Postcolonial feminisms speaking through an ‘accented’ cinema: the construction of Indian women in the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta

Diasporic films can be described as engaging in dialogue between the home and host societies of the filmmakers writes SUBESHINI MOODLEY. Through an examination of the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, she proposes a theoretical framework for the support of a potential postcolonial feminist film practice.

Hamid Naficy¹ argues that even though the experiences of diaspora and exile differ from one person to the next, films produced by diasporic filmmakers exhibit similarities at various levels. He calls this an ‘accented’ cinema. Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora whose films depict Indian women – in comparison to their popular construction – in unconventional and controversial ways. The similarity of the construction of Nair and Mehta’s female protagonists, as a result, seems to facilitate a filtering of postcolonial feminisms throughout the narrative of their films. This focus therefore proposes that the merging of Naficy’s theory of diasporic filmmaking, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s notions of postcolonial feminism, in the analysis of Nair and Mehta’s construction of their female characters, will establish a theoretical framework for the support of a potential postcolonial feminist film practice.

An accented cinema

‘Accented cinema’ is a label given by Naficy (2001) to films directed/produced by exilic and diasporic people around the world. His argument is based on the belief that diasporic and exilic filmmakers seem to exhibit specific similarities – at levels of technique, style, aesthetics and ideology – in the production of their films. Naficy (2001) says that if the dominant cinema (read: Hollywood) is considered to be universal (and thereby lacking accent), diasporic and exilic films are accented. This notion of accent does not simplistically emerge from ‘the accented speech of the diegetic characters’ within these films, but from the ‘displacement of the filmmakers’ (Naficy, 2001:4).

The term ‘displacement’ is used in relation to its opposite, namely, placement. Naficy argues that the notion of place is expressed through spatial and temporal configurations. On the one hand, a place is a certain section of space to which a person or many people may attach special significance or value. Place is therefore not something singularly physical. It is rather a concept characterised by the social relations attached to it. On the other hand, place is also characterised by history, giving it a temporal dimension (Naficy, 2001). Therefore, the ‘displacement of filmmakers’ refers not only to the physical movement of filmmakers from
their own 'place' to another, but also to the timing of and reasons for that move, and the social, emotional and psychological experience/expense that the move incurs.

As a consequence of diasporic films being produced in the transition between cultures and societies, 'accented' cinema is interstitial and can be described as engaging in dialogue between the home and host societies of the filmmakers (Naficy, 2001:6).

Diasporic people, says Naficy, tend to cling to notions of their ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness. These concepts are achieved through an awareness and perpetuation of elements specifically characteristic of, or associated with, the homeland. This is often not favourably received by either the home or host societies. The reason is that on the one hand the host country, in some instances, interprets a maintenance of tradition, culture or ethnicity as an assertion or imposition on their society. On the other hand, the home country may sometimes view a diasporic move out of their country as a betrayal or rejection of their tradition, culture and ethnicity – whether or not the diasporic community attempts to maintain, or is critical of, these elements. This is where the controversy in Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta's films arise. Both filmmakers have received negative responses in India for the content of their films. Nair's film, Kama Sutra (1996) was heavily criticised for the nudity it contained and its open references to sex. Even though she wove a fictional storyline around the ancient Hindu book on the art of lovemaking, her film was still considered unacceptable and a desecration of Indian values and principles. Each of the films in Mehta's trilogy was disrupted during their making. The first two (Fire, 1996 and Earth, 1999) were severely criticised, and the last (Water, date unknown) was not completed because the Indian government had stopped shooting. In addition, Nair and Mehta's female characters are constructed as Indian women with agency and not simply as ideological constructs of nationalism.

To understand, however, what constitutes the notion of agency in their films, it is first necessary to understand the symbolic nationalist representation that these filmmakers challenge.

A persistent theme of Indian Nationalism has been the reprocessing of the image of the Indian woman and her role based in the family, based on models of Indian womanhood from the distant glorious past. The woman becomes a metaphor for the purity, the chastity, and the sanctity of the Ancient Spirit that is India. As Chatterjee puts it, the national construct of the Indian woman attributes 'the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on' to femininity, which then stands 'as a sign for nation' (1989a:630).

Consequently, anything that threatens to dilute this model of Indian womanhood constitutes a betrayal of all that it stands for: nation, religion, God, the Spirit of India, culture, tradition, family (Bhattacharjee in Dasgupta, 1998:172).

Bhattacharjee suggests that the symbolic status of the Indian woman has led to her oppression...
and colonisation, such that her body and its representation become subject to the dominant hegemony of patriarchal nationalism. Popular Indian cinema, Bollywood – the dominant cinematic practice in India – has tended to capitalise on this and has perpetuated this control through the establishment of female dichotomies – the virtuous, dutiful, sexually pure woman versus the ‘loose’ or ‘common’ woman. It is thus the rejection or transgression of this inscription of the Indian woman and her body, in the films of Nair and Mehta, that this focus offers as the notion of agency.

The female characters in Nair and Mehta's films rebel against their oppression through the exploration of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies. By stretching the boundaries of their sexual identities, these women speak out in resistance through the language of their bodies. Their bodies being the marginal spaces that they occupy, these protagonists don't always begin as women with agency, but grow and develop to that point. Their marginal spaces are first defined and highlighted in order to show how they later redefine and transcend its boundaries. The growth and development toward agency is riddled with difficulties, and these women often have to struggle with their Indian identities and revisit the unfair expectations placed on their roles as daughters, wives and mothers. 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 own identities to become the subjects of their own lives.

This process is characterised by what Naficy refers to as 'journeys of identity'. Borders, in this regard, are a significant aspect: they can either be a connection or a division between the 'home' and 'elsewhere', or the familiar and unfamiliar. Borders are interesting locations (physical or imagined) where a variety of factors (race, class, gender, history and national identity) diverge and intersect. Border consciousness arises out of being situated at a border location and can be described as 'multiperspectival and tolerant of ambiguity, ambivalence and chaos' (Naficy, 2001:31). Relating to this, Nair 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 choices made against the grain, succumbing to desire or engagement in rebellious activity.

Before borders are crossed, however, journeys are embarked upon. While border-crossing relates to the change-over or refashioning of identity, journeys relate to the content of the transition that occurs during the processes of changing over and refashioning. These journeys are motivated and, like borders, can be either actual or imaginary.

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, 2001:33).
Focusing on the latter type of journey, many elements of physical journeys can be applied. For instance, psychological/metaphorical journeys can be heterogeneous and evolutionary. They can also be exploratory, involving personal quests, wandering and searching, thereby altering individual targets, purposes and objectives (Naficy, 2001). This type of journey is deeply philosophical venturing into the individual psyche and establishing subjectivity. The journey thus becomes one of identity. As a consequence of uprooting or being uprooted from one country and attempting to transplant the physical self into the new environment, necessary mental and emotional changes are made in order to exist comfortably in the new environment. Amidst all of these changes, people in exile and diaspora begin to question who they are and who they have to become. They begin to analyse and measure the appropriateness of the influencing factors of both their homeland and their host country. These internal transformational shifts in identity often surface in the personal struggles of these filmmakers’ characters whether or not the film depicts a story about living in exile or the diaspora (Naficy, 2001).

Homi Bhabha’s thoughts, regarding the narration of nation, shed an interesting light on Naficy’s ideas of journeying, border-crossing and identity:

The ‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary... and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity, incorporating new ‘people’ in relation to the body politic, generating other sites of meaning and inevitably, in the political process, producing unmanned sites of political antagonism and unpredictable forces for political representation. The address to nation as narration stresses the insistence of political power and cultural authority... What emerges as an effect of such ‘incomplete signification’ is a turning of boundaries and limits into the in-between spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated (Bhabha, 1990:4).

Nair and Mehta’s women characters undergo journeys of identity. 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 the Indian woman that were governed by norms and rules that would supposedly make her an acceptable, worthy being. The actions of the women in the films disrupt mainstream convention, and re-define the nature of the margin on two levels: it becomes both a site of resistance for the characters in the films, and a site for the expression of that resistance for the filmmakers. Whereas the characters find themselves in the margins of the narrow confines of tradition and nationalism and react in rebellion, the directors find themselves in the interstitial margins of the homeland and the host country and respond politically. bell hooks supports the concept of the margin as a platform for resistance (hooks, 1990:149-150):
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For me [the] space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. [...] [the margin] is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds.

It is in the nature of the border-crossing journeys of identity and the marginal resistance of the female characters in the 'accented' films of Nair and Mehta, that postcolonial feminisms become significant.

Postcolonial feminisms

Postcolonial feminisms is a rich and diverse field of study that has arisen as a reaction to, and as a transformation of, the various forms of western feminism.

Chandra Talpade Mohanty's ideas (1988, 1991) begin with a critique of some forms of western feminism, arguing that they can sometimes be too narrow to be applied to the plight of the Third World woman/ woman of colour. The often universalist approach of these feminisms tend to assume that the Third World woman/ woman of colour is a singular monolithic subject. A consequence of employing western feminist methodological and analytical modes to the Third World experience is that a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an average Third World woman (Williams and Chrisman, 1992).

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc). This ... is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions (Williams and Chrisman, 1992:200).

Mohanty suggests that a change be made such that the representation of Third World women is a truer reflection of their contexts/ circumstances/conditions. This can occur in two ways: Third World women, women of colour or women previously belonging to the Third World have to become active participants in their self-presentation, or Western scholarship has to become more open, taking into account that factors such as race, class and ethnic origin play a significant role in the lives of Third World women.

Naficy, in identifying 'accented' cinema, shows that dominant, 'western' cinematic practices are not always applicable to all groups of people (specifically people originating from countries
considered to be Third World or non-western). The conventions of the Hollywood discourses and narratives are not sufficient to tell their stories or effectively capture their experiences. However, when these people do move into the western spaces, the access to appropriate resources and established frameworks, and the ability to express the self allow for the creation of new discourses such as ‘accented’ cinema and postcolonial feminisms. Similar to Mohanty, Naficy also proposes the consideration of factors such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, politics and nationalism in the understanding of where these filmmakers are coming from and where they are going. This is important in establishing a framework for the analysis of Nair and Mehta’s films – being Indian is specific to them. It is therefore crucial to draw on the above-mentioned factors in order to understand the Indian female experience of identity and how it takes form in their films.

Furthermore, a consideration of history reveals the significance of race in feminist analyses. One of the most prominent criticisms of western feminisms has been their heavy concern with gender inequality at the expense of race and its inscription in gender injustice. Mohanty views gender and race as relational concepts. A woman, she says, is not a woman because she is biologically female. Historical constructions and ideologies of womanhood are linked as much to class and race as they are to sex:

"[t]he very practice of remembering the grain of 'public' or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggle to assert knowledge which is outside the parameters of the dominant suggests a rethinking of sociality itself" (Mohanty et al., 1991:38-39).

This has implications for both Naficy’s theories and Nair and Mehta’s filmmaking. The films of Nair and Mehta, falling under the category of ‘accented’ cinema and employing its techniques to defy convention and make controversial, political statements about the representation of...
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the Indian woman, are creating discursive spaces for female and feminist narratives.

This then filters into Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's ideas surrounding the notion of the subaltern. Spivak has been extensively involved in both literary and postcolonial studies. Her theories relating to the subaltern emerged out of this involvement and they have had a significant impact in the area of postcolonial studies (and, in particular, postcolonial feminisms).

Taking the term from the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971), Spivak's main concern regarding the subaltern was: 'can the subaltern speak?' (Williams and Chrisman, 1992). In response, she posits that the subaltern is not heard and, as a consequence, cannot speak.

The Oxford Dictionary suggests that the term 'subaltern', in reference to an officer of lower rank, has its origins in the military. It has, however, developed to mean inferior or subordinate. Spivak subscribes to a very specific notion of the term. Although she appropriated it from the work of Gramsci, she prefers Ranajit Guha's conception:

Spivak sometimes uses the term in reference to the Third World Indian woman. She argues that the subaltern cannot speak because, as such, she is not heard by the privileged of either the First or Third Worlds. She believes that the status of the subaltern would change completely, were she to make herself heard, such that she would cease to exist as a subaltern - 'a most oppressed and invisible constituency'. Spivak perceives this as the ultimate goal as she is not interested in preserving subalternity (Landry and Maclean, 1996: 5). She suggests, at this point, the consideration of two levels of representation10.

'Representing', as it stands, refers to political representation in the sense that someone assumes the place of someone else and speaks for or on behalf of that person. The hyphenated 're-presenting' relates to the portrayal of someone in some form or another, such as art. These two levels are complicit by nature and have to be considered in conjunction to one another when applied to the concept of the subaltern.

This is the point Naficy makes when he speaks about how the tension, created by the filmmaker's diasporic or exilic position, finds expression in the films that they make. Having left their homeland, a potentially restricted place, they create a political space (accented filmmaking) from which to represent people sharing their ethnicity. In other words, 'accented' filmmakers speak on behalf of the people in or from their countries, as directors, through the depiction of these people. In terms of Nair and Mehta, they are both Indian women filmmakers who, as directors, are creating narratives about other Indian women in various contexts, through the portrayal of these women in their female protagonists.

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The status of the subaltern would change completely, were she to make herself heard

the space that is cut off from the lines of mobility in a colonized country. You have the foreign elite and the indigenous elite. Below that you will have the vectors of upward, downward, sideward and backward mobility. But then there is a space which is for all practical purposes outside those lines (Spivak, in Landry and Maclean, 1996: 289).
In this way, Nair and Mehta work toward eliminating the subaltern (sometimes in the way Spivak conceives of the term, but also in the sense of inferior, subordinate and oppressed). Nair and Mehta's female characters may not all be subaltern, but the construction of each of these women exhibits, at some level, aspects of a subaltern identity. Therefore, by allowing their characters agency in representation, these directors are subsequently allowing the Indian woman to make herself heard.

Spivak often, in her writings and interviews, relates the story of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a teenage woman who committed suicide in Calcutta in 1926, because she was unable to execute an assassination entrusted to her by a political movement that was involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence and that she belonged to (Spivak, in Williams and Chrisman, 1992). In an interview entitled, 'The problem of cultural representation' (Harasym, 1990:50-58), Spivak explains that the complexity of the act of relating Bhuvaneswari's story lay in the fact that she was not giving this young woman a voice, but she was rather (re)-presenting her by writing her narrative to be read (Spivak, in Harasym, 1990:57).

This could also be said of Nair and Mehta (and other filmmakers falling under Naficy's concept of an 'accented' cinema): they represent the texts of other Indian women, where the text is the nationalism of India inscribed in the notion of the ideal Indian woman and the consequences that accompany this. They are not speaking for these women but are allowing them a resistant space in which to be heard. In this way, Nair and Mehta contribute to the ailing existence of the Indian woman as subaltern in some instances, or as an oppressed, colonised nationalist metaphor, in others.

**Conclusion**

This *focus* has worked toward establishing a theoretical framework of analysis not only for the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, but one that could also potentially argue for an emerging postcolonial feminist film practice.

The framework proposes that Nair and Mehta, as a result of their diasporic positions, portray Indian women in unconventional ways. These unconventional ways result from a comparison of the construction of Nair and Mehta's female characters to that of popular Indian cinema, Bollywood. Indian women have been made to maintain nationalist ideals through the perpetuation of Hindu values and beliefs. Religious and social rules governing the behaviour of Indian women have ultimately led to their oppression and patriarchal control of their bodies. It was the ideal wife, mother and daughter who respected and devotedly obeyed the rules governing behaviour that were favourably portrayed in popular films. Indian women thus developed as symbols of nationalism.

Nair and Mehta subvert this concept of the Indian woman. They depict Indian women as reclaiming their bodies and sexual identities. It is at this point that Naficy is introduced to argue for the similarities in Nair and Mehta's work, and to attribute these similarities to their displacement as diasporic filmmakers and its consequences.
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Postcolonial feminist discourses provide an understanding of how text and narrative – the medium of film in this focus – can be specific to different groups of people, occupying the margins, through the incorporation of defining elements such as race, gender, history, geography, ethnicity and nation; and, in this specificity, become a tool of resistance and transgression.

References

Films
Mehta D (date unknown) Water (production company unknown as film is incomplete).

Notes
1. Naficy, himself an Iranian living in the diaspora, has researched and written extensively about the media practices of diasporic and exilic Iranian communities in America. These media practices are, he argues, an attempt at remembering the homeland (Iran) and either rejecting or retaining all that it stands for. In An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking (2001), Naficy broadens his theories to include the filmmaking of other exilic and diasporic nationalities. Through the study of filmmakers of diverse backgrounds, Naficy illustrates the appropriateness of his theories to various filmmakers in the diaspora. His ideas are therefore significant, for the purposes of this focus, as they allow for the establishment of similarity between the chosen filmmakers. I have not encountered any other work in the field that so coherently captures the concept of diasporic film practice.

2. 'Interstitial' is an adjective derived from the noun 'interstices', which refers to a gap or small space between two things or component parts. The term 'interstitial' therefore describes the 'in-between', trapped or undecided position that finds expression in 'accented' films or that 'accented' films occupy as a result of the filmmakers' personal and internal experiences of living either in the diaspora or in exile.

3. Both Nair and Mehta are women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora.

4. Two of Nair's more acclaimed films include Mississippi Masala (1991) and Monsoon Wedding (2002).

5. Bhattacharjee is referring here to theorist Partha Chatterjee's (1989) article, 'Colonialism, nationalism, and colonialized women: the contest in India'.

6. Western Second Wave feminisms is a term used in this focus to describe various forms of feminism (eg radical, socialist, Marxist) that have developed in the west. This focus does not aim to completely
alienate or berate western feminisms, for they have earned their place. However, some forms of these western feminisms have tended to speak, on behalf of all women, from a middle-class white perspective. In doing so, western feminisms have unwittingly tended to assume that the struggle and plight of all women (no matter their differences) are the same. The experiences of women of colour and women from underprivileged backgrounds were thus not allowed the importance they deserved. It cannot be assumed that all women experience the same things in the same way. Third World women/women of colour have therefore begun to speak out and, as a result, have given rise to postcolonial feminist discourses—a more holistic approach to the struggles of women.

7. The use of these terms in the *focus* is in no way an attempt to perpetuate a homogenising category, as this would contradict the argument that Mohanty proposes. Trinh T Minh-ha (in Pines and Willemen, 1989) and Grace Poore (in Dasgupta, 1998) explain that these terms initially emerged as a way of including or giving space to those women who were overlooked by white/western/European privilege and discourse. However, these terms have developed into a category that perhaps homogenises women of various backgrounds and have become part of mainstream vocabulary—an inescapable process. For the purposes of this "focus", the category "Third World women/women of colour" can be understood as women of colour who are natives of or have connections to Third World countries, and have suffered gendered oppression influenced by ethnicity and a lack of resources.

8. Third World women are not always powerless victims (Williams and Chrisman, 1992).

9. This has implications for Nair and Mehta (formerly citizens of India, a Third World country) in the sense that they are changing the self-perception of women by firstly representing them in films and by secondly representing them with critical agency, identity transformation and decision-making power.


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