

Locating Hybrid Identity Formations: Readings on Mississippi Masala, The Namesake and Bhaji on the Beach.,

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Abstract

Diasporic cinema or what Hamid Naficy would like to call 'accented cinema' is an expression from the interstices of societies where the diasporic groups occupy an 'in-between' position. However, with the increasing formation of such groups and thereby blending of different cultures, languages, and nations etc. the concept of hybridity has gained much importance as the agency through which the dominant discourses and essentialised notions of race, nation, and ethnicity can be challenged. Going by Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity is heresy' and it is 'how newness enters the world' the current study will focus on the diasporic communities who are such cultural transgressors or translators who are in an 'in-between' position, a position of alienation from both the host and originary nation.

Taking up Indian diasporic cinema by 'exilic' or diasporic filmmakers who are themselves in the interstices of societies, the study will try to look into the transformations undergoing in the identity formations of the Indian diaspora through different generations. The current study takes up three movies- Mississippi Masala(1992) and The Namesake(2007) by Mira Nair, Bhaji on the Beach(1993) by Gurinder Chadha. Mira Nair's Mississippi Masala which depicts the story of an Indian family settled in Mississippi, USA after being expelled from Uganda by the Idi Amin regime. The Namesake is about a Bengali family based in the USA. Bhaji on the beach' by Gurinder Chadha entails the journey of a group of Indian diasporic women in Britain. The paper will try to explore the hybridness in the identities of the characters who are torn between nations and in the midst of the assimilation and resistance in their host nations.,

Introduction

In this new age of immense blending and intermixing of cultures and languages, the term hybridity has gained new importance. However the true sense of the term cannot be restricted to just mixing of elements but it has been interpreted in vastly different lights which is why the term may sometimes remain ambiguous. Moreover, the process of globalisation has also brought the term into limelight with more and more people crossing over to different countries creating diaspora who are unique communities placed between societies, a position which is apt for cultural mixing and creation of new identities. However this paper brings in diasporic cinema which Hamid Naficy(2001) terms as 'accented cinema' depicting the transformations in the diasporic communities and looking into such 'accented' films the paper will try to understand the social and cultural dimensions of the new identity formations.

Conceptualising hybridity

The term hybridity owes its emergence to biology when the debate of race among human beings came to the foreground. However the term has expanded in its scope and meaning and now can mean anything ranging from a mix of various genres to a mix of different cultures. Going by the different notions of hybridity, one common strand of thought that surfaces is the power play in a hybrid. A hybrid is a locus of power where different aspects are brought together but is neither collaboration nor assimilation. It becomes a 'third' entity where the components remain distinct yet together. This sense of doubleness can be drawn from what Homi Bhabha conceptualises as mimicry, a process of making something 'almost the same but not quite' (Bhabha,1994, p.122). In terms of culture, hybridity works when the received notions of traditions are reworked upon. It negates the myth of purity which bases the compartmentalisation of all identities into pure boxes forming the foundation for essentialising notions of nation, ethnicity, race, language, culture. Hybridity as a counter to this notion overthrows the strict boundaries and tends to go 'beyond' them.

Hybridity and diaspora

For the diaspora 'home' is a desired place to which the diaspora wants to return and 'away' is the place to which he/she has arrived and now is. The place where he/she is, is a combination of the roots (home) and also the routes which he/she has traversed and has arrived at. For Paul Gilroy, belonging is both being from a particular place and also this process of arrival (Kalra, et.al, 2005, pp.29). This understanding challenges the essentialist ways of belonging to a single place, nation or ethnicity which comes from the interstitial position that the diaspora occupies inside the nation, a position of belonging to different nations inside one nation. The claims of homogeneity by a nation or an 'imagined community' (Anderson,1983) are overthrown with the presence of this 'other' inside. With the increased flow of people over the globe and creation of diverse diasporas has rendered the discourse of multiculturalism inadequate for the dynamics of migration. Multiculturalism tends to contain multiple cultural differences in a singular narrative of a nation. The diaspora possesses a 'double consciousness' which Samir Dayal (1996) conceptualises as 'neither just this/nor just that' situation. It is the doubled or ambivalent position of their allegiance or their hesitation to belong to their 'homeland' or their host, a position of "neither in nor quite outside the narratives of nation". So it acts as the interstitial agency which breaks the borders of culture (Dayal, 1996, pp.54).

For the children of the migrant people who have not experienced migration, see the homeland as an illusory place whose image is fractured (McLeod, 2010). Children born of migrants or those who have migrated to new lands at a very small age have very little or no memory of their homeland unlike their parents who maintain a clear picture of their home. Thus their issues with 'home' become different from their parents. They do not have a memory of their homeland to have recourse to as 'home' and while 'away' they are constantly characterised as outsiders. Thus the migrants and their children occupy an intermediate position living 'in-between' different nations where they are not able to connect in an emotional level with either of the places.

In these interstitial spaces in which the migrants are positioned, the conventional ways of belonging like belonging to certain ethnic race or a homogenous group or being rooted to a specific geographical place no longer works. Thus newer models of identity are being born out of this 'in-between' position. In their attempt to create new identities the younger generations of diasporic individuals actively participate in transforming the received notions and systems of knowledge. Diasporas become the cultural translators or transgressors who are able to rework with their received notions or cultures and reframe and modify them accordingly to give birth to newer forms. In the midst of the demands for assimilation into the host society the diasporas carve out for themselves an identity which pulls together different nations and cultures and at the same time refusal to belong to just one of them. This belonging and yet not belonging to certain particular 'home' or 'away' builds for them an identity formed from the weaving of variable sources, different materials and different locations, a process which knocks down the idea of subjectivity as stable, single and pure. Hybrid identities are thus not complete and remain in flux, open to change.

Mississippi Masala

The movie by Mira Nair released in 1992 depicted an Indian family expelled from Uganda in the 1970's during the drive for Africanisation. Jay who was born and brought up in Uganda is much hurt by the order and tries to resist it. Okelo, Jay's best friend tells him to leave Uganda with his wife Kinnu and daughter, Mina. At this point Jay who is of Indian origin resists and calls Uganda his home.

Okelo: Not anymore, Jay. Africa is for Africans. Black Africans.

This statement deracinates the whole idea of Jay's 'home', an idea that is very much embedded in rootedness, permanency and safe refuge and anyone to have displaced the foundation of this belief comes as a blow for Jay. Next the movie shows the family after 18 years, in Greenwood, Mississippi, 1990. A picture of a Ugandan landscape with lush green lands and rivers recurs in the movie a few times as a fragment of Jay's idea of his 'home'. But this scenery always remains static and uncontaminated by Jay's present. On other hand Mina is shown as a grown up lady who works for their family motel. She meets Demetrius, her love interest who is an African American. At a point in the movie Mina describes her identity as a 'mixed masala' to Demetrius which becomes the crux of the movie and an expression of the unique identity of Mina.

Mina: Three years in Mississippi, but before that in London and before that in Africa. I have never been to India. I am a mixed masala.

These dialogues have an overall effect upon the movie. Here it becomes clear as to how Mina perceives herself, her identity and her affiliations. Since she has origins in India but born and brought up in places other than India, it makes her identify with all the places that she has grown up in. Though she calls herself Indian but she is also very much aware of all other places that have built up her identity. She has not tried in fixing her identity and has kept it fluid and open.

So the element of rootedness in an identity is absent for her and thus here her 'roots' have been replaced by 'routes'. She reflects the double consciousness of a diasporic individual and a hybrid (Dayal,1996).

Towards the end of the movie Jay decides to go to Uganda because he feels his present land to be a stranger's land. For him his land of origin, India too does not hold as homeland. The film ends with Jay visiting Uganda. He goes to his old home which is now in shams. His little flowered garden, a picture which recurs to him as his home, is no more there. The picture in his imagination is now shattered with the news of Okelo's death and with this he gives up his search for his home.

The film traverses the anxieties of searching an identity for Mina and an utmost endeavour at holding on to an identity and homeland for Jay. Along this searching and fixing identity Mina is confronted with multiple grounds on which she can lay her identity but she does not restricts to one and glides through a number of them. Her accumulated identities do not bother her and she is much more comfortable in the layered identities. While for Jay the foremost concern was to hold on to whatever was left of his 'home'. At an old age he wanted to return back to his home, Uganda and not stray away in some 'foreign' land. But when his picture of home was shattered by the visit he leaves behind his 'home' and ends his search for home. Thus here too Jay tries to glide through 'homelands' and not fixing his identity to any land or ethnicity.

Bhaji on the beach

Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* released in 1993 deals with a group of Indian diasporic women who go on a trip to Blackpool together and along the way and their journey together reveals their characters. The movie starts with a dream sequence of Asha, one of the ladies who join the trip, looking at a huge God statue who reminds her of her responsibilities towards her children and husband. Her dream sequences are recurring in the movie through which the director has tried to put across the system of patriarchy acting upon the women in diaspora.

Jinder who with her child leaves her husband and has filed for a divorce is despised by other older women of the community because for them she is indecent enough to leave her husband's family and house. On the other hand Harshida who is about to go into medical college seems to be the ideal girl that every parent would want. But her unexpected pregnancy, Harshida pulls down her dignity in the eyes of other women. There is a difference of opinion between the younger and the older women regarding Jinder's decision. All the diasporic ladies are joined by a woman from Mumbai, Rekha who is decked up in western clothing. Seeing her, the older women who were mostly clad in sarees and traditional salwar kameez become apprehensive.

Asha: ... My own daughter, the other day I was telling her that it's the woman who makes the family. You know what she did? Next day she shaved her head.

At this all the women laugh.

Asha: You think it's funny? I was teaching her morals from back home.

Rekha: Home? What home? How long has it since you been 'home'? Look at you, your clothes, the way that you think!

Although the diasporic women have been away from their homelands they have created certain pictures in their minds about the traditions of the homeland. In communities living outside their homeland the responsibility to maintain that link with the homeland through traditions and customs is given to the women counterpart. Asha, as aware of the responsibilities, tries to teach 'morals from back home' to her daughter to which the daughter vehemently opposes by shaving off her head. This indicates clearly that the daughter or the younger generation women are no

longer willing to carry the burden of tradition which are unfamiliar to them. Rekha from Mumbai tries to show the picture of present day India, a picture which does not conform to the ones imagined by the diasporic women as uncontaminated and pure.

The older women are scandalised by the news of Harshida's unexpected pregnancy and Harshida who was till now regarded as the one that they were proud of, became the point of disgrace and more serious was the issue of a black father. However the younger girls try to resist and differ with the older ladies as they are not concerned with upholding values in the societies and have moved away from the older ways of representing oneself as an Indian. They are striving to free themselves from the clutches of Indian patriarchal system.

Another very important scene in the movie which brings out the difference of opinion among the young and the older generation of diasporic women on societal norms and morals is an interaction of Pushpa, Veena and Harshida. With the cups of coffee inside a coffee shop both Pushpa and Veena take out their homemade food boxes on the table when the owner of the coffee shop, a white lady, gets infuriated at seeing the homemade food. She comes over to their table and declares that anything other than English food is not allowed there. Getting back to her counter she makes some racial comments on the Indians. With this racial attack by the white lady, simultaneously Pushpa and Veena attacks on the moral standard of Harshida who had just entered the shop. Both the racial comments and comments on morals go parallel yet differing.

White lady: No manners!

Veena: No shame!

White lady: They want to get back from where they come from.

Pushpa: We should never have come to this country.

White lady: They breed like rabbits!

Pushpa: If the baby dies it will be a blessing for everyone. Thank God I never had a daughter. What for? To curse me like this?

Harshida who has been tolerating both the comments on her moral standards and also comments on her racial background could take it no longer and walks up to Pushpa, throws coffee on her and then goes over the counter and shouts at the lady. Harshida's reaction to both the types of comments comes as a rebellion against the way Pushpa perceives her as a spoilt girl and also against the racial attack by the lady. It gives us a picture of the double victimhood of women in diaspora, as a victim of racial assault and as a victim of patriarchy. She does not deem herself as a carrier of Indian culture but at the same time tries to redefine her Indian identity in a new way by attacking Indian patriarchal system of knowledge and also attacking racism on the other hand.

The Namesake

Released in 2007, *The Namesake* by Mira Nair is a movie based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri. It depicts a Bengali family based on the US. Ashok Ganguly is a man who marries a Bengali girl, Ashima and settle down in the US where they give birth to Gogol and Sonia. The movie beautifully traverses the relationship between the parents and the children as to how the children distances themselves from the parents during their growing years and how all the members of the family mature together to their surroundings and understandings.

After a boy is born Ashima becomes apprehensive of bringing up a baby in a foreign land without relatives and family members around. But Ashok persists on staying because this land will provide the child with better opportunities. For Ashok the place away from home is better for a child's future while home for him is a nostalgia and desire. Ashima sacrifices her desire to return back home for their child's future. As the movie proceeds Ashok and Ashima have another child, a baby girl, Sonia.

The whole family goes for a vacation to India. With their arrival in Kolkata there is a burst of colours onscreen with pictures of the Howrah Bridge, the old buildings and crowded streets. Both Ashima and Ashok are seen excited while the children are uninterested and indifferent. They don't seem to adjust well with the new setting in Kolkata which is the home for their parents although they are amused at the sights and sounds of the streets. The reaction of children is;

Gogol: What's wrong with you?

Sonia: I wanna go home.

Sonia and Gogol don't like their stay in Kolkata and for them it's just another ritual that they have to go through for their parents. All the hullabaloo in the house on their arrival is something new that the children are experiencing. A scene where Gogol travels by a tram he seems to be misplaced in amongst the crowd.

As time goes by, Gogol starts a new life with his American girlfriend, Maxine, away from his parents. Gogol starts avoiding his parents as he perceives himself to be different from his parents who are still in their own world of nostalgia of their homeland and cultures. Gogol identifies more with the 'American way' than his parents. But here too, in his attempts to assimilate, he is constantly reminded of his difference by the dominant society. One such conversation between a lady and Gogol gives a hint of the stereotyping done to the image of Indians. Even when Gogol says that he was born in America, the lady doesn't take any heed and takes for granted that he is from India. Here the dilemma that the younger generation of migrants face is clear. The children who are born of Indian parents are deemed as Indians and kept aside when all the while they try and somehow assimilate with the society. They don't feel fit in their parents' homeland like Gogol and Sonia, and also they are seen as the 'other' and not 'one of us' by the host society. However after his father's sudden death he starts to change his mind about his parents as different and un-understandable. Gogol shaves off his head as a sign of mourning for his father because he had once seen him do the same when his grandfather died but for Gogol it was a way to make up to his father. Later, Gogol goes on to marry a Bengali girl, Moushumi. But after a year they fall apart. The character of Moushumi is depicted as one who has lived in many places like London, Paris and now New York and has had been in a number of affairs. Her character gives insights to the boundlessness of an individual, an absence of permanency and being rootless (ibid).

The movie very skilfully depicts the journey of a Bengali couple in the US who are always rooted to their home. It depicts their slow assimilation into the host society but they have created certain boundaries which for them should not be crossed. Ashok was doing his PhD when he came to Kolkata to marry a Bengali girl, Ashima, had already spent much time abroad. But the idea of marrying a non Bengali was never a thought for him. As their time in the US proceeds both Ashima and Ashok's English improves but they do not take up the American accent while their children spoke in the accent.

Ashima and Ashok are shown to socialise with other Bengali families in town through social gatherings with their children accompanying them. At one moment Gogol regrets that during his childhood he had never been to any place other than visiting Bengali families in and around. And also he regretted eating Indian meals out of Tiffin-boxes during these journeys when all the while he wanted to go into a McDonald for a meal. His regrets and desires to spend his childhood times as any other American kid made him identify his parents as different and this very idea distanced him from his parents.

Speaking of hybridity in such mid-way is the projection of this middle path as not an anxiety but a new space or the third space which could enable the formation of different identities for the

children, as against the identity of their parents and also identity of the host society. Gogol and Sonia as they mature, they accept their parents as they are and the parents too try to change their views in certain ways to be more acceptable to their children. For example Ashima is no longer anxious when Sonia wanted to marry an American man while that was not the case with Gogol when he brought home his American girlfriend. However the movie does not explicitly deal with the identities of the characters but very implicitly it informs us of a confrontation with the push and pull in a host society as put up against the backdrop of the nostalgia for the original home. Ashima and Ashok represent the need for a rooted identity in a homeland while the children occupy a precarious position where they do not agree with their parents' homeland and also are not able to be fully absorbed in their current society.

Readings on 'Mississippi Masala', 'Bhaji on the Beach', 'The Namesake' A comparative reading of the three movies brings to the fore certain strands which run through all of them in a similar pattern.

Perceiving 'home'

One aspect which is common to this desire or nostalgia is that the picture of the home which the nostalgia creates is always pure and uncontaminated by the present changes in the societies. In the case of Jay, the picture of his small garden of his Uganda home has remained the same even after eighteen years. He has never thought of any changes that might have occurred or he has deliberately kept such changes from contaminating the pure picture. For the older women in 'Bhaji on the Beach' the picture of India which they hold is a land of traditional values and beliefs. Living away from the homeland has made them ignorant of the recent changes in the Indian society itself and Rekha, the new age woman from Bombay contaminates the pure picture of India in their minds. This creates anxiety among the older ladies who become apprehensive of her.

Difference between generations

The concerns with 'home' and 'away' are different for different generations of migrants and it has been a common element in these movies. The formation of identity for oneself has been depicted in 'Mississippi Masala' where Mina who is the daughter has harboured a totally different identity as against her father Jay who is always rooted to his 'home'. Mina has built a hybrid identity with resources from all the places that she has grown up in while her parents are very much rooted in their perceived home. A similar concept has been explored in 'The Namesake' where Gogol has a different impression of himself which is distinct from his parents Ashok and Ashima. Sonia and Gogol do not identify with their parents' idea of 'home'. As born and brought up in the host society the children try to associate themselves with the dominant society but here too they are sidelined as strangers or aliens. So in such a dicey situation the children carve for themselves newer identities which are unlike their parents as well as the host society. The younger girls in 'Bhaji on the Beach' try to project a different identity unlike the other older Indian women in diaspora who try to hold onto the age old beliefs of their homeland which they think is pure.

Assimilation and resistance

The anxiety of the push and pull or the issue of assimilation and resistance in diaspora has been touched upon in all the movies. In *Mississippi Masala* Jay's position on his sticking to his picture of 'home' and calling his present territory as the foreign land suggest to a stance of resistance from his part. However Mina's identity which does not base itself on any land cannot be called assimilation because her fluid identity is her way of going beyond the question of resistance and assimilation. The younger girls from *'Bhaji on the Beach'* can be seen to be assimilated with the host society but this is only to an extent. Harshida's reaction to the racial comments by the coffee-shop owner highlights the point that though the younger girls have tried to assimilate but have at all times fought against racial attack on them. This aspect gives a different face to their identity as women in a diasporic community. The character of Gogol in *'The Namesake'* has been in an effort to assimilate into the host society. However his desire has arisen from his want to be accepted as an equal in the dominant society. But his efforts were in vein because time and again he was made to realise by the host society itself that he was an outsider who had just happened to take birth there. Thus the anxiety of the resistance and assimilation could be clearly felt in his character.

The gender question

Taking up the gender aspect of a diaspora community, it is the women in a community in exile or diaspora become the carrier of the culture and traditions of the homeland (Kalra *et al.* 2005). The women's body become the reflector of culture of a particular community where woman is made the icon of traditions through her dressing which is generally traditional attire and her subjugated attitude. In *'Mississippi Masala'* the mother Kinnu is portrayed as a fairly independent woman who has her say upon the family decisions. But she doesn't keep herself away from the societal responsibility that has been bestowed upon her as a woman. She tries to impart cultural learning from her ordinary society and when she learns about Mina's relationship with an African American she considers it a shame to the family. However, for Mina such aspects of traditionality do not hold any meaning in her life unlike her mother who try to adhere to the gender roles she is supposed to play in the diaspora community.

In *'Bhaji on the Beach'* the older women were very much entrapped into the system of patriarchy and followed its dictates without questioning while their younger generation women no longer considered themselves as upholders of cultural and traditional morals. From the very beginning there is a friction between the age groups on the issue of a woman's moral standards but towards the end there is an understanding between the two groups where all of them come together against Jinder's husband. Here their sympathy towards Jinder gives them the realisation of their position which is entranced into the system of patriarchy.

In the *'The Namesake'* with Ashima entering into an inevitable arranged marriage with Ashok and moving to the US, the film juxtaposes her lack of power to decide for herself with her daughter's decision to marry an American man. Moreover, the character of Moushumi who is married to Gogol for a brief period unsettles the conventional idea of a woman as stable and poised for she is projected as a woman who is always on the move. She has been living in many cities but had never settled down in any of them and has had a number of affairs but had never married. Thus when she marries Gogol she feels entrapped and tries to free herself from the societal belongings by getting involved into other affairs. Her character violently shatters the picture of an 'Indian woman' who is ought to be graceful, rooted and domestic.

Hybrid representations

Drawing a common thread of hybridity through all the three movies gives us a host of characters and situations in which hybridity as a common phenomenon can be traced. Mina in *'Mississippi Masala'*, Gogol, Sonia and Moushumi in *'The Namesake'* and the younger women in the group of *'Bhaji on the Beach'* are the characters who can be sorted out for the purpose. Mina with her layered identity and one which she does not base on any place or ethnicity is where hybridity as a way of going beyond conventional notions of belonging is being reflected. For Gogol his hybrid identity comes from his differences with his parents' perception of 'home'. Unlike his parents, US where he is born, is his home but here too he is marginalised from being acceptable into the dominant society. So his in-between position gives him different tiers of identities and he too does not bother to link his self to any piece of land. For Moushumi who is an independent nonconformist woman of societal norms, the hybridness in her character comes out from her boundlessness. In *'Bhaji on the Beach'* the young girls who are in their attempts at freeing themselves from the Indian patriarchal system can be said to have moved towards a hybrid element. Having an overview of all the characters other than the ones mentioned, there has also been hybrid component in their identities. Jay at the end of *'Mississippi Masala'* gives up his attempts at securing his home and changes his perception of his home. So Jay at last frees himself of the bounds of territory. In Kinnu a different strand of hybrid element is observed because of her being a woman in diaspora and yet at the same time detached from the conventional Indian patriarchal norms. The elderly ladies from *'Bhaji on the Beach'* who are the staunch followers of patriarchal norms at the end are shown to have realised their victimhood. Throughout the movie, holding onto a static picture of India and its traditions in hand, the older ladies try to keep their links with the land intact by performing the traditions of the land. However, later at the end when they realise their exploitation in the system, they land themselves in the path to emancipating themselves from it. Asha who has the recurrent dreams of being bogged down by sacrifices revolts against the system by helping Jinder.

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