Review Mississippi Masala

Review: *Mississippi Masala* by Mira Nair, Michael Nozik
Review by: Erika Surat Andersen
Film Quarterly
Vol. 46, No. 4 (Summer, 1993)

Director: Mira Nair. Producers: Michael Nozik and Mira Nair. Screenplay: Sooni Taraporevala. Cinematographer: Ed Lachman. Production designer: Mitch Epstein. Editor: Roberto Sivi. Music: L Subramaniam. Samuel Goldwyn.

In Mississippi Masala (1991), director Mira Nair (Salaam Bombay, 1988) offers fresh images of people previously ignored, denigrated, or stereotyped by Hollywood. The film features people of color not as subordinates to white dominant culture but as central figures. European-American characters are only peripheral, and the leading characters are either Indian, African, or African-American While Hollywood has recently produced several films centering on African-American characters, such as Boyz N the Hood and New Jack City, these movies are most often limited to a theme of gang life in the inner cities. Mississippi Masala is an enjoy. able and vibrant film; it is hampered, however, by problematic characterizations of the Indian commu nity and by the fact that its central subject, interracial romance, is upstaged by the story of a secondary character.
The story begins in Uganda, in 1972, with the ex pulsion of Asians by the Idi Amin government. Mina, a young East Indian girl, emigrates with her father, Jay, and mother, Kinnu, to Greenwood, Mississippi And it picks up roughly 20 years later-
-Mina (played
by Sarita Choudhury) is a shopping-cart-wielding, self-assured young woman adept at the ways of the Western world. She happens upon Demetrius-
-by rear-ending his van--and soon they fall in love. Demetrius (Denzel Washington) is an earnest, hard-working African-American man who has started a successful carpet-cleaning business. Mina and Demetrius begin a relationship that becomes sexual and public, much to the consternation of both sets of parents and the community, and changes the course of their lives and the lives of those around them.

The film's title originates from Mina's self-description as "masala," a mixture of spices used in Indian cooking. She uses this term in a conversation about her life experiences as an Indian woman, born in Uganda, having lived in England, settled in the United States, embarking on a relationship with an African American. She traverses the Indian and African-American cultures with a refreshing ease. She is close to her parents, and is an accepted member of the Indian community. She is also comfortable in the African world, as evidenced in Uganda by her knowledge of Swahili and her affection for Okelo, a black Ugandan and her father's best friend. In Mississippi she is at home in the black disco, and enjoys spending an afternoon with Demetrius's family. By showing Mina's social interaction with individuals from several different cultures, Nair makes the point that such interaction is not only possible but also natural and desirable.

For me, a product of a mixed union (being half East Indian and half Danish), it was a rare and welcome experience to watch a film centered upon a multicultural character with a talent for social mobility-a skill that a multicultural person has no choice but to hone. The character of Mina, however, crosses more than just cultural boundaries. In Feminist Theory from Margin to Center, bell hooks writes about the intersection of oppression based on gender, class, and race, and the need to address all of these oppressions simultaneously and not to be forced into choosing to battle against one or another of them.

Mississippi Masala, unlike most commercial films, features an active female character: Mina goes places, does things, speaks her mind. She is the one to initiate contact with Demetrius after their chance meeting; she is the one to chase down Demetrius's truck in order to make him face her, something Demetrius is trying to avoid. She is an active participant in their lovemaking, and never plays a coy game of having to be coaxed.

Mina is a young working-class woman of color, and depending on the situation, she identifies differently in a given scene. She fits right in to the social world of a big Indian wedding ceremony; in the argument with her parents over Demetrius she identifies as a young person and as an American. When meeting Demetrius's family, she identifies as an African. In scheming with Demetrius about reviving his business, Mina, the daughter of a former barrister, identifies as a fellow worker, stating that she knows a few things about cleaning toilets from her job as a hotel employee. Mina's character is multidimensional, in contrast to most other films dealing with interracial relationships, in which the identity emphasized for each of the characters does not go beyond racial categorization (as is the case with the black man and white woman engaged in the doomed-and shallow-relationship of Spike Lee's Jungle Fever).

A fundamental problem with the film, however, is that it contains two different stories which compete for the audience's attention--the romance between Mina and Demetrius, and the more interesting story centered around Mina's father, Jay, and his relationship to Africa.

When Amin comes to power and the Indians are expelled, Jay has to face exclusion from a country that he considers his homeland. This rejection becomes particularly painful when Okelo tells him that "Africa is for Africans, black Africans," and urges Jay to leave with his family. Jay is a brown man rejected from a black world who in midlife is forced to assimilate into a white world that is totally foreign to him. In emigrating to the United States, Jay must accept a lowered social status--going from a well-to-do barrister to a motel worker--as well as confront his own unexpected racism when his daughter gets involved with Demetrius, a black man. (It is not made clear, however, whether he really objects to the interracial or the sexual aspect of their relationship.)

The father's story is further highlighted by the fact that the movie begins and ends with Jay. The first scene shows Jay and Okelo being stopped at a roadblock at night; the last scene is of Jay coming to terms with his former homeland on his return visit to Uganda.

Although the father is supposed to be a subordinate character, he is the one who experiences the most profound external and internal changes throughout the film. While Mina meets with opposition to her sexual liaison, none of her fundamental beliefs are challenged, nor does she encounter any hurdle so high that she doesn't know how to overcome it. An interracial relationship provides ample material for conflict and character development, yet the film doesn't take advantage of it. The interracial romance used to market the film is in fact upstaged by the more complex and interesting story of the father.

Another provocative issue is raised by Okelo, a secondary but significant character in the film. An alternate reading of his relationship to Mina's family can be drawn from the text, namely, that Okelo is Mina's father. In the very beginning, one of the few possessions that the mother takes from the home is a photograph of Okelo and Mina together; she looks at it wistfully before placing it in her purse. She later places this photograph in a prominent position in the liquor store she runs in Greenwood.

The farewell scene at the bus station in Uganda, when Mina's family, like dozens of other Asian families, are saying good-bye to their black African friends, also suggests a relationship between Okelo and Kinnu--they share an intimate embrace, and get a somewhat hostile look from Jay when he happens upon them. Mina and Okelo's parting is affectionate and their faces are nose-to-nose in the frame, suggesting their similarity in appearance.

Mina is a shade darker than her mother and father, refers to herself as a "darkie," and is mocked for her skin color by gossips in the Indian community in Greenwood. If Mina is indeed half African and half Indian, it gives new meaning to the term "masala." Not only is she able to traverse the two cultures, she is the embodiment of the traversal itself. Certainly this reading of Okelo's character is open to debate; but if the film-maker had intended such an ambiguity, the message may be that we are all more racially mixed than we know.

Mississippi Masala is surprisingly humorous, and while the satire is at times at the expense of believable characters, at other times it proves enjoyably enlightening. For example, the issue of internalized racism within the Indian community is conveyed succinctly and comically by one of the gossips at the wedding ceremony (played, incidentally, by the director herself). In trying to quiet her friend's fears about Mina's going out with an eligible and wealthy Indian bachelor--Harry Patel--whom her friend wanted for her own daughter, the gossip comments, "You can be dark and have money, or you can be light and have no money, but you can't be dark and have no money and get Harry Patel." An elegant way of explaining the racial and class hierarchies within the Indian community.

Although Mississippi Masala shows the racial animosities between the Indians and the blacks, the larger context is often ignored. In a picnic scene at Demetrius's house, the film does point out the parallel between Africans who were enslaved in the U.S, and Indians enslaved as indentured servants in Africa: both identify with a homeland they have never seen. But when asked why she left Africa, Mina is interrupted by Demetrius before she can answer. Thus the opening scenes of the film, when the Asians are being expelled from Uganda, are never explained.

It's not mentioned that Indians had become the merchant class in Uganda, and as such were taken to be the agents of oppression, becoming targets of the Amin government. The less visible but more powerful force in Africa, the British, are not mentioned at all, nor is the legacy of their divide-and-conquer tactics. Similarly, in the U.S. setting, the Indian and African-American communities are seen bickering and cheating one another throughout the film, claiming a phony solidarity at one moment that falls apart at the next. Lacking any political or historical context, we are reduced to seeing these issues at the level of individual weaknesses, hypocrisy, and bigotry, without recognizing the result of systematic and enforced racist and classist oppression that has been perpetrated for decades and continues today. Symptomatic of this approach is Masala's sim

plistic solution to the problems that the two protagonists face. This film, which is original in many ways--international drama, interracial relationships characters of color--unfortunately relies for resolution on the familiar Hollywood tradition of romantic love as a panacea reserved for exceptionally beautyful people.

One of the issues that film makers of color face is the depiction of their own ethnic group in their work. I found many of the Indian characters in Masala to be negative and satirized. The film presents two kinds of Indians--Mina and her family, who are portrayed genuinely and sympathetically, and the rest of the Indian community, who are portrayed as caricatures. Their mannerisms, such as the bobbing of the head from side to side (an Indian way of saying yes), are exaggerated to the point of ridicule. At the wedding ceremony, the men are drunks and the women are gossips. The hotel owner is greedy and hypocritical--paying lip service to people-of-color solidarity in one moment and disap proving of the mixed-racial romance the next. The bridegroom is depicted as effeminate, impotent, and ludicrous-in one of several bedroom scenes, he checks under his pajamas for an erection, then hops on top of his bride, who emphatically rejects him; he puts on headphones and watches TV instead. The Indian community is shown to be greedy, petty, and ridiculous. If a non-Indian film-maker had portrayed such characters, there would have been pub. lic outcry at the racist stereotypes. What does it mean for a film-maker to make such a film about her own people?

In contrast to the Indians, the black characters in Mississippi Masala are much more three-dimensional-Okelo, Demetrius's father, his Aunt Rose, and even his friend Tyrone and his younger brother are shown as having both strengths and flaws. Tyrone, who first appears to be simply a womanizer, is a faithful friend; he picks Demetrius up from court, and his only objection to the sexual relationship with Mina is that it's dangerous and could get his friend in trouble. The younger brother, who is initially shown as a goof-off, is supportive of his brother when the pressure starts to mount.

The expanded question then becomes: What does it mean for a film-maker to depict her own culture in such a negative light and yet treat another culture with such sensitivity? Is it that she feels privileged to poke fun at her own kind? Are these scenes included purely for comic relief? While the almost slapstick behavior of the Indian community may add humor, these characters are limited and seem to be lifted from a movie of a different genre. If Mississippi Masala is trying to raise real issues about the mutual racism between the Indians and the African Americans, both groups need to be represented on equal ground.

Yet despite the shortcom-ing in characterization, the film deserves credit for taking on the ever-critical issue of racism in the United States and for making us think about the effects of racism on and between two different communities of color.

ERIKA SURAT ANDERSEN