

# THE FEMALE MIGRANT NARRATIVE IN POSTCOLONIAL CINEMA

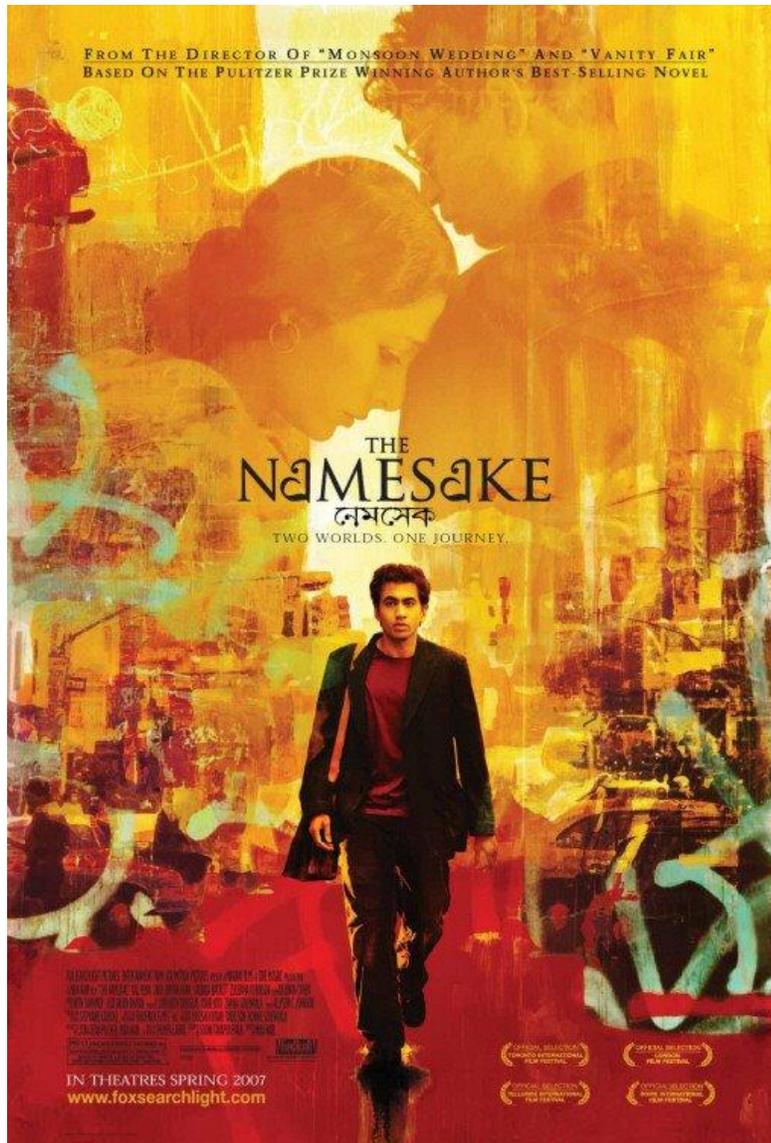


Figure 1. The Namesake. Movie Poster. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web. 27 August 2012

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# THE FEMALE MIGRANT NARRATIVE IN POSTCOLONIAL CINEMA

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## ABSTRACT

This research attempts to uncover the gaps that lie between the dominant narratives in film and feminist scholarship through an intersectional approach in understanding of the female migrant identity in the 21st century. The main research question investigated in this thesis is *How does Mira Nair explore female migrant narratives in her postcolonial films, the Namesake and Mississippi Masala*. The migrant women narrative here is explored as a hybrid identity, especially pertinent in the articulation of postcolonial cinema of Nair.

The thesis focuses on questions of gender, race, colonialism and the South Asian Diaspora particularly in Mira Nair's films *The Namesake* and *Mississippi Masala* which make visible the much longer history of colonialism and their interconnections with migrant identities. The research question is grounded in the theories of Homi Bhabha's Hybrid Identities and the Third Space (1990, 1994, 1996) and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's *Under Western Eyes" Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles* (2003). The theories allow the understanding of female migrant identities explored as hybrid identities in their "in-betweenness" (Third Space) within Nair's postcolonial cinema. Though parallel research has been conducted in Subeshini Moodley's 2004 MA thesis using postcolonial feminisms through accented cinema, my own research diverges from her hypothesis using 'migrant women' as a category of analysis within postcolonial cinema. This thesis extends upon Moodley's research by focusing on the specific category of migrant women within the broader group of Third World Women. The reason for this choice is to highlight the intersectional oppressions operating within the migrant subjectivities and how gender complicates the dynamic while crossing borders of nation, culture and race.

While Postcolonial Theory and film both engage with the language of representation, postcolonial cinema connects histories of colonialism to present day racial politics and remains an apt framework to understand the narrative of female migrant identities. The research methodology chosen to investigate the central research question is Discourse Analysis (DA) through a case study of the two films within the framework of postcolonial cinema. The main findings of this thesis illustrate that Mira Nair through the cultural representation of migrant women in her postcolonial films is able to give a speaking voice to historically silenced figures. Thus, using a postcolonial analysis female migrant identities are represented as a central subject telling their own stories and how such hybrid

identities in their interstitial spaces challenge essentialist notions of culture and identity. Finally, Nair's narratives of migrant women in her postcolonial films articulate new possibilities of seeing and understanding marginalized identities.

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Cinema, Female Migrant, Hybrid Identities, Third Space, Diasporic Filmmakers, Postcolonial Feminism

## INTRODUCTION:

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### TOWARDS AN AESTHETICS OF FEMINIST REPRESENTATION IN POSTCOLONIAL FILMS

Films as an art form have often been a way to change the world – however, they have never been created from a neutral perspective in ideological terms. While being inflected with a representational legacy and industrial tropes of cinema, to decolonize the medium would require unveiling these established tropes<sup>1</sup> and visual language in exchange for a different method of viewing. While seeking alternative images of women in film, postcolonial cinema has upheld marginalized identities that have slipped between the gaps of mainstream narratives. According to Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller:

*Postcolonial cinema is not a new genre or label for cinematic production, but rather a framework of analysis – an epistemological standpoint, or optic - through which films emerge in their engagement and contestations of power dynamics.”* (Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012).

As Ponzanesi and Waller elucidates, postcolonial films propose new engagement with the visual medium representing subaltern voices by subverting racial ideologies that have historically been constructed with whiteness at the center of visual representation at the cost of marginalizing others. The practice of using cinema to examine postcolonial critique also sheds light on perspectives erased by colonization working to produce alternative re-telling of history from the margins. Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) highlights the western imperial logic of civilizing missions that led to the construction of the Orient as a cultural deviant and inferior through the exoticized and hypersexualized imagery that was perpetuated further with imperial cultural machinery. Marginalization of film cultures has been symbolic of the orientalization of cinemas and aesthetic modes emerging from countries outside western borders.

The constitution of the discipline of cinema stems from the cultural hierarchy of Eurocentric formations of knowledge that has carried its legacy to the present day and forms an intrinsic part of the political discourse and representation. Postcolonial films attempt to disrupt the canon by

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<sup>1</sup> According to Nashville Film Institute (NFI) tropes in cinema have often been defined as storytelling devices that often allude beyond literal meaning, which sometimes develop into clichés. Female character tropes commonly used in cinema include the femme fatale, the girl next door and the damsel in distress while common racial tropes that have been discontinued include blackface, colonial heroes and loyal black servants including Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939)

exploring narratives through the context of culturally specific films that intersect both gender and race along with ethnic and nationalist subjectivities. The production of cultural knowledge from western centers of power and their transmission and reception into the Global south created an ontological system of one-way flow. According to Stuart Hall in *Representation: Cultural Representation and signifying Practices (1997)*, language constructs meaning and produces culture, thus representation of culture has been in this case, is assisted through the language of the colonial episteme.

The cultural erasure of marginalized identities has taken place through a steady process of aesthetic stigmatization and othering of racialized bodies in mainstream Hollywood. Fatimah Tobing Rony (qtd. in Stoller, 1998) in *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle (1998)* examines how the inception of the visual medium has been inscribed through the racial taxonomies and visualizing their topographies hand in hand with psychoanalysis and the western scientific community. What she terms as ethnographic cinema in her analysis of Felix-Louis Regnault is a denial of historical agency and voice to the postcolonial subject, that has been fixed as the ‘other’ in the viewership relation. Locating the native cultures into an axis of difference, they have not only been reduced to tropes within the Hollywood industrial machinery but also constructed their identities outside the filmic medium, dictating race and gender relations. In this context, Ella Shohat highlights: “*orient had become not only a cultural other that was mechanically reproduced from film to film and genre to genre*” (Shohat, 2006 a, 49)

The creation of the Orient was a western notion but while it served as the testing ground and manifestation of white supremacy it also perpetuated images of eroticized bodies into Hollywood tropes and playing out sexual fantasies that remained outside the mainstream and yet was an accepted diversion. According to Shohat, it also became the avenue of hypersexualization of the exotic female body without fear of censure within western aesthetics and social constructions. Additionally, the ideological construction of the postcolonial female identity has been a fraught metaphor lost between nationalist interpretations of the woman and mainstream Hollywood tropes.

Shohat in in this context remains pertinent to the discussion of feminist interventions in postcolonial film for it created a “complex space for feminisms, open to the specificity of community culture and history” and thus moved beyond some of the limitations of its predecessors in Revolutionary Cinema

or Third Cinema. Additionally, Shohat's interventions on post-Third Worldist films<sup>2</sup> provide a precursor to the feminist narratives within postcolonial cinema.

Whilst a revision of the western filmic canon happens from a feminist postcolonial lens in postcolonial cinema, the migrant subjectivity has often come to occupy the center of its narrative especially in the works of diasporic female filmmakers. Thus, postcolonial cinema foregrounds its role in political transformations and identity constructions through a more discursive and mediated representation of marginalized figures often situated between two worlds. They take their inception and meaning from "difference"<sup>3</sup> using it as an empowering metaphor. Where the language and cultural productions of postcolonial and diasporic films intersect is the subject of migrant identities who though take their roots from marginalization and displacement but work towards a conception of hybridity and empowerment. In doing so, postcolonial cinema not only sheds light upon the paradigmatic constructions of the other but also creates a visual representation of female diasporic identities that goes beyond loss and absence. Thus, a representation of the diaspora envisages a more connected presence where female voices emerge from a narrative of translation to an understanding of nation and race. The postcolonial filmmaker uses stories interwoven through cultures to portray the universality of the migrant experience in crossing borders into what Hamid Naficy<sup>4</sup> in his work, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) calls, "identities of becoming."<sup>5</sup> Within these diasporic formations and narratives, there has not only been a successful middle-ground being created between the binaries of the west and east but a questioning of the identities depicted

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<sup>2</sup> Ella Shohat's interventions in the Post-Third World Cinema highlights the role of feminist filmmakers who create from their identities of location while still touching upon universal themes of oppression and walking away from a narratives of the nation. While Post-Third Worldist Cinema focused on national imaginaries relying on intertextual and oral narratives majorly in languages of the country of origin, postcolonial cinema depicted migrant identities and their experiences in exile often using a fusion of two languages. Give examples of Post- Third Worldist Cinema

<sup>3</sup> Filmmaker and Theorist Trinh Min ha elucidates in her work *Reassemblage* (1982) drawing connections between postcolonial theory and cinema as a medium of representation of postcolonial female voices. Herein, she uses the term "difference" as an empowering metaphor to foreground the realities of the postcolonial identity in crossing borders of culture and nation, also depicted in her film *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989)

<sup>4</sup> Alastair Philips in his discussion of Hamid Naficy's *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) refers to the proliferation of global cinematic practices and migratory experiences that contribute to the experience of exilic filmmaking. Taken from a linguistic trope, exilic filmmaking has evolved through aspects of memory, loss, fantasy and desire for a homeland that "filmmakers in exile" often nurture for their countries of origin.

<sup>5</sup> In Subeshini Moodley's work, *Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking Through Accented Cinema* "identities of becoming" are defined in the premise of Hamid Naficy's accented style of cinema whereby migrant/ diasporic female characters take an active role in the critical construction of their identities. This process of growing towards agency through exerting choice or resistance often within their diasporic settings is particularly significant due to their cultural environment in forming identities that go through transitions that cross borders of race, gender, nation and class

in the visual arts. With overlapping themes of exile and displacement, postcolonial and diasporic films both have attempted to draw a new understanding of migrant identities while responding to imperial legacies and their neo-colonial operations. Through a re-telling of diasporic lives, these films simultaneously challenge and construct alternative perspectives of the Third World Woman. Attuned to the fragmented experiences of diasporic exile, they touch upon imperial legacies to connect them to the present while rewriting the female migrant identity through intersecting themes of oppression.

The language of both postcolonial studies and cinema has been mediated as they both address issues of representation<sup>6</sup> and as illustrated by Sandra Ponzanesi her work, *Postcolonial and Transnational Approaches to Film and Feminism (2016)* she underlines the role of regional Indian cinema especially in the works of Satyajit Ray and Aparna Sen. While being precursors to the Postcolonial form where the narrative and aesthetic rejected mainstream portrayals they touched upon feminist themes of displaced identity and isolation, freedom through fragmented lives wrought upon by experiences of exile and dynamics of an insider outsider position. Touching on themes of female agency and independence within a swiftly changing neoliberal society albeit emerging out of a colonial past, they narrate tales of border crossing through female roles within a postcolonial cinema. The South Asian diasporic filmmaker, Mira Nair, has similarly navigated issues of gender and diasporic narratives using her own idiom of filmmaking that is neither fully Western nor based in the Bollywood tradition. While refusing to be a cultural ambassador, her visual repertoire uses inspiration from the documentary style to a cultural infusion of songs and music which she argues represents the life of the people as they live it. Thus, her creative oeuvre negotiates spaces in between West and East while still portraying discourses of color, colonial histories and their current manifestations in post 9/11 America. In this attempt, she manages to represent the voice of the non-Western Women often silenced in mainstream filmic canon, their hyphenated identities to their fraught postcolonial present. Her cinema relies heavily on images that cross cultural borders and appeal to our innermost anxieties and desires, surpassing the medium of language and restrictions of the canon. Her films often use English interspersed with Hindi and Urdu - this linguistic fusion is

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<sup>6</sup> Postcolonial theorists Edward Said and Homi Bhabha have been accused of gender blindness in their interventions despite the Orient being a gendered conception. While Bhabha addressed the gaps and fissures where the engagement of colonizer and colonized highlighted their complex psychological relationship engineered through language, representation and culture, he concentrated on notions of nationhood through a male perspective. Bhabha (qtd. in Ponzanesi's *The Arena of the Colony*) also articulated the resistance of postcolonial subjects through this complex relationship through the voices of minorities, migrants and subalterns.

also integral to the cultural specificity of a South Asian migrant identity that is hybrid in its very nature.

Female Diasporic Filmmakers<sup>7</sup> like Nair have a unique contribution in the field of visual representation in reconstructing a new narrative of the South Asian Diaspora beyond the hackneyed and stereotypical notions of victimhood and exotica. They engage with multiple overlapping histories of imperialism and their connections to the present through a narrative of journeys and forging of identities in these processes of transition. In this case, a worthy mention is Indian Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta who like Nair inhabits the diasporic space between home and the foreign, the boundaries often blurred in the recreating of stories that foreground postcolonial feminisms and cultures of difference. What both of them exhibit in common are the legacies of imperialism that endure to the present day in power relationships and crossing of borders of nation, race, color and class. Where the role of these diasporic female filmmakers become significant is how they deconstruct the dominant ideologies and hegemonies in narratives that create a new feminist taxonomy within the cinematic form. They connect to epistemologies of difference that illuminate new perspectives while revising the canon. The diaspora in this context, becomes the space from which a unique and empowered language may emerge and reclaim its own place in the world.

Postcolonial Cinema becomes a pathway to achieving this through its narrative of the female migrant whose experiences are both gendered and racialized in its journey of border-crossings through marriage, migration and love. As postcolonial films, Nair's female migrant characters on screen emblematic of real-life counterparts undergo processes of transformation while understanding their own identities in the context of the American mainstream. What makes female filmmakers like Nair and Mehta relevant is that they themselves create from the position of the insider outsider who negotiates a fluid crossing of borders through narratives that span many worlds. In addition, the transformation of a multicultural has also called for the need for a different representation of the migrant woman as a subject of postcolonial cinema. What qualifies postcolonial filmmakers for representing these voices authentically is not only their politics of location but their own diasporic identity - their narratives explore imperial histories paving its way to contemporary postcolonial displacement and identity crisis. Nair has often remarked that own immigrant experience as a

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<sup>7</sup> Post-colonialism is an interdisciplinary field that encompasses fields of literature, politics and cinema and deconstructs histories often through the narratives of migrant and diasporic communities situated in the First World and hailing from formerly colonized nations. Thus, Diasporic and Postcolonial cinema often covers overlapping concepts of postcolonial historiography and racialization of marginalized identities and offer an interstitial space to voice their concerns and narrate stories

graduate student in Harvard seeing snow for the first time was what led her to Aashima's own reaction to New England winters. What Nair also explicates in her aesthetics of filmmaking is the voice of the South Asian diaspora - her methods of narration may be based on western models, the stories are entrenched in native history culling from classics but re-telling them in a postcolonial medium. In their narratives of border crossing, the female migrant figure defines new territories for herself within what is often defined as a hybrid space of "in-betweenness" elaborated through Homi Bhabha's (1990) theory of the Third Space. So, while postcolonial identity is questioned, analyzed and dissected through their migrant journeys across culturally specific spaces and times, these films also bring about a new visual language of seeing diasporic bodies. This research also examines how Postcolonial cinema articulates the work of Nair it explicates how this genre occupies a fluid space between worlds and it deconstructs to an extent, the binaries of East and West through these narratives that become a dialogue for exploring silences and gaps left in mainstream film. Read within the paradigm of postcolonial cinema, Nair's films transcend the borders of geography into universal narratives of identity, home, family and intergenerational conflict as she often centers them upon the essential dichotomy of the migrant life. Addressing the themes of the migrant narrative in postcolonial cinema through three chapters that intrinsically weave together the historically marginalized voices through the decolonized language of visual representation.

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## LITERATURE REVIEW

My research has taken into account the work done by Subeshini Moodley and Urmila Sehshagiri who has particularly worked on Mira Nair's films, *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* amongst others.

In her work *Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking Through an Accented Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta (2004)* Moodley speaks explicitly on the positioning of filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta who represent figures silenced through their politics of location (Third World Countries) through Accented cinema. Extending this narrative through depicting the experience of migrant women, my research brings into question the element of migration as a Third Space for the exploration of hybrid identities in postcolonial films. Thus, this research uses migration which is often affected by postcolonial histories of movement and displacement to highlight these women's journeys into freedom and construction of a new self-identity that is hybrid and interstitial. These female migrant identities go beyond the narratives and cultural ideologies of the nation especially as they cross borders both physical or otherwise in journeys of migration and subsequent cultural dispossession.

The second work worthy of mention is *At the Crossroads of Two Empires: Mira Nair's Mississippi Masala and the Limits of Hybridity (2003)* by Urmila Seshagiri published in *Journal of Asian American Studies* (Vol. 6, No. 2) which also uses Mira Nair's films to illustrate notions of hybridity and cultural crossovers. While Seshagiri critiques Nair's celebratory interracial ending in *Mississippi Masala* and the limits of hybridity being reduced to a spectacle without offering a solution to such identities in between, my analysis of Mina's final choice sees infinite possibilities for a better future in a more multicultural setting of American life. *Mississippi Masala's* ending when seen through a postcolonial lens shows the couple leaving for the road – but as opposed to seeing this as aimless, Bhabha theory of Third Space allows for understanding this as a productive space of inclusion, which in turn engenders new meanings (Bhabha 1994: 1). According to Bhabha's conception of hybrid identities in this thesis, it allows for the protagonists, Mina and Demetrius's interracial relationship to gain a more pluralistic status and rise beyond the narrow confines of nationalism, race and history. Seshagiri also questions if hybridity is given a legitimate space of belonging in society as portrayed

in Nair's films - the postcolonial analysis of the two films would show that hybrid identities create their own spatiality of inclusion (Bhabha, 1994) beyond colonial binaries.

It should be reiterated that this research uses postcolonial cinema as a frame of analysis within which the female migrant narratives are projected which bears some in common with the themes and techniques of Accented Cinema that falls under Moodley's analysis. However, this thesis specifically focuses on postcolonial cinema because of issues of postcolonial historiography which are in intersection with migrant identities and their conception within the space of in-betweenness. In her explication of Postcolonial Cinema in *Introduction: genres and tropes in postcolonial cinema(s) in Europe* (2016) Sandra Ponzanesi and Verena Berger states:

*“This approach requires a preliminary agreement on what has to be understood under the heading of ‘postcolonial cinema’, which is of course an open alliance with many other categories. For example, the terms ‘migrant cinema’ and ‘postcolonial cinema’ are often used interchangeably, yet the latter has a wider theoretical and aesthetic resonance. As an established concept in Film Studies, ‘migrant cinema’ – also termed ‘accented cinema’ by Hamid Naficy (2001) – introduces a complex and eclectic mix of styles, conventions and forms, often emanating from non-Western traditions.”* (Ponzanesi & Berger, 2016, 111)

It has been discussed in the works of Moodley and Sehshagiri that despite the utopian message of *Mississippi Masala*'s ending, there is no simple answer to where such hybrid characters belong. However, in the process of addressing the research question this thesis will show how such hybrid identities not only evolve from their liminal space but create their own productive space.

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## RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

Being a migrant alters who and what we are – identities are fissured and ruptured along lines of gender and race during spatial displacement of migrant bodies. The specific focus on female migrant identities in this research emerges from my own experience of being a female migrant, situated in interstitial spaces of “in-betweenness” (as appropriated by Bhabha) that allows for growth and potential to define oneself beyond factors of nationhood, gender and culture. My aim through this research is to give an alternative view that migrant women have as a choice to define themselves beyond images of dispossession and cultural restrictions. Moving on from hackneyed and stereotyped portrayals in Hollywood film and media, migration is not seen as a path of liberation but certainly a potential for the future that also provides a space of articulation (Bhabha, 1994).

Mira Nair has been one of the few filmmakers who has attempted to represent migrant women in such light – perhaps because of her own experiences as a female migrant and filmmaker herself, these hybrid subjectivities have emerged so strongly in her work. In this context, Mohanty interventions also highlight the complicated subject position of the Third World Women where she uses the metaphor of ‘feminism without borders’ (Mohanty, 2003) to highlight the essential mobility of her subject who is no longer situated in a specific geographical location but creates and narrates from a hybrid position and identity. In doing so, a close look into the two films through the lens of postcolonial cinema enumerates Mohanty’s conception of the Third World woman whose commonality she states lies beyond gender as a social/ biological construct to shared colonial history that manifests into multiple experiences of marginalization. In addition, applying Homi Bhabha’s theory of Third Space (1990) allows for the articulation of experiences of hybrid women in spaces of in-betweenness of cultures and countries. Bhabha stresses “*cultures are constituted in relation to otherness*” (Bhabha, 1990, 210) so the act of translation i.e. representation moves beyond the original constructs. He adds that it opens up the space for articulating difference through a liminal space, which he calls the Third Space. When the representation and social justice of women often coming from Third World countries are in question, it cannot be resolved through simplistic models of universal sisterhood as Mohanty claims. In this context, Homi Bhabha’s (1990) theory is important to analyze the spaces in-between which are simply not situated and derived between the subjectivities of the colonizer and colonized but dismantle essentialist notions of identity. This research applies it to female migrants as hybrid identities explore their belonging in spaces in between.

Analyzing the narratives of the migrant woman through the lens of postcolonial cinema as a site of gendered cultural production, my research centers around two specific films of Mira Nair *The Namesake* (2006) and *Mississippi Masala* (1992). With theoretical interventions of Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Homi Bhabha, these two films offer an interpretation and understanding of the Third World Woman as a migrant figure beyond the Eurocentric narratives of Hollywood's exoticization and demonization. Engaging postcolonial questions through a gendered perspective allows an intersectional look into postcolonial problems of identity and representation. My research will attempt to deconstruct the visual language that remains hegemonic and patriarchal through the representation of female migrants to help produce counter narratives of diasporic lives. The objective of this thesis is to allow a more intersectional view of the female migrant identity beyond an object of displacement, and exploring her processes of evolution through migration within the framework of postcolonial cinema. In this context, postcolonial films are a relevant background and chosen because they shed light upon longer histories of dispossession and displacement of people as a result of colonization.

*Mississippi Masala* (1990) uses the twice displaced identity of Mina, born in Africa and growing up in England and Mississippi, U.S.A as a metaphor for hybridity which is thrown into further relief due to her relationship with an African American Demetrius. Nair's cinema allows the migrant female to be a subject of her own storytelling - her representation in postcolonial cinema moves beyond an Orientalized image to a more authentic portrayal of narratives.

The second film of Nair to be analyzed here is *The Namesake* (2006), an adaptation of Pulitzer winning Jhumpa Lahiri's novel of the same name, delves into questions of identity and naming, and how this relates to a sense of belonging or displacement. The film uses imagery of bridges as a metaphor of connecting two worlds, the past and present, familiar and foreign to understand migrant identities in their hybrid conceptions. This thesis particularly focuses on the female protagonist Aashima's journey following her transition from Calcutta, whose marriage and migration choices shifts her identity. Through her worldview, Nair's master narratives uncover historically erased figures and create a new political space for migrant belongings. In this process, the thesis will aim to answer the following questions through the case study of two films:

**Research Questions:**

How does Mira Nair explore female migrant narratives in her postcolonial films, *the Namesake* and *Mississippi Masala*?

- i. How do female migrants engage with cultural and racial cross-overs in the above mentioned two films?
- ii. How does Postcolonial film in the works of Nair engage with representation of the Other?
- iii. In what way can Nair be read within the paradigm of the Postcolonial cinema?

The main research question explores the subject formation of the third world migrant woman specifically within the South Asian diaspora had been reproduction of a patriarchal and western rhetoric between mainstream Bollywood and Hollywood cinema.

What is addressed in the first research question of racial crossovers is culled from her own experiences as a female migrant student, filmmaker, wife and mother in the United States and Uganda along with her Indian heritage.

As addressed in the third research question, Postcolonial cinema has attempted to uncover gaps and silences and walk away from a representation of the Other as a cultural and ideological deviant While deconstructing western stereotypes and language of patriarchal. The goal of this question is to investigate if these films have a transformative effect in defining a new paradigm of spectatorship and global viewership that spans and intersects race, language, culture and nation.

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## RESEARCH SCOPE: BORDERS AND MORE

This research will focus on the position of migrant women as a hybrid identity represented within postcolonial cinema. The central research question will be examined through the postcolonial and semiotic analysis of the two films *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* chosen for case study. The visual representation of hybrid identities has been aptly and extensively explored in Nair's postcolonial cinema but this research will focus on female migrants (of South Asian origin) only. In this study, though Mira Nair as a postcolonial filmmaker represents marginalized groups (just as Mohanty as a scholar writing within the western academy) the question of them being a spokesperson for the Other remains. While this research will not be able to address all these concerns, it will attempt to represent migrant women narratives through Nair's storytelling whereby the female migrant becomes a subject of her narrative instead of being the object.

As previously stated, Subeshini Moodley has conducted research on postcolonial feminisms speaking through Accented Cinema using Mohanty and Spivak's theoretical interventions which highlight issues of marginalization and representation. However, my thesis adds to this existing work by using migrant women as a category of analysis to explore further into the field of postcolonial feminist research. Additionally, this thesis analyzes 'migrant women' as 'hybrid identities' who attain an alternative space of empowerment through the in-betweenness of narrative. Her two films analyzed through semiotic and postcolonial analysis of scenes and tropes will illustrate how migration is not simply displacement and loss, but empowerment through and beyond such absences. It also makes visible and articulates hybrid identities and alternate subjectivities disrupting the "visual hegemony" (Ponzanesi, 2016, p.112) that remains at the center of most mainstream representations.

Nair's postcolonial films, though has much in common with accented cinema, also relies upon postcolonial histories to construct these migrant narratives. The fact that both female protagonists are from previously colonized nations foreground the importance of historical to current politics of racialization.

## **DIVISION OF CHAPTERS:**

**The Introduction** introduces Mira Nair who works within the South Asian diasporic space - through dismantling hegemonic concepts of mainstream visual language, she represents a narrative of fractured temporalities and identities in flux through female migrant characters. The Introduction also delves into Third Cinema and Post Third Worldist Cinema, the latter aimed at addressing the gaps in the former, especially the representation of the female narrative and her voice. It moves to an exploration of Postcolonial cinema especially through the feminist lenses of the diasporic filmmakers focusing specifically on the works of Nair and her characters.

**Chapter 2** applies the theoretical tenets of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) and Homi Bhabha (1990, 1994, 1996) in the narrative of postcolonial female identities who are often doubly displaced through their gendered and racialized representations.

**Chapter 3: Methodology** discusses on the chosen Methodology of Discourse Analysis (DA) and Semiotic Theory in the Postcolonial analysis of the two films. The sub-chapter on Data Selection also elaborates on why the two films were an apt choice for this analysis and how it befits the Methodology.

**Chapter 4** and **Chapter 5** concentrates on the works to be analyzed including Mira Nair's films, *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* respectively, and how their migrant female characters explore the possibilities of a transcultural space of in-betweenness defined as the Third Space within their diasporic identities. The chapters dissect themes of double displacement while subverting the cultural imperialism of the West through its media interventions and visual re-telling by creating narratives that define new realities and understanding of hybrid identities from a space of inclusion and empowerment. The postcolonial analysis of the film explores the female migrant characters in defining their own hybrid identities through agency and choice through their connected themes of exile, trauma, displaced identities to multicultural spaces of belonging.

Lastly, the **Conclusion** summarizes how connecting narratives of diasporic identity with larger issues of representation, Mira Nair's postcolonial cinema attempts to reconfigure a new language to relate experience of immigration and displacement through specific themes and cultural motifs. While they uncover historically erased figures or those subjected to gendered retellings, they also create a new political space for migrant belongings. It also addresses limitations and questions that are beyond the scope of this thesis and suggestions for further research.



## CHAPTER 1

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### MIRA NAIR'S POSTCOLONIAL CINEMA

#### BACKGROUND:

*“Postcolonial cinema is not a new genre or label for cinematic production, but rather a framework of analysis – an epistemological standpoint, or optic - through which films emerge in their engagement and contestations of power dynamics.” (Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012, 3)*

Postcolonial cinema attempts to break away from the universalism dominated by a Eurocentric perception and hegemony influenced by the interdisciplinary field of postcolonial studies. Often titled as Cinema Diaspora, Nair's cinematic language is seen as an act of decolonization through its representation of the lived experiences of migrants and diasporic lives. While Nair creates with an insider/outsider perspective, a female artist situated within the West and having lived and worked in three continents, her worldview encompasses an aesthetic that crosses genres and styles, and boundaries of nation, language and color. Thus, within the framework of postcolonial cinema, her work as such provides a decolonial look into the female migrant identity in defining themselves which lends itself to an analysis through the lens of postcolonial feminisms.

While the Introduction focuses on the background, the goals and objective of this thesis, this chapter will delve into why Postcolonial cinema is an apt framework for analyzing female migrant narratives. In addition, it will give a background into Nair's films and how she develops this aesthetic through themes, styles and crossing of genres. While postcolonial cinema as a genre will be explored in detail, the aim of this research is to highlight its particular role portraying migrant women at the center of their storytelling and subject formation in addition to highlighting imperial histories that work their way into present multicultural politics. As mentioned before, previous work on accented cinema by Subeshini Moodley has brought up the importance of creating within interstitial spaces and using methodological tools that specially work towards this conception, this chapter will essentially shed light on postcolonial histories and the language of cultural representation to depict migrant women in Nair's cinema. Zsanett Varga in his piece *The Diasporic Cinema of Mira Nair*

(2018) in the journal *Americana*, refers to the panel discussion “Between Two Worlds’, A Conversation with Mira Nair,” conducted by Kris Manjappa and Kamran Rastegar (2016),

“Nair observed that South Asian arts are very distinctive in ways such as having multiple sensibilities, tastes, and forms that are meant to play together – these serve to depict the complex canvas of a postcolonial themes articulated through migrant voices narrating their own stories.” (Varga, 20018, p. 3)

A proponent of cinema verite or direct cinema she often infuses two languages and opposing cultures to reflect a politics of oppression that underlie the seemingly effusive narratives. For instance, in *Monsoon Wedding*, she uses non-professional actors juxtaposing them with veterans like Naseeruddin Shah and Lillette Dubey, mixing Hindi and English to create a distinctly South Asian linguistic palate to uncover a story of incest within the dynamics of a family wedding. As the story unravels, so do the women’s voices and sexual choices, whether it is the young bride Aditi or her cousin Ria, both of whom cross a certain threshold of silence and assert their agency. Imitating the *cinema verite* style to an extent like *The Battle of Algiers*<sup>8</sup> directed by Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo who fused a politics of truth with aesthetics of Third World cinema to create a documentary effect, Nair crosses genres and styles much like her migrant characters that cross borders of identity. Though *Battle of Algiers* is significant as a postcolonial feminist film, the female revolutionary characters<sup>9</sup> carry the burden of national allegory with only marginal representation and no agency. While Postcolonial cinema questions new subjectivities across borders, connecting the local with the global, domestic with the foreign, Nair’s film push the limits of hybridity and multiculturalism to pose further questions on migrant identity and marginalization. Exploring the intersection of feminism and film studies, Nair’s works become texts that create a new episteme for articulating the untold stories of the postcolonial experience. Thus, Nair’s representation of hybrid identities focusing primarily on female migrants in the films under study pushes boundaries within the visual aesthetics of postcolonial cinema.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Battle of Algiers* by Gillo Pontecorvo uses the mirror as a political revolutionary tool to fight back from the margins. The film explores themes of identity and border crossing through the narrative of Algerian independence struggle and rebel tactics used against the French military. The role of women is especially significant in this work where they use the

<sup>9</sup> Postcolonial Cinema as enumerated by Sandra Ponzanesi (2012) addresses some of the shortcomings of Third Cinema in according a ‘speaking voice’ or status to marginalized identities.

Thus, issues of identity and belonging analyzed through postcolonial lens illuminate subjectivities long buried or glossed over in racist tropes and narratives of the Other. The cultural imperialism of Hollywood has often been dissected and critiqued through postcolonial cinema that depicts lives and voices through authentic narratives which are universal much like Nair's work. Often combining western and Indian traditional elements of cinema, Nair weaves together stories and characters that create a cinematic fusion often using the symbolic possibility of images that transcend the restrictions of language thus disrupting the canon. In using the symbolic quality of images in speaking language that goes beyond syntax and grammar, she extends her viewing audience to a universal spectatorship. Nair's first feature film *Salaam Bombay* dealing with the subject of child prostitution and street kids of Bombay was grounded in the politics of location. As Zsanett Varga recounts in his piece *The Diasporic Cinema of Mira Nair* (2018) in the journal *Americana*, it was a narrative told from an insider with an outsider's imbuing a unique cultural quality to a life in exile, essentially metaphorical in the journey of street children in Mumbai who remained displaced not simply through geography but the politics of identity and class distinctions. Although based in the city of Bombay (currently Mumbai), it delves into concepts of home and displacement through the narrative of a young boy Krishna, looking for a way to return home. The loneliness and loss of family, identity and name (Krishna is seldom called by his name, instead referred to a Chaipau or tea-boy) is a common theme that runs into her sprawling productions much later, reflected in the journey of migrants affected by a similar crisis.

An advocate of telling one's own stories, Nair has worked with the chess prodigy Fiona Motesi in *The Queen of Katwe*, she tells the story of young girl born in the slums of Katwe who rises to global prominence and provides a differential narrative of the Third World / African Woman beyond her disenfranchised self. The film in Nair's re-telling of a story of Africa in many ways subverts existing tropes of women of color and gives a voice to the characters especially through Fiona's mother (played by Lupita Nyong'o) and the protagonist herself. Produced by Disney, it constructs a different construction of African female identity beyond narratives of violence, submission and victimhood. While her goal and ideology remains in deconstructing stereotyped representations of non-white people often in diasporic spaces (especially with her later films *Mississippi Masala*, *The Namesake* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* among others) Nair also explores the nexus of feminist epistemologies inflected by race, gender, ethnicity with an amalgamation of western and Indian cinematic traditions. The nuanced characters of Nair's films cross boundaries in their displaced

identities and quest for home thus, giving her films a transformative impact on cultural identity. Through a representation of the migrant female identities in postcolonial cinema, she not only presents these as central subjects but also provides ways for migrant women to define themselves in alternative space.

Nair's film in their postcolonial re-tellings itself becomes a palimpsest – an aesthetic developed through a meeting point of two different cultural worlds. In Mira Nair's recent Netflix production, *A Suitable Boy* (2021) she tells the story of her female protagonist Lata in search of a suitable life partner in the backdrop of the birth of a nation emerging out of the lingering trauma of colonialism. The characters also cross boundaries of religion, class and gender through entangled histories of the nation all lending meaning and layer to the postcolonial narrative. Though hailed as a coming-of-age drama, Nair's prolific production with BBC brought about her own visual gaze which transforms how we understand the reality of the subcontinent. The show unfolds in the backdrop of a country still grappling with a violent history of colonialism and a new social reconstruction within which the characters negotiate their own postcolonial identities. A young 19-year old Lata seeks to assert her own choice for a life partner and find her own identity amidst the clashing ideals of home, family and self. Thus, her narrative attempts to re-inscribe the voice of the postcolonial female identity and nation arising from the ashes of imperial rule.

In *The Suitable Boy*, Nair projects this essential duality where a nation, effervescent and emerging from a colonial past is juxtaposed with eagerness to embrace modernity and choose its own fate. Taking the political into the personal, it is mirrored much in the character of Lata at the throes of making a choice as an act of freedom much like that of the birth of a nation. As an underlying theme in most of Nair's films, the concept of home and loss pervades the lives of Lata and her mother who are devoid of a home of their own, often moving back and forth between relations. Each family is emblematic of a part of India, the juxtaposition of British taste and traditions and emerging Indian cultural consciousness lies at the crux of the narrative. Stephanie Carroll, Production Designer on the sets of the Netflix show of *The Suitable Boy* elucidates the importance of the period of the 1950s which signifies a nation unsure of its own identity. A country lived in the tradition of British influences in language, manners and modes, seeks to embrace its history and legacy: questioning its loyalties, belongings and self-identity much akin to the dilemma of a diasporic person. Families like the Chatterjees especially, are reminiscent of a bygone era of imperial practices - they emulate manners, dress and custom from their English forbears and project a more risqué western sensibility

that is frowned upon by the current Indian society. As a subcontinent, the Indian identity is hybrid and multifaceted in itself but with her migrant characters, it is culled from the sense of dispossession and longing for home. Though hailed as a coming-of-age drama, Nair's prolific production with BBC brought about her own decolonial visual gaze which transforms how we understand the reality of the subcontinent. Ella Shohat in her work "*Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema*" (1991) argues:

*"post-Third Worldist feminist cultural practices also break away from the narrative of the 'nation' as a unified entity to articulate a contextualized history for women in specific geographies of identity."* (Shohat, 292)

What Shohat calls for is a representation of a contextualized history of the female identity beyond its national/ ethnic self, as a subject she is inevitably and intrinsically a part of it especially when it comes to postcolonial films. Whether it is a character like Lata or Mina, these female characters chart their courses beyond their geographic locations while still culturally grounded in it. In this context, the postcolonial histories of the nation are also inscribed into their self-identities even as they step out of their countries of origin as in the case of migration. For example, in Nair's film *Mississippi Masala*, Mina routinely describes herself as a masala, an exotic blend of spices that gives the cuisine its unique taste and aroma: she prescribes her identity as neither fully Indian or African but centered in a new American self, a mixture of three multicultural influences.

Nair's foray into feature films especially with *Salaam Bombay* (1989) was grounded in the politics of location where an insider tells a story with the perspective of an outsider. Indeed, the story of street children in the violent social politics of Bombay's underbelly and themes of trafficking and abandonment – is a metaphor of the diasporic life. It bears resonance with a postcolonial film like *The Battle of Algiers*, where the visual apparatus including the camera and lenses all become an instrument of truth and agency assuming the role of a militant weapon to shoot back images of resistance through the narratives of the people. Thus, decolonizing the camera with screening from the margins is also a preoccupation in Nair's postcolonial cinema where her cinematic subjects not only engage with disenfranchised people but also reflect back on their histories and connected stories of oppression.

Much in the tradition of Postcolonial film, Nair uses non-professional actors, hand held cameras and

culturally specific locations that walk away from the grandiose mainstream productions of Bollywood or Hollywood. The personal stories frame universal narratives beyond the violence of imperialist productions and nationalist agendas creating a filmic palette that strives for transformation of our visual language and representation of “Others” on-screen. Another significant example is the representation of the Muslim ‘other’ in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* adapted from Pakistani writer Mohsin Hamid’s novel of the same name. It is clear how much Mira Nair’s filmography has been impacted by the socio-political changes and the American psyche where the notions of the Self and the Other has been heightened by delineating borders and cultural differences. However, in an aftermath of 9/11 race, ethnicity and culture began to foreground identity conflicts – the culturally deviant outsider came to be regarded with suspicion, fear and apathy that was reflected not only in day to day experiences from job markets to airports but altered mainstream media representations. In the film *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* which reflects much of the politics of migration and postcolonial identities, the protagonist Changez’s (essayed by played by British Pakistani actor Riz Ahmed) self-perception alters where his Islamic identity becomes a fraught metaphor within his American corporate life. Where the film *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* also provides a significant detour from the literary narrative of the novel is that fact that it is presented as a dialogue between two worlds. Changez’s positioning is symbolic of migrant workers in the high-qualified segment of the western countries who often rise through the socio-economic ranks by dint of their education and professional achievements but are often faced with the same aspects of displacement.

In her postcolonial filmmaking, Nair is uniquely positioned in constructing a dialogue between East and West to bring about a sense of bridging gaps in communication - what was essentially a monologue in the part of Changez ‘speaking back’ is transformed into a dialogue between him and Bobby. Thus, the character of Bobby had to be created to form a bridge, an interconnection for understanding before achieving social justice much akin to Mohanty’s feminism across borders. Nair also elucidates on the aspect of the silence of the postcolonial voice as entrenched in Hollywood cinema which she tries to counter in her telling. (Nair, 2013)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Mira Nair in an interview with Newslandry on May 16, 2013 explicated on the speaking out of postcolonial voices in Mohsin Hamid’s novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*

## MIRA NAIR AND DEEPA MEHTA: POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST FILMMAKING

The feminist postcolonial lens has also been extensively employed by Indian-born Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta who shares a thematic integrity with the works of Nair which merits discussion. Mehta's films evoke myriad themes of lesbianism, partition and widowhood by situating them in the Indian sub-continent that lends itself to the historical specificities of the narrative. While her cinema employs a much universal narrative pattern like Mira Nair, she tells stories that are intrinsic to the culture, ethnicity and fraught present of Indian socio-cultural life. Her elemental trilogy named *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water* uses the camera to intercede between frames of personal and political. Mehta's *Fire* and its multiple allusions to the mythic characters of Sita and Radha who foreground history question the framing of female identities beyond such denominations. Mehta's female characters occupy the contested space between idealized or demonized selves while reclaiming their own choices, something that remains common to Nair's visualization of marginalized others.

Taking cues from Hindu mythology, Indian women have been eulogized into goddesses symbolic of the values of self-sacrifice and duty to motherland: Mother India or *bharatmata*<sup>11</sup> literally translates her into the body and spirit of the nation. The postcolonial female body in both Mehta (and Nair) films often becomes a site of honor and violence especially in conflict zones like depicted in the case of the Indo-Pakistan partition on *Earth* (1998). While film focuses on elements of religious identity in the event of the partition, centered around a Hindu woman Shanta (or *Ayah*/nanny) working for a Parsi family in a Muslim dominated province. The Parsees who had migrated to India long ago under religious persecution often maintained a diasporic status – neither Hindu nor Muslim, occupying a position of in-betweenness and hence ambivalent in the event of a religious conflict. The relationship between film and cultural identity is inextricably entangled in Mehta's films much like Nair. Commonalities in the construction of such identity position is also prefigured in the characterization

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<sup>11</sup> *Bharatmata* literally translated means Mother India or motherland evoked for the first time in the Bengali writer Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel *Anandamath* or *The Abbey of Bliss* as the body of the nation to rouse patriotic sentiment. Since worshipping the mother is the ultimate devotion, equating the nation with mother served to unite the masses in a better understanding of nationhood beyond ethnic boundaries of religion, caste, language and gender. However, the problematic aspect of perceiving female identity as such subjected the native women to violence especially in the aftermath of partition, as they became repository of honor and emblematic of nation / land

of Mina in *Mississippi Masala* where an interracial conflict erupts around her sexual relationship with an African American man. Since an Indian woman's body is a repository of cultural code and honor, its violation or infringement either becomes a tool of domination in the event of war or threat to communal honor.

Nair bears much resonance with Mehta who also explores her characters' journeys in morphing their identities along with the nation's journey of finding its identity: postcolonial India much like the characters and films represent these trajectories of finding oneself and negotiating with the past and the present. As evident from the discussion, postcolonial female filmmakers have been embroiled in the task of rewriting the code of the exotic colonized female body by counterpoising classic imperial narratives and orientalist tropes. At the same time, they have been engaged at reconstructing a female agency even while being removed from their countries of origin. Thus, re-writing a new visuality in representing the female migrant identity, these postcolonial filmmakers often within diasporic spaces have decolonized the filmic canon to a certain extent. In addition, Mehta's foray into gendered narratives of women portray the same crossover as migrants: if not racial crossovers, as with Mina's case they help project marginalized identities through a new visual language. The interstitial space in which postcolonial filmmakers such as Nair (and Mehta) are situated is deemed as a privileged space because it is a site of resistance to create, represent and translate narratives but also one from which they can be heard. As Ella Shohat also explicates in her theoretical interventions of the cultural productions from the Third World making penetrating very little of the First World psyche, it falls upon filmmakers like Nair and others whose work within margins that help mediate conversations between both worlds and often present reality.

## CHAPTER 2

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### FROM POSTCOLONIAL THEORY TO CINEMATIC PRACTICE

*“Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis.” (Mohanty, 2003, 24)*

This chapter is an appropriation of the theories of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, and Homi Bhabha which delves into questions of cultural representation of female migrant identities or hybrid identities questioning the Eurocentric notions of feminism that reproduce the same oppressions it seeks to dismantle. As previously stated, feminist practices have been intimately engaged in countering discourses of canonical knowledge and their processes of inquiry through methods that resist entrenched power hierarchies. Since, western cultural production has been deeply immersed in imperial hierarchies of language they often do not reflect ground realities or allow a voice for authenticating marginalized identities. Mohanty’s explication of the category of Third World Women<sup>12</sup> and how universalistic modes of interpreting them in the context of their victimhood does not pay attention to nuances of their political struggle or identity formation highlights the need to situate their struggles within a cultural space that is unique due to their position and identity. This section brings into focus a discursive understanding of the categories of Third World Women and the migrant identity. The second strand of critical inquiry that is brought into this analysis is Homi Bhabha’s concept of Hybridity explored in a space of “in-betweenness” termed as the Third Space where such subjectivities emerge. This chapter will highlight the specificity of these discourses through an intersectional and decolonial analysis of feminist scholarship.

In her definition of Third World Woman, Mohanty also includes minorities/ women of color in the United States, who slip between the gaps of the dominant narratives and whose representation is

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<sup>12</sup> In Part I: Decolonizing Feminism, of her work *Feminism Without Borders decolonizing Theory practicing Solidarity* Mohanty highlights the fact of Third World Women as a category that is not a monolith through her critical take on western notions of feminism due to codification of knowledge based on Eurocentric formulation of power. It also acknowledges the factors of racism and heterogeneity that go in the formation of women as a category and the entangled oppression that form her identity. She also highlights the historical specificity of women and politics of location in understanding their epistemic perspectives bringing into focus the intersectionality of ethnic nationalism and capitalist consumerism both of which foreground these marginalized subjectivities

skewed or erased along racial and gendered lines. She also addresses one of the primal questions that run through this research – who produces knowledge and represents the former colonized countries/postcolonial nations and how the politics of identity play a role in this. In addition, she questions the methods used to locate female agency and self-representation in this complex narrative. As an answer to these, she examines how histories of colonialism, race, gender and migrant pathways are entangled in analyzing these power relations and representation of migrant identities as hybrid conceptions.

## I. DECONSTRUCTING THE MONOLITH OF THIRD WORLD FEMINISMS TO RECONSTRUCTING POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES

Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her work *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory Practicing Solidarity* (2003) elucidates upon her title as a discursive method of exploring gaps, fears, fault lines and dissonances that foreground transnational feminist practices. In this sense, her use of borders refers to transcending them and the processes of embodiment and identity ruptures that occur in these transitions. She also refers back to her own postcolonial background and as an intellectual based in a western institution writing from within which metamorphosed into her initial work, *Under Western Eyes* (1986)

While she calls for a collective social and economic transformation through her transnational feminist aims, she also hopes for a borderless project in quest of social justice. In doing so, she acknowledges the dual challenges of conceiving plurality and hybridity through borders that impose restrictions while allowing crossing overs. This dichotomy and tension is often highlighted in postcolonial cinema through characters' journeys which remain intrinsic to migrant identities. Mohanty also calls for attention to the silences and gaps that are often not addressed within the wider annals of western feminism. The work of diasporic filmmakers seems to be engaged in this very practice through a decolonial examination of the visual medium and re-writing the canon from the margins. Their migrant characters have defined a new epistemology beyond orientalist tropes and altered the gendered and racialized version of viewing the outsider/ Other. Mira Nair's films to be analyzed in further detail, weave together experiences and collective histories of her female migrant characters who assert their agency through journeys which in the vein of Mohanty's discourse forms coalitions across borders. To sum up in her words, they work towards the common goal of "*decolonizing and politicizing knowledge and by rethinking self and community*" (Mohanty, 2003: 10).

What Mohanty argues for is the cross-cultural exchange that happens at the site of media outlets and diasporic productions much akin to the postcolonial cinematic projects of Nair that allow a reverse or rather intersecting exchange of cultural knowledge and worldview. Both Nair and Mohanty's idea of a future of transnational feminism happens through collaborative practices where identities are reconfigured through sites of conflict and rupture. While Mohanty advocates

for the Third World Woman in creating her own stories and self-knowledge, Nair in her postcolonial filmmaking explores these through narratives of the migrant female characters.

The Indian woman's body has been a colonized space at the metaphorical and physical level where a portrayal of her sexed and gendered body remains at the center of a skewed representation in literary and visual arts. In her book *En-gendering India: Woman as Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (2000), Sangeeta Ray points out how the embodied subjectivities around the Indian female body has been fraught with images and symbolism of nationalist agenda: the physical violation of her body has been emblematic of the conquest and domination of land, as her discursive representation in cinema has always been occupied with notions of her identity as a stand in for nationalist values, tradition and culture. In this context, the migrant female body, despite being removed from her land of origin, is often tied to the same cultural oppression in addition to being subjected to epistemic violence in her mainstream representation. While under colonization, women suffered through a two-fold intersection of oppression through gender and race which was multiplied under western feminist scholarship. The introduction of the western gender system was accepted by men because it legitimized the inferiorization of women through hierarchical categories of gender: economic, political and cognitive (Mohanty, 2003). Since production of knowledge is gendered especially the colonization of the female body designated as the Third world woman, its representation in cinema has resulted in a binary opposition. Thus, colonization as a sexual/ racial metaphor of sowing seeds of civilization into a pre-industrial world corrupted by langor, sexual excess and aberration has endured as a discursive justification of the present day migrant policing and representation. The conquest and submission of the colonized/ female subject continues in the vein of control, oppression and hegemony over the "demonic other": immigrant cultures are seen as an extension of the same postcolonial subjectivity as extensions of a "other" world.

Mohanty's assertion that Third World Women's feminisms often reject the idea of feminism as formulated by white middle-class privilege instead defining their own grounded struggles as women of color within their communities. So, the idea of a borderless feminism and universal sisterhood is fraught with questions over differences in experience especially in crossing multiple borders. Women of Color have often formulated their own understanding of feminist practice as arising from the personal into political space and through their everyday resistances running through interconnected webs of nationalism and racial struggles. As Mohanty notes,

*“that cross-cultural feminist work must be attentive to the micropolitics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as to the macropolitics of global economic and political systems and processes.”* (Mohanty, 2003, 3)

Within Nair’s micro-politics of context in Mina’s trajectory as a migrant woman, the macropolitics of global political systems of hegemony play an immense role – her position as a migrant woman of color makes her vulnerable due to her status.

In *Under Western Eyes Revisited* (2002), Mohanty talks about how cross-cultural feminist practice has shifted and embraced other disciplines while recalling her own engagement with transnational feminist writing. Mohanty also situates her writing from inside and outside the west for her own politics of location complicates the while questioning the role of transnational feminism at a critical juncture of history and what methodological and theoretical tenets needed to be reviewed and reconstructed. Herein, Mohanty develops three critical frameworks for feminist pedagogical practice within the politics of knowledge production – they take into account female agency, bridging the gap between global and local and finally identity formations. The first titled the feminist as tourist model uses the metaphor of a tourist to supplement knowledge bases within the Euro-American curriculum – thus, there is not an intrinsic change or immersion or connection into the understanding of Third World Feminism only an additive function as Shohat explains (Shohat qtd. in Mohanty, 2001, 1269–72). In this case, the Eurocentric female is a vital changing central subject in her complex manifestations while the Third World Woman is still a monolith congealed between orientalist narratives.

The question remains in how to develop a model for understanding and analyzing the Third World/Migrant Female as center to her narrative crafting her own story in her own words which leads to second model also known a Feminist as Explorer where the object and subject of knowledge is the “foreign” woman or other – thus, marginalized narratives of the previous model gain a voice and as Mohanty elucidates a deeper and more contextual understanding within their politics of location. She also highlights that the spaces in which these develop are separated geographically and culturally and thus provide no relation lacking a common basis of evaluation (Mohanty, 2002: 520).

She finally argues for a feminist solidarity model which divests itself of geographical boundaries and instead works through connections across the spectrum of race or nation, culture or class - metaphorically it comes closest to the concept of bridging borders between local and global because it is not defined in geographical terms. Thus, women’s experiences of historical oppression inform

each other in this study through collective knowledge/ consciousness and uses connected histories of struggle, resistance and empowerment for analysis:

*“What I call the comparative feminist studies/feminist solidarity model, on the other hand, potentially counters this logic by setting up a paradigm of historically and culturally specific “common differences” as the basis for analysis and solidarity. Feminist pedagogies of antiglobalization can tell alternate stories of difference, culture, power, and agency. They can begin to theorize experience, agency, and justice from a more cross-cultural lens.”*  
(Mohanty, 2002: 524)

Mohanty focuses on the politics of knowledge in bridging the local and global where culture becomes the hegemonic tool to control and regulate images and identity formations. Whether it is their portrayal in world media or cinema, the gap between the the local and global has been addressed by postcolonial filmmakers to an extent for they work in the interstitial spaces, languages that cross borders to depict female migrant lives that exist in between.

While we focus on Mina’s journey as a migrant woman choosing her own identity instead one conferred by her own ethnic community of the American society at large where she is treated as the Other based on her racial and class distinctions. In this context, Mohanty interventions on not only racial and gender categories of oppression but also “class-based” distinctions that configure identity formations. While Mohanty particularly criticizes western feminist scholarship and academies which becomes centers for feminist change, she points out how the lived experiences of women are not taken into account for either knowledge construction or lasting social transformation. Herein, I advocate for the role of postcolonial cinema in addressing to an extent, such gaps and changes through storytelling that is not only inspired by real-life experiences of authors and filmmakers but also taking into account authentic details of historical displacements engineered by autocratic regimes.

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## II. HOMI BHABHA: FEMALE MIGRANTS EXPLORED WITHIN THE THIRD SPACE OF IN-BETWEENNESS

Homi K. Bhabha (1990, 1994, 1996) formulates the concepts of Hybridity and Third Space which are applied in this research to analyze hybrid identities aka migrant female identities in the two postcolonial films of Nair. This aims to address the main research question, how are female migrant identities explored within the discourse of postcolonial cinema using the two films under consideration. The term Hybridity has been deemed as problematic due to negative associations but Bhabha attributes it to a different interpretation of sorts. In his interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha's conception of hybridity denies the authenticity or superiority of some original construct; in this context, "*hybridity becomes a third space which enables other positions to emerge*" (Bhabha, 1990, 211). Thus, this research along the lines of Bhabha uses it as a metaphor for possibilities and specifically to understand the conception of hybrid identities in female migrants where the experience of migration becomes an 'interstitial space' of empowerment.

Hybridity as conceptualized by Bhabha is thus an empowering space that allows marginalized figures to find a belonging and forging identities that are denied often in their countries of origin or destination. According to Bhabha in his interview with Jonathan Rutherford (1990, 211), "*all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity and hybridity displaces the histories that constitute it*". Thus, a migrant identity is developed in a third space which is separate from its inceptions whether the home or host culture and evolves by its own political authority. This gives a theoretical frame upon which hybrid identities i.e. female migrants in this case are explored in Nair's postcolonial cinema. Thus, the concept of the Third Space and is it critically used in the conception of hybrid identities / female migrant identities and their narratives in postcolonial films. These two films of Nair through their storytelling using migration as a metaphor allows a space for female migrant subjectivities to emerge. Bhabha (1994) in addition, uses the concept of the Third Space as an alternative to the hegemonic practice of the colonial binary situated between the colonizer and the colonized, and uses it to break essentialist categories. In Nair's postcolonial two films chosen for

study, both Mina and Aashima as hybrid identities who are situated in the interstice of their two cultural worlds negotiate a space of belonging, expression and agency within it.

Bhabha's appropriation of hybrid identities in postcolonial studies is applied to the understanding of female migrant identities within postcolonial film in my thesis, which as pointed out by Moodley's analysis has much in common with *Accented Cinema*. However, taken from Bhabha's dismantling of essentialist notions exploring the potential of hybridity in forming new and evolved identities, my analysis of the two films will stress on the importance of a 'third space' in the empowerment of migrant women. While colonialism as a historically determining factor has been seen as responsible for the transmutation of such hybrid identities, my research expands this argument into the migrant female agency achieved through the articulation of this space of in-betweenness. According to Bhabha:

*“Despite the exposure of the third space to contradictions and ambiguities, it provides a spatial politics of inclusion rather than exclusion that “initiates new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.”* (Bhabha 1994: 1)

The Third Space becomes “a spatial politics of inclusion” (Bhabha, 1994, 1) which thus allows for the emergence of a collective self not necessarily from its original points of inception. As in the case of the character of Mina, her identity in her final choice emerges from this third space irrespective of her countries or cultures of origin. With regard to spatiality of inclusion, she feels most included in the interstitial space she occupies with Demetrius – not in Uganda, or India or even Mississippi. In this case, interstitial spaces of in-betweenness enumerated by Bhabha is useful in understanding how such identities are voiced and represented. In Rutherford interview of Bhabha, he explains how the dominant culture attempts to locate the minority culture/ identity within its own grid and thus, othering it. (Bhabha, 208). Bhabha calls for a dismantling of these fixities of identity and in the case of a migrant female character of Mina, who is often forced to choose between her native culture (Indian in this case) or that of her host country (America), it is not so easily resolvable. Thus, for a hybrid identity like Mina, it is imperative to construct her own self in her own terms, and herein lies the manifestation of the third space.

Because cultural difference and representation is intrinsic to the female migrant identities within diasporic spaces – Nair's representation in this case, allows an alternative visual vocabulary to

emerge for the representation of such hybrid identities. Falling into the subject of Postcolonial Cinema Studies, the theories of Mohanty along with Bhabha will be used to foreground the visualization of the female migrant narratives in Nair's two films. It is not an implicit application of these postcolonial feminisms that this thesis aims to undertake but use them as a model to illuminate the postcolonial paradigms in Nair's cinema particularly when representing such hybrid identities through a decolonial method of portrayal.

Both Bhabha and Mohanty's theories rests on the paradigm that postcolonial female identity is discursive and fraught with complexities of translation and representation in western discourse and hence their representation on-screen requires an alternative perspective to understand the intersectional factors that go into such hybrid identity constructions. In this context, Bhabha's conception of hybrid identities articulated through a space of in-betweenness which gives it a sense of belonging and empowerment is useful to understand the depiction of female migrants in Nair's cinema. So, the narratives of migrant lives forge a new language and syntax for visualizing them within the discipline of postcolonial cinema but subverting Eurocentric notions of Third World Women as a monolith (Mohanty, 2003). Thus, exploring hybrid identities lies at the center of this research which will be fully explored through the case studies of the abovementioned films of Nair. The subsequent chapters will allow a deep and fervent analysis of the films, character, scenes and tropes and how they intersect with the racial, cultural and national boundaries to narrate a postcolonial feminist identity in becoming.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

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### DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND SEMIOTIC THEORY IN POSTCOLONIAL FILMS

The Methodology chosen for this analysis is Discourse Analysis formulated by Stuart Hall and Semiotic Theory applied to the postcolonial analysis of the above mentioned two films of Nair. In addition, postcolonial theory has many points of intersection with film and media studies (Ponzanesi, 2016, 111) in its ability to unpack the power relations intrinsic to the use and construction of language and by its extension, representation of marginalized identities onscreen. Stuart Hall in his seminal book (Julia Evans, and Sean Nixon, eds.) *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (1997, 2d ed. London: Open University) states that meanings are created by the ‘discursive’ use of language that reinforce power asymmetries. This in turn reproduces our understanding of self and the other through representation in literature, film and media. Hall directed the Cultural studies department in the University of Birmingham whereby he incorporated various intellectual strands into an interdisciplinary field of viewing culture and influence on language and meaning making. Thus, it rests on aspects of representation and discourse stemming into Semiotic theory and decoding of symbols in mass culture. In Hall interpretation of representation is tied to hegemony through ideological reconstruction - the control of image and language by those in power reinforce the public understanding and enforce meanings. According to Hall (1996) discourse is seen as:

*“is a group of statements which provide a language for talking about—i.e. a way of representing—a particular kind of knowledge about a topic. Discourses are produced through language and practices. They are ways of talking about and acting towards an idea or group of people. One of the most powerful insights concerning discourses is that “anyone deploying a discourse must position themselves as if they were the subject of the discourse”* (Hall, 1996, 201, 202)

Hall's analysis in *Routledge Handbook of Counter-Narratives* (eds. by Klarissa Lueg, Marianne Wolff Lundholt) states discourse as a way of constructing knowledge, the films under study would aim to offer counter-narratives to a mainstream discourse centering around society's others. In this case, Hall's discourse analysis is particularly relevant to this research because interpretation of

postcolonial films and the gendered and racial dynamics of migrant female narratives lie at the crux of representation. The premise of Postcolonial Studies relies on the conception of hegemonic relations in the construction of knowledge – Hall’s theory rests on the use of power relations within language and ideology, giving meaning to our understanding of our concepts. Thus, relations of power are embedded within language use which can be decoded and understood for wider implications through Semiotics.

Semiotics refers to a method of decoding and understanding culture (especially the idea that signs are part of a universal structure of meanings that pre-exist) in a manner that one deconstructs language for meaning making. Within film analysis, semiotic theory is often moves to audience interpretation beyond the creator’s subliminal messages embedded within scenes and storytelling and their attributing meaning to scenes and characters. The reason why semiotic theory is appropriate for the understanding of migrant narratives and their deconstruction through counter-hegemonic practices is because they offer alternative perspectives and deconstruct meanings ossified in collective public memory through discourse and culture. To this end, reference to Hall’s critical inquiry into the formulation of culture (qtd. in Web Byte, Hall, 1982, p. 77) and Bhabha’s argument that cultures are constantly challenged through hybridity is relevant. Semiotic Theory in films and in this case along with postcolonial film analysis uncovers signs and symbols that point to the articulation of women who are often caught between narratives of nation, culture and race and who as the subject of their narrative (Mohanty, 2003) bring about a new way of visualizing hybridity through migrant women’s stories.

Postcolonial analysis of films has often exposed hidden messages, symbolism and hegemonic relations that continue to the present day despite the end of colonialism. The film *Avatar* has been a popular subject of postcolonial criticism due to its central theme of indigenous rights juxtaposed with a superior power that uses military might and some amount of social manipulation (establishing schools to teach them English to the indigenous people) to take over their land and resources (unobtainium in this case). However, in this research postcolonial analysis of the two films would be used to address the main research and sub-questions – *how are female migrant narratives explored within the two postcolonial films of Nair, how do they represent the ‘other’ and engage with racial crossovers*. Also, taking from Ponzanesi and Waller’s interventions that postcolonial cinema uses this space to break with nationalist or colonial conceptions, Nair’s cinema also challenges the norms of

mainstream filmmaking by amalgamation of styles criss-crossed with themes of postcolonial displacement:

*“The objective of postcolonial European cinemas is, therefore, to foreground new forms of interventions by accounting for silenced or marginalized histories that might be de facto centre stage in the New Europe.” (Ponzanesi and Berger, 2016, 113)*

A semiotic and postcolonial analysis of the two chosen films will reveal how Nair explores migrant female narratives in her cinema, creating a space for hybrid identities to be articulated through breaking of conventional modes of representing others. In doing so, it will also highlight how through subtext, dialogues, costumes, frames in her scenes deconstruct hegemonic narratives and fill the gaps left in between. Thus, discourse analysis through a postcolonial lens will serve the case study films to be analyzed in order to answer the research questions. In addition to answer the third research sub-question, the framework of postcolonial cinema will be utilized to analyze the key themes and questions within the two films selected for study.

## DATA SELECTION:

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### WHY MISSISSIPPI MASALA AND THE NAMESAKE

*“Protagonists are not present as ego ideals or every persons, though, but as multi-dimensional figures—often marginalized, subordinated, displaced or deterritorialized—whose subjectivities as well as subject positions are open to the unexpected, the unpredictable, which may enter from somewhere beyond our particular epistemological ken.”* (Ponzanesi & Waller 2012, 7–8)

The reason for choosing *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* is their core narrative and visual representation of migrant women through postcolonial themes of displacement, identity, and cultural negotiation in hybrid spaces. As with the former, there is a two-pronged effect in deconstructing the visual language of Nair – the imperial histories and how it relates to the present day politics of identity, race and class with the migrant female subject at the center. The central themes of *Mississippi Masala* (migration, interracial love, displacement and hybridity) connect with colonial histories and slavery in the American South and how this affects and complicates these hybrid identities of the two women. The female protagonist in this case lies at the central subject of analysis and the processes of her uprooting through migration forms her own identity in such spaces. This ties back to my research question of *how Nair explores migrant women narratives in her two films* and the following sub-questions:

- *How do female migrants engage with cultural and racial cross-overs in the above mentioned two films?*
- *How does Postcolonial film in the works of Nair engage with representation of the Other?*
- *In what way can Nair be read within the paradigm of the Postcolonial cinema?*

The second film, *The Namesake*, has been often stated as a metaphor for migration. While the central protagonist Gogol’s struggle with his hyphenated identity remains the main plot, his mother Aashima’s story is the one I choose to focus on. Portrayed by the legendary actress Tabu, she captures the nuances of early South Asian migrants and their ambivalence and negotiations between

their own culture and the American one. While narratives of women in diaspora have been explicitly explored in books and film, Nair's visual language adds a new dimension to this genre which this research seeks to highlight. Nair's representation of a migrant woman of Indian Bengali origin has been constructed with sensitive details to her journey of migration and how its space of in-betweenness forms the crux of her identity. Connecting back to the main research question, Nair's film explores this journey of identity through Aashima's migration to America, starting from her scene of meeting her future husband Ashoke for the first time to her final decision of choosing a home between two worlds. The film particularly resonates with my own self-experience of a young woman migrating to New York and making a home through traversing borders of culture, race and language.

The two films both use English as the dominant language liberally interspersed with Hindi and Bengali in moments of critical expression, the postcolonial aspect of the film also ties to this very fact of a language situated in between the colonizer and colonized. While English has remained an official and popular language of expression in urban India, it is peppered with local euphemisms and expressions that connote the essential postcolonial experience. The following chapter projects a deconstructive gaze by applying the optic of Postcolonial cinema into migrant subjectivities through the transformation of these female characters to a more mediated representation through agency and choice. In this context, borders become physical and psychological spaces where female migrant identities are dissected within intersections of race, class, nation and religion. A postcolonial analysis of Nair's two films *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake* demonstrates how the representation of migrant female characters and their voices differ from mainstream constructions in cinema and how they are explored within the framework of postcolonial cinema. As discussed in Chapter 1, postcolonial cinema is created from the margins breaking traditional film forms, alternative versions of history and representation of the other. (Ponzanesi and Berger, 2016). The articulation of migrant identities within postcolonial cinema is under analysis through these two films, addressing the research questions posed at the beginning.

This chapter aims to address the central research question: *How does Mira Nair explore female migrant narratives in her postcolonial films, the Namesake and Mississippi Masala* through the films chosen for study. Representation of the migrant female identity through the characters of Aashima and Mina using theories of Mohanty questions and challenges the monolith of a Third World female identity. Thus, the differential categories and origins of the Third World Women are neglected in

such an analysis especially in their self-representation in the art which western women often have the privilege of. Nair's endeavor in this case is to subvert the canonical narrative and represent the Third World Woman as a discursive category within their roles as migrant women is a way to give them a voice to them and allow them to tell their own stories (often in their own language) and eventually be heard. Migrant identities have occupied the position of the racial other in mainstream representation whether in film or media – in this case, women who migrate are often conflated and their specific oppressions that emerge from an intersection of factors including race and gender, are often ignored. This thesis addresses the central research questions of the narrative of female migrants within the framework of postcolonial cinema. Thus, a postcolonial film analysis is relevant to address how Nair is read within this paradigm and how the representation of the migrants as 'other' are challenged through a discursive re-telling.

Since postcolonial films aim to break with imperial epistemologies by criticizing such representation and presenting with alternate forms of expression, Nair's two films within the postcolonial analysis will uncover visual codes within scenes and characterization to break stereotyped notions of representing racial and diasporic identities from the margins. Her counter-narratives tell stories of women who have formerly been missed in mainstream film and subsequently pages of history. Nair relies on her own screenplays and diasporic literature culled from Pulitzer winning writer, Jhumpa Lahiri, to construct authentic narratives. The stories also bring to the surface moments of isolation and identity crises whether brought about by displacement which the characters encounter and negotiate. Ultimately, these female migrant narratives in the two films culminate to a moment of self-realization and empowerment through this hybrid space which allows them to confirm new identities. As defined by Bhabha in his conception of the Third Space, it becomes one of belonging in two spaces or of in-betweenness which gives rise to a unique sense of belonging as demonstrated with the case of both Mina and Aashima.

The figure of the migrant has been historically situated in the realm of the Other, without much reflection on its origins, motivations or impact/ potential. The aim of this thesis is not simply to highlight how the migrants working in western academies and higher echelons have the potential to transform power dynamics in a postmodern world but presenting alternative and diversified viewpoints.

## CHAPTER 4

### ***MISSISSIPPI MASALA* (1991) – FROM CONNECTED HISTORIES TO THE PRESENT**

*“Postcolonial cinema is therefore called to make the invisible visible (Young, 2012, 21) and to find a visual repertoire that can create a dialogue between aesthetic representations and political intervention.” (Ponzanesi and Waller, 2012)*



Figure 2. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

*Mississippi Masala* (1991) as a postcolonial film that presents an intimate look at a diasporic family of Indian origin expelled from Uganda and currently living in Greenwood, Mississippi. What is also interesting about Mira Nair’s narrative is that the racial tension in the film is not between Blacks and Whites (Seshagiri, 178) as common in most mainstream Hollywood productions (*Mississippi Burning*) but African Americans and a South Asians, questioning aspects of identity and racial stratification in the American South. Nair as a postcolonial filmmaker successfully conveys the trials and nuances of minority lives and in not only how they are positioned within the dominant American culture but with respect to other minorities of color. Though the scenes of their interaction end in

violent clash, Mina's migrant identity is thrown into relief in order to articulate the intersectional factors that work into such hybridity.

Nair opens up a possibility of seeing past borders into creating a hybrid space for displaced identities often depicted in turmoil with each other and within themselves. Mina is born in Uganda, and as a child her family is forced to leave their country of birth on account of the dictator Idi Amin<sup>13</sup> who in 1972 expelled all Asians from Uganda, Africa. In this context, the racial lines drawn between the black and brown communities through economic and political underpinnings is structured around Amin's virulent expletives, "the Asians have milked the cow but not fed it." The film begins with Jay Loha, played by Roshan Seth, a lawyer of Indian origin in Uganda who is imprisoned because of giving an interview on BBC radio against Amin's dictatorial regime that forced Asians out of Uganda, their home of two generations. As a result of this expulsion and subsequent dislocation, Jay's identity is fissured along fault lines of race, especially evident in his confrontation with his childhood friend Okelo, essayed by Konga Mbandu, who tells him, "Africa is for Africans, Black Africans".

The above lines introduce one of the key postcolonial themes of racial hierarchy in the understanding of identity, nationality and belonging. It is also the theme running through the entire narrative from Uganda to Mississippi that questions the female protagonist Mina's own space of belonging. Nair's narratives of hybrid identities in their quest for home and belonging can be seen through the female protagonist Mina's choice in defining her future with Demetrius (essayed by Denzel Washington) and embracing a relationship which gives her a sense of belonging and political authority (Bhabha, 1990). Mina's quest for home and identity through her migrant trajectory is portrayed differently from her father Jay, who attempts to recover his past through continued lawsuits for his property restitution. As a migrant female, Mina chooses to define a different path for herself and her hybrid

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<sup>13</sup> Idi Amin (1971-79) is the Ugandan dictator who systematically destroyed the legal system of the country and expelled Asians in a bid to establish a country of ethnic/ native Ugandans accusing the Asians of disloyalty and unwillingness to integrate with Black Africans. Amidst charges of corruption in lieu of Asian owned business which were demolished along with violent and forced expulsion of their communities within a period of 90 days. The South Asians were historically brought into Africa by the British to act as a buffer community between blacks and whites, who stayed back after the end of colonialism. Considering Uganda as their home and having built successful businesses, the South Asians as depicted in Nair's film *Mississippi Masala* were left in a state of homelessness and vulnerability and not knowing where they belonged. While the British has historically invested in the education and socio-economic uplift of the South Asian minority leaving the Black Ugandans often bereft of opportunity and improvement causing further rift and disintegration between them.

identity lies at the center of the narrative articulated through her choice and interracial relationship

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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### MINA: HYBRID IDENTITY IN A LIMINAL SPACE

Homi Bhabha's conception of hybrid identity is constituted around the idea of liminal space of belonging which he also terms as the Third Space. In his interview with Jonathan Rutherford, Bhabha argues that the third space as follows:

*“But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace to original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the third space which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.”* (Bhabha to Rutherford, 1990)

As Bhabha illustrates, the conception of hybridity breaks through two essentialist categories, and when applied to the case of a hybrid identity that of Mina who is a female migrant in this case, she exists in a liminal space of belonging that is neither fully Indian, or African or even American.

In addition, Mohanty's conception of the Feminist Solidarity model argues for the construction of Third World women beyond specific geographies but through connected histories of struggle and resistance. As a female migrant, Mina's identity is thus discursively created through connected postcolonial histories that prefigure current racial politics of identity. Mina's hybrid self is narrated around Nair's construction making her the subject and object of her story-telling. Such an act of self-representation uses the postcolonial film and its embedded tropes, aesthetics and themes to convey and challenge the mainstream construction of such marginalized identities. As Nair and by extension Mina, a female migrant whose life takes her from Uganda, to England to America, advocates for her own complex hybridity through her race, gender and ambiguous ethnicity it also interrogates imperial practices that have engendered these oppressions.

From what Mohanty terms as the vantage point of the Third World woman as a site of deconstructive analysis, the visual representation of these migrant women are analyzed in Nair's postcolonial film. While Mohanty aims to draw a common framework between feminist pedagogy and cross-cultural feminist movement, Nair films advocate for a common cause of feminism within her narrative of a

migrant woman. What she begins as a location of feminist scholarship in *Under Western Eyes* (2002) is also apparent in Nair's films:

*"My newly found teaching position at a primarily white U.S. academic institution also deeply affected my writing at this time. I was determined to make an intervention in this space in order to create a location for Third World, immigrant, and other marginalized scholars like myself who saw themselves erased or misrepresented within the dominant Euro-American feminist scholarship and their communities."* (Mohanty, 2002: 503)

Mohanty's sentiments are echoed in Nair's own motivation to make movies that creates a discursive space for migrant identities that have suffered misrepresentation and tropes of model minority within media or western feminist scholarship. What both Mohanty's project and Nair's filmmaking aims at is unequal power relations and need to draw the commonality in differences. While seemingly idealist in its conception, Nair's films have cut across borders through experiences that are universal and common to cultures, races and genders. This positions the hybrid identities with dual ability to exist between two cultures (also prevalent with Mina) and yet within a third space that is independent of its original. Representations of hybrid identities (Bhabha 1990) are articulated through postcolonial cinema in order to address the main research question and sub-questions posed at the beginning.

## **CONTEXT AND INTERVENTION: RACIAL CROSSING OVERS AND REPRESENTATION OF *OTHERS***

*“In the face of Eurocentric historicizing, the Third World and its diasporas in the First World have rewritten their own histories, taken control over their own images, and spoken in their own voices, reclaiming and reaccentuating colonialism and its ramifications in the present in a vast project of remapping and renaming.” (Shohat, 1)*

The visual representation of the female migrant identity in cinema and media is distorted by orientalist perceptions and discourses of disenfranchisement. Addressing the main research question of female migrant narratives in Nair’s postcolonial film, this analysis focuses on Mina’s hybrid identity situated in a liminal space of in-betweenness that also serves to empower her. This chapter will firstly focus on the main research question: *How does Mira Nair explore female migrant narratives in her postcolonial films, the Namesake (next chapter) and Mississippi Masala* and the sub-question of how female migrants engage with cultural and racial cross-overs through a semiotic and postcolonial analysis of the film.

The central protagonist Mina is a female migrant in lieu of her family’s displacement from Uganda, Africa and as a young woman of color in Greenwood Mississippi she is often shown to occupy a hyphenated position. Her fraught identity arises from her dually displaced status both as an African born woman of Indian origin and a minority of color in American society. The film uses the metaphor of migration to not only define Mina’s identity but also uses imperial histories and politics of color to frame her racial crossovers. The film within its postcolonial framework presents a decolonized counter discourse and yet how they are complicated by imperial histories - Mina’s childhood in Africa is aesthetically and politically constructed through a traumatic experience of displacement. The role of cinema in the production of cultural representation is complicated and interstitial especially in the narratives of the migrant female subject. The diasporic existence including class and cultural segregation between the Loha family (recent immigrants/ outsiders) and the Indian community in Greenwood is depicted through scenes amidst festivals and social occasions. While the racialized class hierarchies create the tensions and demarcates borders in the film, they also

illuminate the postcolonial legacy that seeps into the present. Despite the end of colonialism, their lives of once-colonized countries continue to be touched by a stained history which becomes especially jarring in moments of crisis like immigration and border crossings. Though a choice for betterment, it is affected by loss of belonging which renders migrants as outsiders both in their countries of birth and residency. The female migrant in this context is displaced over and over through her gender, race, class and migrant status leading her to define her own identity through her own choices. Here, Bhabha's intervention on how the third space articulates and becomes productive as a space with new possibilities, outcomes and enunciates new political engagements (Bhabha qtd. in P. Meredith, 3). Thus, Mina's hybrid identity made visible through her experiences with Demetrius, his family and her own community projects a new space (third space) which is formed irrespective of the original constructs which adheres to new cultural meaning. What emerges through Nair's postcolonial production are these discourses of race and nationality and how identities are shaped and reshaped through these binaries with Bhabha's notion of hybridity. In *Mississippi Masala*, Mina coins her own identity as a masala, an exotic mixture of spices reminiscent of tropical colonized lands that is often reduced to a ubiquitous space on a Eurocentric palate, stripped of its unique flavors, history and qualities.

## SCENE ANALYSIS – “I AM A MASALA”

The film’s title gives no indication of its myriad themes of dislocation and loss; instead *Mississippi Masala* suggests exotica, and the American South. However, as the first scene picks up in Uganda, Africa it brings with it a dark foreboding. Mina and her family’s displacement from their country, Uganda examines postcolonial histories and trauma that foreshadow into present times. Africa, where Mina is first shown as a young girl, leaving her homeland is serene mountains and green valleys, a picturesque scene that camouflages hidden prejudices and violence of an imperial past. Nair’s camera pans over the placid landscape that gives the viewer an alternative visuality of the continent. In the backdrop of the South Asian expulsion, Mina’s fractured sense of home and belonging is depicted through explicit scenes of her father’s imprisonment due to speaking against the dictator Aiming to their packing their life to reluctantly begin another. The cartographies of exclusion as Mohtanty underlines in the construction of Third World women and particularly female migrants in this respect. Similarly, not every female migrant hybridity is formed by the same - Mina and Aashima beginnings of a migrant life are differently shaped and though both signify hope and forward movement, Mina’s is accompanied by a far deeper trauma.

Multilingualism which is another aspect of postcolonial film is portrayed through the character use of Swahili in Mina’s departure from Africa especially with Okelo as demonstrated in the scene below. Okelo tells her not to forget her Swahili as he bids goodbye to Mina, to which she answers to whom she would speak it to. Thus “modalities of representation and politics of encounter” (Ponzanesi, 2016, 1) within postcolonial film denotes Mina’s rupture from her home and identity through a language break, and expulsion from her familial world of childhood.



Figure 3. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

As the film moves forward with Mina's journey of migration from Africa, the audience is taken through an animated map onscreen and the transition of music from a sad lyrical note as the camera pans from Africa to England, to Mississippi which changes to the playful beats of American pop. Mina's evolution and transition is thus portrayed through an audio sensation (haptic element in postcolonial cinema) which symbolizes a change in her identity.

In the film, parallels are drawn between Indian migrants from Uganda, Africa and the African Americans who had never been to Africa but despite living in the United States for generations are racialized as the other. This is where Nair's interrogation of Mina's migrant identity occurs as it is thrown into a backdrop of racialized and gendered identities in the American South. In Nair's articulation of the migrant female identity through the aesthetics of postcolonial cinema, she highlights the inscription of race along with gender to understand how these intersecting factors are an important consideration. This also ties to Mohanty's argument on drawing in diversity and difference as a defining paradigm for postcolonial feminisms expressed in cinematic texts.



Figure 4. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

The scene under analysis is that of Mina meeting Demetrius's family - what can be construed as a gay summer day in Mississippi takes on shades of political interrogation through a conversation on histories of belonging, displacement and identity. The scene kicks off with the issue of where Mina is from: Demetrius introduces that she is from England, Africa and India. This raises curiosity amidst Demetrius's African American family members, especially her brother who says that she is just like them, and they have never been to fricia either. Demetrius's father Williben also asks, "How come they have Indians in Africa?" To which, Mina replies, "The British brought them there," tying colonial histories to narratives of migration and displacement. Through these scenes, Nair's sheds light on how a woman's identity is affected, fissured and formed again through her experiences of migration. The scene where Mina gets asked in a meeting with Demetrius's family as to how Indians came to Africa and why they left, is shrouded in the dynamics of the personal and political intermingling and questions of identity twice displaced. As Mohanty advocates for history being a significant factor in postcolonial feminism – the rewriting of history and representation of female migrants within postcolonial cinema becomes an act of self-defining Mina's identity.



Figure 5. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

What Nair examines through the scenes is how Mina, despite being American, is relegated to the position of the Other, due to their skin color and socio-economic class. In her conversation with Demetrius at the beach she points out how the guests at the Monte Carlo motel comment on her appearance, “Not another goddamn Indian!” which angers her and makes her realize her otherness within the white mainstream class. The backdrop of the sea somehow symbolizes the changing contours of her identity as she dissects her fraught identity in Mississippi. Mohanty draws on diversity and difference as a defining paradigm for postcolonial feminisms expressed in cinematic texts.

Mina’s identity is deeply gendered and racialized as she cannot find a context for herself within the Indian value system as a woman, nor can she fully fit in with the African-American community with Demetrius. In analyzing Mina’s hybrid identity as a female migrant in postcolonial analysis it is important to examine her interracial relationship with Demetrius which signifies the Third Space as enumerated in the previous section. Mina’s ultimate choice in leaving Mississippi with Demetrius and re-inscribing her identity beyond the borders that have been set by her gender, culture, nation to define herself points to a spatiality of inclusion / belonging (Bhabha, 1994, 1996) and in some ways, manifesting the idea of the American dream.



Figure 6. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

As the above scene projects an inside look into the Indian community's preoccupation with light skin color. Two women converse amongst themselves about Mina's dark skin which coupled with her family's reduced circumstances make her marriage prospects nil. As evident from the dialogues between the two Indian women at a wedding, Mina is shown to be a status within her own Gujarati community in the American South who are financially successful, and emigrated from India. Her Indian heritage is fraught with questions of non-belonging for despite her ethnic origin, it is a country she has never been to. Additionally, her dark skin alienates her within the conservative Hindu society that privileges light skin for women especially as marriageable prospects. In this respect Nair's postcolonial films open borders and new ways of viewing the diaspora and female migrant subjectivities represented in them situated amidst fragmented spaces. Concurrent with postcolonial themes and imperial legacies, the color divide was often perpetuated through the enforcement of white superiority which created a desire/ norm to emulate behavioral conventions and the colonizer's mindset. The shared ethnicity of the Indian (Gujarati) characters in *Mississippi Masala*, are nevertheless divided along class lines – especially Mina and her origin from Uganda alienates her from the community.

As a young woman of marriageable age, she occupies a precarious position due to her family's fallen economic status, her own outsider status and finally, her skin color. While Mina is certainly exotic in her appearance, Nair unravels the layers that make her – her childhood in Africa almost captured in idyllic images of misty mountains and green meadows, a land that seems unblemished and

innocent to the untrained eye till violence upon Asians erupts. Thus, Mina's identity as narrated through the story is that of the Other in postcolonial cinema - however it constructs through the discursive histories and racial politics that go into their making instead of a homogenous inscription of Third World woman. As argued by Mohanty, a universalizing framework of a global Eurocentered system creates essentializing definitions of female migrants of Third World origin instead of finding connectivities.



Figure 7. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

When the film takes the viewer to Mina's life in Mississippi, as a young woman working at the Monte Carlo motel, she is depicted as independent and free-thinking despite her ethnic origin and conservative community of South Asians. In many ways, she is closer to a young American woman than what may be expected of a traditional and subservient Indian woman – has a mind of her own and refuses to be dictated by so-called norms of behavior. Her unconventional appearance (read exotic), an added plot device by Nair, makes her a subject of gossip along with her darker complexion which makes her an 'other' in her own community. This is her second point of rupture that creates further displacement wherein Mina is positioned as an exotic other within her own community. Mina's otherness represented in the film – it is defined by her experiences of displacement and awareness of non-belonging expressed by her in her conversations with Demetrius and with her

parents. This leads to her final choice in leaving Mississippi with Demetrius marks her need to define herself outside the set norms of nation, culture and race as breaking the fixities and essentialist conceptions of identity forming (Bhabha, 1990, 1994).

Despite her culturally ambiguous status she defines her hybrid identity often calling herself a 'masala' thus outlining the spatiality which is productive and through which she enunciates her own subject position. To answer the second research sub-question of *how the film engages with cultural and racial crossovers* Mina's defines herself through such a cultural crossover through her relationship. For this purpose, Nair uses postcolonial frames as a space where she can truly belong – where all aspects of her identity including its racial histories can happily coexist leads her to a relationship with Dimitri. She creates this in partnership with Demetrius and her need to escape from the racial politics and social segregation of Mississippi thus, ushering a new narrative in constructing her own identity. This interracial relationship which is also her space of belonging, productive and empowering, is analyzed as a racial crossover addressing my second research sub-question. Thus, Nair representation of the 'other' in postcolonial cinema moves beyond delineating this subliminal space from where her migrant identity is examined in its in-betweenness.



Figure 8. *Mississippi Masala* (1991). Dir. Mira Nair, 1991. Mirabai Films, Inc. IMDb. Web.

One of the pervading themes of *Mississippi Masala* “racial hierarchy” (Nair, SBS interview, 1991) whereby the South Asians are shown positioned between the White and Black population in the Mississippi. The following frame which shows Mina driving the car, the nouveau riche recent expat business community running the motels is shown with the woman clad in a traditional sari counting money, as a young black boy labors stacking the groceries. This frame not only introduces power hierarchies established through socio-economic class distinctions but also Mina’s identity differently poised from the other Asians. As a young American woman, she is the one who talks to the man at the counter in English, not her female companion who has come to buy milk for the wedding.

As a female migrant character whose identity itself is fractured because of her race and culture, Mina takes a step forward compared to her father who remains ensconced in the past. His sense of nostalgia is contrasted with Mina’s taking stock of her own destiny. Thus, Mina’s final choice symbolizes this Third Space which is not simply formed out of her exclusion of disparate cultures of absence but a position of empowerment she articulates herself. As her father Jay proposes to move them back to Uganda, Mina asserts her agency reclaiming her own identity beyond the cycle of oppression scripted by a history of slavery, colonization and migration. Nair draws a direct line of narrative through these women especially Mina and Kinnu, her mother to an extent, of the conflicts and crises figure into their lives as the phantoms of colonialism’s dark history. The violence of racism and non-belonging makes them lose their home time and again, till Mina makes a ubiquitous choice – her home thus becomes a transnational space situated between two worlds, two races, much like her own identity, name and culture.

## CONCLUSION:

*“In the face of Eurocentric historicizing, the Third World and its diasporas in the First World have rewritten their own histories, taken control over their own images, and spoken in their own voices, reclaiming and reaccentuating colonialism and its ramifications in the present in a vast project of remapping and renaming.” (Shohat, 1)*

As illustrated in the above semiotic analysis of Nair's film, postcolonial cinema becomes a space of viewing migrant female identities beyond Eurocentric definitions of otherness thus addressing the research sub-questions:

*How do female migrants engage with cultural and racial cross-overs in the Postcolonial film and a representation of the Other?*

*In what way can Nair be read within the paradigm of the Postcolonial cinema?*

The above analysis also highlights how *Mississippi Masala* explores the female migrant narrative by defining a hybrid space that is interstitial and yet productive in giving new meanings beyond colonial constructions or cultural boundaries. Revealed through the scenes of exposition, themes and storyline, Mina's own understanding of herself is the hybridity which is brought upon by her displacement from Uganda as a child, her realization of being a dark-skinned Indian woman rendering her as an Other within her so-called native community and finally, as a woman of color in America. Each of these identities expressed through the film are entangled with her own gendered and racial position, which manifests in defining herself in her own words: a masala, a cultural a racial crossover that she inscribes to herself. Thus, her migrant identity erases the borders of her belonging i.e. nation and culture, race and class to a new meaning. According to Bhabha (1994) the limitations of these existing forms challenges and questions fixities of culture and identity. Nair through her migrant narratives uncovers the voices of doubly marginalized female migrant characters like Mina which not only represents the Other revealing longer cartographies of exclusion and non-belonging (Mohanty, 2003) but also allows her to be a subject of her own story. Thus, addressing the second research sub-question of representing the 'other' in postcolonial film.

In Mohanty's feminist decolonizing project, differences are used as an empowering metaphor within the narratives of migrant women as examined with Mina's narrative. Her difference adds to the formulation of her hybrid self within the interstitial space or Third Space. Mohanty describes a changing process of empowerment and identity formation through choice and agency which is central to my research – how the stories of female migrants emerge from absence, displacement in their diasporic lives to empowerment through difference. This is veritably echoed in Nair's filmic method of narration of the female migrant through a layered, cross-cultural analysis of Mina's history and cultural non-belonging cast within the racial and gendered dynamics of an American society. This addresses the main research question on how female migrant narratives are explored in Nair's films.

Finally, the third sub-question on how Nair can be read within the paradigm of postcolonial cinema, is addressed through the various frames, scenes and dialogues that present a decolonial aesthetic engagement recreating stories of exile through subliminal spaces. According to Ponzanesi and Waller postcolonial films aim at engaging with the visual medium through a counter-aesthetics that are often “decolonized and de-orientalized.” (Ponzanesi, 2012). Reading Nair within the paradigm of the postcolonial film, one notices not only a different visual aesthetic but also political engagement inextricably entwined in the representations of race, gender and culture through Mina's transition. Female migrants are not depicted as silent and submissive creatures nor ones accepting their fate - as Mina's trajectory shows, they choose who they are through an understanding of their own hybridity paving the way for a new epistemology of viewing such migrant figures. Highlighting the internalized oppression within western society through its delegitimization of colored bodies and migrant identities, Nair's postcolonial cinema thus brings together intersectional approaches to understanding difference, loss, displacement and forging of identities through them. Whether Mina, Kinnu or Aashima, all these women make courageous choices while keeping their hybrid identity which despite their national origins and cultural beliefs are also a product of their diasporic existence.

#### INTRODUCTION:

*“For being a foreigner, Ashima is beginning to realize, is a sort of lifelong pregnancy - a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts. It is an ongoing responsibility, a parenthesis in what had once been ordinary life, only to discover that that previous life had vanished, replaced by something more complicated and demanding (Lahiri 49-50)*

Jhumpa Lahiri’s first novel *The Namesake* is often described as a metaphor for a migrant life encompassing issues of identity crisis, displacement and exile within the South Asian diaspora. While Lahiri’s medium of diaspora writing touches upon the traumas, memories, intergenerational conflict and identities in flux, Mira Nair takes on the story of “a boy named Gogol” (Lahiri, ) and weaves a narrative of nostalgia, cultural fluidity, hybridity through families and countries tied together by the universality of human experience. In her film, Nair uses the imagery of bridges to symbolize the interconnections and dichotomies of a migrant identity whether it is those of the male protagonist Gogol or his parents, Ashoke and Aashima. While Nair focuses on the hyphenated experiences of diasporic characters (much like the writer Lahiri herself) she also moves beyond to create her own narrative that tells the story as the characters live it. Martein A. Halvorson- Taylor distinguishes Diaspora literature<sup>14</sup> as one written with more of a focus on the positive and possibilities of the country of exile while still maintaining ties with the ancestral land. The

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<sup>14</sup> The experiences of diaspora and exile have often been conflated in its historical foundations where the diaspora harks back to the the verb *diaspeirein* and the noun *diasporá* (Kevin Kenny in *Diaspora: A Very Short Introduction*) which symbolizes a condition of spiritual anguish after the dispersal of the Jews beyond Israel and often refers to dispersion of people from their original homeland. However, within modern literature the differences of forced exile and political emigres often merge with migrants who choose to leave their countries for better employment opportunities, often following an education. Within the South Asian diaspora, the experiences of immigrants have been myriad – from indentured labor to the Caribbean to a brain drain of jobs in the technological sector in the 90s.

protagonist Gogol's identity crisis mirrors that of his author Lahiri; but Nair adapts this story and transforms it to the conception of migrants as hybrid identities where mobility and belonging to two nations is possible. Her portrayal of Aashima, Gogol's mother, and her journey of migration from displacement to freedom through a spatiality of inclusion or Third Space (Bhabha, 1990) accords her with a sense of belonging and new understanding of self. Instead of being a woman whose identity is often formulated by national and cultural boundaries, she evolves through a culturally negotiated process into empowerment. The film analysis through several scenes, frames, themes and imagery will address the research questions posed at the beginning:

*How does Mira Nair explore female migrant narratives in her postcolonial films, the Namesake and Mississippi Masala?*

*How do female migrants engage with cultural and racial cross-overs in the above mentioned two films?*

*How does Postcolonial film in the works of Nair engage with representation of the Other?*

*In what way can Nair be read within the paradigm of the Postcolonial cinema?*

While *The Namesake* focuses mostly on Gogol's narrative of identity crisis and his name at its central plot, it does connect the thematic strands with Aashima's migrant narrative. The film begins on a train which also signifies journeys and mobility – Ashoke reading a book and next to him is a man, who speaks to him about world travel. The scene echoes themes from Satyajit Ray's films (which also touch upon postcolonial themes) and Bengalis' passion for travel and crossing borders, their love of reading literature and politics.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

In 'The *Namesake*', the analysis rests on the female migrant Aashima and her hybrid identity especially focusing on the “liminal zone” which Homi Bhabha in his concept of hybridity defines as a Third Space. Paul Meredith’s analysis<sup>15</sup> in her paper *Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand* states that the hybrid identity is a conglomeration of cultures and is positioned within this third space, as ‘lubricant’ (Papastergiadis qtd in Meredith, 1997) in the conjunction of cultures.

“Thus, the third space is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a productive, and not merely reflective, space that engenders new possibility. It is an ‘interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative’ (Bhabha qtd. in P. Meredith, 1998)

According to Bhabha (1994, 1996), the hybrid identity has the power to negotiate between two cultures and such a quality of mediation allows them to exist within a spatiality of inclusion. Within Aashima’s character as a migrant woman, the “borderless” aspect of her name signifies that her identity through her diasporic journeys would situate herself in an interstitial space of belonging – between India and America. Her choice shows how migrant women like her often change from their identification solely with national culture to a more multicultural identity. Aashima re-inscribes herself through her final choice of belonging to both worlds, of her birth and her home of two decades. What Mohanty proposes in her *Feminism Without Borders* is shifting the Third World Woman from an object to a subject position whereby can narrate her own stories. As concurrent with Mohanty’s motive in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory Practicing Solidarity*, Nair’s filmic representation of Aashima as a migrant women is a more authentic portrayal of her circumstances, desires and critical agency. Aashima despite being a traditional Bengali woman is inflected with a sense of adventure and quiet strength and stands her in good stead through the travails of her diasporic life.

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<sup>15</sup> Hybridity in the Third Space: Rethinking Bi-cultural Politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Paper Presented to Te Oru Rangahau Maori Research and Development Conference, 7-9 July 1998, Massey University Paul Meredith, (Ngati Kaputuhi/Pakeha), University of Waikato

Mohanty's assertion of the grounded struggles within contexts of their own oppression of Third World Women applied in the case of female migrants like Aashima in *The Namesake* encompasses her conflicts between dualistic cultural values which is shown somewhat resolved through her hybrid self, which she realizes in the end. In this context, Mohanty's argument of Third World Women as a monolith without an examination of their lived reality is called into question. Often adapting to the western ideals as means of survival, adjusting expectations and their own needs to changing climate, political upheaval and socio-economic status, the migrant women like Aashima realize that their hybrid selves are an identity that occupies an interstitial space due to their migrant history.

Their need to hold on to the Indian value system is a result of displacement and loss, and as in the case of Aashima, a desire to go back and reclaim some element of themselves while still maintaining a life in America. The situation reflects much of what diasporic Indians settle for after their children grow up, as they realize their changed selves no longer fit in one single world. Within the conception of cultural representation of the Third World Woman, the narrative of migrant women are accorded a speaking voice as they relate their experiences of childbirth, snow, Christmas through their own gendered postcolonial lens. Aashima is shown celebrating Christmas and baking cake for her children's birth along with the traditional Bengali rice pudding (*payesh*) to allow a more hybrid and multicultural upbringing in her home that her children can relate to. While many of Aashima's experiences are represented through her own voice making their struggles different to those of western women, they also highlight friendships, interconnections and similarities as with bridges that connect the cities of Calcutta and New York.

## **CONTEXT AND INTERVENTION: AS A POSTCOLONIAL FILM DEPICTING MIGRANT THEMES**

*“Recreating an identity in the liminal zone of exile.”* (Shohat, 312)

As a postcolonial film, Nair touches upon migrant themes of non-belonging and isolation, also using the imagery of trains and bridges to signify spatiality and cultural continuum, connections, movement. To address the third research sub-question of *Nair being read as a postcolonial film* the following themes, motifs, frames and dialogues should be taken into consideration. The underlying theme of the film depicted is displacement, sense of home and loss which remains a transnational and fractured space portrayed through the fluidity of images that spill into one another between cities and countries as the characters traverse multiple spatialities and temporalities. Thus, the postcolonial framework engages with how *Nair explores female migrant narratives, the Namesake and representation of the Other?*

In this context, the camera becomes a decolonial device in Nair’s hands as she rests on the images of the ‘other’ and imbues them with meaning and context. Each object symbolizes its relation to the thread of the narrative weaving together emotions and affect. The festivals, idols, winding staircases in old houses of Calcutta, singing in the open terrace all convey a world that has often been represented as exotic and unreal in mainstream depictions. The loneliness of a migrant life is often reflected through frames that show empty apartments cold and stark, devoid of human touch as Ashoke lands for his teaching position in Ohio, missing Aashima. Aashima makes cards for families back home in India, sticking sequins in place signifying their cultural ties. As Aashima sits by her window making the christmas/ new year cards, a Christmas tree stands next to her, reminiscent of American tradition within Indian homes. Aashima’s negotiated space of belonging and in-betweenness is conveyed through every scene and frame where she seeks a belonging between two worlds.

Lahiri’s writing is often transformed in Nair filmic canvas into an idea of home into a multiplicity of locations, a dispersed consciousness that lies somewhere between nations and cultures. In doing so, she projects the cities of Calcutta and New York with her imagery of bridges, art and cosmopolitanism highlighting the similarities but also suggesting the gaps between generations and

how they experience exile differently. Gogol's conflict with his name and dichotomous identity is different from his parents who remain nostalgic for the India they have left behind and wish to return to someday. The movie circles the universal theme of home, which is a transnational space in Nair's postcolonial cinema – for her migrant characters, as for herself it is not simply situated in specific geographical locations rooted to land and nation but takes the idea of nationhood beyond narrow shores. Much like Indian migrants, expats and communities scattered throughout the globe, whether in Uganda or the Caribbean, home and identity are both in flux and a hybrid concept that derives from the exilic existence. Nair's re-telling of the stories of migrant lives put them at the center of the narrative even as she creates front he margins. Every nuanced detail is devoid of any exoticization and remains integral to the plot and storyline

### **ANALYSIS – CASE STUDIES: FEMALE MIGRANT IDENTITIES AND BORDERLESSNESS**

*“Consequently, as categories ‘migrant cinema’ and ‘postcolonial cinema’ are often interlocked, for migration is frequently an o spring of colonial dislocations. Yet the term ‘postcolonial cinema’ not only addresses the question of mobility and uprooting, but also wider issues of visual hegemony and aesthetic counter-discourses. The ‘postcolonial’ in postcolonial cinema functions, therefore, not simply as an adjective or declination of the migrant condition, but as a framework of analysis – an epistemological or optic standpoint through which films emerge in engagement with and as contestations of colonial dynamics and their legacies in the present, as well as epistemic devices capable of implementing a substantial departure from colonial paradigms of knowledge.” (Ponzanesi and Berger, 2016, 112)*

Spatiality and borders are an important context of migrant belongings within postcolonial film and as pointed out before, Nair uses the imagery of bridges and trains to suggest forward motion and connections between not just generations, but cultural worlds often separated by language and ethnicity. Nair's use of such images and frames highlight the cultural continuum.

Multilingualism is another aspect of postcolonial film (Ponzanesi and Verger, 2016) which is explored in Nair's depiction of Aashima's fractured self - from which her hybridity also emerges. The songs she sings, whether lullabies to soothe the children or at the beginning of the film are in Bengali highlighting her voice. Several sentences are uttered in Bengali especially in moments of critical and emotional juncture, even as she reprimands her children. The following scenes explore the postcolonial themes, frames and tropes that capture the lived reality of female migrant lives through several stages of Aashima's growth from a shy bride uneasy in her new surroundings to her process of becoming "American". Nair's exploration of Ashima's migrant narrative as a metaphor of hybrid identities is cast in the broader canvas of postcolonial themes of migration and displacement.

While addressing the main research and sub-questions, this analysis also highlights the essential decolonial aspect of the film depicted in its nuances and cultural details from clothing, gestures, selected frames to express movement, loss and isolation of the migrant experience. Through these scenes the evolution of Ashima's character will demonstrate how she negotiates a hybrid identity within liminal space of exile and belonging giving to a new empowered self.



Figure 9. The Namesake. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

The film highlights the south Asian custom of arranged marriages not as a forced institution with orientalist overtones but as a cultural custom where two strangers often bond with each other through the commonality of experiences. Nair's first scene of Aashima's trying to fit into her husband-to-be's shoes represents her desire to see and experience a world beyond where she was born. The first scene of Ashoke and Ashima's meeting with their families in tow is portrayed as any Bengali family would meet amidst tea and perhaps asking the girl to sing a song or recite a poem as in Ashima's case. Ashoke's father questions Aashima, "Will you be able to go halfway across the world, live in a cold city with freezing winters?" highlights the intrinsic dilemma of all migrant women - living on "unaccustomed earth"<sup>16</sup> with a stranger, far from home.



Figure 10. The Namesake. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

The few scenes chosen represent Aashima's beginning of a new life as a migrant woman, the changes she does not anticipate, her curiosity and sense of adventure at marrying a man who lives halfway across the world is a foreshadowing of her journey and transformation. All the trepidation of a new

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<sup>16</sup> Lahiri's novel of the same name written tells the story of Indian diaspora

life is also exemplified in her grandmother's advice when she says: Embrace the new life but do not forget the old. Enjoy and live your new life to the fullest." It symbolizes what Aashima life would become, remnants of her old life would be slowly chipped away even as she tries to hold on to them, as she heeds her grandma's advice in embracing/ adopting to her new country.



Figure 11. The Namesake. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

The above scene, which is goodbye at the airport, shows Ashoke and Aashima looking back and they wave to their families who have all gathered to see them off. A scene that is familiar to every South Asian migrant especially newlyweds - Aashima's face captures all the clashing emotions, leaving her home, her family and country of 20 odd years and beginning a new life in a new country. The garlands around their neck signify that they were married recently, perhaps a day back and have been advised by elders to keep the garb. Aashima wears a red going-aways sari and *alta* (red hand paint worn by Bengali brides) symbolizing her newly married status. Every detail is painstakingly depicted with sensitivity alludes to migrant women, who often leave home after marriage. Addressing the aim of postcolonial film using alternate ways of telling stories, subverting Eurocentric norms and

presenting the other side, these details inscribe hybridity through the cultural conventions of minority groups. In doing so, the cinematic text emerges as a site of production of cultural knowledge as well.



Figure 12. The Namesake. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

In this scene, Ashoke sits with a rug on the floor (practice familiar in Bengal's tropical summers) and explains the subway map to Aashima. While the scene depicts a moment of bonding between the characters, two strangers alone in a foreign land forming a tentative relationship over common experiences and loneliness - Aashima looks coy in her white and red sari, often worn by Bengali women with her traditional white and red bangles (ivory and coral) and asks Ashoke, "What if I get lost?" to which Ashoke replies, "Do you think I will let you get lost?". Ashoke is shown as a sensitive man who despite Ashima rudimentary mistakes (shrinking his clothes in the laundry) attempts to pacify her with apologies. Despite the fact that they have had an arranged marriage, the couple is shown to develop a loving relationship cemented through the commonality of their experiences and shared background. Mohanty's interventions on the Third World Woman as a monolith represented through a homogenous narration of disempowerment loses a multilayered, contextual analysis to reveal how the particular is often universally significant. (Mohanty, 2003).



Figure 13. *The Namesake*. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

One of the most poignant and embodied experiences for Aashima is giving birth in a foreign land. As a migrant woman, her pregnancy seen through a gendered lens encapsulates the ambiguities of a migrant life: her experience of the pain of childbirth is metamorphosed into her mental state of loss and alienation in her new cultural surroundings. As described in the book pregnancy is alluded to migration – being in a perpetual state of flux, fear and anxiety reflecting Aashima’s own state of dispossession and loss. While she lies in her hospital bed without her family’s loving presence, her helplessness and loneliness is compounded as she sheds silent tears and times her contractions. In this scene, Aashima is uncomfortable in her smock that the hospital has provided and asks for a longer gown, to which the nurse replies, “...and hide those gorgeous legs?”. She watches in exasperation as the nurse unsuccessfully tries to fold her sari into a tumbled mass, heightening the alienness of her experience of giving birth alone in a foreign country. Herein, Aashima’s re-telling of her own lived experience converts the embodied state of childbirth into a journey of ambivalence and impermanence that is unique due her migrant status.

Like every female migrant, Aashima feels at odds with the culture, where she does not feel a sense of belonging (at this stage, she is a young mother and not working yet) and wishes to go back to

India. The scene is portrayed with an inside look into a migrant couple's life through their eyes, and motivations for often staying back in a foreign country where they feel displaced. Ashoke consoles Ashima's crying and tells her: "Think of Gogol's future. This is the land of opportunity, Aashima." The scene would also find resonance with many young migrant women and others who often stay back in their host countries for the sake of their children, education and future opportunities. Within the framework of Nair's postcolonial cinema, the representation of the Third World/ migrant women is thus configured from a position of difference and a space that is not geographically located in countries of the Global South only. Specifically, as noted Nair's narrative spans time and space Aashima morphs and discovers herself in her cultural environment.



Figure 14. The Namesake. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

The other scene that also highlights Ashima's migrant experience and strikes a chord with the diaspora in general is the loss of a parent while in a foreign land. Ashima's father's death is sudden and ubiquitous and a phone call from her brother informs Ashoke who offers to break the news to her. He does so with as much compassion he can muster between her sobs, holding her as Gogol awakes to his mother's cries. The experience of loss and tragedy is often compounded by being alone, away from the presence of family for comfort and is shown in Ashima's stalled movements at the airport when she says, "I cannot go. I cannot see them like this." At this Ashoke implores her

to be strong in the face of such tragedy. The scene resonant with the myriad emotions of helplessness in a host country is often characterized with stoic understanding and acceptance of the losses migrants often come to bear in their diasporic state.



Figure 14. *The Namesake*. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

This scene depicts the essential dichotomy of being Indian parents to American teenagers. Gogol is embarrassed and upset at being named after Nikolai Gogol, the Russian writer who was an “eccentric genius” gets bullied by classmates for being named after a hypochondriac, depressed and paranoid author. Aashima says, “And don’t call us guys. Sometimes, when I close my eyes and listen to you both, I feel I have given birth to strangers.” Her reaction is typified as an immigrant mother who feels a sense of displacement as her children grow up, cultural alienation from her kids’ American identity morphed through their separate environment and peers, an experience they often do not share. In this context, Ashima’s hybridity is important for she exists in a space of in-betweenness - situated between her Indian and American identity.

The film captures cleverly through its frames the alienation of snow as Aashima feels at odds with the weather, the clothing and the cultural changes. She recoils from her experience at the laundromat, watching a man take off his shirt in public before putting it into the washer. The scenes capture her unease with the unfamiliar customs, sometimes with wry humor and at times, with resignation but

throughout it all, as resonant with most migrant female figures. While there is a desire to adapt and define a new identity for themselves outside the borders of their country of birth, their communal restrictions. Aashima's agency and choice is somewhat thwarted by her husband's position, as she assumes a dependent status without pursuing a career for herself, instead having to devote herself to the demands of raising a family. While Aashima struggles to adjust to her life in the American continent, the harsh New England winters often projecting Nair's own dilemma with the weather and winter clothing, she ultimately resolves to give in her best and adopt herself. She writes back to her parents leaving out the unpleasant details of her new life: the discomfort of her new surroundings, awkwardly walking through the snow in her husband's winter coat and her small university apartment. Filtered through Mohanty's postcolonial lens, they touch upon the realities and contextual struggles of Third World Women as migrants.

Aashima, a resident of old Calcutta is used to bigger houses, sunshine and perhaps household help as a middle class woman. Transported to the United States in her husband's functionally small apartment, she feels shackled, bereft of the freedom of her familial space. Even in the first scene with Aashima's waking up in an icy cold apartment of her American home, a climate alien to her mind and body, she is confronted with the dilemma of resting and taking up her husband's offer of making food or doing it herself. When her husband asks her to rest due to jet lag commenting, "It is the American way" she replies with a shy smile, "I cannot.". The scene uncovers the change of gender dynamics between a young migrant couple who are often forced to adopt to changed customs and ways. While Nair's camera peeks into the inner nooks and crannies of their diasporic lives, it is used as a gendered and postcolonial lens to document the personal that becomes political. Aashima's confusion with winter wear walking through the snow reflects migrant lives as lived – Nair comments that the scene of Aashima walking to the laundromat trying to "make sense of the snow" is a perennial dilemma for many migrant women for whom the snow doesn't signify the joy of winter or Christmas carols but the loneliness of American suburbia, a space devoid of family or sense of home and often marked by long frosty winters indoors.

The biggest loss comes on Ashoke's sudden death during Christmas as Aashima switches on every light in the house (a hindu custom) while crying. The contrast of death of a loved one with the Christmas decor juxtaposed around her, frames contrasting with each other to further highlight the alienation of migrant lives in suburban America. While the role of Postcolonial film is defining the

position of the self and the other within multicultural societies allowing for a more decolonial episteme - Nair uses alternate spatialities and images juxtaposed through pivotal moments in Aashima's life to construct a more decolonized and contextual understanding of her subjectivity. Another use of alternative frames to depict the cultural lapses is Maxine's arriving at Ashoke funeral in black clothes while everybody else wears white, which is the color of mourning for Hindus. Nair's clever use of this scene highlights the theme of polarity and cultural dissonance which at this stage causes a break in the story, highlighting the essential differences between Maxine and Gogol in the context of their immigrant backgrounds and history.

It is only when her children are grown and married and her husband passes away, that Aashima expresses her wish to her friend who she works with at the library, to live in India for six months and in America for the rest of the year. This choice as Nair herself recounts in Director's Note (British Edition of *The Namesake*) is the first time she asserts herself and her agency which emerges from a space of inclusion between two countries - as a migrant woman, and mother to two American adults, her life is tied to her children and yet she feels nostalgic for her homeland where she also belongs. Thus, Aashima chooses to live in her state of in-betweenness as she announces her decision recounting her memories in the United States that have become a part of her identity. In a scene with her friend at the library Aashima speaks of feeling lost (after Ashoke's death and Gogol's marriage) when she suggests remembering a time when she was truly happy which she calls "following her bliss". This scene is crucial because it makes her realize how much she has changed due to her migrant life which is now situated in-between and her identity is no longer solely that of an Indian woman, but as a migrant woman is a hybrid one. The images Aashima conjures on closing her eyes are a montage of her life as a migrant woman with her husband, the hardships and happiness, isolation and friendships. What Mohanty explicates in her cartographies of feminism are essentially situated in discontinuous locations between the west and the east. It is often this discontinuity of location that Nair charts in Aashima's narrative for they are never anchored on a specific soil - much like the identities of her migrant female characters are fluid in their multicultural expressions.

Aashima sees Gogol's avoidance of his parents as an estrangement symbolic of losing her family all over again - she points out that leaving India to get married was accompanied by a loss of her own family, a trauma she feels all over again. Herein, Aashima's experience of dislocation with her children especially Gogol is filtered through her own identity as a migrant woman for whom her family signifies ties to her country, selfhood and cultural identity. Her loss of her children to the American way of life is conflated with her sense of displacement and non-belonging as a migrant

woman – it becomes a part of her collective diasporic experience of losing a family, language and identity. The following scene of the last Christmas celebrated by Aashima before she leaves for India and sells her home, shows an amalgamation of diasporic American life - an image that captures the palimpsest of postcolonial films that Nair conveys through her frames. Christmas is celebrated in a South Asian household in suburban America encompassing the ritual decorations, and tree with gifts beneath and a smattering of Indian customs. The scene shows the women sitting down, some on the floor and some getting ready to sing while one wears a sari and others a mix of eastern and western garb. As the voices rise in cacophony there are Bengali sentences and expressions mingling with English phrases - an aspect of multilingualism that Nair highlights in her films.



Figure 16. The Namesake. Dir. Mira Nair, 2006. Fox Searchlight Pictures. IMDb. Web.

Nair expresses the complexity of South Asian diasporic life often through her own life experience of suburban isolation, the imagery of the garage which has never been portrayed with such authenticity on the big screen. From the first scene in the film where she dons the shoes with “Made in America” inscribed in their insoles, it foreshadows a desire that will take her beyond the limited confines of her existence and somehow define both her tragedies and triumphs. When she says, “I want to be free” it signifies her space of inclusion which is literally situated between two worlds, one she was born into and the one inherited by her children and shared with her husband. Nair also

examines the blurring of borders through the very name of her Aashima, which means ‘borderless’ or limitless:

*“True to the meaning of her name, she will be without borders, without home of her own, a resident everywhere and nowhere”* (Lahiri, p. 276)

## **CONCLUSION:**

*Consequently, both the narration and aesthetics of the so-called ‘postcolonial cinema’ deal with the waves of migrants from Latin America, Africa and Asia moving into the European Union, with inclusion, exclusion and pluri-ethnicity as well as with modalities of representation and politics of encounter. (Ponzanesi and Berger, 2016, 111)*

Nair uses her own cinematic language to construct this narrative of a female migrant – while the film begins with Aashima’s displacement, discomfort and cultural negotiation, it also leads to the final resolution of her hybrid self as borderless. Thus, addressing the main research question, *How does Mira Nair explore female migrant narratives in the Namesake* conception of borders and bridges are used succinctly by Nair in reflecting the fissures and fluidity of migrant identities for they are not fixed entities bordered between one nation and the other, or one culture and the other. They flow from one to the other and exist in both or a subliminal space of belonging – Aashima’s final decision to live in the United States for her children and in India, the home she grew up in is emblematic of this Third Space which moves beyond geographical boundaries. A duality of language within these postcolonial films often resonates with the duality of diasporic life observed in Mira Nair’s films.

*How Nair’s film The Namesake, engages with the representation of the Other*, is posed in the research sub-question - in answering this, Aashima’s narrative told through with her as the central subject expresses a different modality of representation of the Other (Ponzanesi and Berger, 2016). Nair uses the voice of her migrant female characters to tell collective stories of such displacement rendering them with a speaking voice that is heard by a universal multicultural audience. Aashima’s name meaning “without borders” is also a play on her migrant female identity and as such her desire to transcend the definitions of her national character and her conception of a Third World Woman who is limited in her desires as in her ambitions.

Experiences of isolation and displacement are narrated through the scenes, plot lines and frames including Christmas scenes and death of a loved one depicting American suburbia as a space of loneliness as opposed to Hollywood depictions of security and American dream. Addressing the research sub-question of racial and cultural crossovers, Aashima's subsequent inclusion through cultural negotiation/crossovers is traced through her multiple experiences of negotiating herself into interstitial space of belonging between his immigrant country and country of origin. The dichotomies of such a position have been analyzed through Nair's representation of female migrant trajectory which moves beyond a representation of the Other in postcolonial cinema to defining new selves.

The third research sub-question of *how Nair can be read within the paradigm of postcolonial cinema* is answered through a counter-discourse that she creates through her depiction of migrant women's journeys through space and time. The landscapes of New England, New York and Calcutta flow into one another through the story-telling showing how the world of the 'self' and the 'other' are continuous through migrant journeys creating bridges between cultural worlds. The migrant character's life is not told through a Eurocentric formulation of the exotic other, but represents a decolonial foray into the reality of their lives, heartbreaks and triumphs. Whether this is Aashima choosing to marry Ashoke and traveling to another world, feeling displaced in her experiences of pregnancy and loss of husband and finally reconciling her hybrid self that exists between two worlds. However, as immigrants born and raised in both cultures, these films embody both subjectivities – it is precisely their insider outsider status that adds to their postcolonial vision and need to create visual metaphors from the margins.

The articulation of these narratives in postcolonial cinema of Nair correlate and translate entangled positionalities in gender, culture and language. In the process, it attempts to encapsulate/ represent a new way of seeing migrant lives which rests on much longer histories of colonial oppression, power struggle and adaptation, the female migrant identity would be seen as a metaphor for hybridity in an age of chaotic social change, displacement and identity crisis. What also emerges into critical inquiry is whether Nair working within the framework of postcolonial cinema manage to subvert the colonial binary as they depict migrant lives that traverse multicultural worlds.

Women are most often bound by social definitions that shape their motivations and choices – as the characters in the films, both Mina and Aashima particularly depict how the process of migration can change this pattern and break these boundaries/ limitations. The cinematic vocabulary of Nair's films foregrounds a new identity – one that exists in many worlds simultaneously. Nair sensibilities much like her female migrant subjects dismantle essentialist conceptions of race and hybridity as illustrated through the analysis of the above films *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake*. As noted, the female identity is hybrid in its conception in both films analyzed through a semiotic and postcolonial analysis of Nair's films. In addition, it also offers an intersectional view of the migrant female as phrased in the research questions foregrounding Bhabha and Mohanty's theories. While both their critical practices approach in different ways, they weave together strands that remain organically entrenched in the decolonization of the Third World Woman especially in the figure of the migrant. What Mohanty argues for in terms of production of cultural discourse called the Third World calls for an antiimperialist feminist praxis – her theoretical interventions find political practice in Nair's films. Third World women are shown to be active participants in their self-representation through their embodied experiences of displacement and empowerment. In Nair's films, they emerge often as active narrators having a speaking voice (often denied in other forms of Cinema, including Third World Cinema) and who fashion their own identities beyond ethnic or national conceptions of gender.

Why hybridity and third in the construction and projection/ representation of migrant identities: going back to Bhabha's conception of culture being challenged by hybridity, the presence of migrants in the First World has blurred boundaries of self and the other especially as they become natives of the land, through each successive generation. This is also why the choice of Mina and Aashima is deliberate - they represent two kinds of female migrants, second and first generation and how they question the ideas of identity within the native country/ culture/ collective. Nair's play on names allude to elemental traits and desires – both Aashima and Mina's names signify some aspect of their migrant selves. While Aashima means without borders, or boundless signifying freedom, Mina almost gives herself a name that becomes her identity of mixed exotic influences. Both women

refuse to be defined or confined by their environments, social expectations while remaining true to themselves and their values, they walk through borders asserting the limitless possibilities of migrant lives. Both academic scholarship and western film and media representations of Third World Women and female migrants reproduce axioms of colonization through stereotyped notions of victimhood, or exotic portrayals. Thus, they continuously produce narratives from a figure of absence and loss, without agency or voice.

Mohanty also alludes to the construction of women as a category not simply through her gender but also imperialist histories, class, race and ethnicity which remain tied to their journeys across borders as migrants figuring into the everyday micro-politics of their existence (work, family) as well as to the macro-politics (foreign policy, immigration). In the case of a filmmaker like Nair situated in a particular geographical location (United States, Africa, India) she can not only harness resources but her own experience of inhabiting a dual space both as a migrant woman herself and as an artist in exile. Thus, through her hybrid visuality she is able to portray Third World Women's varied contexts of struggle, growth and emancipation are laid bare through an intersectional analysis of their character's graphs especially in their trajectory of migrant women. The cinematic text thus becomes a canvas and space to articulate hybrid identities through the representation of these women. As Bhabha (1990) says in his interview to Rutherford, cultures are constantly morphing through hybridity which engender new possibilities in their becoming - whether it is the representation and visualization of women like Mina and Aashima on screen, it articulates the changing contours of an American identity from within. The politics of representation thus forms a connecting thread in Nair's articulation of female migrant identities especially in the discursive histories of Mina or Aashima in her films *Mississippi Masala* and *The Namesake*.

The reason why their articulation is particularly significant in the context of postcolonial films is because of their imperial histories, their identities as female migrants are complicated further by the violence of a racialized and gendered space that has emerged from conflict, nostalgia and non-belonging. Formerly colonized countries and their inhabitants have experienced displacement and loss of identity as in the case of Mina (and her family) who had been formerly uprooted from their original countries (India) and brought to Africa. This leads to an entrenched duality due to the coexistence of two languages and cultures side by side even as they migrate further to England or America. Herein emerges the understanding of a dichotomous existence where a colonizer's language becomes one's own and yet not, their tradition, culture and manners have inhabited their land and life and yet are those of an oppressor. Mina and Aashima both negotiate their identities as

migrant women through these intersecting oppressions that question their belonging, loyalty and identity further. Art has always imitated society and our perceptions, stereotypes and inherent biases have been based on our visual experiences of understanding right and wrong - thus the moral underpinnings highlight how identity shifts occur in a cultural landscape that impacts relationships within a community.

Nair often remarks that in her films there is an attempt to understand the Other beyond western media interpretation and prejudices in creating a knowledge base and voice that is familiar and universal. In doing so, she often transcends the Eurocentric denominations of identity, the 'us' versus 'them' and a continuous polarization that have been brought upon in the aftermath of political and cultural war against the Other. Often mainstream narratives of film and media fail to address and portray the female migrant subjectivities through their history of imperialism and intersectional analysis of racial and gendered narratives. As dissected through the postcolonial feminist readings of the films, Nair's representation of migrant women characters goes beyond the essentialist notions of Third World female identity as monolithic victims of patriarchy. Thus, the need for a more comparative basis of analysis where Third World Feminisms are contextual and connected to lived experiences through collective understanding of female identities has been a gap which this thesis attempts to address. As my analysis of *The Namesake* and *Mississippi Masala* elucidates, the migrant woman is not only simply a "placeholder marking memories of an empire" (Ponzanesi, 2012) but a metaphor for hybrid identities that remains common to all gendered and racialized subjectivities.

The diaspora scattered in its loyalties are not simply specimens for ethnographic study but open a dialogue towards identities that create bridges. While diasporic cinema would attempt to present histories buried or glossed over, they would essentially help decolonize the western patriarchal gaze for an in-betweenness of narrative that situates the female migrant spectator in a position of equal representation. From sexual tropes of the exotic female body in film, a cultural other, encompassing deviant sexuality, Postcolonial film especially in works of Nair, and others have brought forth stories that are "universal while still being culturally specific". In this vein, postcolonial film seeks to subvert the hegemony of the Eurocentric gaze by defining a new aesthetics of hybridity through diasporic feminist practices. In addition, Nair's work addresses some of the shortcomings of Third Cinema highlighted by Ranjana Khanna in her essay, "*The Battle of Algiers and The Nouba of the Women of Mount Chenoua: From Third to Fourth Cinema*" (1998)

*“the depiction of marginalized women is agential and given speaking voices, step forward due to the feminist intervention in film medium”* (Khanna, 1998 ).

While the revolutionary style of guerilla and Third Cinema reproduced certain patriarchal stereotypes, postcolonial cinema cast within diasporic spaces allows female migrant identities to fully unravel their displacement and their choices towards defining hybrid identities in a space of inclusion, belonging and empowerment. The depiction of the South Asian migrant women has often been dissolved into cinematic tropes of model minority which erases the complexity of the migrant identity – these figures have become fixtures of submissive conformity that never question of challenge the dominant status quo preferring to devote themselves into STEM careers within the ubiquity of corporate offices. What Nair has endeavored to achieve through her decolonized feminist approach within the medium of postcolonial cinema is an alternative re-telling, an exercise that allows a different reading. In the vein of an orientalist construction of the Third World, the category of the Indian/ South Asian woman in the mold of virtuous and traditional, incapable of choice or agency, is a patriarchal construct that has been perpetuated through her discursive representation in Bollywood films and media. The voice of the Indian woman in this representation has been as much silenced as it has been in western feminist scholarship.

In my research, I would also like to add Nair's creative oeuvre also stems from her own experience of the dualities of migrant identities themselves, and whose gendered position arises not simply from being female but also migrant. They contribute to the reading of Nair within the paradigm of postcolonial cinema thus addressing the research questions framed at the Introduction. Additionally, this research involves my own position as a South Asian migrant woman living and working in the United States, writer, teacher, journalist. It has also evolved through the careful curating of the filmic practices of postcolonial filmmakers and my own background in Postcolonial Studies within English Literature and how they often convert the lived experiences of the diaspora with a site of resistance and new knowledge. An identity chosen by country of residence is far more empowering than one of accidental birth because the process of becoming is a far more immersive experience. As evident in the narratives of the female migrants in Nair's postcolonial films, it accompanies deeper understanding of one's own identity, position and belonging in a world of shifting values. The thesis consolidates how the migrant narratives in Nair's postcolonial cinema articulate a spatiality of belonging, productivity and inclusion through their postcolonial analysis applying a deconstructive

gaze to understand these fissured subjectivities and their embodied experiences. Connecting narratives of diasporic identity with larger issues of representation, postcolonial cinema attempts to reconfigure new language to relate experience of immigration and displacement through specific themes and cultural motifs.

### **SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH:**

This thesis is limited in its scope but can be used for further research within the field of migrant studies, postcoloniality of film studies and most importantly for analyzing female hybrid identities. The presence of the South Asian diaspora has led to many questions and narratives within film and media from immigration practices to acculturation and belonging. The South Asian diaspora scattered across the world has been often the result of colonial practices of displacement leading to movement of people whose identity as result, has become fraught and problematic. The presence of the Trinidadian community in West Indies (Naipaul) and the once dislocated Indian community in Uganda, Africa expelled later by Idi Amin, occupy a space of non-belonging which is hybrid and allows for the emergence of new subjectivities.

Tracing from such colonial histories to current practices of migration, not much has been focused or centered around the female migrant who undergoes intersectional oppressions through several processes of displacement. This research can be used as a jumping off point for using migrant identities and their agency, to understand further and apply them irrespective of gender. Ella Shohat explicates in her work, *“Gender and the Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema” (1991)*, the deviant representation of the Other in visual culture has been accompanied with sexual tropes that demonize the female migrant identity which postcolonial cinema seeks to subvert. As a differentiated way of looking and understanding reality, it breaks from the Eurocentric notions of racialized and gendered portrayal of the female cultural other using a filmic grammar and methodology that is unique to the depiction of diasporic lives. The need to express through a different language, filmic grammar and norm would allow the changing viewership of a multicultural audience a differential gaze. The language of Postcolonial Cinema in Nair’s films often called Cinema Diaspora is already decolonized because its written from the margins back to the center. Thus, the need for a decolonial medium in cinema through an oppositional gaze that cuts dominant hegemonic patterns of viewing migrant identities and bodies is called for. The limitations of this research lay

within the scope of a MA thesis and could be further explored in a Ph.D dissertation – my formulation of a “brown gaze” in postcolonial cinema brought about by a changing spectatorship of feminist and multicultural audience can be analyzed further through the work of postcolonial filmmakers within the diaspora. It would accord new ways of seeing and understanding hybridity and filtering migrant narratives through an oppositional gaze allowing for a more decolonial way of viewing such subjectivities.

While the thesis began with the problematic conception of hybridity, it moves towards the transformative potential of migrant identities. From the first generation to the next, migrants can serve to unite worlds separated by borders of culture by highlighting essential commonalities and causes. To my critical observation, this ties in also with Mohanty’s feminism across borders idea of gender justice for she argues on the need to conceive feminisms beyond disparate categories of First World and Third World.

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