julie is cross cut by the scene where Ashok, the elder brother is seen pressing the feet of Swamiji in the ashram, a place that he frequents. There is not much love in his marriage with Radha and there are no children too, theirs being a match that has been sustained for more than thirteen years by the concept of *duty*, a concept that was binding more on the wife than on the husband. The childless Radha had thus to be the dutiful and obedient wife of Ashok, keeping his house, looking after his ailing and bedridden mother, Biji and toiling day in and day out to run the family's flourishing restaurant and take away business. Love, passion and sexuality were out of question in this marriage that was based on duty. Swamiji's teaching about the destructive nature of *desire* prompts Ashok to engage in an exercise of purging his mind of desire by keeping objects of temptation around him and resisting them. His wife Radha was forced to be the testing ground of his resistance to temptation and his vow of celibacy. Radha describes Ashok's practice of celibacy to Sita: "Whenever he felt any desire for me, he wanted me to lie next to him … to make certain that [he was] beyond temptation and therefore closer to God!" (01:26:12-36). The strength of the Hindu joint family being sons who would carry forward the family name, Ashok and Swamiji worked on the conviction that "the only reason to have a sexual relationship is to have sons [who] would carry on family name" (01:25:39-47). Since Radha was proved to be infertile by doctors – "No eggs in ovaries, madam!" (01:27:33-35) --

Ashok found a way of "turning [their] misfortune into an opportunity" (01:25:55-01:26:02) and pursuing his spiritual aspirations. Radha confesses to Sita that they have been living like brother and sister for thirteen long years and sometimes their relationship bordered on that of a mother-son bond (01:26:02, 01:27:06). Ashok's marital life, sexuality and concept of duty echo the lives and principles of two other iconic figures of the nation – Rama, the ideal husband and King of Hindu mythology and Gandhiji, the father of the nation who endorsed an ethics of austerity and abstinence. Both these idols placed their sense of duty above their personal lives and upheld the need to suppress corporeal instincts at the cost of their wives' happiness. Ashok's experiments with celibacy, in particular, resemble Gandhi's practices and methods of controlling passion and temptation.

Shunning passion and pleasure in his personal life, Ashok, the patriarch nevertheless placed overt importance on sustaining family honour and had a clear idea as to how an ideal family should be. As he could not have a son himself, he pins his hope on the newly-married Jatin and keeps reminding him of his *duty* as a husband. Jatin, who has seen through such out-dated concepts, blurts out, "Duty? And what about your duty, *bhai* ? Everything you do is for that bloody Swami of yours!" (00:23:46-50). Unlike Ashok, Jatin has no blinkers and Mehta makes him the harshest critic of the institutions of family and marriage. This includes his bold questioning of the stance and motives of his elder brother, a rare feat in family films that abide by values of implicit trust and respect toward the elders. In a way, the movie subverts the ideal family depicted in Ramayana, the Hindu epic that forms the subtext of the film, where Ram, the elder brother is seen as an infallible person whose dictates are followed unquestioningly by his wife and brothers. Jatin openly expresses his exasperation at having to live in a joint family and at having a joint bank account. He

also confesses that he was forced to marry Sita by his brother and mother: "And as far as saying yes to Sita is concerned, you are forgetting that you and Biji made my life bloody hell. Day in and day out, nagging – 'Jatin, you must get married, Jatin, you must have children!'" (00:22:20-33). Much younger to Ashok in age and taste, he is aware of the flaws of marriage and family and is not particularly respectful of the ritualistic or religious practices prescribed for the well being of the family. He tells Sita that she need not take a fast on *Karva Chauth*, the north Indian Hindu festival in which women fast for the longevity of the husbands. While Ashok had no objections to Jatin marrying his Chinese lover Julie, the young man purposefully refrains from the prospect as Julie didn't want to "get stuck in a joint family and become a baby making machine" (00:22:15-19). Married life and family in the Hindu household, Jatin senses, is nothing more than performing duties and fulfilling certain expectations sans real love and passion. He reserves his passion for Julie even after marriage and spends most of his time with her, and at the same time, tries to fulfill his duties towards Sita by making love to her and asking her to have a baby to keep herself "occupied and happy" (01:20:36-46). As Jayita Sengupta rightly points out, "Jatin's role as a husband to Sita is only functional, limited to the consensual sexual act as a part of the marriage ritual….His lack of tenderness and demonstrative callousness through the sexual act towards his wife reveals his semiotic rage against patriarchal repression" (104,105).

Central to the joint family is the figure of Biji, Ashok and Jatin's old mother, bed-ridden and dumb as a result of a stroke and whose only means of communication was the ringing of a hand bell. It was Radha's responsibility to bathe, powder, clothe and feed the old woman everyday – actions the regularity of which suggested the preservation of traditional values in the family. Ashok's act of saving Biji from the

fire that erupts in the house towards the end of the movie, neglecting the safety of his homoerotic wife, reaffirms the status of the old woman as an epitome of traditions and family norms. Though helpless and dependent on others, Biji comes out as a staunch symbol of tradition and propriety, who would express her disapproval of any act going against family decorum or tradition by ringing her bell. The bell, which is an instrument used to attract or arrest the attention of people, is noted for being associated with authority, and is the means by which authoritative figures exert control over people and bring about discipline and order in a particular institution. The hand bell, the peals of which are regarded as sacred, is an indispensible part of Hindu religious rituals. Biji's surveillance of the actions of her daughters-in-law and her ringing of the bell in protest signifies the moralizing grip and power of religion on individual lives, a theme closely intertwined with the trope of family in the movie. The matriarch, in most movies as well as in real life, acts as the custodian of tradition and values and often exercises a power that is oppressive. When the affair of Radha and Sita has gone too far, Biji, who has been a silent witness to their transgressive acts, expresses her anger and consternation by spitting on Radha's face. The same Biji only writhes helplessly and cries when Mundu, the servant, constantly watches porn videos in her room and masturbates. The family order necessitates a particular way of conduct from daughters-in-law like Radha or Sita, whereas people like Mundu are not taken to task or penalized as severely as the former by token of their being outside the family order and because of their maleness.

Like Jatin, Radha and Sita, the women of the family also realize the futility of the institution of marriage. Tired of keeping up appearances and dancing to the tune of customs and tradition, despaired of the lovelessness in their lives and the hectic work they are supposed to do in the family restaurant, the women start experiencing the

house as a virtual prison. The only relief they get is in the terrace of the dingy house where they go to in the nights to get some fresh air. Mehta has a way of using sparse but suggestive dialogues between her characters to criticize and deconstruct the status quo. In one such masterstroke, she shows us a marriage procession advancing through the street in the night as Sita and Radha watch on from the terrace above. The festive and celebratory mood of the procession is clear – with the decorated groom on the horse, the illuminations, the dancing and the crackers. The band plays the tune of the wedding song, "Doli saja ke rakhna, mehendi laga ke rakhna" from the celebrated film *Dilwale Dhulhaniya Le Jayenge* that was released in 1995, a year before *Fire* came out. "Someone's getting married," says Sita casually, and Radha concedes with the words, "Yes, again someone is!" (00:33:40-48). Marriage to them is a mundane occurrence repeated on a routine basis, a mistake that most people commit only to repent later, and nothing to be excited about. Though the elderly Radha speaks less than the loquacious and forthcoming Sita, her limited words are filled with sarcasm and subversive truths. On another occasion, when Sita jestingly recalls her mother's comment about unmarried women: "woman without a husband is like plain boiled rice", Radha retorts, "I like plain boiled rice" (00:30:30-32, 00:30:41-46). For Radha, customs and rituals like *Karva Chauth* that Hindu women are supposed to observe for the well being of their husbands become nothing more than occasions to "[w]ear fancy saris, heavy jewellery, anything we wish!" (00:41:44-46). The main ritual of Karva Chauth is to worship the moon in the presence of the husband and break the fast by taking water and food offered by him. Radha and Sita, the female lovers perform the ritual of Karva Chauth in the absence of their errant husbands. In a subversively meaningful gesture, Radha ends Sita's fast by offering her water.

Sita, the young woman who enters matrimony with many expectations but is

disillusioned from the very beginning, exhibits traits that are quite unlike the mythological character from whom she gets her name. More outspoken and expressive of dissent than Radha, she is nothing of the coy, demure wife and bride expected in a conventional marriage. Though in the initial days of her marriage, she is seen adopting the attire, demeanor and expectations of the traditional bride, like touching the feet of elders, obeying orders and being romantically drawn towards her husband, Mehta makes her have a hidden interior that acts as a counter to the usual representations of the bride in Hindi cinema. This comes to light when she is left alone in the bedroom soon after her arrival in Jatin's house after the honeymoon. Standing before the mirror, she removes the resplendent and brocaded red sari of the new bride, quickly takes out one of Jatin's pants from the cupboard and dons it, puts a cigar to her mouth and dances wildly to a song put on the music player. She is so engrossed in this transvestite dance and role play that she is oblivious of the ringing of Biji's bell in the hall. The subversive and rebellious potential of a character like Sita is apparent right from this seemingly insignificant mundane act. She comes to know of Jatin's affair with Julie very soon and is unhappy about the lack of love and meaning in her married life, but refuses to accept her fate and be a submissive wife like Radha. Jatin tries to devise a life where the necessary evil of their marriage may be sustained by having a pact with Sita -- she can have a baby to occupy her, while he continues with relationship with his mistress. Unwilling to waste her life in a loveless marriage and submit to such self-centred and utilitarian patriarchal arrangements, Sita calls him "a pompous fool" (01:20:57-59). When Jatin strikes her for this, she strikes him back – a response that is not expected of a wife in most cultures, a response that nevertheless elicits in Jatin a spark of admiration for her. "I like that! I like my woman in fire! Whoever thought that this coy, young, demure wife of mine would turn out to be a fire cracker!"

(01:21:24-39), he exclaims, revealing his ennui with feminine stereotypes of women.

In fact, it is Sita who takes the initiative to begin the relationship with Radha. The attraction they have for each other draws them into the warmth of an emotional and physical bond which induces new meaning and joy into the life of Radha who says, "[t]his is unfamiliar for me – this awareness of needs, of desires" (01:16:38-46). Their bond is sustained by mutual care and guidance, "where there are no impositions of the will on the other" (J. Jain 60). It is a tender and fortifying bond in which the older woman assures the younger one that they didn't do anything "wrong" after their first sexual encounter and the younger woman assures the older one that they can begin their own takeaway business once they leave their husbands and start a new life together. The change is more perceptible in Radha, who had been lurking like a shadow in the dim interiors of Ashok's house. She becomes more resplendent in appearance and starts rebelling against the tyranny of Ashok, asking him to feed Biji himself, answering his calls only after considerable delay and refusing to cooperate with his celibacy practice sessions. When he asks for an explanation, she can boldly tell him, "Sita says the concept of duty is overrated" (*Fire* 01:05:11-14). Ashok realizes that it is impossible for him to exert influence over Radha anymore because of "Sita's fault – all these new ideas in [Radha's] head!" (01:05:11-14).

The scene of confrontation between husband and wife after the former witnesses his wife's *sin* with Sita in the bedroom, following the lead given by the vengeance-driven Mundu, is one where the austerity, abstinence and piety advocated by religion clash with the principles of life, passion and desire. Sita goads Radha to leave the house with her soon after their transgression is exposed, but Radha insists on staying back and confronting her husband before she makes her final exit. In an

attempt to prove his manliness and win back his wife, Ashok, who had for thirteen long years, abstained from physical contact with Radha, is at the point of breaking his vow of abstinence. He orders her to accompany him to the bedroom. When she refuses to comply, he tries to coax her by putting fear of sin into her mind: "What I saw in the bedroom is a sin in the eyes of God and man. Maybe Swamiji can help you -- Help us!" (01:38:24-33).When he reminds her that desire brings ruin, Radha reacts strongly: "Brings ruin? Does it Ashok? You know that without desire I was dead. Without desire there's no point in living…. I desire to live. I desire Sita – I desire her warmth, her compassion, her body. I desire to live again. If you want to control desire, you ask for Swamiji's help, not mine!" (01:38:42-01:39:11). The transformation of Radha is complete and she has transcended the social, religious and national codes prescribed for married women by choosing to forsake her husband for her female lover. Moreover, she is bold enough to make an open assertion of a woman's desire and passion. Ashok's consternation at his wife's refusal to beg his forgiveness is apparent: "Instead of begging for forgiveness, you give me lectures! .... What kind of wife you have become!" (01:39:22-53). Radha's transformation marks the victory of true passion, love and life over a crippling sense of austerity, duty and tradition.

This scene of confrontation is also significant in that it refers to the title of the film and the motif of trial by fire that is central to the film. The tussle between Radha and Ashok in the kitchen causes Radha's sari to catch fire from the stove, the flames of which spread to the heavy curtains in the room and the other parts of the house. This scene connects with *the trial by fire* that the mythological Sita had to go through as a test of her chastity and purity. Ashok impulsively protects his mother, in a gesture signifying his anxiety to preserve the purity and austerity that his widowed mother stands for, and carries her away from the engulfing flames, leaving the impure and

unchaste Radha to rescue herself. Ashok's gesture is typical of the moral stance of the patriarchal nation, a stance connecting him with King Ram of the epic whose preoccupation with "dharma" led him to subject his wife to a trial of chastity and later to the dangers of the forest, despite the fact that she was pregnant. The film, which was released in India in 1998, was a take on the fervent Hindutva movement that had started sweeping India in the 1990s, a movement that was anxious to mould the nation according to the values of ancient culture found in the so called religious texts of Hinduism. *Ramayan*, the serial by Ramananda Sagar broadcast on the national television channel, Doordarsan became a household affair in the 1990s with the nation being glued to television sets on the days it was broadcast and unknowingly imbibing the standards it endorsed. Ram, the ideal man who would not swerve from *Rajya Dharma* or state ethics on any count and Sita, the ideal woman symbolizing the values of chastity, obedience and sacrifice became idols to be emulated. The references to *Ramayan* in the film are twofold – the first, being a video recording of Ramananda Sagar's TV serial played for Biji from time to time and the second, being the discourses and performances based on Ramayan that takes place in Swamiji's ashram.

Both the serial and the dance drama are shown at the point of Sita's *agni pariksha* or test of chastity by fire after her sojourn in the demon King Ravana's Lanka. Purnima Mankekar observes how the Doordarshan Ramayana "create[d] *relatively* few spaces for Hindu viewers, men or women, to criticize Ram's treatment of Sita" and absolved Ram of the blame by having "Sita as insisting on going into exile" by choice (213). The dance drama staged in Swamiji's Ashram portrays a Sita who questions and challenges Ram's motives even as she acquiesces to his command. Her persistent questionings, "My Lord Ram, what has your Sita done to deserve this?", "Why are you testing my purity?", "Why do you test me my lord?" (*Fire*

01:00:38-48, 01:01:56-58), ring throughout the performance and beyond, entering the domain of the film, where the lesbian relationship of Radha and Sita is indicted and into the real world of the nation which insists on ideals like purity, chastity and hetero-normative ethics. The scene of Radha's *agni pariksha* in the film goes a few steps further than the serial or the dance drama and brings about a complete reframing of the *trial by fire* envisaged in the epic:

> This scene restages Sita's *agni pariksha* but with some significant differences. Thematically, it mirrors the *Ramayana* and tells the story of a wife confronted by her husband about infidelity. In addition, the larger issues it raises about desire, purity, and the ideal woman are resonant with the *Ramayana*. On a visual level as well the scene refers to *Ramayana*: like the mythic Sita, Radha is engulfed by flames as her husband looks on….Yet in contrast to the Ramayana in which Sita's adultery is imagined, in this version the adultery is decidedly real: Radha and Sita are lovers. Even more significant, in this retelling Radha defends her desires as legitimate, something the *Ramayana*'s Sita never does. Thus the story so frequently used to curtail women's desire is revised to defend this most shocking of infidelities. In fact, *Fire* recasts the mythic Sita's exile in the forest as Radha's escape to live with the woman she loves, transforming the tragic ending to a happy one. (Barron 81)

The recasting of agni pariksha in the movie, the subversion of *Ramayan*, the sacred text of Hinduism and the challenging of the values enshrined in it – all go a long way in contesting the imaginings of the nation. Mehta's strategy of using the names of two revered mythological characters, Sita and Radha, for her lesbian protagonists is a bold act of sacrilege. Sita, "the pure, chaste and loyal" wife of Rama had feminine virtues

that were regarded worthy of emulation and Radha's union with Lord Krishna exemplified "perfect and transcendent" love (Barron 67). The degree of sacrilege that Mehta is capable of and the irreverence with which she subverts religious and mythological texts are attributable to the penchant for the profane that the diasporic sensibility has. The appropriation and reframing of cultural symbols like Ramayana and ritualistic practices like Karva Chauth or agnipariksha in the film are instances of how "[c]ulture is invoked to counter culture" (R. Kapur 51).

A serious blow to the sanctity of the epic *Ramayan* occurs in Mundu's act of watching porn videos and masturbating in Biji's room by hoodwinking the family into believing that he is showing Sagar's *Ramayan* to the old woman. When he is finally discovered by Radha and reprimanded by her and Ashok for this, he defends himself by saying that he is entitled to some recreation amidst his hectic work schedule. After her initial denunciation, Radha however has a more compassionate attitude towards Mundu's act and tells Sita that though what he was subjecting Biji to was wrong, he was only being selfish and seeking bodily gratification and pleasure like them. The entire scenario therefore raises questions about "non-reproductive sexuality, pleasure and consent" (Barron 75). Mundu's deviant sexuality, the lesbian love of Sita and Radha's and the passionate extra-marital love of Jatin and Julie -- all lie outside the matrix of marital reproductive heterosexuality that would bring in children to the family and sustain its glory. It is as if Mehta was using a formidable array of profanity to counter the purity prescribed by religion and the nation. However, by the patriarchal logic permeating the nation, Mundu, the man servant is pardoned for his deviant behaviour and given a second chance, the greatest penalty for his act being a lecture by Swamiji and a compulsory viewing of the *Ramayan* in the presence of the whole family. In contrast to this leniency, the flaw of the women is regarded as something

heinous and unpardonable and they are thoroughly censored and penalized for it.

The last scene of the film that comes after the trial by fire shows the reunion of Sita and Radha at the shrine of the Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizammudhin in the midst of showers of rain, a suggestion that their passion and union which have withstood the test of purity is being validated and blessed. If the first scene took place against the back drop of the Taj Mahal with insinuations about the failure of a heterosexual relation, the scene at the shrine suggests the victory of homoeroticism. Hazrat Nizammudhin, the Sufi saint and poet who lived in the thirteenth century is known for his secular views and broad humanitarian values. The shrine is a secular site visited by people cutting across different faiths, religions and cultural backgrounds for spiritual realization and prayer. Moreover there are also references in Nizammudhin's work to "same-sex love and desire for poet Amir Khusro" (Desai, "Homo" 164). According to Snigdha Madhuri, the shrine "does not belong to any dominant religious discourse; rather, Mehta challenges the dominant religious ideology in India by portraying [Radha and Sita's] union at a shrine which is a place of minority discourse that signifies freedom" (120). Ratna Kapur also comments on "Mehta's counter cultural move" of making the women lovers temporarily occupy "a Muslim spiritual space, the space of a persecuted religious minority, the space of another Other, bring[s] us to … a new level of complexity and challenge" (90). The film has a definite anti-communal agenda that seeks to combat the Hindu Fundamentalism that started raging in India from the 1990s and this is evident in her lambasting of a Hindu text like *Ramayana* with its stringent codes of conduct for women and highlighting the shrine of a Sufi saint as a space of love, hope and freedom.

The second film in the trilogy, *Earth*, which resonates with the politics of

nationality, narrates a fictional tale against the historical backdrop of the Partition of 1947 which resulted in the birth of two nations based on religion – India and Pakistan. The Partition, a major catastrophe that split the subcontinent into two and initiated a mass exodus of people to the countries of their respective religions, had caused untold misery and trauma, the scars of which are still fresh. Official records and national histories homogenize the event in staid national and political terms, overlooking the plurality of personalized experiences of the event. However from the 1990s, there have been revitalization of academic discussions and a leftist and feminist re-orientation of the area of studies from "official national readings" to what can be called "new Partition studies" which gave scope for a "scholarly rethinking of Partition … [and] diverse readings that focus more on the social and psychological effects of the trauma of Partition than allowed for in earlier scholarship" (George 137). In the words of Jill Didur,

> …historiographers have redirected their attention to exploring 'the particular' rather than 'the general' in an effort to disrupt the state's universalizing and hegemonic historical narratives. To this end, historiographers have turned to literary texts and their representations of what has been called 'the everyday' (Pandey, "Prose" 221) in search of alternative perspectives to that of the state's central archive. (42; parenthesis in original)

There is a spate of alternative perspectives on the Partition available in the form of novels and films, perspectives coming from the everyday lives of common people. Such readings from the everyday and the individual point of view are important as they "resist the drive for a shallow homogenization and struggle[] for other, potentially richer definitions of the 'nation' and future political community" (Pandey,

"Defence" 559).

The alternative perspectives and mundane, everyday responses to historical events like the Partition and nation formation could appear in varied forms like feminist historiography, minority discourses, narratives of memory and trauma, psychoanalytic studies and subaltern perspectives. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin emphasize the importance of "restoring women to history not only to challenge conventional history-writing, but to emphasise that a representative history can only be written if the experience and status of one half of humankind is an integral part of the story" (10). Urvashi Butalia, another prolific writer on the Partition stresses the importance of memory of common people: "I have come to believe that there is no way we can begin to understand what Partition was about unless we look at how people remember it" (13). Rosemary Marangoly George liberates Partition narratives from the constrained definition of tales about the birth of two nations and suggests the presence and interconnection of gendered, diasporic and national discourses in them (135-136). According to her, the idiom of diaspora is suitable for Partition narratives because of "diaspora's resonance as metaphor" (135). Moreover, Partition narratives can be "identified with diasporic aesthetics … [as] such tropes operate on a metaphoric level to articulate the gendered trauma of Partition on individual lives" (George 136).

An analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Earth* points out how the Partition has been approached from all these angles – from the woman's perspective, the subaltern angle, from the child's view and by employing the device of memory and psychoanalysis. *Earth*, which is an adaptation of Pakistani writer, Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* or *Cracking India*, is a cinematic exploration of the trauma induced by

religion-based nationalism on individual lives. Told from the perspective of an eight year old Parsee girl called Lenny Sethi (enacted by Maia Sethna) living in Lahore, Pakistan at the time of the Partition, the novel/film looks at the turmoil wrought by the event on the lives and psyches of ordinary people. The narration of Lenny, the polio-infected girl who is marginalized owing to her handicap, her age and her Parsee identity imparts a different dimension to the upheaval than could be perceived in official discourses. The voice over in the first and last scenes however is that of adult Lenny; the opening scene where young Lenny is shown colouring the map of undivided India and the last scene where an adult Lenny talks to the audience directly make it clear that the narrative is actually an act of memory on the part of a grown up person. Lenny's character is partly based on the autobiographical details in the life of her original creator, Bapsi Sidhwa, a Parsee novelist of Pakistani descent residing in the United States, who had also contracted polio and lived with the ailment from infancy. Born in 1950 in Amritsar, an Indian city that shares its border with Pakistan and that is home to scores of Hindus and Sikhs who fled Pakistan during the Partition, Mehta, the filmmaker, grew up hearing stories of the exodus, rapes and massacres perpetuated during those times (Levitin 274). These autobiographical implications are compounded further by the diasporic perspectives that impact the ways of seeing of the event by both the writer and filmmaker. All these permutations make the narrative "a historical document, a social and cultural record, as well as a personal memoir" (Jaidka 52).

Though Lenny Sethi belongs to a well-off Parsee family in Lahore, which is insulated from the catastrophe on account of the proverbial neutrality of the Parsees, she is nevertheless drawn into the vortex of the events as a result of her relationship with her Ayah. Lenny gets exposed to the realities of life and the tumultuous

happenings in Lahore during her strolls to the outside world with her vivacious Ayah, Shanta, and her meetings with Shanta's circle of acquaintances. The film actually "stages a confrontation between the structures of meaning that characterize nationalist discourse and fictional representations" of Lenny and Shanta's "'everyday' experience at the time of partition" (Didur 68). Again, the subaltern gets to speak in the film not only through the voice of Shanta, but also through her circle of friends who come from different faiths and represent different professions. Shanta's friends include the Ice Candy man, the *Maalish Wallah* or the masseur, the zoo keeper, the butcher, the knife sharpener and so on. As Snigdha Madhuri points out, "[t]he daily lives and experiences of working class people in this film not only challenge the normative discourses and institutions, such as nationalist ideology and state decisions regarding partition, but also demonstrate the ways in which daily lives can be transformed into sites of knowledge, alternative histories and political consciousness" (58-59).

The Lahore that Lenny and Shanta live in is a place of idyllic charm ringing with religious amity in the pre-Partition days. Mehta works out the horrendous transformation of this amity into rivalry and revenge in the wake of the Partition. There is the charge of inaccuracy that Mehta may have to answer in such a portrayal because unlike what is portrayed in the movie, Lahore the border city was the site of religious struggles in the pre-Partition days and "the city where the Pakistan resolution and the 'two nation theory' were endorsed by the Muslim League in 1940" (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 440). This lapse can be justified by the argument that Mehta's Lahore does not fit into the "empirical rigor" of the academician or the historian but portrays her personal vision and aspirations:

Where the historian ends, the filmmaker takes over. What Mehta invents as a

> way out of this vicious cycle of violence and communal hatred is an imagined pre-Partition affable society. Thus, the harmonious atmosphere of pre-Partition Lahore becomes not just a narrative ploy for Mehta but also proof that Indian people, uncorrupted by opportunism and greed of politicians and religious leaders, can live together. Even though the city never existed in form, the audience can identify Mehta's Lahore as both memory and aspiration, past and future…. Mehta's representations of the events of 1947 do convey a political interpretation of these events, but their key aim is to advocate a socially more progressive and cohesive India. (Lichtner and Bandyopadhyay 442)

Mehta's pre-Partition Lahore is therefore one where differences of class, race and religion are set aside -- where masters show a rare degree of kindness and intimacy to members of the servant class as seen in Mrs Sethi's treatment of Shanta and in Lenny's attachment to her,where people of different races meet each other and dine together as is evident in the dinner hosted by the Sethis for their Punjabi and English guests, and where people of different religions share a true spirit of camaraderie as witnessed in the gatherings of Shanta and her group of admirers in the parks of Lahore. The pre-Partition Lahore depicted in the film – whether it is the sun-drenched interiors of Lenny's home or the lush gardens or parks outside or the sleepy rustic backdrops where Shanta and Hassan meet and mate -- is one of idyllic charm and beauty. The kite festival in which Lenny and her Ayah participate with the ice candy man and the ensuing song sequence highlights the pleasurable life of the people at the time.

Shanta, the ayah (played by Nandita Das, with her dusky complexion) sporting saris of earthly hues like deep green or ochre is a metaphor for *earth* of the film's title. The symbolization suits her on account of her job as nurturer, her subaltern status, her

sensuous vitality and her ability to hold people of varied religions and occupations together. The word *Shanta*, in most Indian languages, signifies peace and the image of Shanta as India is evident in the very first scene in the park – draped in a green sari with a white blouse and a saffron-coloured flower in her hand, she brings to mind the tricolor of the Indian flag. Shanta, "who occupies a marginal position as a female Hindu servant in colonial India, nevertheless exercises agency over a variety of men from diverse cultural backgrounds" (Coates 211). She can reprimand the men and warn them that she will avoid joining them in the park again if their talk borders on religious rivalry, thereby making them abstain from the feelings of hostility that were rampant in Lahore during the Partition. The butcher, one of the members of the group congregating around Shanta in the park tells her, "Yes Shanta Bibi, Hindu, Mussalman, Sikh, all of us hover about you, like fireflies around the fire" (*Earth* 00:25:32-40). Lenny gets acquainted with ayah's friends and admirers including the zoo-keeper, the butcher, the masseur (Rahul Khanna), the knife-sharpener and the ice candy man (played by Aamir Khan). She benefits from such an exposure and becomes "aware of the cultural, ethnic, and class diversities in the larger society. Ayah's would-be suitors also stem from a variety of religious persuasions – Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh – and hence represent a multicultural mosaic, or a microcosm of diverse India" (Coates 209).

Though Shanta's body symbolizes the nation, as in the scene where she dons colours of the national flag, it is also a body that radiates sexual energy and warmth, an equation that subverts the usual representations of the nation as a mother figure devoid of sexual instincts. Apart from becoming the centre of attraction of her male friends, she exercises the agency to "negotiate her desire for sexual intimacy with a variety of men from diverse cultural backgrounds and thereby subvert patriarchal

expectations for her behavior" (Didur 86). The fact that Ayah has "the ability to displace the codes of chastity and monogamy and still maintain the respect of her admirers suggests an alternative to the patriarchal relationships that govern Lenny's mother's life" (86). Most of young Lenny's perceptions on life including her notions on sexuality come from her relationship with Ayah. Shanta, the subaltern woman who warps the codes of chastity and conjugality as well as the conventions of race and class, and represents the earth of the film's title as well as the nascent nation, is thus filled with subversive potential and the agency acquired thereby:

> Ayah's initial ability to subvert the codes of chastity and conjugality becomes a radical source of inspiration for Lenny. The subversive potential of Lenny and Ayah's relationship stems from its socially 'unregulated' history. Ayah and Lenny's relatively unsupervised time together allows them to build a bond of unmanaged intimacy that challenges patriarchal, racial, and class conventions. (Didur 85)

Snigdha Madhuri describes Lenny and Shanta as characters with interstitial and liminal identities who can soar above the restrictions imposed on them by patriarchal nationalism (59). Lenny's Parsee origins and her elite background are permeated by her close ties with people of the lower rungs and various religious and racial compulsions and an empathy with their experiences and feelings. Lenny's idealization of the Ayah "constantly negotiates and contests the normative gender and religious identities promoted by nationalist discourses" (Madhuri 75). On a deeper level, Ayah and Lenny "negotiate, contest and question the patriarchal nationalist and religious constructions of women as 'bearers' of national and communal honour and identity in this film" (75).

The powerful motive behind naming a film depicting violent forms of patriarchal nationalism as *Earth* and identifying a subaltern woman, a care giver and nurturer with the image of the earth is a highly political act. Shanta's predicament and tragedy correspond to and are deeply intertwined with the fortunes of the Earth. The figurative division of the Earth into two new nations during Partition is reflected in the victimization of Shanta herself by the worst form of patriarchal nationalism based on religious fervor. The title sequence of the movie is done against the background of the rough earth or mud – foreboding what is in store in the film, namely, the investment of a basic and natural element like the earth with the political, ideological and religious compulsions of mankind. The very first shot of the movie that comes immediately after the title sequence captures the disturbance brought about by such man-made divisions of the earth on the psyche of individuals. Lenny, the child narrator is seen colouring the map of an undivided India in a room furnished with deep maroon curtains – standing for the deep hues of the earth as well as the dark red of blood and violence. As she daubs colours on the map with her pencils, a voiceover is heard that sets the tone for the whole movie and establishes Lenny in the position of the narrator:

> I was eight years old, living in Lahore in March of 1947 when the British Empire in India started to collapse. Along with talks of India's independence from Britain came rumblings about its division into two countries, Pakistan and India. Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs who had lived together as one entity for centuries suddenly started to clamour for pieces of India for themselves. The arbitrary line of division the British would draw to carve up India in the August of 1947 would scar the subcontinent forever. (*Earth* 00:01:22-00:02:05)

Lenny's next act is to rise from her chair, take a saucer and crack it by throwing it on the floor to see what happens when a country is broken into two. This is an incident that shows how a major political and national event has deep entrenched influence on the everyday lives and the psyche of common people and in this case on the psyche of a child. She is seen asking her mother: "What will happen if the British break India where our house is? How will I get to the park then?" (00:03:04-10). The *rumblings* of the Partition and the violence portrayed as the film advances already have their reverberations in the Sethi household, with the English and Punjabi guests falling on each others' throats after bitter references to the issue of Partition during a genial dinner.

The echoes of hatred heard in the Sethi mansion seep into the outside world too, killing the charm and amity of Lahore, with erstwhile friends fighting over issues of religion and nationhood. Even Ayah looks on helplessly as religious hostility starts raging among her group of admirers. Once the Partition becomes official, tension mounts as Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims who had lived together as friends become bitter enemies suspecting each other and plotting against each other. The streets of Lahore witness atrocities like burning of dwelling places of enemy groups, processions, mob violence and murder, not to mention the flow of refugees to India with their belongings and the counter flow to Pakistan. The transformation of Lahore is so complete that the terrace on which Shanta had flown kites during the kite festival with Ice Candy Man becomes the vantage point from where she looks on with Lenny, Ice Candy Man and Masseur at the bloodshed and violence perpetrated in the city.

The scene also suggests the transformation that has happened in Dil Navaz, the Ice Candy Man, who because of his sugar coated words and pranks, versatility and wit

made a mark of his own wherever he went and was a hero of sorts to little Lenny. In fact he was the chief contender for Shanta's love along with Hassan, the Masseur, with Lenny secretly preferring him over Hassan as her Ayah's suitor. Ice Candy Man receives a jolt when he awaits the arrival of his sisters from Gurdaspur by train and is greeted instead by compartments filled with massacred bodies of Muslims and four sacks filled with the breasts of Muslim women. The vivacious spirit in him dies and is replaced by hatred and vengefulness for the Hindus who had caused the death of his sisters and the other Muslims. As Hassan and Shanta watch the scenes of bloodshed and brutality with horror from the terrace of Ice Candy Man's residence, the latter is seen jubilating over each act of violence committed against the Hindu tenements. He turns to Shanta for help, telling her that only she can control the *animal* within him by marrying him. When he realizes shortly that Shanta's real affection is for Hassan and that she is unattainable, the dark forces of hatred and jealousy get the better of him, resulting in the intertwining of personal motives and religious fanaticism to perpetrate the worst forms of retribution not just against Hindus but also against his own friends irrespective of religion. The murder of Hassan and the disposal of his body in a sack in the street and the abduction of Shanta by the mob in the last scene are ghastly acts masterminded by him sans any feeling of remorse.

The stories of Shanta and Lenny and their circle of acquaintances are instances of how a major political and national event affects the everyday lives and aspirations of common people. The cordiality in the gatherings of Shanta and her friends give way to open expressions of religious hatred and people start converting to Islam or Christianity in Lahore as a means of escaping persecution and death and Hindus and Sikhs leave the city for India en masse. The turmoil seeps into the insular Sethi household too -- Hindu servants start leaving for India; those who prefer to stay back

embrace Islam, like Hari who converts to Islam and becomes Himmat Ali; Hindu servants marry off their girl children to aged men belonging to safer religions as in Papoo's wedding to a dwarfish and aged Christian. When Shanta is advised by Mrs Sethi to leave for Amritsar, where her relatives are, she expresses her reluctance to leave Lenny and the Sethis. But Hassan persuades her to take the step with promises that he would accompany her to India and convert into Hinduism before marrying her. Their dreams of a life together are thwarted by the turn of events – first, by Hassan's murder and then by Shanta's abduction from the Sethi household that becomes the climax of the movie.

That Shanta's abduction is made possible because of Lenny's unwitting betrayal of her to Ice Candy Man is a shocking twist to the climax. As a raging mob of Muslims enters the Sethi household in search of Hindu servants there, Imam Din, a senior servant tells them that Shanta has left for Amritsar. The mob would have left but for the intervention of Ice Candy Man, who steps forward from behind the crowd. When a visibly relieved Lenny runs to him, he exploits the trust the girl has in him and uses *ice candy* words to extract from her the information that Shanta is still with them. The Ice Candy man squats down stonily on the premises after instructing the mob to go inside the house and bring Shanta out. Nobody can stop the frenzied fanatics as they drag Shanta out of the house and take her away, clothes torn and wailing for help in the cart. This incident and her guilt of betrayal leave an indelible scar on Lenny's psyche: "And that day in 1947 when I lost Ayah, I lost a large part of myself" (01:35:25-30), ruminates a grown up Lenny, fifty years later, in the closing shot of the film. That Mehta made Bapsi Sidhwa appear as the adult Lenny is an indication of the participative commitment and biological inscription of the duo in their work.

While women bear the brunt of patriarchy on an everyday basis, major upheavals like the Partition and the ensuing religious fervor and mob violence aggravates their sufferings further. National histories and official records focussed more on the national and political interests of Partition and have remained silent about gendered violence:

> During the Partition months, violence against women (in the form of sexual assault, mutilation, murder, and abduction) rose to unprecedented levels, and this gendered violence has mostly been read as metonymic of the violation of the land …the violence that Partition brought to women is understood to be similar but of a different magnitude than the usual fare doled out to them in a patriarchal society. (George 136)

The patriarchal contours of the nation and the aggressive masculinity underlying national formulations can best be brought to light by tracing the "radical gender critique that some Partition fiction presents" (George 142). The raging mob of Muslims, who had entered the premises of the Sethi household in search of Hindu servants, first confront Hari, the gardener. But he escapes death since he has converted to Islam, assuming the name of Himmat Ali, circumcising his penis and learning to recite the *Kalma* or the Muslim confession of faith. Thus when fanatics "resort to violent ethnic and communal cleansing in the name of a pure nation," women are more vulnerable than men because of "the possibility of the male body to signify its identification with another body and escape death" (Ray 113). Women on the other hand are "ethnically identified [only] through their relations with Hindu, Muslim, or Sikh men" (Daiya 226). Shanta's declining of the fanatical Ice Candy Man's proposal of marriage and her decision to marry the more peace-loving Hassan, who had decided

to leave for India and convert to Hinduism spells doom for both of them. Hassan, unlike Ice Candy Man is a strong pacifist and is untouched by the religious fervor, hatred or war-like instincts infecting the latter. His refusal to assume war-like qualities in defense of his religion and his decision to transcend both his nationality and religion causes his death: "masculinity that cannot rise to the occasion of the fight is constructed much as that of women, wherein men of an 'other' religion are considered as effeminate and therefore symbolically castrated" (Madhuri 67).

Shanta's abduction is the climax of the movie and Mehta chooses to end the movie there unlike Sidhwa's novel which goes further and probes into what happens to Shanta and other abducted women like her and the role of Parsee women in the rehabilitation of such women. Mehta has been criticized for not having done full justice to the novel by eliding important parts and nuances of the novel including the role of Lenny's mother and other Parsee women in rehabilitating the lost and abducted women, the misogyny that existed in the Parsee community, the empowerment of Parsee women and so on. Though the film is indebted to the novel and is its adaptation, we have to grant that the filmmaker has the autonomy to envision the film anew. Rather than going deep into the dynamics of Parsee culture or the status of Parsee women, as Sidhwa had done, given her Parsee identity, Mehta's primary concern was to explore how women were victimized by patriarchal nationalism and religious fanaticism. The title sequence portraying *earth* and the film's climax portraying the violation of Shanta, the Ayah or the nurturing woman, intensify the equation of *earth* to *womanhood* and offer a critique of the aggressive masculinity underlying concepts like nationality and religion. All religions are culpable here – if the Hindu Ayah is abducted at the behest of Ice Candy Man, who is a Muslim, we cannot overlook that he hardened and turned into what he is because of what happened

to his sister's at the hands of the Hindus. "I want to kill someone for each breast cut off from my sisters" (01:13:42-45), he is heard telling someone. Again, as he tells Shanta, "This is not just about Hindus or Muslims. It's about what's inside us. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs – we are all bastards, all animals. Like the lion in the cage that Lenny-baby is so scared of. He just lies there, waiting for the cage to open. And when it does, God forbid" (01:01:55-01:02:37). It is this beastly instinct that finally supersedes in him and in the climax of the movie, as Shanta is abducted by the raging mob, we see the hardened man squatting on the premises of the Sethi household, watching the scene with hatred writ large on his face. Rather than putting the blame on any particular religion or nation, we have to grant that the fatal combination of nationalism, aggressive masculinity and religious intolerance is capable of unleashing extreme levels of atrocity and violence.

The element of aggression and violence that lurks in human beings and that is hinted at by Dil Navaz surfaces time and again in the movie right from the scene of the dinner at the Sethi household where the Sikh man and the English guest spit racial venom at each other and have a physical tussle. The simmering racial and religious hatred and hostility that lurked in people of Lahore is unleashed with full force once the Partition becomes a reality. Aggression and violence seems to be the underlying theme of the film as evidenced in Manju's heartless beating of her daughter Papoo and in Lenny's act of tearing apart her doll with the aid of cousin Adi as a reaction to the incidents around her. Parallel to the communal violence is the violence against women, the abduction of Ayah and the rape of thousands of other nameless and faceless women. If the Manju's act of mercilessly beating her daughter on a slight pretext and the marrying her off to a dwarfish and aged Christian are horrendous acts in themselves, we should not lose sight of the milder and more civilized forms of

gendered violence among the privileged sections and classes, that are suggested in more subtle forms as in Mrs Sethi's submissively pressing the feet of her husband as he lies down in bed after returning from work. All these traces of aggression in the film create an eeriness that culminates in the violence and aggression on women's bodies epitomized by the sack of women's breasts in the train from Gurdaspur, the camp for abducted women near Lenny's house, the gunnysack that contained the effeminate Hassan's corpse and the abduction of Ayah in the climax of the movie.

As Mattie Katherine Pennebaker observes, "[w]omen's bodies constituted a religious, geographical, and familial symbol. Defilement of the woman of a family would be the greatest dishonor the family unit could endure – and thus violence enacted on women during partition was tantamount to a sacrilege against one's religion, country, and family" (Pennebaker). The trope of the *abducted woman* that is central to both the novel and the film underscores the gendered nature of communal violence. It is a historical fact that scores of women on both sides of the border were kidnapped from their homes and raped and killed. Some of them returned to their homes and were reintegrated into their families with some difficulty, others had taken to prostitution and the fate of many others is unknown as many of them just ceased to exist. Mehta prefers to give multiple possibilities to the fate and whereabouts of the abducted Ayah. The guilt-ridden and grown up Lenny ruminates: "Fifty years have gone by since I betrayed my Ayah. Some say she married Ice Candy Wallah, some say they saw her in a brothel in Lahore, others that they saw her in Amritsar. But I never set eyes on her again. And that day in 1947, when I lost Ayah, I lost a large part of myself" (01:35:11-30). These words bespeak of the invisibility of abducted women in official history and point out the ambiguity of their whereabouts. Snigdha Madhuri's argument that the rape, abduction and disappearance of women exemplified by the

fate of Shanta is affirmative rather than derogatory justifies the abrupt ending of the film with Ayah's abduction and Lenny's remembrance of and identification with her:

> [B]y identifying herself with Ayah after her disappearance, Lenny represents Ayah's subjectivity through her rape rather than presenting Ayah as [the] degraded image [of the] fallen woman. It is clear that in spite of Ayah's physical disappearance, she still exists in Lenny's memories and narratives…. Ayah's abduction and disappearance do not represent Ayah as a victim; rather, her abduction examines the actual complexity and silence of abducted women during the partition.
>
> Focussing on Ayah's abduction, rape and her ambiguous position in post-colonial India and Pakistan, Mehta not only reveals the untold stories of subaltern and women during the partition, but investigates into the gaps, contradictions and ambivalence of political narratives regarding partition. (83, 84)

As Shanta is taken away in the cart, she is heard shouting out to Mrs. Sethi, "Madam, tell Hassan" (01:33:54-57), unaware of the fact that the lifeless body of her fiancé has been discovered in a gunny sack a short while ago. Having witnessed the romance of Shanta and Hassan blossoming, this small detail of Shanta's last request to her mistress is heartbreaking. Such details personalize the abducted woman and invest her with human qualities, instead of obliterating her or reducing her to a mere number in official records. There is a scene in the movie where Lenny and her cousin Adi go to the terrace of Lenny's house to see the abducted or "fallen women" (*Earth* 01:10:40) housed in the nearby premises, faceless and nameless women on whose bodies communal hostilities were contested. The boy in the camp, whom Lenny and Adi meet

and talk to from the safety of their terrace, recounts his harrowing experience of hiding under dead bodies to save himself when the Hindus came to attack his village. He painfully recalls how he found his dead mother in a mosque, naked and with her hair tied to a ceiling fan. Articulations such as these break the silence of those countless unknown individuals who had borne the brunt of the Partition and were rendered non-existent in official records and narratives.

The scene of Lenny and her cousin Adi's conversation with the refugee boy from the safe and elevated position of their terrace is significant in that it brings out the detachment and neutrality of the Parsees with respect to the traumatic incidents of the Partition. There are traces of condescension and insensitivity in the way Adi questions the boy. "Was your mother raped?" (01:10:59), he asks him. Lenny too unwittingly participates in this condescending neutrality when she tells the boy that it is her birthday and offers him cake, a thing that the boy has never heard of. The Parsees were one community that came out unscathed by the Partition violence because of their position of neutrality, opportunism and pragmatism that enabled them to refrain from taking sides with any group or religion. Bhaskar Sarkar speaks of the neutrality of the Parsees that was also related to their imitation of English ways of life:

> This neutrality [of the Parsees] was not only prompted by a political pragmatism, but also stemmed from detachment that was the result of their investment in a Western lifestyle – an investment that the film establishes through its reference to markedly Western practices (celebrating Lenny's birthday with a cake; ballroom dancing) and "progressive" attitudes (women driving cars, frowning the marriage of underage girls). (B. Sarkar 282-83)

When Lenny, who was in affinity with the common folk of Lahore, brings to her

mother's notice that the Parsees are mockingly referred to as the "bum lickers" of the British (00:19:51-52), Mrs Sethi counters that they are not bum lickers but "invisible" people who merge with whatever group they are put in (00:21:04). She narrates the story of the Parsee saint who sent a bowl filled with milk and sugar to the Indian King to indicate that they would melt and merge with the new land just as sugar does in the milk and be "sweet, but invisible" (00:20:56-58). Lenny's young mind revolts against the detachment and neutral stance of her parents and the Parsees as a whole. She contradicts her mother's version of the Parsees by saying that Parsees were "not bum lickers, [but] invisible people" (00:21:01-04). The empathetic Mrs. Sethi is able to step out of the neutrality and align herself with those around her and show compassion for the people affected by the Partition. She tells her husband: "This neutral position is not comfortable…. We are letting down our neighbours" (01:06:42-57). Mr. Sethi's callous response is that the best position is the neutral position and if the Swiss can be neutral, so can the Parsees (01:07:18-28). As Jill Didur suggests, the Parsee community is unwittingly aligned "with the patriarchal and elite postcolonial nation-state" and "the narrative's preoccupation with Lenny's exaggerated feeling of responsibility for Ayah's abduction can be read as a symbolic commentary on the failings of the postcolonial state under the rule of solipsistic elite groups" (90).

The complicity that both the British rulers and native politicians have in the Partition and the ensuing massacres gets its share of censure. The elite group of people, safe as they are in the echelons of power and privilege, seem unaffected by the agony and trauma ordinary men face during major political events like the Partition. The Sikh friend of the Sethis expresses his resentment for the English leaders who accomplish their work of dividing India from comfortable hotel rooms before making their final exit. The same sentiment is expressed about Indian politicians by Hari, the

gardener, when Shanta's friends, shattered as they are by the violence around them, huddle together to listen to the radio broadcast of Nehru's famous "Tryst with Destiny" speech on the midnight of Independence. As the optimistic first Prime Minister of India talks in fluent English about the tremendous possibilities before the newly Independent nation, Hari remarks, "These political leaders speak with twisted tongues. Good independence they give us -- soaked in our brothers' blood" (00:53:50-57). It is quite natural that Nehru's words sound hollow and far-removed from the lived situation and agony of these ordinary folk.

The elitist attitude of the diasporic filmmaker and the detached perspective of audiences as they look on at the incidents in the remote past from the safety of the present moment have also been criticized and commented upon. Bhaskar Sarkar senses a lack of authenticity in Mehta's depiction of the past:

> That is to say, the nature of historical understanding –cognitive *and* affective – that the film affords remains grievously limited. Tableau-like shots of weary refugees streaming into town on foot or in bullock carts, or of the beautifully lit and aesthetically arranged corpses in the train, are presented like a series of picture postcards: as if the past were, indeed, a foreign country, an exotic location in time, now opened up for tourist contemplation and consumption through cinematic time travel. (284)

Many of the scenes, including the one in which Ice Candy Man, the Masseur, Shanta and Lenny look on from the safety of the terrace at the flames going up in various parts of the street and at people running amok have been described by Sarkar as "implausible" and "stilted" and providing "a suturing point of view for an audience that is contemplating the horror from the safety and aloofness of the present moment –

distant in time and space" (B. Sarkar 284). The limitations of technique and method are inevitable and have to be seen as part of the imperfections and amateurishness that Hamid Naficy attributed to diasporic cinema (*Home* 131). But the charge of elitism and detachment of the diasporic filmmaker is unwarranted and will be proved to be flimsy when tested against the genuine empathy with which she has portrayed the everyday lives, dreams and heartbreaks of the ordinary folk who were affected by a major national event.

If the film *Fire* had created controversy soon after its release, *Water*, the third film in the trilogy courted controversy even before it was produced. Set in pre-independent India of 1938 and portraying the abysmal condition of the widows of Varanasi, a condition brought about by the collaboration of religion with patriarchy, *Water* elicited the ire of religious fundamentalists in the initial stages of the shooting itself. Since the first film in the trilogy, *Fire* had gained notoriety by going against the ethos of the Hindu nation and the institution of the family, it was natural that the Hindu fundamentalists looked at Mehta's move to portray the lives of the widows in the widow houses of Varanasi, situated on the banks of the holy river Ganga, as another attempt to tarnish Hinduism. The film had to face what may be called pre-production censorship when the shooting was about to begin in Varanasi in February 2002. The protests took on a dramatic turn with effigy burning, suicide attempts by Hindutva supporters and threatening phone calls to the director. Things went out of control when mobs related to right wing organizations like the RSS and Sangh Parivar disrupted the shooting by shouting slogans and burning up the sets of the film. The violence escalated to such levels that Mehta had to call off the shooting and disperse the crew. She had to wait for another five years before she could resume her shooting, and that too, in a different locale altogether, Sri Lanka, and with a fake

title, *River Moon*, to escape censor.

Devyani Saltzman, Deepa Mehta's daughter by Paul Saltzman, who was closely associated with the making of the film has written a memoir named, *Shooting Water: A Mother-Daughter Journey and the Making of a Film* which delineates the traumatic incidents surrounding the making of *Water* including the interruption of the shooting in Varanasi and its resumption five years later in Sri Lanka. The memoir serves as a firsthand account of the violence and hostility the film had to face in India that was ruled by the right wing party, BJP at that time. Caught by the irony of having to fight "for freedom of expression in a country that called itself the world's largest democracy" (Saltzman 71), Mehta's daughter muses,

> …the shutdown of *Water* was not about permission from the central government, re-permission or democracy. In all likelihood, opponents of the film probably cared little about widows…. It was about the blind pursuit of an idea of Indianness, an idea that required anything that challenged it, threatened to fray its perfect borders be cleansed and destroyed. (Saltzman 84)

The memoir traces the shutting down of a film on account of religious fundamentalism, its revival five years later in a foreign clime and its successful completion with changes in the actors. Initially, the actresses from the first film of the *Trilogy* -- Shabana Azmi, known for her activist profile and Nandita Das -- were to play the leading roles in *Water* too. But Mehta had to change them and cast Seema Biswas (known for her role as Phoolan Devi) and Lisa Ray in the roles of Shakuntala and Kalyani respectively. The child actress she had selected in India to play the role of the child widow, Chuyia had to be substituted by Sarala, a Sri Lankan girl selected by Mehta on the basis of an audition. Akshay Kumar, the Bollywood star was substituted

by John Abrahams in the role of Narayan. Saltzman relates how the members of the crew had to painstakingly model and create the bathing ghats of River Ganga on the banks of a Sri Lankan river for the purpose of the shooting. All the difficulties that Mehta and the members of her crew had to put up with for the completion of the film stand out as fine examples of human endurance and commitment to the cause of freedom of expression and democratic values that fundamentalist forces try to thwart.

The hostility against the so-called attempt to defile Hinduism and pollute the Holy River was so great in India that Mehta was denied permission to shoot the film anywhere in India. The reason for the animosity against the film was the fear that the idea of India as envisioned by the Hindu right wing would be defamed in the film. There exists only a thin line between religious fundamentalism and nationalism or patriotism and these two forces align to cast the nation's women in a particular mould. In the case of Mehta's film, the women to be *protected* by the custodians of religion and culture against the diasporic interventions of a filmmaker happened to be widows. As Malini Bhattacharya observes, the "stated purpose" of the violence against *Water* was to

> uphold the 'honour' of the Hindu community, as usual conflated with the Indian nation, and to mobilize opinion within the Hindu community to close the ranks on behalf of what was described as 'patriotism'. The argument was that a foreign-based director, with a westernized approach, was trying to spread calumny against Indian traditions, particularly against the status of Hindu widows….The Hindu widow as the icon of submissive piety is thus very important for mobilisers along communal lines: to protect her good name is seen as a 'patriotic act'. But a crucial aspect of this phenomenon is the way

> in which the icon becomes a living one, the way in which the iconic status is internalized by the women themselves (75, 77)

The submissive piety of the Hindu widow, on close analysis, will prove to be nothing more than an attribute forced on her by patriarchy and religion, an enforcement that dates back to ancient times and that has to be read in connection to the plight of Indian women in general. *Manusmriti*, one of the several Dharmashastras that prescribed moral principles and code of conduct for Hindus, was written somewhere around 1250 or 1000 BCE and had influenced the way women and widows were looked upon. Manu's dictate that a woman deserves no independence since she is protected by her father in childhood, by her husband in her youthful days and by her sons in her old age was effectively practiced in ancient India and holds its sway in society even today.

If the Vedic period was more liberal in its stance towards women and witnessed the equality of both sexes, the condition started deteriorating in the post Vedic times. Women had no education or property rights and were relegated to the four walls of the house. Child marriages only served to exacerbate the problems of women and caused a high incidence of widowhood, given the frequent deaths of the aged husbands. Widow re-marriage which was in vogue during the Vedic age was not permitted any more in the subsequent eras. The code of conduct for widows was strict. Mehta's *Water* begins with a display of Manu's dictate for widows on the screen which goes as follows: "A widow should be long suffering until death, self-restrained and chaste. / A virtuous wife who remains chaste when her husband dies goes to heaven. / A woman who is unfaithful to her husband is reborn in the womb of a jackal" (qtd. in Mehta, *Water* 00:00:02). Accordingly, a widow was expected to lead a life of asceticism and penance which included the tonsuring of her hair, wearing of white

robes, dietary restrictions like a frugal meal a day and the avoidance of sweets or fried food and sleeping on the bare floor. The unattractive appearance and frugal existence of the widows ensured that they were unappealing to the opposite sex with whom they were supposed to have no contacts at all. The custom of *Sati* or widow burning prevailed in India and had reached its peak during the middle ages. Though the immolation of the widow was regarded to be a voluntary act undertaken by the widow as a mark of devotion to her husband and as a means of avoiding the hardships of widowhood, the truth remains that the practice of Sati was often enforced on the helpless and reluctant widow. Regarded as inauspicious and left to lead a life of abstinence, self-negation and penury, many of these widows took refuge in the widow houses or *ashrams* in places like Vrindavan or Varanasi, where they could spend the rest of their life in piety and prayers.

A widow house in Varanasi and the debilitating life and hardships the widows had to face there form the subject matter of Mehta's film. The images of the widows, trapped in the inner recesses of the Widow Houses, bald-headed and in drab white robes and with repressed urges and desires, both physical and otherwise, haunt us. The ritualistic initiation into widowhood is portrayed through Chuyia, the eight year old girl whose hair is cut off and bangles are broken even before the corpse of the deceased husband is cremated. The widow ashram houses widows of different age groups – children, young women and older ones and they form a kind of family with its own power hierarchies, oppressive patterns and rules. Regarded as bad omens and deprived of many of the basic human rights granted by modern society, the widows had to languish in the widow houses performing rituals and singing *bhajans* or hymns in the temples of the Holy town of Varanasi. Though widows underwent such humiliation and hardships in the name of religion, the underlying exploitative

patriarchal and economic agenda behind such treatment is far too obvious. Narayan, the Gandhian and the lover of Kalyani, the prostitute-widow later explains to the widow, Shakuntala Devi, the real reason for the ill treatment and banishment of widows: "One mouth less to feed, four saris, one bed and one corner are saved for the whole family…. Disguised as religion, it's just about money!" (*Water* 01:37:23-48).

By depicting the story of a child widow, the film becomes a pungent comment on the issue of child marriage as well. Much of the pungency can be attributed to the sharp and searing comments made the child widow herself on patriarchy and its customs, comments made in childhood innocence, which nevertheless scathe patriarchy and expose its standards. Chuyia, the eight year old girl married off to a man in his forties, becomes a widow when her ailing husband dies even before the consummation of the marriage. She has a rebellious streak in her which stands up against the mighty force of societal, religious and patriarchal sanctions. The rebellion in Chuyia is apparent from the very beginning, from the first shot of the film. She is shown travelling in a bullock cart in her colourful clothes and flowing tresses with her sick husband and her mother-in-law who is engaged in nursing the dying man. The child bride who was too young to comprehend the meaning of marriage, (given that she was with her parents after marriage, a leniency some child brides enjoyed till they attained puberty), is in a carefree attitude, unbothered and oblivious about the sick man or her relationship with him. She is seen relishing a piece of sugarcane, her legs dangling down the cart and even poking the leg of her sick husband with the sugarcane, unaware of her impending widowhood.

The scene in which Chuyia's father wakes her up in the night to break the news of her husband's death and her newly-acquired status of widowhood is done with a

sparseness and economy of dialogue, expression and action unheard of in Indian cinema that has a predilection for melodrama and artificiality. When the grief-filled father asks her, "Do you remember the man you got married to?" (*Water* 00:02:55-59), she bluntly answers in the negative, striving hard to keep away sleep. The father solemnly informs her: "Your husband is dead! Now you have become a widow!" (00:03:03-07) and the sleepy girl queries nonchalantly, "For how long, father?" (00:03:11-12), a query directed against the rigid structures of patriarchy and the codes prescribed by religion. Another startling question posed by Chuyia comes after she resides in the Widow's Ashram for some time and experiences the privations of widowhood. While she is with the older widows performing the expected rituals on the banks of the river, she asks with genuine curiosity: "Where is the house for men widows?" (00:31:56-59), a question too daring and unthinkable, that the other widows' consternation is quite palpable. The widows call her a bad omen and curse her: "God protect our men from such a fate! May your tongue burn! Pull out her tongue and throw it in the river!" (00:32:04-10).

Chuyia is rightly described as the catalyst of change in the ashram, as from her first day there, she puts up a lot of resistance and goes against the dictates of Madhumathi, the despotic old widow who acted as the head of the ashram. When Madhumathi tries to soothe the newly-arrived and disconsolate Chuyia and explain the situation of widows to her by quoting from the *Shastras* or the Holy texts of the Hindus, Chuyia would have none of it and bites her in protest. She is chased by the other widows for this act and she has to take refuge in the room of Shakuntala, the learned widow who has a voice of her own. Shakuntala gently reprimands her with the words, "Sharp teeth. Sharper imagination!" (00:10:41-42) and assumes the role of mentor for the girl from that moment, a relationship that grows to the level of a

mother-daughter bond. It is natural that Chuyia quickly forms a bond with those widows who have the streak of resistance in them – Patiraji, the old widow who mocks at the ways of Madhumathi, and Kalyani, the beautiful young prostitute widow, who is sent by Madhumathi to the rich landlords of the area, to earn money for the ashram. Chuyia with her childhood innocence, refusal to submit, persistent questioning and frank utterances brings about a stir in the forsaken ashram where life had previously come to stand still. She refuses to submit to her fate and reacts to injustice whenever possible. For instance, she wrings the neck of Mithu, Madhumati's parrot and kills it to protest against the despotic widow's treatment of her friend Kalyani. She believes she would not have to live for quite long in the ashram since her mother would come to take her home.

A friendship develops instantly between Chuyia and the aged Patiraji, who has an innate disdain for authority and imposition of power. She commends Chuyia for having bitten Madhumathi: "You really made the fat cow dance" (00:11:48-51), she giggles. The next question that Patiraji confidentially asks her is, "Do you have a ladoo?" (00:11:59-00:12:02). She confesses that she sees ladoos in her dreams. Ladoos and sweets were food forbidden to widows, but such delicacies are the frequent theme of the old widow's dreams and the subject of her conversation with Chuyia. She shares with Chuyia the memories of her wedding feast that took place decades ago: "plump white rasagullas, piping hot gulab jamuns – the saliva was drooling out of my mouth – yellow ladoos made with pure ghee, cashew nut sweets covered with gold leaf" (00:19:12-32). The old woman sighs thinking about her present plight without sweets and remarks, "Life is so disappointing!" (00:19:35-36). The other widows in the film seem to be forgetful of their childhood and younger days with the onslaught of widowhood. This is indicated by the words of the widow Kunti who says, "I don't

even remember being seven" (00:34:12). But the trauma of widowhood causes Patiraji to sharpen her memory – a strategy she uses to overcome the restraints and drabness of widowhood. She lets Chuyia into this world of memories and longing and the child becomes her partner in crime. In one of her strolls outside the ashram, the girl flouts the rules, buys a ladoo from a sweet shop and presents it to the old widow. Patiraji eats the ladoo and reminisces about her marriage once again and dies that night. When a guilt-stricken Chuyia confesses her *crime* to Shakutala, the latter comforts her saying, "Don't worry, she will go to heaven after eating your ladoo" (00:55:27-32). The "denial of the pleasures of food to widows" (Madhuri 42) is akin to the repression of their sexual desire by society and the resistance of widows to such denials and repressions are etched throughout the film.

The rebellion of Kalyani, the widow cum prostitute who is forced to earn money for the ashram by satiating the sexual appetites of the rich Brahmin landlords of the area, is central to the plot and opens up questions about widow remarriage and sexuality of widows. Kalyani, who is in her early twenties and is allowed to grow her hair as a means of attracting her clients, is put up in a separate room upstairs and not allowed to mingle with the other widows for fear that she may pollute them. Every now and then, she is ferried across the Ganga to the houses of rich landlords by Gulabi, the eunuch as per the arrangements of Madhumathi. This deviation from the rule of chastity and penance of widows is permitted as it is brings economic gain. This nevertheless is a pointer to the double standards and hypocrisy underlying all stringent codes and customs. *Water* unveils the double standards of patriarchy which calls for the control of female pleasures and desires but permits the gratification of male needs. In the words of Dhanya Johnson,

> This film interrogates the male privilege in Hindu patriarchy… [that is] designed to accommodate and normalize masculine preferences and patterns of gratification. The widows' house in Varanasi replicates the order of things in the male patriarchal system, where the widows despite their subversive urges, abide and control their gratification of sensuous and sensual pleasures. (78)

Kalyani, the widow is forced to work as a prostitute for the sustenance of the ashram, but at the same time is prevented from gratifying her passion by getting married to the man she loves. Madhumathi the old caretaker admonishes Kalyani and reminds her about the vow of purity of widows: "We must live in purity to die in purity" (01:15:09-11). When Kalyani demands to know why she was being sent as a prostitute if that was so, Madhumathi answers as follows -- "For survival. And how we survive here -- no one can question, not even God!" (01:15:17-23). This is typical of how rules and customs that are stringently imposed on women are twisted or diluted to for the sake of vested interests or utilitarian purposes.

It is Kalyani's friendship with Chuyia that facilitates her meeting and love affair with Narayan, the young educated son of a landlord and follower of Gandhiji. The love plot of the film has all the ingredients of a Bollywood love story – facilitators, accidental meetings, love at first sight, elements of song and dance etc. In fact it is when Chuyia runs after Kalyani's pet dog Kaalu that she bumps into Narayan resulting in his getting introduced to Kalyani. But despite the Bollywood frame work, *Water* touches on crucial questions concerning widowhood, religion, chastity, prostitution and exploitation by *zamindars* or landlords. Sexual exploitation of widows and their succumbing to prostitution were usual in the past. Kalyani is prey to the vicious system in which "[w]idows provided almost the only possible route to

consensual love and self-willed romance, because the wife, married in infancy and crushed under domestic and procreative labour, was rarely a figure of romance" (T. Sarkar 101). Narayan's mother is an example of a woman neglected by her husband and as it turns out, his father Seth Dwarakanath is an avid admirer of widows like Kalyani. Deeply entrapped in this schema of sexual exploitation, the only way Kalyani can find some respite is by learning "to live like a Lotus, untouched by the filthy water that it grows in" (01:08:31-35) as prescribed in *Gita*, the holy text. When she tells this to Narayan, he is quick to contradict her: "Krishanji is a God, Kalyani. Not everyone can live like the lotus petal!" (01:08:42-46). His words portend the doom of their love story, a doom brought about by society's antagonism towards widow re-marriage and its enforcement of codes of chastity and purity on them.

Both Narayan and Kalyani take a bold step when they decide to get married by transcending the stigma and taboo associated with widow re-marriage. The story of Kalyani, the prostitute-widow can be regarded as a treatise on the rights and condition of the widows of pre-independent India, given the sexual and economic exploitation they were subjected to and the hostile attitude of Hindu society towards the question of widow remarriage. The regressive discourses on widowhood and widow remarriage were so rampant in society that Madhumathi's response to the prospect of Kalyani's marriage is typical of the times. Chuyia unwittingly discloses the love affair and impending wedding of Kalyani when she insolently tells Madhumathi that she will be able to eat hundreds of *puris* (round deep-fried bread) for Kalyani's wedding. Since Madhumathi believed that widow re-marriage was a sin that would cause not just the sinner but all associated with her to burn in hell, she acts quickly and cuts Kalyani's hair and locks her up in her room. Even the more progressive Shakuntala acquiesces to this act initially, but when she hears from the Priest Sadanandha (Kulbhushan

Karbanda) that a law sanctioning widow remarriage has been passed, she demands the key to Kalyani's room from Madhumati and liberates her.

Though widow remarriage was legalized by the British government as early as 1856, it was unacceptable and rare even in 1938 in spite of the Nationalist Movement and the progressive thoughts that the movement elicited. The doomed love affair and the impossibility of the marriage of a young idealist to an unchaste widow are natural indications of this. The lovers have a brief moment of happiness when they are on their way to Narayan's house to meet his parents -- full of expectations and contemplating as to what colour Kalyani should wear first after shunning her widow's robes. Narayan is optimistic that his father who is a liberal and progressive man will get around his mother to accept Kalyani as daughter-in-law. But as the boat nears Narayan's house and Kalyani realizes that he is the son of Seth Dwarakanath, one of the landlords who had exploited her, she wants Narayan to turn the boat around. Economical in her use of words, the only words Kalyani utters when the perplexed Narayan asks for an explanation is: "Ask your father" (01:30:47-48). Kalyani's revelation comes as a hard blow to Narayan and crashes the icon of his father he had cherished so far. His father's reaction to the whole scenario further exposes the callousness of upper class and upper caste patriarchy and Brahmanism. In the most unperturbed way, the father tells the son: "What happened was unfortunate. However, so you've found out that she's not a Goddess. Don't marry her – keep her as a mistress!" (01:31:04-32). He further defends his act of having slept with a widow by saying that "Brahmins can sleep with whomever they want and the women they sleep with are blessed" (01:31:42-49).

Earlier on in the film there is a scene where Narayan and his friend Rabindra

relax on the bathing ghats of Ganga in the night and watch a boat ferrying a widow across the river to some client. Narayan, who is a novice to the ways of his tribe as he has just arrived at Varanasi after his higher studies elsewhere, is enlightened by Rabindra: "The landlords here have an unnatural concern for widows" (00:27:47-53). It is a vicious system of lechery and consumerism where the widows lose their identity and just become objects or bodies to be exploited by the elite with the full sanction of the widow ashrams where they had taken refuge. "My father doesn't even bother about their names – there's the old one, the fat one, the new one, the young one" (00:28:31-40), says Rabindra. Dwarakanath's advice to his son to keep Kalyani as a mistress rather than as a wife emphasizes the desirability of widows as mistresses and their unacceptability in the marital sphere. The viciousness of the system of sexual exploitation is evident in the haste with which Madhumathi makes Chuyia take the place of Kalyani after the latter's suicide. Chuyia is taken out on her first trip to a landlord's place with promises of a meeting with her mother and the prospect of returning home. The girl is so innocent that she tells the man waiting for her somewhere in the huge mansion what she has been made to believe she had gone there for: "I've come to play" (*Water* 01:41:42-44). Fortunately for her, she is saved after this first traumatic violation by the timely intervention of Shakuntala.

When Kalyani's hopes of beginning a life with Narayan are thwarted, she initially returns to the widow's ashram, but commits suicide soon after by walking into the waters of the holy river. Critics have commented on the suicide as blunting the feminist edge of the film as Kalyani becomes a mere victim sans any agency or empowerment, choosing death over life. Such arguments could be countered by looking at things from a different perspective. A dip in River Ganga is believed to wash away sins and Kalyani who had been ferried across the river so far as a prostitute

now fully immerses herself in the holy water and merges with it. Kalyani who is regarded as twice impure, first as a widow and second as a prostitute, transcends the rigidities of society and the stigma of impurity by merging with the waters of the holy river. Though suicide is commonly seen as defeating, it becomes an act of victory for Kalyani, a victory over structures of patriarchy and customs that bear women down. The barriers set by society as to the pure and the impure are washed away and become immaterial as the doubly impure woman submits her life to the holy river. Again, Kalyani commits suicide before Narayan comes to the widow ashram to take her away. She should have been aware that Narayan would come for her, but she chooses not to wait for him. So too, Madhumati is eager to send Kalyani on her rounds to the landlords as soon as she returns to the ashram. This prospect of being forced into a life she abhorred could have hastened her decision to end her life. Deprived of her wishes and defeated by circumstances, Kalyani rises to victory in the end by having her own way and defeating the designs of patriarchy and other vested interests.

Kalyani's suicide is offset by Chuyia's embarking on a new course of life as the film ends in the train bearing the followers of Gandhiji. As already mentioned, Shakuntala rescues the drugged and raped child and carries her determinedly to the railway station where Gandhi is conducting a prayer meeting before boarding the train for his next destination. As the train, that is swarmed by his followers, starts from the station, Shakuntala runs after it with the child, screaming to the passengers to take the child and hand her over to Gandhiji. By a stroke of luck, Narayan happens to be in the train and Shakuntala succeeds in entrusting the child to him. The last shot of the film shows in close up the frame of a relieved Shakuntala with her gaze partly directed at the audience as the train speeds away behind her. The message conveyed in clear – Shakuntala can rest assured of Chuyia's safety as she is now in the care of Gandhiji,

who is one answer to the problems of the widows. Gandhiji is made out to be a positive sign of salvation for the oppressed widows, a symbol of hope and progress. Gandhiji therefore is used by Mehta to stand for the only means of salvation in the limited and dark world of the widows. The train that chugs away with Chuyia symbolizes a journey into newness, hope and life as against the bullock cart that was shown in the opening shot that took Chuyia into a world of despair, death and desolation.

By today's standards, Gandhi's views on women and his attitude to them including his treatment of his wife Kasturba Gandhi, influenced as they were by his strong religiosity and adherence to tradition, appear to be seriously flawed and bordering on misogyny. The intertextuality of *Fire* to Gandhi's practice of abstinence has already been discussed. Nevertheless, we have to agree that Gandhi's national movement enabled women to have more visibility in the public sphere for the first time. The champion of the downtrodden and suffering, he among other things, advocated the emancipation of women who had hitherto been a suppressed lot. The name of Mahatma Gandhi is referred to throughout the film, especially in the talks between Gulabi, the eunuch and pimp and Madhumathi, the widow. They discuss with consternation and loathing his new and progressive ideas on widow remarriage and untouchability that were unheard of in those times. This consternation is obvious in Narayan's mother who hears of her son's decision to marry a widow and blurts out, "Gandhiji has corrupted your brain…. It's a sin to marry a widow" (*Water* 01:12:20-22). Narayan as Gandhi's follower and a participant in the nationalist movement is deemed to be much ahead of his time. His act of falling in love with a widow and his decision to marry her even after coming to know that she is unchaste and has been used by his own father are subversive and bold.

It is quite natural that the aura of change brought about by the Nationalist Movement under Gandhi should seep into the life of widows too. As Dhanya Johnson observes, "the story of *Water* follows three widows who dared to stand up for themselves in the liberating times of Mahatma Gandhi" (80). Of the three widows, Shakuntala, by far, appears to be the most subversive and powerful, delineated as she is with more depth and pathos. Educated and well-read, she has a say in the ashram and is the only widow who can stand up against the dictatorial ways of Madhumathi. Shakuntala proves herself to be not only humane and but also human – human because she proves that under the veneer of silence, stoicism and conformity of the widow, her basic human instincts are still intact. Apart from the instinct of motherhood, she still retains her "worldly desires" (*Water* 00:41:25) and her craving to be appreciated. This is clear from a query that she makes to Chuyia about her *looks* when the two are alone in their room. There are suggestions that the devotion Shakuntala has for Priest Sadanandha, who gives religious talks to the widows on the banks of the river, are mingled with instincts other than religious piety. On one occasion, as she carries on with her services to him before his talk, the priest asks her, "Shakuntala Devi, you've been doing this service for many years -- so many years of sacrifice and devotion. How near to *moksh* [self-liberation] have you reached?" (00:40:38-56). Shakuntala replies, "If moksh means detachment from worldly desires, then, no, I'm no closer" (00:41:19-29). Her candid confession stresses the fact that in spite of the strict codes of conduct and taboos imposed on widows, taboos and codes that could deform any human being, she is resilient and human to the core.

Shakuntala, the widow with a reserve of silence around her, can nevertheless stand up against injustice and oppression and do what she feels is right. Helpful and kind-hearted she takes upon herself the duty of looking after and protecting the

defenseless widows living with her, Patiraji, Chuyia and Kalyani, being examples. Grounded as she is in the traditional beliefs and customs of her time, she observes the codes of conduct expected of widows and yet breaks them without hesitation when she realizes their fallibility. Though she had been a silent spectator when Kalyani was imprisoned by Madhumathi, she liberates her when she comes to know that widow remarriage is sanctioned by law. Mehta ends her film with a close up of Shakuntala gazing into the eyes of the audience in a kind of reverse gaze after rescuing Chuyia, a look that penetrates into the double standards and callousness of the practices inherent in caste and class systems and religion and patriarchal nationalism. She thus emerges as the champion of the oppressed, a true leader bringing about a silent revolution. The *bhajan* or religious hymn, "Vaishnava Jan To*"* that rings out during the prayer meeting of Gandhiji turns out to be true in the case of Shakuntala. The bhajan, a favourite of Gandhi, was written in Gujarati by Narsinh Mehta, a fifteenth century poet and enumerates the qualities of a *Vaishnavite* or person of God. The attributes listed in the song include empathy for those in pain and extending a helping hand to those in misery, treating all with equality and respecting a woman as one's own mother. The bhajan holds true in the case of Shakuntala and Narayan and underlines the need for religion and religious men to reset their orientations and priorities when it comes to the question of the oppressed sections of society like women, widows or children. The film, which exposes the cruelties imposed on the weak and destitute sections of society in the name of religion and patriarchal nationalism, therefore becomes a strong plea for compassion and mercy.

Like the other films in the *Trilogy*, *Water* ends on a positive but ambiguous note. There are promises of fresh beginnings, but there is also an uncertainty that stems from the altered circumstances, the journeys and new beginnings that the

characters are made to undertake. The change and newness make the movies' endings become beginnings or starting points and the journey motif in them are in resonance with the diasporic situation. The endings of the films are unconventional and unlike the endings of most mainstream films, which leave all threads resolved and where everything is restored to the accepted order of things and the status quo. The new course of life in the homo-normative mode that awaits Radha and Sita in *Fire*, the sudden change in the life of Lenny or Shanta in *Earth* and in the life of Chuyia, Shakuntala and Narayan in *Water* are in keeping with the principles and agenda of reframing that happens to the nation in the films of Mehta.

Marked as they are by a richness and plurality of themes and discourses on the nation and nationalism, with *Fire*, the first film becoming a critique of the middle class joint family that is a miniature nation, *Earth* analyzing the perils of religion-induced national fervor and violence on the bodies of women and men and *Water* exposing the ploy of patriarchy and religious nationalism in repressing women, the films invest on the agency and potential of women to transgress and transcend the rigidities of nationalism per se. Sita and Radha of *Fire* break the quotidian rules of the middle class household, Chuyia, Shakuntala, Kalyani and Patiraji of *Water* defy the prescriptions of religion and patriarchy in the everyday lives of widows and Lenny and Shanta of *Earth* transcend the limits set on them by religion, race, class and gender. The transgression of these characters bind on mundane and everyday aspects like matters of dressing or cross-dressing, overcoming restrictions of food, observance or non-observance of customs, subversion of hierarchies, defiance of power structures and breaking codes of behavior and rules of bonding and sexuality. These acts of everyday defiance become correctives to the excesses and rigidities of nationalism and uplift these women from the status of mere victims to those of agents who bring about

a transformation in their own lives and in the lives of others around them.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta discussed in the thesis, disparate as they are in themes, locales and time frames, succeed in providing the audience with a wide and banal panorama of the nation spanning the lives of destitute people in the streets, the happenings in ancient palaces and kingdoms, the interior spaces and goings on in Indian joint families and middle class homes, the tumult and agony of the Partition, the tyranny induced by religion and patriarchy on people and so on. The disparate films are linked together by certain common threads, the female diasporic perspective of the filmmakers, the quotidian and everyday quality of nationhood that is reframed and the vantage points of *space off* and *elsewhere* from where the reframing takes place, being chief among them. Setting these films against the standards of mainstream commercial cinema and identifying how they converge or diverge from them on both thematic and structural planes are valid tasks as the reframing of the nation is closely bound with a reframing of the paradigms and elements of mainstream national cinema. A study of the films with respect to cinematic paradigms like the choice of protagonists, the centrality of the family, gender dynamics and equations, questions of ethics and morality, treatment of the body and sexuality, psychological motives of characters and other specificities of plot and structure will illuminate us better on the reframing of the national imaginary that

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happens in them.

The qualities most in need for the sustenance of the nation are unquestioning loyalty, acts of sacrifice and the abdication of one's individuality for the sake of the community. Those who fail to comply with these standards are met with disapproval for swerving from the principles of nationhood. Mainstream cinema portrays people who conform to the ideals of the nation and uphold its values. On the other hand, female diasporic films are peopled with characters who are in the fringes of society, characters who do not coalesce with the groups or communities to which they belong and characters who rebel in different ways and in different degrees against the pressure to forgo their selfhood and personal aspirations at the altar of commonality and homogeneity. The movies selected for the study fiercely stand against the most basic requisite of nation and nationalism. The characters of Nair (Chaipau, Sweet Sixteen, Rekha, Maya, Jai Kumar, Aditi, Ria, Pimmi, Alice and Dubey) and the characters of Mehta (Sita, Radha, Lenny, Shanta, Chuyia, Kalyani, Shakuntala and Narayan) are endowed with strongly etched identities that resist a complete submission to the communities to which they belong and to the other hegemonic structures surrounding them. The communities and hegemonic structures that these characters rebel against are manifest in various guises and forms like brothels, the network of crime and drug mafia infesting cities, the stringent state-run remand homes for young offenders, the joint family, Brahmanism and bourgeois values, Widow Houses, caste and class hierarchies, religious rites and rituals and communal hostility and prejudice. The rebellion and nonconformity of the characters and their unwillingness to submit to and follow the cherished ideals and principles of these communities prove that the ideal of nation and nationhood stands deconstructed in the films.

The protagonists and characters of the films, apart from being rebels and non-conformists, belong to economically, socially and morally underprivileged and ostracized sections of society. They are people whose stories are not usually represented in mainstream cinema which has a penchant for protagonists who are "young, fair, handsome, eligible, romantic, mother fixated, upper caste, north Indian and preferably rich" (Deshpande 97). The protagonist of a typical Mira Nair or Deepa Mehta film is different from the protagonist in a Bollywood film and the characters range from street kids, sex workers, drug addicts, courtesans, maids, victims of child abuse, marriageable girls who transgress the codes of chastity, neglected and overworked housewives, homoerotic women, widows, physically disabled children and ayahs and caretakers. The attributes of these characters demarcate them from the well-defined, elite and stereotyped protagonists of mainstream cinema and mark them as liminal beings, inhabiting the borders and margins of the nation and the regions of *elsewhere* or *space off*. The representation of subaltern characters in the films and the visibility they get as a result accord them an amount of agency. As Subeshini Moodley puts it, "'accented' filmmakers speak on behalf of the people in or from their countries ... [and] work toward eliminating the subaltern (sometimes in the way Spivak conceives of the term, but also in the sense of inferior, subordinate and oppressed)" (73). The peopling of frames with subaltern characters goes a long way in displacing the elitist and bourgeois discourses and values that dominate the frames of mainstream cinema.

Since it is *elsewhere* spaces that are highlighted in the female diasporic movies studied in the thesis, the space of the family, which forms the centre-stage of the action and events in mainstream cinema, is either present only sparsely or is totally absent in them. Rather than showing absolute devotion and loyalty to the family, the characters

of the movies either question its values or openly rebel against them. If in mainstream cinema, the family is a miniature nation following ethical values and keeping intact the mores of patriarchy, the female diasporic movies selected for the study are less devoted to maintaining the sanctity or primacy of the family and its ideals. The movies often expose the family as ineffectual and incapable of providing security, happiness, love and bonding. Spaces other than those represented by the family occupy the centre-stage of action and gain primacy in the female diasporic frames. Chaipau in *Salaam Bombay!* is ousted from his family by an unrelenting mother who wants him to work hard and fetch money as compensation for the bike that he had destroyed. There is no home or household depicted as such in the films and they focus instead on life in the streets and pavements, in the drug dens and brothels. Maya, the protagonist of *Kamasutra*, is also a homeless wanderer like Chaipau, traversing distances, towns and lands all alone. She is at times seen rambling about on rocky terrains and forest lands with her lover, Jai Kumar. For a short while, when she gains the position of chief courtesan, she has a roof over her head. But this state is short-lived and she is seen setting out on another of her never-ending journeys as the film comes to a close. The family in the film, the royal family comprising King Raj Singh and Princess Tara, deteriorates steadily due to the ways of the King and affords little by way of comfort to either of them.

If the film *Fire* avidly portrays the fault lines that the Indian middle class family is ridden with and *Water* exposes the mercenary values and cruelty that prompt families to disown widowed women, *Earth* also sidelines the Parsee family to which Lenny belongs. The polio-infected girl seems to relish the alternate spaces of warmth and belonging provided by Ayah and her male friends in outdoor areas like parks and eateries more than the cosiness afforded by her actual family in their sprawling

mansion. Such alternate family formations that break the status quo are seen everywhere in the films – in the family of sorts formed in the widows' ashram in Varanasi, in the live-in system followed by Baba, the pimp and Rekha, the sex worker in *Salaam Bombay!*, in the bonding of the kids in the streets in the same movie and in the new life of homoerotic companionship that the sisters-in-law of *Fire* are embarking on. Even *Monsoon Wedding*, which is the only movie that celebrates the joys and togetherness afforded by the family, does so only after unearthing and resolving the sordid and distasteful realities that lie beneath seemingly perfect families.

Another striking difference that we note in female diasporic films is the absence of the hero or male protagonist as defined by Bollywood standards. The films focus mainly on women characters and women's stories, on the woman's point of view and on the empowerment and agency women gain after breaking free from patriarchal nationalism, aggressive masculinity, class and caste hierarchy and strictures of religion. If the *Trilogy* effects the emancipation of women by equating them to the natural elements of fire, earth and water which signify passion, nurture and purity respectively, the movies of Mira Nair tackle the woman's question by highlighting the case of the unchaste and impure woman. *Salaam Bombay!* centralises the case of the impure women of the nation by an empathetic portrayal of the lives and miseries of prostitutes, *Kamasutra* subverts the accepted notions on women's purity and chastity by placing the courtesan against the queen or the married woman and *Monsoon Wedding* studies women's chastity in relation to the institutions of family and marriage.

If "men and masculinities" invariably "figure centrally in the imagining of the

nation" in mainstream cinema (Oza 9), they are reframed and rendered ineffectual in female diasporic cinema. There are men who exhibit aggressive masculinity and victimize women, but such men are stripped of their masculinity in the course of the films. Chaipau/Krishna, the central character of *Salaam Bombay!* is a young boy with a slender frame, a deep empathy for victimized women and a manifest absence of the virility shown by protagonists of mainstream cinema. Significantly, he becomes instrumental in the disposal of Baba, the sadistic pimp and drug dealer who embodied the principle of aggressive masculinity. Baba's death symbolises the destruction of the virility and the aggressive principle that imprisoned and indoctrinated women's bodies. Like Baba, King Raj Singh of *Kamasutra*, who has a disproportionate obsession for women, is another character exhibiting virility and aggressive masculinity. He is also rendered powerless in the end by his very virility and unbridled sexuality, his addiction to drugs and his negligence of his kingly duties. Prince Vikram Singh, Tara's brother, who nurses a longing for Maya from childhood and tells her that he would like to make her his queen and *slave* is another character with potential for aggressive masculinity. The fact that he is portrayed as a hunch back – a physical disability that in his case symbolises an inward depravity too -- with little prospects of being attractive to Maya or to women in general divests him of the virility that would have led him to victimise women. The world of *Monsoon Wedding* offers very little scope for any kind of aggressive masculinity to reign. Most of the men there – Lalit, the bride's father, Hemant, the groom or Dubey, the romantic hero of the subplot and the other relatives of Aditi – lack the virility usually found in the male characters of Bollywood cinema. They are effeminate, soft and women-friendly characters rather than outright moustache-twirling patriarchs who control and terrorize women. Vikram, Aditi's adulterous lover as well as Tejpuri, the paedophilic uncle are virtually

ousted from the life of the other characters and from the flow of events of the movie, thereby wiping away all traces of aggressive masculinity from the movie.

Such an ousting of aggressive masculinity and patriarchy happens in the *Trilogy* too. The union of the sisters-in-law in the film *Fire* exemplifies the triumph of women over masculinity and patriarchy. The inability of the brothers, Ashok and Jatin, to keep the patriarchal joint family intact indicates the collapse of the values of masculinity and patriarchy cherished by the nation. Though aggressive masculinity and patriarchal and religious nationalism seem to gain the upper hand in *Earth* when Shanta is taken away by the raging mob of religious fanatics, the masculine and patriarchal principle undergoes a toning down by the very fact that it stands unmasked and vilified. Coming to *Water*, Narayan, the only male character who is well delineated, epitomises the feminine principle and is soft and gentle in his dealing with women. The other characters like Priest Sadanandha and Chuyia's father are also seen to be empathetic to women. The landlords of Varanasi including Narayan's father instantly get the censure of the audience for being thoroughly villainous and hard-hearted people who exploit hapless widows. Narayan stands as a counterpoint to landlords like his father by his compassion for the downtrodden and his embracing of social causes. In all the three films of Mehta, the feminine principle gains the upper hand and triumphs in the reframing of the nation.

Though aggressive masculinity and patriarchal nationalism intrude into the everyday lives and realities of the women characters, curtailing their liberty and infringing upon their identities and sense of dignity, the women are able to successfully transcend these debilitating forces and emerge victorious and triumphant in the end. The women protagonists may not be emancipated and empowered persons

in the beginning, but gain various degrees of emancipation and empowerment as the movies progress. The victimised women do not remain victims, but transcend their victimhood in course of time and are thus defined by the transformation that happens to them, a transformation closely intertwined with diasporic perspectives and paradigms. The quintessential Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta woman protagonist acquires agency by crossing borders and boundaries, especially internal and metaphysical ones:

> ...these protagonists don't always begin as women with agency, but always grow and develop to that point. Their marginal spaces are first defined and highlighted in order to show how they later redefine and transcend [these] boundaries....The process involves much introspection and, at some point, these protagonists take an active step in rejecting the current inscription of their identities and participate in the creation and construction of their identities to become subjects of their own lives...Nair's and Mehta's characters often seem to be in a state of tension regarding who they are expected to be, and who they would like to be. These characters often transform through *a crossing over of borders within themselves*. These are evident in the choices made against the grain, succumbing to desire or engagement in rebellious activity. (Moodley 68; emphasis added)

The female characters in all the six films, Rekha in *Salaam Bombay!*, Maya and Tara in *Kamasutra*, Ria and Aditi in *Monsoon Wedding*, Radha and Sita in *Fire*, Shanta and Lenny in *Earth* and Shakuntala, Kalyani and Chuyia in *Water* gain agency as they cross borders which are social, cultural and traditional as well as internal and psychological. Rather than remaining static and unchanging, all of them undergo

internal changes as the story progresses, changes that enable them to overcome the oppressive situation in their lives. This is a change that is not unlike the transformation that happens to diasporic individuals as they cross borders and adapt themselves to new lands and cultures.

The idea of border and border crossing thus has a central place in the works of Nair and Mehta, making them truly diasporic texts. Hamid Naficy speaks about the ability of borders to foster multiple perspectives and tolerance of ambiguity, ambivalence and chaos. While a change in identity is brought about by physical journeys and border crossings, such changes and transformations in identity are also made possible by internal and imaginary journeys. Even films by diasporic filmmakers that do not directly deal with exile or diaspora have characters experiencing personal struggle as a result of internal transformation and shifts in identity (Naficy, *An Accented* 31). Though the films discussed in the thesis do not deal with themes of diaspora or exile per se, the characters live in situations akin to that of exile and gain agency only when they realign their lives by crossing borders and boundaries. These characters are not diasporic in the literal sense but in a metaphoric sense as a result of the internal and metaphysical border crossings and the empowerment brought about by such crossings. Significantly, in the process of making the films, the filmmakers also get involved in the internal journeys and border crossings of the characters: "Not all journeys involve physical travel. There are also metaphoric and philosophical journeys of identity and transformation that involve the films' characters and sometimes the filmmakers themselves..." (Naficy, *An Accented* 33). The characters are caught in the "narrow confines of tradition and nationalism and act in rebellion," and the directors are caught in the interstitial spaces of the home and host nation and "respond politically" (Moodley 69). The redefinition of margins

thus becomes an act of resistance for the characters and an expression of that resistance for the filmmakers.

The internal journeys and border crossings of the women characters of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are facilitated in two ways -- one, by a rebellion against the external constraints and situations in their lives and two, by a reclamation of their bodies and sexualities. The woman's body therefore becomes the site where resistance and inner transformation are initiated:

> By stretching the boundaries of their sexual identities, these women speak out in resistance through the language of their bodies.... They travel from being obedient, dutiful, virtuous women who honour the family (and by implication the country) to women who step outside of tradition to become empowered, decision-making beings. The change comes through a reclaiming of body and sexuality, as these are the aspects of Indian woman that were governed by norms and rules that would supposedly make them acceptable, worthy beings. (Moodley 68, 69)

For a woman, the body becomes an important tool with which she resists and overcomes oppression. This is particularly true in the case of Indian women as it is on their bodies that the ideals of nation and nationalism are inscribed and social and religious rules and traditional and cultural values are played out. Therefore it is with their bodies that most of the women characters rebel – Sita and Radha by opposing the hetero-normative ideal of patriarchy through their homoeroticism, Shanta by overruling patriarchal expectations of women's chastity and the principle of monogamy, Kalyani by annihilating her body itself rather than lending it to masculine dictates and pleasures, Rekha, by freeing her body from male captivity, lust and

coercion, Maya by using the body to transcend class and gender hierarchies and gain fulfilment and Aditi by going against conventional expectations about the chastity surrounding the Indian bride.

This recourse to the body and the tapping of the power of sexuality are also means by which women transcend the norms of morality and purity used by the national imaginary to circumscribe them. The dying out of *parampara* or Indian traditions is the central issue discussed in the films. There is a scene in *Water* in which Narayan tells Kalyani about the "dying out" of traditions to which she naively responds, "But what is good should not die out" (01:04:07-10). Similarly, in the talk show hosted by Aditi's married lover in *Monsoon Wedding*, one of the panellists says, "Just because India has gone global, should we embrace everything? What about our ancient culture, our tradition, our values?" (00:05:49-58). The films of Nair and Mehta go on to subvert the sanctity of traditions, the rules of morality and notions of purity and sexuality that define Indian culture. They do so by an open depiction of sexuality, with intimate sexual scenes and close ups of lip to lip kissing that Indian cinema shies away from. These approaches to sex and sexuality shock the average Indian viewer and elicit severe criticism. The female characters in the film are freed from the moral responsibility and burden of being embodiments of the nation's honour and purity and cinema is freed from the artificiality, restraints and moral prudery it usually resorts to while depicting sexuality and the woman's body.

The violation of the rules of purity and chastity by women corresponds to their transcendence of the sacred space of the family or household and makes them on par with diasporic individuals who also transcend the borders and paradigms of national and cultural purity. The films deconstruct the principles of purity and moral values

enforced on womanhood and subvert *the dichotomy of inner and outdoor domains*, which deems the inner and purer domain as the rightful place for women. Sita and Radha defy the hetero-normative rules of sexuality and then step outside their marital to begin a new life; Shanta leads the disabled Lenny into the eclectic outdoor spaces of Lahore from within the confines of her sprawling mansion, ramblings which also become educative sessions on sexuality for the young girl; Chuyia, the little widow with a free spirit is forever on the move in the exterior spaces of Varanasi, the streets, the bathing ghats and so on and this enables Kalyani, the prostitute-widow also to have a free movement leading on to her controversial meeting and affair with Narayan. As *Salaam Bombay!* comes to an end, Rekha liberates herself from confinement in the pimp's apartment and moves out into the streets of Bombay and Maya, the courtesan in *Kamasutra* is a perpetual wanderer with a mind or body that cannot be confined or imprisoned against her will. Aditi who goes against the norms of chastity and purity expected of an ideal Indian girl also finds the outdoor spaces more liberating and invigorating than the indoor spaces of the family. If fixedness of family, homing instinct and rootedness are all attributes of nation and nationhood, the films selected for study, by disregarding these attributes, are more in concord with the diasporic quality of rootless-ness or homelessness. The preference for outdoor spaces and the sense of movement that is at the heart of these films can be attributed to this very logic.

A notable feature of the diasporic films of Nair and Mehta that merits serious consideration is the vitality of human bodies displayed on screen and the distinct politics inherent in the depiction of human bodies. Bodily sensations other than audio-visual ones amply transpire in the films examined here. The depiction of the bodily sensations in cinema has an intrinsic politics and dynamics that aligns itself

with Laura U Marks's concept of haptic or tactile visuality, whereby senses other than the audio-visual, namely, the tactile or the sense of touch, the olfactory or the sense of smell and the gustatory or the sense of taste are conveyed through films made by exilic or diasporic filmmakers. This sensory feasting, according to Marks, is linked to diasporic memory and longing and has the power to challenge official discourses. Alpana Sharma's views about the depiction of the body in the films of Mira Nair converge with Laura U Marks's theory of tactile visuality:

> Nair's politics of provocation are wedded to a belief in the agency of the body…. [W]hat we see is an insistent spatial presencing of the human body engaged in the daily bodily rituals that simultaneously sustain and constrain it, a way of the body's *mattering* that is only reinforced by the powerful exteriority of the medium of film, film's ability to show plainly on the surface what lies just below the skin. (92, 93)

Like Laura U Marks, Hamid Naficy also stresses the fact that "the most poignant reminders" of the exilic and diasporic condition are tactile images that are "non-visual and deeply rooted in everyday experiences" (*An Accented* 28). The body and its experiences and sensory perceptions belong to the domain of the everyday, the banal and the mundane and are hence prone to be taken for granted in the life of the nation depicted in cinema. But in the female diasporic frames of Nair and Mehta, these mundane and banal aspects and haptic and tactile images become potent forces that transcend the limits of an audio-visual text like cinema and challenge the hegemonic discourses of patriarchy, nationalism, religion, class or caste.

The nation that the films attempt to reframe is not a remote and far-fetched entity, but an all-pervasive reality that seeps into the everyday lives of its citizens

influencing even their intimate moments and bodily experiences. The regressive influence that nationalism has on the banal, everyday aspects of life is counteracted and subverted by the proliferation of the frames with banal and mundane bodily sensations and experiences, especially those related to sexuality. The body is made to matter in the films of Nair and Mehta predominantly by registering the nuances of sexuality wherein the sense of tactility is uppermost. The pleasure and pain evoked by sexual acts are imbued with a deeper purpose and meaning than would have been possible with sheer lust depicted in pornography. The body and sexuality are first made to matter and are then given political and ideological associations, thereby making them the means by which the characters gain agency and transcend limitations.

Apart from sexual images, haptic and tactile visuals and a range of sensory experiences related to taste and smell that resonate with political and ideological implications occur abundantly in the films and become instrumental in the cinematic reframing of the nation. Since haptic images and other sensory experiences in the film are engaged in a reframing of the banal aspects of nationalism, a look at how these images affect a reframing would be fruitful. Given the central place that children and childhood experiences have in the films, the haptic images often engage in challenging the hegemony of adulthood and in foregrounding the world of children, bringing out their aspirations, hidden fears and insecurities in everyday life. A striking example from *Salaam Bombay!* would be the tactile image of little Manju consistently scraping with her fingers and clawing on the glass panelled door behind which her mother entertains customers. This haptic image evokes a tactile experience that grates on the conscience of the viewers and brings home the plight of this neglected child of the nation. The tender body of Chaipau or Krishna that is forever on the move on his tiny

legs is an example of the kinaesthetic visual which evokes a sense of bodily movement. Sans mooring and always adrift, the body of Chaipau epitomises the body of the orphaned street kid and reminds the nation of its dispossessed. Chaipau or Krishna also becomes a prototype of the diasporic or exilic individual with qualities of inconstancy, insecurity, memory and pining writ large on his body and its movements.

The haptic and tactile visuality afforded by a movie like *Kamasutra* is accentuated by two elements from nature -- water and rock. There are many scenes in the film where the characters' bodies are seen immersed in pools, both man-made and natural. Water serves the purpose of bringing people together and doing away with divisions and hierarchies. If the forest pools, in which Jai Kumar and Maya splash about, signify the intimacy of lovers, the pool in the palace where the young bodies of the Princess and her maid intertwine suggest the dissolution of man-made hierarchies and divisions. The sense of touch or tactility is inherent in Jai Kumar, the sculptor's vocation of imparting life to stone by the magic touch of his fingers. King Raj Singh, who is on a visit to the sculptor's work site is so impressed by the tactile and life-like quality of the stone statue of Padmini that he remarks, "So imbued is the stone with the warmth of woman, I want to kiss the skin" (00:57:25-32). This is a scene that evokes the haptic and the tactile, but it is also one that resonates with the implications of the power play whereby the royal sculptor is courting the danger of losing his Padmini or Maya to the despotic ruler. The half-naked muscular bodies of King Raj and Jai Kumar that engage in duels over the ownership of Maya and the chained, wounded and dying body of Jai Kumar being dragged along and stamped on by an elephant at the command of the jealous King are all part of this power play. Rather than being mere displays of the human body and its sensations of pain or pleasure on the screen, these scenes of tactile visuality are intertwined with more serious questions

of power hierarchy, gender disparity and sexuality.

Monsoon Wedding which belongs to the wedding genre is filled with a riot of colours, sounds and movements that rise to an audio-visual crescendo, but there are also moments in the film when the possibilities of senses like that of smell and taste are explored. An interesting instance would be that of the bride's mother, Pimmi smoking secretly in her bathroom and hiding the smell using room freshner. Pimmi's clandestine act to which the audience are voyeurs indicates her tendency to surpass the gender expectations of society and the stereotyped image of the traditional Indian mother in mainstream cinema. Deviations and idiosyncratic behaviour patterns related to the body are the norm in the film -- whether it is the transgender tendencies exhibited by Varun, Pimmi's son through his body language and preferences or the strange gustatory predilection of Dubey and Alice for devouring marigold flowers which have a pride of place in marital decorations. If Varun'stransgender leanings and tendencies expose the diasporic family of the movie as one rife with the subversive impulses, the gustatory habit of Dubey and Alice indicate the underlying passion of these subaltern characters and intensifies the parody and humour with which the Bollywood romance of the couple is presented in the film.

Like the movies of Nair, those in Mehta's *Trilogy* are also replete with examples of haptic and tactile visuality wherein senses other than that of the audiovisual are at work. The opening shot of *Fire* in the blossom-filled field, where the young Radha is advised by her mother to *see without looking* is a pointer to alternate ways of sensing and perceiving that the *Trilogy* endorses. *Fire* and the other films project the sense of tactility as the means by which characters are drawn closer to each other. Two striking images that come to the mind from *Fire* are that of Radha

applying oil to Sita's hair as their images are reflected in the bedroom mirror and that of Sita pressing Radha's feet at the park during a family picnic -- images which emphasise the breaking of social and familial taboos by means of tactile visuality. In the first instance, the women involved in touch are reflected in the mirror and the taboo touch takes place in the privacy of a room and in the absence of male scrutiny. In the second instance too, the touch of the women lovers are free from male look or censure as the men of the family are oblivious of the erotic significance of the touch. Such tactile expressions of homoerotic love within the heterosexual space of the family are instances of how banal and mundane acts that happen within the family domain are used to reframe the ideal conceptions of sexuality, family and nationhood.

The haptic and tactile visuality of a film like *Water* is attributed chiefly to the element water itself and its association with physical and spiritual purification. The tactility and coolness of water over the human body is well communicated in the scene where water from the well is poured over the head of the rebellious Chuyia in the ashram to cool her down followed by the scene where Shakuntala applies a cool paste of sandalwood on her bald head. Kalyani, the impure woman is seen cleansing herself in the cool and pure waters of Ganga from time to time and Narayan gets drenched in the water poured inadvertently on him from Kalyani's upper-storey apartment. The religious connotations of the element water and its capacity for spiritual purification have to be read in correspondence with the theme of purity/chastity of the widow and the idea of purity/chastity of the woman of the nation that the movie is concerned with.

The sense of taste, evoked in the movies of the *Trilogy*, is also ridden with political and ideological import. The restaurant and take away unit with its range of

mouth watering dishes that is central to *Fire* highlights the gustatory or the sense of taste and acts as a foil to the impoverished, suppressed and deviant sexuality of the members of the family. The link between food and sexuality is clearly brought out in the scene of homoerotic bonding in the kitchen where Radha explains to her female lover how spices induce sexual pleasure in people. Food and dining together are the means by which people come together in a movie like *Earth*. The dinner in the Sethi household, where people of different races -- Sikh, Parsee, English and Muslim -- come together, albeit their fight during the course of the dinner and Mrs Sethi's attempt at keeping peace, is an interesting example. Again, Shanta, the ayah and her group of friends from different religions and professions are seen sharing moments of togetherness in the *dhabas* or eateries of Lahore, thereby underscoring the unifying impact of food and the sense of taste. Food and its lack, gustatory indulgence or deprivation form the crux of *Water* that deals with the life of abstinence of worldly and sensory pleasures. The opening shot of the film in which the yet to be widowed Chuyia in her colourful clothes and her flowing tresses is seen relishing a luscious piece of sugar cane in the bullock cart that is carrying her ailing husband is rife with implications. The fondness with Patiraji, the old widow reminisces the mouth-watering sweets of her wedding, her craving for the forbidden sweet ladoo and Chuyia's clandestine presentation of the sweet to her indicate the tendencies of widows to break gustatory taboos. The frugal diet served to the widows as against the forbidden tasty dishes that the dictatorial head of the widow house, Madhumati enjoy highlights the preciousness of food and its link to power hierarchy and oppression.

Apart from the sensory images and haptic visuality depicted in the frames, the films of the diasporic filmmakers, especially those of Mira Nair, pulsate with the colour and warmth of Indian life. As against the anti-narrative, *avant garde* approach

to cinema advocated by critics and practitioners like Laura Mulvey which nullifies the pleasure principle in art forms, the films of Nair and Mehta throb with the erotic and the pleasurable. The erotic and pleasurable in their films emanate not from gazing upon the female characters, but from the richness of detail in the frames, the *mise en scene*, the cultural paraphernalia and the details of the interior settings and the external landscape. All the frames of Nair are rich feasts of the colour, movement and the minute details of life. In an interview given to Karin Luisa Badt, Nair had said that she would like to "amplify" and "explode" her frames with life (Nair, "I Want" 10). The chromatic opulence and liveliness of Nair's frames remind one of the visually stunning frames of Bollywood cinema and attest to the fact that even while Nair deals with serious socio-political issues, she does not dispense with the visual pleasure that cinema is capable of eliciting. Her films, it becomes increasingly clear, have lesser structural affinity with the *avant garde* and formal modes of cinema that advocate sparseness and restraint.

Nair is at her best when she colourfully portrays the details of life of her homeland as a diasporic filmmaker and both *Kamasutra* and *Monsoon Wedding* have frames filled with the details and hues of Indian culture and customs -- the resplendent costumes, the paraphernalia and rituals connected to ceremonies like marriages, the colourful interiors of palaces and mansions, the intricacies of the customs and ways of life and so on. There is also a detailed portrayal of the outdoors in the movies and such details from the exterior world that usually go unnoticed or merely form the backdrop of the actions of men in other movies, gain a life of their own here. The camera lingers fondly on the mundane aspects of a street in Delhi with fruit sellers, balloon vendors, snack shop owners and rickshaw pullers, on the slums, railway stations and red light zones of Bombay and on the old bazaars, market places, forest

lands and stony tracts of an ancient kingdom in India. The significance of these frames is that apart from having visual intensity and warmth, they centralise and project the banal and mundane aspects of life in the nation.

Deepa Mehta has spoken of how every movie script evoked colours in her mind and how she actually did a colour palette with her daughter's pencils soon after she read a script. Mehta has been selective in her use of colours in films -- for instance, she has predominantly used the colours white, orange and green in *Fire* and has avoided the colour blue which evokes coldness. *Water* uses drab shades of white and blue and *Earth* is enriched with earthly hues like brown and orange (Levitin et al 289).When compared to Mira Nair's frames, those of Mehta are less bright and dazzling, given the sombre quality of her *Trilogy.* The spurt of colour that occurs once in a while during the portrayal of traditions, customs and rituals is often intermingled with a tinge of irony or sarcasm. The austere interiors of the household, in which the family in *Fire* lives, match the austerity practised by characters like Ashok and Swamiji. The film, which employs marriage as an underlying theme does not have much to display by way of the rich paraphernalia of customs that we see in *Monsoon Wedding* or *Kamasutra*. The wedding rituals of Jatin and Radha are pared down to the minimalist gesture of welcoming the newly-weds home with the *arati* or the auspicious lamp. The sighting of a wedding procession marching down the street with music band, illuminations and crackers elicits sarcastic comments from the homoerotic sisters-in-law about the institution of marriage. So too, the festival of Karva Chauth, instead of being an occasion for exhibiting Indian culture and rituals at their best, evokes wry humour and musings among the characters.

Earth, which was set in pre-independent Lahore, is sparse in the depiction of

ceremonies pertaining to any faith. The only instances of ceremonies are the marriage of young Papoo to a dwarfish middle aged Christian, done with the intention of saving her family from communal ire and the kite flying festival in which Lenny, Shanta and Dil Navaz take part. Rather than being a resplendent and festive occasion, there is something eerie about the portrayal of Papoo's wedding and the audience along with the child narrator, Lenny is filled with consternation at gruesomeness of the child marriage. *Water*, the film portraying the colourless and insipid life of the white-robed widows is also devoid of the vibrant colours and splendour that is supposed to mark the Indian way of life. Nevertheless, there are a few occasions when colour is used in the frames and these few instances have an accentuated and striking effect on the eye as they break the monotony and pervasive drabness depicted in the film. These brief stints of colour and joy contrast the colourless and joyless existence of the widows. Patiraji fragmentary memories of her resplendent marriage ceremony in her childhood and the celebration of Holi, the festival of colours in the widows' ashram, with the widows daubing colours on each other contrast the colourless and insipid existence of the widows and have deeper critical implications than being merely commemorative of Indian culture. If Nair is more profuse and generous with her display of colours and symbols from Indian culture, Mehta uses them judiciously and in a sparse and subtle manner. When Nair effects the refraction of national values amidst the vibrancy and exuberance of the hues of the nation, Mehta brings about a refraction of national values in a more restrained and toned down atmosphere. Either ways, the priority has been to reframe the nation.

In addition to the colourful and lively frames, an important factor that links the films of the female diasporic filmmakers with Bollywood cinema is the occurrence in them of cultural referents or national symbols. Such referents and symbols ranging

from the resplendent costumes donned by the characters, ritualistic objects like lamps, camphor and flowers, the customs of *Mehendi* or *Sangeet* during marriage celebrations and festivals like Holi or Karva Chauth are so prevalent in life within the nation and in national cinema that they assume a banal and mundane quality, whereby we hardly notice them. National symbols or cultural referents that embody the ideologies of the nation also manifest themselves in mundane ways through buildings or edifices, visual or printed texts, and even people and places. Instances from the select films are the Taj Mahal and other ancient edifices including palaces, temples and stone carvings, the written, dramatised and serialised versions of *Ramayan*, the religious epic of India, ancient texts like the Upanishads and the *Kamasutra*, the persona of Gandhi used in different contexts and with varied inflections, the iconic Indian widow, the image of the Indian bride, the great Indian joint family, the dances of India and the perpetual enemy, Pakistan. What makes the special referents or national symbols different in the case of the films of Nair and Mehta is the reframing or subversion that happens to them and to the ideals they embody.

It is notable that the tactile optics, colour patterns and symbolic referents of the movies that have been discussed in the preceding paragraphs are all "propelled by the memory, nostalgic longing, and multiple losses and wishes that are experienced by the diegetic characters, exilic filmmakers, and their audiences" (Naficy, *An Accented* 29). The movies border on the exploration of the diasporic psyche and the female psyche which are marked by memory, dream sequences, longing and guilt. The dream sequence which recurs in Radha's mindscape from time to time depicting the orange-coloured flowers in the mustard field is a fusion of colour, rhythm and music and embodies in various degrees nostalgia, passion and childhood innocence. The emphasis on *seeing without looking* made by the mother in the dream sequence refers,

among other things, to the involuntary and intuitive nature of dreams. The repressed wishes of the characters often surface in the form of internalisations and visualisations. For instance, Mundu's secret passion for Radha surfaces in the comical representation of what is passed as one of the myths of Karva Chauth, where he is portrayed as the King and Radha as his devoted queen. The incidents of the film *Earth* unravel through the guilt-tinged narration of the traumatic childhood memories of the Partition by the adult Lenny. The widows in *Water* also break the restrictions imposed on them and the repression of their desires through their dreams and memories. The film is very much about the unrealised and unfulfilled longings of the characters – Chuyia's longing to be at home with her mother, her craving to eat forbidden food like *puris* for Kalyani's wedding, Patiraji's craving for sweets and Kalyani's longing to wear the colour blue that matches with Lord Krishna's hue during her marriage.

Dreams, memories, mindscapes and unrealised longings which are very much a part of the diasporic baggage form the crux of Mira Nair's films too. Like Chuyia, Nair's Chaipau nurses the dream of returning home to his mother, but his dream also remains unrealised. The scene in which he seeks the help of a professional letter writer on the streets to prepare a letter for his mother is suggestive of the diasporic longing to keep roots intact and maintain connections with the homeland. The letter writer's gesture of crumpling and throwing away the letter after Chaipau leaves suggests the receding of such dreams and the nonentity the boy. The longing for people physically absent or dead seems to be endemic in the films. Jai Kumar, the sculptor in *Kamasutra* is seen reminiscing about his courtesan mother from whom he was estranged soon after his birth. He shares with Maya his memories of the few and fragmentary moments he had spent with his mother during childhood and this sharing and

fortification of memory become a source of strength to him. The absence of loved ones from the lives of the characters, the impact of such an absence and the overcoming of the absence or the inability to overcome it – all form an important part of the diasporic logic of these films. The absence of ayah in Lenny's life in the film *Earth*, the absence of Kalyani in the lives of Narayan and Chuyia in *Water*, are all deeply felt. The framed photograph of Ria's deceased father which has a central place in the film *Monsoon Wedding* stresses the concepts of physical absence and symbolic presence. Past memories offer pain, but they also serve to empower people and enable them to fight against oppression. Ria's memories of being sexually abused by a relative in her childhood had inhibited her agency for a long time, but that agonising memory causes her to expose the wrongdoer and prevent him from abusing another young relative. The mindscapes and memories projected in the films reaffirm diasporic undercurrents, accommodate alternate and subversive memories and realities and counter staple images of the glorious culture and tradition evoked by the nation.

Bollywood films are known for their happy endings that resolve all the threads, underscore the patriarchal logic of the family and validate the ideals of the nation. The movies chosen for the study deviate from this patterned and stereotypical ending in several ways. In the first place, they reaffirm the project of feminization that the filmmakers have undertaken. Most of the movies end framing women within their closing shots -- the figure of Maya embarking on her solitary journey, a journey that is aimless and more of a metaphorical plane in *Kamasutra* or the picture of the conjoining of the sisters-in-law at the secular Sufi shrine in *Fire*, the close up shot of Shakuntala, whose oppositional gaze at the audience informs the ending of *Water* and the guilt-ridden persona of a grown up Lenny in the last shot of *Earth* are instances. The endings signify journeys and new beginnings, both of a physical and metaphysical

nature and epitomize the diasporic situation. At the same time, the endings have a sense of uncertainty and unresolved quality as opposed to the clear-cut and definite endings of mainstream movies. The uncertain future or destiny that awaits characters like Sita and Radha, Maya, Chuyia, Chaipau, Rekha and Shanta is in keeping with the liminal and rootless nature of the diasporic condition.

Monsoon Wedding is the only movie that has a perfectly happy ending with the portrayal of a marriage ceremony, the warmth and togetherness of the family and the monsoon showers blessing the wedding and validating the sexually violated women. In contrast to this happy ending, is the ending of *Salaam Bombay!*, where Krishna or Chaipau sits all alone on the veranda of a house and weeps after being separated from Rekha, the prostitute, during the Ganesha festival procession, his future quite uncertain and insecure. As is the case with *Earth*, the last frame of this movie communicates the feelings of desolation and sorrow, but like *Earth* such a communication serves to highlight the travails of the subalterns and foreground them in what may be seen as an affirmation of their presence and the centralisation of their stories. Unlike *Monsoon Wedding* and *Fire* that have affirmative conclusions, movies like *Salaam Bombay!*, *Kamasutra*, *Water* or *Earth* have endings that are either catastrophic, ambiguous or indefinite. The female diasporic films have open ended closures in contrast to the definite closures and happy endings that form the staple of Bollywood cinema.

Vehicles and means of conveyance are used in plenty in the frames of these movies to signify this sense of open-endedness and onward movement and are in sync with the diasporic condition of travelling and being on the move. *Water* is an interesting example of the suggestive use of means of conveyance. The movie begins

with the shot of an age old means of travel, a bullock cart, in which little Chuyia travels with her ailing husband and mother-in-law, unaware of her fast approaching widowhood. The movie is punctuated with boat journeys made across the placid waters of River Ganga by Kalyani the prostitute-widow to her clients' houses, the journeys made by her with her lover Narayan and the fatal journey of Chuyia to the landlord's place as a substitute for Kalyani after her death. In the last scene we see the child widow being entrusted by Shakuntala to the care of Narayan who is embarking on his train journey with Gandhiji and his followers. As the train moves, the screen is filled with the profile of Shakuntala half turned to the audience, bringing home the point that modern thoughts and technological interventions like the train are the means by which the salvation of widows can be brought about. *Earth* also ends with the powerful shot of the bullock cart in which Shanta is taken away by the raging mob to an unknown and uncertain fate. The film transcends its catastrophic ending by the very act of presenting and problematizing the fate of subaltern women like Shanta, whose stories and lives would otherwise have remained obscure in the tumult of events of national and international significance.

Jigna Desai indicates the hybrid quality of South Asian diasporic cinema when she describes it as a cross between Bollywood and Hollywood -- the fantasy of the former and the realism of the latter (J. Desai, *Beyond* 39 - 41). Mainstream Bollywood cinema "continues to peddle escapist fantasy" and are "masala pictures [or] diversionary fare delivering a combination of romance, comedy, action, melodrama, song, dance and nearly always an unrealistic happy ending" (Brook, "Indian"). Classical Hollywood cinema on the other hand, is more realistic and has a narrative logic which gives importance to the psychological motivation of the characters, to a linear and continuous narrative and a realistic cinematic time and space. The films

studied in the thesis have an assortment of the features of both Bollywood and Hollywood cinema and are thus hybridised. The narrative logic of the films, the cinematic time which is predominantly continuous, linear and uniform, the cinematic space that creates a realistic effect and the psychological motivation of the characters – are some of the features these films share with Hollywood cinema.

A close analysis of the films shows that there are residues and traces of Bollywood in them even when they attempt to swerve from its principles. Even *Salaam Bombay!*, Nair's first movie that consciously worked against Bollywood expectations of storyline, characterization, casting and conclusion is not free from the influence of Bollywood. References to Bollywood happen every now and then -- snatches from Bollywood songs are sung by the characters and Chaipau and his friends are seen watching a movie in a cinema hall in what becomes an occasion to comment on the artificiality of Bollywood cinema. Bollywood songs, especially the older romantic variety, are aptly made use of in a film like *Monsoon Wedding*, where the romance between the tent maker and the maid is punctuated with songs and other Bollywood elements, like obstacles to the romance, separation, conjoining and so on. Though both *Kamasutra* and *Monsoon Wedding* brim with the colours and textures of Indian life and culture, they cannot reach the splendour and luxury of the big budget Bollywood productions in setting, costumes or choreography. *Kamasutra* which lacks the splendid dances and songs that are the norm in the films of the courtesan genre like *Umrao Jan* or *Pakeezah*, rely more on the erotic power of the courtesan's body than on the cultural trappings of song and dance. The dance and music sessions of *Monsoon Wedding*, a film that belongs to the wedding genre, is also devoid of the elaborate trappings and stylized and choreographed dance numbers of blockbuster films belonging to the same category. The family in *Monsoon Wedding* has to make do with

the dance of its younger members for the wedding eve celebrations and the youngsters are actually seen practicing for the session. However, on the day of the wedding, the whole family joins in a joyful dance drenched in the pouring rain. Though these dance sequences may appear amateurish, they are more natural, spontaneous and true to life.

The movies of the *Trilogy*, especially *Water* and *Earth* are very much like Bollywood movies in their use of songs that are either extra-diegetic or unnecessary for taking the plot forward. That the music composition for the *Trilogy* has been executed by A.R. Rahman, the well-known music composer, singer and lyricist of India, who has worked for both commercial and non-commercial cinema, is an indicator of the affinity that the films have for Bollywood cinema. If extra-diegetic songs like those usually found in Indian cinema are conspicuously absent in *Salaam Bombay!*, *Kamasutra*, *Monsoon Wedding* and *Fire*, they are used to express the emotion of love and to tone down and camouflage passion and sexuality in films like *Earth* and *Water.* While both the movies are indebted to Bollywood for their love plots interwoven with song and dance numbers, *Water* has additional elements from Bollywood cinema like coincidence and chance meetings of the lovers, obstacles to love, separation, re-union and so on. Even *Fire*, which is the farthest removed from Bollywood due to its controversial theme, has relied on the stereotyped Bollywood pattern of love and romance, which involves the presence of obstacles and the surmounting of these obstacles, to depict the union of its women lovers.

The films are more of an accented and hybrid nature in that they are a mixture of different aspects, attributes or compulsions. For instance, *Salaam Bombay!* is a hybrid film that uses the cinema verite and documentary style of filmmaking. It deviates from the usual elements of fantasy that inform commercial Indian cinema and

tells the story of dispossessed Indians by using the Western format of realism. *Kamasutra* fuses the past with the present, the body with the spirit and an Eastern text on sexuality with candid representations of eroticism in the Hollywood mode. The Kings, Queens and other antique characters from medieval India use English as the language of communication. The accent is explicitly felt when a character like King Raj Singh played by Naveen Andrews, a British American actor of Malayali descent renders his dialogues in an accented English tongue. *Monsoon Wedding* is an example of a crossover hybrid film that blends the wedding genre with the more serious socio-political film. It has an underlying diasporic spirit and presents the story of a family scattered in various parts of the globe congregating in Delhi for the wedding of one of its member. The film is also multi-lingual and employs a mixture of languages like Hindi, Punjabi and English. *Fire* brings lesbianism which was regarded as a Western phenomenon into the life of sari-clad Indian women bound to traditions and customs of India. The dialogues of the film were originally rendered in English and the film is devoid of most of the trappings of Indian cinema. *Earth* becomes accented and multi-dimensional since the tumult of the Partition in the lives people from the lower rungs of society belonging to different religious compulsions is presented to us from the perspective of Lenny, a Parsee girl living a privileged life in Lahore. The language predominantly used in the film is Hindi interspersed with English.

Of the films discussed here, *Water*, which uses the medium of Hindi, is by far more akin to Bollywood. But even this film is accented in that its production was transported from India to an alien location in Sri Lanka, where the town of Varanasi and the bathing ghats of the Ganges were recreated five years after the director's attempt to shoot the film in India was thwarted by fundamentalist forces. Though Mehta and her crew strived hard to recreate with authenticity, the town of Varanasi

with its widow houses, river, bathing ghats and funeral pyres in a Sri Lankan locale, they were not able to fully wipe out traces of the Sri Lankan way of life. For instance, in a marriage ceremony depicted on the banks of the river, the couple are dressed in the South Indian or Sri Lankan way rather than in the North Indian mode. Again, the woman and the young girl who visits the temple, outside which the widows beg, and the man at the sweet shop from where Chuyia buys sweets are dressed in the South Indian or Sri Lankan fashion. These omissions may be a pointer to what Naficy was describing as the amateurishness of the diasporic filmmaker, but they also underscore the attributes of hybridity and palimpsest that inscribe a diasporic film. Since the attributes of hybridity, palimpsest and trans-nationalism that inform the films of Nair and Mehta negate the ideals of purity and homogeneity that the nation aspires to, they become chief forces in the reframing of the nation depicted in the films.

Principles of trans-nationalism and hybridity are also evident in the selection of actors for the films of Mehta, especially *Water.* The character of Chuyia in *Water* was done by a Sri Lankan child actress, Sarala Kariyawasam as it was impossible to cast the Indian child whom actress Mehta had chosen five years ago. The other actors are also of a mixed religious and ethnic heritage -- Lisa Ray who dons the role of Kalyani is half Bengali and half Polish, John Abraham, who acts as Narayan has a Malayali Christian and Zoroastrian lineage and Manorama, the Hindi actress who played the role of the despotic Madhumathi had an Irish mother and an Indian Christian father. The cast selected by Nair for *Kamasutra* also exhibit this transnational quality – Naveen Andrews, who is King Raj Singh, is a British American actor of Malayali origin, Sarita Choudhury, who acts as Tara, is half Bengali and half English, Indira Anne Varma, who appears as Maya, has an Indian father and a Swiss mother and Ramon Tikaram, who plays Jai Kumar, is a British actor of Indo-Fijian

and Malaysian descent. All of them have appeared in film and television productions from various parts of the world. *Kamasutra* and *Water* have a transnational bearing and quality that result from the accented speech, gestures and mannerisms of the hybridised and transnational actors.

Nair and Mehta had cast renowned actors from Indian commercial cinema to play important roles in their other movies – Nana Patekar as Baba in *Salaam Bombay!*, Rekha as Rasadevi in *Kamasutra*, Naseerudhin Shah as Lalit in *Monsoon Wedding*, Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das as Radha and Sita respectively in *Fire*, Nandita Das, again, as Shanta in *Earth* and Aamir Khan as Ice-candy Man in *Earth*. These movies nevertheless have a transnational quality about them on account of the members of the crew. As Mehta puts it, "my crew is very eclectic. My cameraman is British, his first assistant is French, and his third assistant is Italian. The make-up person I use is Canadian, the hairdresser is Canadian, the script supervisor is Canadian, the dolly grip is British, the sound guy is from LA" (qtd. in Levitin 291). Renowned film professionals and personnel from various parts of the world like the producer David Hamilton, the cinematographer Giles Nuttgens, the music composers A R Rahman and Michael Danna have worked for Mehta's *Trilogy.* Mira Nair's films also have a similar pattern -- the cinematography for *Kamasutra* and *Monsoon Wedding* were done by Declann Quinn, who is Irish-American and the music for these two movies was done by the Canadian composer, Mychael Danna. A range of celebrated film personnel from across the globe like Barry Alexander Brown, Sandi Sissel and Kristina Boden, to mention a few, have worked with Nair in these films. These films that are set in India and that deal with socio-political issues that pertain to India have a transnational accent as a result of the multiple perspectives and global influences that inform them.

The cinematic texts discussed here reflect the hybrid excess and the divided and fragmented nature that is indicative of diasporic existence in other ways too. They lack Laura Mulvey's ardent feminist edge that sought to extricate the films completely from visual pleasure, narrative linearity or coherence. Structurally the films have nothing to do with the nonlinear and *avant garde* modes of cinema, though thematically, they are unconventional and do not conform to the patriarchal logic of the nation or mainstream cinema. However, we may analyse them on the basis of Mulvey's principle regarding the dynamics of male gaze. The male gaze in these female diasporic frames is scattered, diffused and diluted and the woman rises above being a mere object of male gaze to an active subject. The gaze of the female diasporic camera, instead of objectifying the female body, dwells on the surroundings, on the colour and flow of life, and on details of landscape and cityscape. *Kamasutra* may appear as an exception, given the status of Maya's body as an exhibit and as an object of male pleasure. It is true that the courtesan's body is exhibited in some scenes of the film for visual consumption by the King and the audience, but the agency of the courtesan in depriving the King of the very same body and the heart enclosed within the body instils the body with subjectivity and power and nullifies the effect of the gaze. Shanta in *Earth* is presented as the object of gaze by her male companions in the park, but diffusing the power of their gaze is the agency and power she has over them and the rewriting of the laws of chastity that she is involved in, being the centre of attraction for many of them. In *Water*, the gaze of the male characters like Narayan or Priest Sadanandha is filled with empathy and compassion rather than with lust or eroticism that objectifies women. There is also mutuality in the gaze of the lovers that nullifies the overpowering and objectifying male gaze, since Kalyani is filled with longing for Narayan and there are also hints about Shakuntala's unrealised secret

passions.

Despite the attempts of the films to nullify the male gaze and embrace a feminist stance, they are still embroiled in the demeaning influence of patriarchy. There are chinks in the armour and on careful consideration we find that the filmmakers are forced to retain certain traditional and conventional forms and values in their conception of the women characters and in their envisaging of the nation. The filmmakers and their characters are thus caught in interstitial or liminal spaces symptomatic of the diasporic condition. The interstitiality is evident on the thematic level and in the situation of women characters, who are in the in-between stages of oppression and emancipation, marginalisation and empowerment. Considering Elaine Showalter's division of women's writing into three phases of Feminine, Feminist and the Female, which correspond to the phases of imitation of men, protest against patriarchy and self-awareness and self-dependence respectively, the term *female* seems more suitable to describe the films. Though the filmmakers shun femininity, they have not broken away fully from the customary to embrace the principles of *avant garde* or feminist cinema. This interstitial position, wherein the women characters of the films are neither overtly feminine nor overtly feminist, fully justifies the choice of the word *female* in the title, albeit the cultural connotations of the first two terms and biological implication of the latter.

The women characters are on borders or interstices that separate the feminist from the feminine. Aditi transgresses the rules of chastity on the one hand but very quickly subscribes to the comforts afforded by the family and hetero-normative marriage on the other; Maya in *Kamasutra* transcends the oppression of class by moulding her body to cater to the pleasure and sexual needs of elitist males and though

Rasa Devi's teaching of the *Kamasutra* to women seems to be a progressive act, the underlying purpose of the act which is to enable these women afford pleasure to men makes it regressive. Again, hetero-normative marriage seems to be the only way for Kalyani's salvation from the sordid life of widowhood and the impossibility of such a proposition leads to her suicide. *Fire* too is ridden with paradoxes in its stance towards women -- the failure of heterosexual marriage and the lack of fulfilment in such a marriage are shown to be the main reasons for the lesbian relationship of the women. Furthermore, Mehta reduces the import of the homosexual affair by stating that the film is more about the choices available to women. All these ambiguous factors cause the films, the filmmakers and the characters to occupy liminal and interstitial spaces.

There is a serious accusation directed at diasporic filmmakers and writers, especially those belonging to the developing world or the Third World countries – the charge that they pander to First World notions of the Third World backwardness and inferiority by becoming "native informants" and selling negative images of their homeland in the international market (Ramone 139-143). This accusation works on the logic that diasporic creativity should be directed only at eulogizing the homeland and that the diasporic artist is divested of any right to represent the seamier side of life in the homeland. A stance of praise and admiration for the homeland without reckoning its failures may amount to what Radhakrishnan R calls the "politics of origin" that often turns into an "obsession with the sacredness of one's origins that leads peoples to disrespect the history of other people and to exalt one's own" (212). Self-criticism goes a long way in making the nation reckon its flaws and become more open, accommodating and tolerant to other nations as well as to deviations and differences within its own borders. Another accusation that is directed against

diasporic artists is that they are inauthentic or false in their representation of the realities of the homeland as a result of being distanced from it. It is true that are many ambiguities, lacunae and limitations in Nair's and Mehta's conception and representation of the realities of the nation. One outstanding example of ambiguity is Mehta's treatment of Gandhi in *Fire* and *Water*. If in *Fire*, Ashok's sexual abstinence and experiments with self-restraint at the expense of his wife echo similar illaudable episodes in Gandhi's life, in *Water*, Gandhi appears as a benevolent persona, a reformer and a radical and the only path to salvation for oppressed sections of people like widows. This and many other conceptual and technical errors have to be seen as part of the imperfect and amateurish quality of the diasporic filmmakers' art, given the interstitial position they occupy by way of geography, identity, knowledge of the homeland and professionalism.

The charge of being inauthentic and slipshod in the representation of the nation can probably be best answered by the argument that there can be no authentic representation in art as any art form, be it literature or cinema, is only an invention of truth or at best half-truths. The native artist who resides in the homeland is as much culpable of inconsistencies and flaws of inauthenticity as the diasporic artist abroad. As Radhakrishnan puts it, "Isn't the insider's truth as much an invention and an interpretation as that of the outsider? How do we distinguish an insider's critique from that of the outsider?" (213). The accusation that diasporic filmmakers are in-authentic in their portrayal of the homeland and that they are involved in a harsh critique of the homeland often springs from an intolerance towards anything that goes against the status quo as is evident in the kind of reaction Deepa Mehta's films generated. The hostility to the portrayal of the negative aspects of India or to anything that questions the established norms of culture, literature and cinema has manifested itself in India

from time to time in the form of mob protests, effigy burnings, book bans and so on. We have a long history of such bans and acts of censorship, recent examples being the fate of Wendy Doniger's book *The Hindus: An Alternative History* which was withdrawn by its publisher, Penguin as an out-of-court settlement of a case filed against the book and the anger elicited by the documentary *India's Daughter* by Leslee Udwin which was about the Delhi gang rape of 2012 and which included interviews with the rapists. The controversies in which recent films like *Padmaavat* (2018), *Lipstick under My Burkha* (2017) *Parched* (2015) or *PK* (2014) were embroiled also indicate the amount of intolerance in India to anything that unsettles cultural presumptions and prejudices. Much of the censure that the diasporic filmmakers face for their in-authenticity and for their negative representation of the homeland falls in line with this culture of intolerance.

It can be strongly argued that Mira Nair's and Deepa Mehta's portrayal of the seamier side of India is propelled by their deep commitment and social vision rather than by any profit-driven motive of projecting the homeland's inferiority at the international scenario. This social vision is manifest in the empathy with which Nair and Mehta portray the subaltern characters in their movies and the reformist zeal with which they highlight the social issues of their homeland. The empathy and social vision of Mira Nair can be witnessed in most of her films, including her documentaries and short films which deal with many pressing social and political issues of the day like amniocentesis and female foeticide, Islamophobia, terrorism, problems of exile and migration, women's issues, paedophilia etc. Her rubbing shoulders with subalterns like bar dancers, street kids and sex workers during her filmmaking sessions and the follow up activities instituted as in the foundation of the Salam Balak Trust that continues to work with kids from the streets -- all indicate her

penchant for social activity. Right from her first ventures in filmmaking to her latest movie *The Queen of Katwe* released in 2016 portraying the life of Phiona Mutesi, a Ugandan girl living in Katwe, the largest of Kampala's eight slums who fought against all odds to become a leading chess champion, Nair has been committed to highlighting the stories of the dispossessed and their struggles to lead lives of dignity. Another important venture by Nair is the filmmakers' laboratory, Maisha Film Lab in Kampala, a non-profit facility that has been training young directors in East Africa.

The movies in Deepa Mehta's oeuvre including the *Trilogy* are a reflection of her social commitment and zeal. Her latest documentary, *Anatomy of Violence* (2016) delves into the root causes behind the Delhi gang rape of 2012 and the factors that breed misogyny and cause the victimisation of women like the rigidity of India's caste system, the rigours of class hierarchy, poverty etc. Such movies bring out the special interest evinced by Mehta in social problems and issues. Two films in her *Trilogy*, *Fire* and *Water* had created a stir and started a public debate in India on issues like lesbianism, freedom of choice for women and the freedom of expression of the filmmaker. The daring and perseverance shown by Mehta in the face of controversies surrounding *Fire* and the determination that led her to complete the film *Water* in Sri Lanka when her attempts to shoot it in Varanasi were thwarted are fine lessons in freedom of expression of the artist in general and freedom of expression of creative women of the nation in particular. Though filmmaking is their prime space of activity and articulation, these women filmmakers have always strongly responded to social realities and problems both through their films and otherwise and in that sense they can be regarded as activist filmmakers, reframing the contours of the nation.

This activist dimension of the filmmakers and their response to the

socio-political realities in the national and international sphere are areas that deserve more research and deep study. The films studied in the thesis bring out this dimension of the filmmakers; but as the focus is on the examination of nation and nationhood in their films, this aspect has not been fully explored and analysed. The documentaries and short films of Nair and Mehta are fertile grounds for the study of the social and political commitment of the filmmakers. Widening the circle further, we could study how the other diasporic and transnational filmmakers of South Asian origin, especially those young and upcoming directors, deal with socio-political issues and questions of nation and nationality in their films. Another worthwhile endeavour would be an analysis of the work of Nair and Mehta alongside the works of contemporary filmmakers residing in India like Leena Yadav or Alankrita Shrivastava, makers of *Parched* (2016) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) respectively, movies which courted controversy and were censored due to the alternate realities they propounded. The ever expanding oeuvre of the filmmakers, filled with multi-stranded perspectives and experiences, provides the researcher with new and fertile areas of research. Moreover, since the thesis is of a comprehensive nature and accommodates varied strands and concepts like nation, diaspora, woman and cinema in it, each of these strands are rife with manifold angles and possibilities for further study and investigation.

True to the multiplicity and hybridity that inscribes the persona of women and diasporic people in general, and women and diasporic artists or creative people in particular, the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta have an eclectic quality that facilitates the co-existence in them of diverse strands and elements like the erotic and the critical, the permitted and the prohibited, the emancipated and the servile, the pleasurable and the socially-oriented and the native and the alien. The films “derive

their power not from purity and *refusal* but from [the] impurity and *refusion*" (Naficy, *An Accented* 6) of these multiple strands and perspectives. The films are in actuality sites of polyvocality and heteroglossia which act as correctives to the homogenizing impulses of the nation and which bring about the revamping and reframing of the national discourse from marginal perspectives using the ideal of re-fusion rather than that of refusal.

Note

1. The thematic analysis of the select movies

necessitates quoting dialogues from them amply. While the movies, *Fire* and *Kamasutra* predominantly use English language, *Salaam Bombay!* and *Water* use Hindi and *Monsoon Wedding* and *Earth* use a mixture of English and Hindi. Again, *Monsoon Wedding* makes use of Punjabi songs and a few instances of Urdu occur in *Earth*. While the English dialogues have been quoted as such in the text, the non-English dialogues have been quoted on the basis of the corresponding English subtitles that were available with the movies.

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