

Of Brown Skin Identities on the Silver Screen: A take on Meera Nair's***Mississippi Masala* and Metin Hüseyin's *Anita and Me*.**

Aishwarya Falke
Masters in English with Communication Studies
Christ University,
Bangalore.

“When races come together, as in the present age, it should not be merely a gathering of a crowd; it must be a bond of relation or else they will collide.....”

- *Rabindranath Tagore.*

Colonization has led to a whole new stream of consideration of the identities of ‘**the other**’. With his concept of ‘**Orientalism**’ Bhabha defines the atrocities of the colonized. In the world of colonizers framing identities after independence was the foremost thing. An identity to assert self-importance and recognition.

One [the West] tends to stop judging things either as completely novel or as completely well-known; a new median category emerges, a category that allows one to see new things, as versions of a previously known thing. In essence such a category is not so much a way of receiving new information as it is a method of controlling what seems to be a threat to some established view of things. (58-9)

This paper looks into the portrayal and the assertion of self-identity in the movie *Mississippi Masala* based on the theories of Homi Bhabha. *Mississippi Masala*, a film by Mira Nair portrays an America without the whites and also the **Pan- Indian** identity wherein she says:

“A "masala" is a mixture of hot, colorful spices. Director Mira Nair '79 used it in the title of her last feature film, "*Mississippi Masala*," because it alludes to her favorite themes of cultural fusion and displacement. And a lot of people can pronounce it. "When I made my first film, 'Jama Masjid Street Journal,'" says Nair, "people couldn't say the name and I hated that." Content to make mouths hiss and burn with "*Mississippi Masala*'s pungent mélange of African, Indian, and American identities, she prefers to leave tongues untwisted.” (Reddy 1)

The paper will study these identity relations through the concept of other, the interracial romance of binaries, and the unforeseen hybridity through negating identities, the recreation of home with the foreign touch, ‘the third world’ idea. Along with these themes the movie is also attempted to study in comparison with the movie ‘*Anita and Me*’ by Metin Hüseyin it is a British comedy-drama film released in 2002 based on the book of the same name by Meera Syal. It was released during a period of popularity for British Asian films, alongside such as *East Is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*.

Both the films has quite similar story lines of being ‘the other’ and the longing for a home and an identity of their own. “Bhabha who writes from the viewpoint of postcolonial studies, which usually deals with such places as India or Africa (places that used to be colonies

and have now become “post-colonial”), what Bhabha says is also applicable in a more general sense about modern societies that, despite increasing individualization, try to maintain order by defining certain groups as “the other.” More specifically, ideas developed in postcolonial studies can be useful to analyze early American culture, for instance that of the Puritans, which, as we have discussed in class, relied on a clear separation of the “Puritan self” and the “savage other.”” (Chakraborty 1)

Further here, will be studied the instances from the movie that clearly portrays these claims. Both films ‘*Mississippi Masala*’ and ‘*Anita and Me*’ shows the longing for homeland in mind with a faded view of it. *Mississippi Masala*, the story began in Uganda in 1972, with the expulsion of the Asians from Africa by the Idi Amin Government. **Mina** a young East Indian girl emigrates to Mississippi with family and then leaped to – 20 years later, a shopping cart wielding self-assured woman, adapting to Western World, on the same lines is the main protagonist of *Anita and Me*, here also with the name **Meena** Kumar - a 12-year-old Sikh girl, lives with her family in the predominantly white, working-class, fictional mining village of Tollington in the Black Country in 1972. Meena meets Anita, a white, 14-year-old girl whom Meena comes to idolize.

Bhabha deals here with the ““**Other Question**” are the basic patterns of the development of colonial discourse and the tropes that they use. He immediately notices how the predominant strategic function of colonial discourse was to create a space for the colonized through the

production of knowledge, a continuous mechanism of surveillance, and the creation of stereotypes” (Chakraborty4)

In the movie when **Mina** is invited at Demetrius’s for a birthday gathering, there is a question raised by his father at the lunch table about her identity whether and Indian or an African, then later laughed upon stereotyping as it does not makes any difference, also in *Anita and Me* there is an instance towards the end of the movie, where **Meena** is asked out by the white boy Sam giving assurance of being one among them, and she refuses the claim by stating herself as “**other.**”

“ There were also moments in the movie that attempt to bridge the gap between the groups. For example, Nair shows how an Indian-American motel owner attempts to resolve a misunderstanding between his friend and Demetrius by offering him tea and talking about sports. He then goes on to say that minorities should unite against all other forces. Later on in the film, Mina goes to Demetrius' house and has lunch with his family. During the preparation and duration of the meal, the audience experiences the harmony between Mina and his family as they exchange words about family values, education, and common interests.” (Su 92) These commonalities can be traced in *Anita and Me* when at the times of family dinner on occasions.

Later there can take the stance of the concept of “**Identity in Negation**” the post-Freudian theorist Jacques Lacan’s concept. Bhabha in the essays collected as “*The Location of Culture*” where it is radically claimed that the colonizer’s identity is derived from, and exists in

uneasy if not contradictory symbiosis with, that of the colonized” (Bhabha 355). In both of these movies there are scenes portraying culture, as in *Mississippi Masala* the Gujarati wedding and in *Anita and me* the Diwali celebration. At both the instances there is a preservation of the Indianess with a mélange of the American influence. At the wedding where **Mina** is dressed up in a Ghagra (Indian traditional attire) switches to a mini skirt shortly, escaping from the wedding. Also the Gujarati boy accompanying **Mina** at the Pub to hangout is completely alright with her attaining a western attire. Also in *Anita and Me*, when during the family gathering all the kids are told to perform an Indian dance form or song, **Meena** ends up singing a English peppy number and all applauded to it.

There is ‘**Third World**’ paradigms where the concept of ‘other’ is the prime objective in which “ Many Third-World intellectuals dealing with the politics of colonization failed to notice the implicit paradox within this system of operation. Whereas the consistent ‘**other**’ing of the colonized is used to situate the West in a position of binary superiority, the complete know ability or visibility of the subject people is also assumed, as if the paradigms of Western systems of knowledge have managed to know or read the ‘**other**’**completely**.” To this leading there is an identification of ‘Interracial romance’ in both the films but here applies the likeness where **Mina** falls in love with the black guy Demetrius, at the end they leave the place in search of new homelands, whereas **Meena** loves a white race boy Sam, but here the family had to leave the place due to conflicts in search of new home grounds. In addition to it when dealt with the brown

skin identities Bhabha's notion of 'in between' seeps in where the brown identity is neither black nor white and therefore portrayed in a position of a dilemma.

All in all Nair in her interview of *Mississippi Masala* says that it "grew out of her experiences as an undergraduate in Currier House. "At the time," she explains, "there were very few of us [people of color]—both Black or Asian. And I sensed, for instance, among the black men that I was a Third World sister, somebody they could take out on date or go around with." Nair sought to complicate the Black or white model of race relations in America with what she calls a "hierarchy of colors," an insertion of brown in between, When Mina (Sarita Choudhury), an Indian born in Uganda but forced to leave during Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians in 1972, falls in love with Demetrius (Denzel Washington), a African American who owns his own carpet cleaning business, they test the "Third World" kinship cultivated between the black and Indian communities of Greenwood, Mississippi. And it fails--no one supports the lovers' right to be together." (Reddy 01)

With the themes above there is a reading of these movies as an offbeat from the Bollywood genres giving an explicit understanding of the people displaced during the time of colonization and then settled back into the new land of the colonizers fearing the acceptance back in homelands. They settled in the new found land and that's where the struggle of this 'brown identity' or 'pan-Indian identity' comes into picture. This struggle goes on resulting to **displacement** which is clearly evident in both the films. These films clearly provides an

overview of the culture similarities and differences of home when in a state, where one is been termed as ‘**other**’.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

Bhabha, Homi K *Locations of Culture: discussing Post Colonial Culture*. London Routledge 1996.

Chakrabarti, Sumit. *Moving beyond Edward Said: Homi Bhabha and the problem of Postcolonial Representation*. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal Vol 14 No 1/2012. 21st August, 2016

Gifford, John *Of God, Film and Men : Culture in Mississippi Masala*

<http://godfilmandmen.blogspot.in/2012/05/culture-and-mississippi-masala.htm>

Pillania, Rajesh K. *The Globalization of Indian Hindi Movie Industry*. . 2008, Vol. 3 Issue 2, p115-123. 9p. 2 Charts <http://bit.ly/2bIrJBs>

Reddy, Ajitha. *Mira Nair- Harvard Filmmaker Stirs Things Up*. MIRA NAIR/ News/ The Harvard Crimson. <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1993/11/11/mira-nair-pbab-masala-is-a/>

Review: Mississippi Masala by Mira Nair, Michael Nozik / Film Quarterly

<http://fq.ucpress.edu/content/46/4/23.abstract>

Su,Danny. *Mississippi Masala barely scratches the surface of racial conflict* - The Tech, Online

Edition Volume 112. Issue 5 : Friday, February 14, 1992

<http://tech.mit.edu/V112/N5/masala.05a.html>

References:

- 1) Movie -Mississippi Masala, www.YouTube.com
- 2) Movie - Anita and Me.