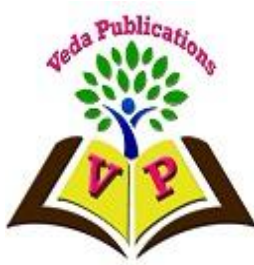


EXACTLY AND APPROXIMATELY**VIEWING MIRA NAIR'S 'MONSOON WEDDING' THROUGH THE
POSTCOLONIAL LENS**

Disha Roy Choudhury

(Open Banerjee Road, Kolkata-700060)disharoy@gmail.com**ABSTRACT**

"We are like that only"-runs the subtitle of a popular production of Mira Nair, representing Indians today. Released in 2001, *Monsoon Wedding* is Nair's "love song to my home city". Through a reworking of the tropes of Bollywood cinema, a medium that connects the global audience, Nair's film depicts the enthusiasm coupled with certain darker shades, more so in the midst of a wedding, of a Punjabi middle class family in contemporary India. Set in the metropolitan city of Delhi, this family is found to be negotiating between ideologies and traditions typical to our country and the practice of modernized existence as a mark of their social standing. At times, they are unable to grapple with it no doubt, but as Nair asserts, that is how we exactly are! Her camera captures a realistic picture of every Indian middle class household that suffers this cultural neurosis in their strife to portray themselves as modernized individuals.

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The act of how we portray ourselves assumes primary importance leading to what can be called 'mimicry'- "Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage..."(Lacan 120).

This is precisely the point at which the movie begins as Lalit instructs his nephew to switch on his car's A.C only after he has received his guests from abroad while prohibiting him from using it otherwise. With the recent introduction of the commodity culture, that is nevertheless embraced, there is an overt insistence on gloss.

Lalit goes beyond his means to hire an event manager to arrange a high-profile wedding for his daughter even if it exhausts him of his resources. He would prefer borrowing money from his friends rather than compromising with the waterproofing of the wedding tent. There is a constant anxiety about playing the part of a certain sociocultural position, of living up to a standard that is both socially imposed and self-created. To 'look' sophisticated is essential, which almost turns into an obligation now as we hear the daughter's mother, Pimmi saying "we can't look bad in front of our in-laws", especially when the in-laws happen to be NRIs from Houston. The question that arises is, what is the necessity for such 'camouflage'? Bhaba remarks, "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other" (Bhaba). Perhaps that is what explains the event manager Dubey's pride about working in the "foreign style". No wonder he feels embarrassed to pronounce his 'desi' name-Parbatlal Kanhaiyalal Dubey, changing it to P.K Dubey. Is it all a means by which the once colonized country appropriates thereby writes back to the Eurocentric culture or is it the product of the integration of cultures (that is not specifically Eurocentric) as a globalized phenomena?

This cultural behaviour is defined as being "almost the same but not quite"(Bhabha 121). Throughout the movie, the members of the family converse in English among themselves. Somebody maybe unaware of the meaning of 'uxorious' and yet he would deny the very existence of the word by calling it a spelling error for 'luxurious'. The film ironically offers a comment on this as Lalit says "Thoda bahut angrezi jhar do, you become a very cultured man." This notion of being cultured makes the use of English preferable among the same language-speaking members of the family. Yet we know that the employed medium may be apparently non-native while the message conveyed is not. Through a process of acculturation of language, it can be asked "Is English really a non-native language for India...?" (Kachru 274). Perhaps it is no longer a conscious venture on the part of the Verma family to speak in the language but something that they have internalized as part of their own culture. It is however interesting to note how the characters sometimes slip into their vernaculars to utter words of endearment or in cases of emotional moments.

The adoption of the manners of the West does not necessarily signify an "economic, cultural and political legacy of western imperialism" (Ascroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 216). This is not to deny the fact of neo-colonialism but to assert the idea of the "Third Space" that Bhabha puts forward. He believes that cultures, not being unitary in nature, negotiate in a space which "represents both the general conditions of language and the specific implication of the utterance in a performative and institutional strategy of which it cannot 'in itself' be

conscious"(Bhabha 156). It is a space where the "symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity...they are caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation"(Bhabha 157). As a space that enables a blurring of the self -other divide, it would perhaps be incorrect to react to this cultural hybridity as a hegemonic extension of Western modernity. The impact of globalization has been quite significant indeed but this urge for modernity is not predicated on a complete negation of tradition, which is what still ensures the maintenance of cultural difference. This co-existence of tradition and modernity is suggested in the decoration of the classy, fashionable wedding venue with marigold, the flower of marriage in India. Again, the wedding brings about a family reunion of all those NRI members whose subject position happens to be defined by diaspora. Their celebrations still comprise of gossip and chorus renditions of old Bollywood melodies. The family observes all the traditional rituals and customs of marriage and yet it is a delight to see all the members, young and old, grooving to contemporary Bollywood songs in the famous pool scene or even during the wedding ceremony. Nair admits that such a sight was quite rare during her own childhood but today the commercial culture is so integral to our daily lives that to efface it totally is almost impossible. It is fascinating to see Nair's dramatization of how a "commercialized, hybridized...cultural form such as Bombay cinema operates as the site of a collective Indian identity throughout diaspora"(Sharpe 61). Nair comments "My family is almost exactly like the one in "Monsoon Wedding". We are very open, fairly liberal, loud people".

The cultural difference is further reflected in the way the women in the film operate within the limitations of the sociocultural framework and yet carve out an identity that is distinct from the Western women. Redefining the concept of Third World Feminism, Nair emphasizes on the importance of the female voice. We encounter the bride, Aditi, for the first time, on the sets of Delhi.com as the camera zooms in to focus on an intimate kiss that she has with Vikram. A savvy woman of the city, she does not get sentimental about the possibility of Vikram divorcing his wife for she has read too many magazines to know that it might never happen. She enters into an arranged marriage with Hemant not out of any kind of parental pressure or hopelessness but out of the choice to settle down. She makes rational decisions but not at the cost of curbing her desire. Even as the family engages in the preparations for the wedding, she is found to be repeatedly making phone-calls to her ex-boyfriend. This stands in contrast to the western portrait of third world women, usually idealized as the subjugated subject. Even before the wedding, she sneaks out of the house at midnight to meet him. Through the scene of lovemaking, she emerges as a woman who has power over her body, one who can make her own sexual choices and can also, literally, drive away from the man who leaves her vulnerable among the police to face the consequences. As women who exercise their agency, the film portrays characters who take the risk of transgressing the normative order. Pimmi may transgress by smoking, though behind closed doors while Ayesha will make no mystery of her desire for Rahul. Sexual abstinence holds no significance any longer. On the other hand, Aditi's cousin Ria chooses to remain unmarried despite all persuasions from her family. She is frequently confronted with questions even

from her mother-"Why can't she be like Aditi and do the right thing at the right time?". This does not deter her from pursuing her dream to take up writing as a career.

Nair does not restrict female desire and sexuality to a certain class only, rather it even permeates the lower working class. Aditi's romantic encounters can be paralleled to the burgeoning affair between the naive, young and beautiful maid of the house, Alice and the wedding planner, Dubey. While marigold runs as a metaphor for marriage in the film, the picture of Alice with the flower tucked in her hair is an expression of her romantic desire. One can speculate whether her act of running into Dubeyji with the tray of glasses was an accident or deliberately choreographed. Her recurrent attempts to draw Dubey's attention through subtle gestures counteract the assumed idea of the man pursuing the woman. Even without articulating in words, she exerts her sexuality and desire through her body and actions. Parita Trivedi remarks:

Conjure up a picture of an Asian woman. Have the words "passive, submissive," been a part of your portrayal?...a woman not able to assert her own ambitions and desires-let alone fight against poverty, degradation, repression? If so, this portrayal of an Asian woman is a figment of your imaginings. (Bose 123)

An apt retort to the misconceived notions about postcolonial women, this is proved further in Nair's film. With the emergence of third-wave feminism, we realize that third-world women itself cannot be a stable category. For all acts of overstepping the boundaries of the monolithic patriarchal order however, the women have to pay a price. Aditi is chastised by Hemant when she makes a confession to him about her affair. Alice's transgression lies in her daring to adorn herself secretly in the bride's jewellery. The scene is potent in its manner of projecting the male gaze on the woman while she flaunts and celebrates her femininity. Accused by the male labourers of theft, she unfortunately can never go ahead to justify herself. This brings back Spivak's question, "can the subaltern speak?": "Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced...If, in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow"(32). Similar is the situation with Ria who, bound by familial obligation, is unable to expose Tej, a pedophile who molests her in her childhood. Tej continues to oppress her even beyond that by announcing to fund her education abroad, to keep her indebted to him and therefore never disclose his secret. Tej seems to hold the position of the patriarch, colonizing the family through financial assistance which accounts for Lalit's dilemma in reacting against him even after being exposed though later he does prioritize his family over it thereby emancipating himself from colonial dominance. The apprehension concerning the gendered view of postcoloniality is reflected further when Lalit is found to be feeling uncomfortable with his son's effeminacy. Lalit wants Varun to play cricket and read books to grow up to be a 'man' but his passion for dance and cooking counters adherence to the normative form of masculinity. The dilemma becomes apparent as Lalit is contemptuous of his dance performance even while he himself, along with other men amuse themselves by dancing with the women's dupatta.

The ambivalence experienced by the people continues as an extension of the clash between tradition and modernity even within the space of appropriation and translation. For all values imbibed from living in USA, Hemant initially is unable to accept Aditi's truth. The man who still prefers lassi and chai over coffee, suffers a moment of indecision: "What am I supposed to do now?...But that shouldn't be a problem. I'm from America. We shall fit right in". Later, instead of being stigmatized for indiscretion, the decision for marriage does rest with Aditi. As the couple decides to get married, they debunk the conventional western conception of an arranged marriage: "What marriage isn't a risk? Whether our parents introduce us or we meet in a club, what difference does it make?" The conflict arising out of cultural assimilation continues as we find Lalit retaining the taste for colourful cloth instead of the tabooed white for the auspicious occasion. All the pomp and grandeur of Aditi's wedding is consciously juxtaposed with the simplistic wedding of the lower class. Assimilation percolates to the lower class indeed as reflected through Alice's awareness about email or Dubey, representing the lower middle class social climber who manages business over the mobile phone, keeps a regular track of the stock market and aspires to launch himself soon as an event manager. Nair remarks, "That's the new India happening right in front of you, so that was the inspiration for his character, and also the realisation...if you want a wedding in Delhi you're at the mercy of the tent contractors". However, when it comes to Dubey's own marriage, he will still prefer a simple, naive bride. Through the parallels drawn between the two kinds of marriage in the film, Nair wanted to "offset the idea of a material marriage with a marriage without anything, over a flower, the marriage of the working class couple..." (Badt and Nair 59). Class differences are distinctly highlighted in Nair's narrative in terms of language and manners. The working class speaks only in the local dialect interspersed with numerous local slangs. Neither of the working class members can participate in the celebrations and remain restricted to their own domain. The class hierarchies in the society becomes another avenue for arguing against the Eurocentric colonizer-Thirdworld colonized divide, as one class happens to be colonized by the other within the same society. In the denouement, Nair does attempt a merging of the classes through the dance between Lalit and Alice. The subaltern attains a voice, making Ria and Alia dance in the rain as a celebration of their emancipation.

As the local unfolds itself as a microcosmic representation of the global, the tension between culture and globalization continues to remain unresolved which translates into a clash between "the idea of culture as a distinct way of life...closely bound up with a Romantic anti-colonialist penchant"(Eagleton 12) and civilization which has "acquired an inescapably imperialist echo"(Eagleton 10). This results in the debate over censorship at Delhi dot com, as one asks "Just because India has gone global, should we embrace everything? What about our ancient culture?". The depiction of explicit sexuality onscreen is perhaps a recent tendency but an impression of such a private experience in the public domain is not simply a western import for it has been present in the Indian tradition even before the period of colonization. Yet the underlying anxiety prevails as revealed through the uneasiness of the Hindi dubbist while performing orgasm. Schiller observes, "Every individual human

being...carries within him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man...it is his life's task to be...in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal"(Eagleton 8). The pursuit of the ideal happens through an attempted progression from culture to civilization, something that today has become synonymous with the adoption of the global tendencies. However civilization being both descriptive and normative, the indigenous and the ideal come into conflict. What we need to ask is that is this only to be located as postcolonial schizophrenia? While the question is yet to be answered, as Nair puts it by the end, we still continue, consciously or unconsciously, to function in "40 locations,30 days. Exactly and approximately".

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