

(Re)construction of Identity in *Mississippi Massala*

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My paper focuses on the way an Indian movie director (re)constructs the main character's identity, applying the concept of 'massala' to an Indian woman from Uganda, in a delightful love-story with an African-American man in the late 20th century 'multiculturalist' America.

In the first part of my paper I will define Mira Nair's concept of 'massala', and then I will give it a first interpretation through a parallel with Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of 'heteroglossia' and I will explore the political contexts in which they were created, in order to show how the concept of identity can be understood and (re)constructed as celebrating 'diversity', that is, how different influences can be harmoniously combined in one and the same person.

In the second part of my paper I will attempt to interpret the same concept in an opposite way, through a comparison with Jacques Derrida's 'deconstruction', in order to show the difficulty of actually redefining oneself.

Mississippi Massala (1991) is the second great film of Indian born movie director Mira Nair. It is written by Sooni Taraporevala, and explores the story of a combination between an African-American man – Demetrius, played by Denzel Washington - and an Indian woman – Mina, played by Sarita Choudhury - coming from India. And, as the second half of the title tells us, Mina's identity will be one of the most important issues to be defined. According to the dictionary, 'massala' is "a variety of spices in different shades", and, in my opinion, the definition can be applied to the movie regarding Mina's cultural identity.

Her story begins in Uganda, Africa, where her father, an Indian lawyer, provides the family with comfort and security until the nationalist Idi Amin confiscates the property of tens of thousands of Indians and orders them to leave immediately. They move to Greenwood, Mississippi, where the lawyer and his wife (Roshan Seth and Sharmila Tagore) own a motel. Mina, (Sarita Choudhury), a child with sketchy memories of Africa, has turned into a beautiful woman of 24, with an American accent that immediately suggests she does not share all of her family's ideas.

One day, she crashes with her car into the van of a young black man (Denzel Washington), and exchanges addresses and perhaps a subtle glance of curiosity. He's interested too, and eventually they go out on a date. This is not the sort of social life Mina's parents approve of; they expect their daughter to marry within their extended community of Indian exiles, and forbid her to see Demetrius. His family accepts her at first, since they have so much in common – both are people of colour, both families had been persecuted, none of them remembers their true country of origin. Even so, after all of the local Indian motel owners boycott Demetrius's rug-cleaning company, the blacks get angry, too.

The film has a happy end, however, in the sense that the two finally decide to run away from home and get married, but without forgetting who they are: the last scene shows both Mina and Demetrius walking on the beach, she is dressed like an Indian woman and he is dressed like an African man.

Religion, history and tradition are very important elements in defining one's cultural identity. And Mira Nair uses them throughout the movie in order to both justify and argue against a possible union between Mina and Demetrius. She opens the film with a very nice song the Indians are singing when forced to leave Uganda, a song that becomes the anathema of the Indian Diaspora in America, and which might be the very first definition of a 'massala' identity : 'My shoes are Japanese/My pants are English/ My red hat is Russian/ But my heart- it's all Indian'." In what follows, we can hear her family speaking English with an Indian accent, her mother sings in Indian, there are special occasions when they all dress like Indians, and the priest advises them: "We should not forget our religion, our past, our gods."

Since Mina's identity is the main interest here, we should also pay attention to three women: the one who directed the movie, the one who wrote the script and the one who plays Mina. We will see that her character is the result of a very interesting combination among the lives and real experiences of those three Indian women.

The first is Mira Nair, the daughter of an Indian civil servant, born in India and who came to America in 1976 with a full scholarship to Harvard to study Sociology, after she had began it in New Delhi during Indira Gandhi's very controversial rule/dictatorship. Since she came to America she turned to documentary and artistic movies, all of them dealing with American or Asian Indians in different situations.

She is quoted by Samuel Freedman in the New York Times in 1992:

Mr. Nair knows firsthand the dialectic of Diaspora, the constant tension between departing and arriving. 'When I left India at 19, I was rooted in a certain reality' the 35-year-old director said recently. 'And since then life has been very fluid [...] I used to have a joke when people asked me where I live. [...] I'd say <I live on Air India>. But the other side is that you live between your ears. You carry your home within yourself. That's a nice sounding cerebral concept, but the truth is that you are torn.' (Freedman 1)

The second is Sooni Taraporevala, the daughter of an Indian businessman from Bombay. She was the one who took care of the racial problems involved in the love-story, writing the script as a remainder of her own origin and of the fact that her father had allowed her to apply to Harvard only because he was certain that if she won admission she would never receive the necessary scholarships. And he was happy when she broke up with her Chicagoan boyfriend, the same way Mina's father doesn't approve of her love-affair with African-American Demetrius.

And, the third, Sarita Choudhury, who played Mina because, as Samuel Freedman tells us in the New York Times:

[Sarita] had grown up in Jamaica where her father worked as a government biologist. India was 'like a storybook more than a reality' ,[...] kept alive by her father's stories and celebrations of the Hindu festival of Divali. Outside the household, however, Ms Choudhury, became so Jamaican she learned the patois of Kingston's slums.' (Freedman 1)

The final result of this combination that makes Mina will be that this character, however American she likes to consider herself, and no matter how free of any racial prejudices, can't help saying she is a 'massala' when Demetrius asks her 'What are you?'

One way of understanding this 'massala' would be, in my view, using Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of 'heteroglossia' in the first half of the 20th century.

According to Christopher Norris in his article from *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory*, 'heteroglossia' is "a word derived from the two Greek words for 'other' and 'language', thus yielding the sense: 'that within discourse which cannot be reduced to the order of any single, self-authorized voice or code.'" (Norris 244) And, as the definition follows, "it is Bakhtin's view that no sign system is entirely self-enclosed, since each and every utterance takes rise from a heteroglossic multitude of meanings, values, social discourses, cultural codes, etc." (Norris 244)

According to James Zappen, one member of the Mikhail Bakhtin's Studies Association, 'heteroglossia' may be defined as "a complex mixture of languages and world views that is always, except in some imagined ideal condition, dialogized, as each language is viewed from the perspective of the others." (Zappen 1)

Where Mikhail Bakhtin was talking about a diversity of meanings and values and discourses that together give birth to one utterance, Mira Nair presents a diversity of cultures, traditions and languages that together give birth to one person. It is not very clear throughout the movie whether the result is a happy combination or not, but what it is clear is the fact that Mira does love to work with such a diversity.

And in order to better perceive what was that made both the Russian writer and the Indian movie director value such combinations, we could make an interesting parallel between the political contexts in which 'heteroglossia' and 'massala' were formulated.

Historically speaking, Mikhail Bakhtin was born in Orel, Western Russia, in 1895, that is, at the end of the Russian Empire. He made his studies at St. Petersburg University specializing in philosophy and literature at the beginning of the 20th century, a period of extremely important historical, political, social and literary changes. (Encarta 2004: 1) According to Michael Green in his article from *A Dictionary of Cultural and Critical Theory* he became a teacher at Venel and then Vitebsk and formed a group together with Voloshinov and Medvedev. According to James Zappen: "Bakhtin's interests in his early years apparently shaped his thinking throughout his career. His experience in Vilnius and Odessa exposed him to a rich and complex mix of different language groups, cultures and classes, illustrative of the mix languages that he would later call 'heteroglossia'." (Zappen 1)

And I think James Zappen's argument might be proved by briefly analyzing both the history and the geographical positions of the two towns mentioned above together with Bakhtin's experience in Vitebsk mentioned in Green's article.

It would be interesting to see, for example, that Vilnius is the capital and the largest city of Lithuania, in the southeastern part of the country. It was first chosen as the capital of Lithuania in 1323 and, after the union of 1589 of Lithuania and Poland the city became known as the center not only of Polish culture but also of Jewish learning. It was incorporated into the Russian Empire in 1795. During World War I the city was occupied by German forces from 1915 to 1918. After the German retreat, Vilnius was controlled successively by the Lithuanians, the Bolsheviks, and the Poles. In 1920, the USSR occupied the Polish-held city and transferred it to independent Lithuania. Although

the League of Nations awarded Vilnius to Lithuania, Poland reoccupied the city later that year. In 1939 the USSR captured the city, and in 1940 it became the capital of the newly formed Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. During World War II it was occupied by German forces from 1941 to 1944 and suffered heavy damage, its large Jewish population being virtually exterminated. (Encarta 2004:1)

Regarding Odessa and Vitebsk, they are both important towns, Odessa being situated in the South Central part of Ukraine, and Vitebsk in Northeastern Belarus. Historians believe that Odessa was founded in the site of an ancient Greek colony, then chosen by Crimean Tartars in the 14th century, turned by the Russians into a naval fortress on territory annexed from the Ottoman Empire in 1794, and occupied by German and Romanian forces between 1941 and 1944. Vitebsk is both a railroad junction and an industrial center that began its existence as an independent principality in the 11th century, was incorporated to Lithuania in 1320, taken by Poland in the 16th century, by Russia in 1772, and occupied by the German forces between 1941 and 1944. (Encarta 2004:1)

The one issue these three cities Bakhtin visited do have in common is their ethnic mosaic, their diversity of people, languages and religions in a period when Russian culture had become less nationalist and more cosmopolitan.

Literary and culturally speaking, the most important elements that seem to have shaped Bakhtin's perception of the relation among different elements of society are contemporary German philosophy and Einstein, according to Zappen, and the brilliant works of Rabelais and Dostoyevski, according to Michael Green. And I think it might be very interesting to see the influence these sources had upon him.

First, in Zappen's words:

He was receptive to Einstein's revelation of a complex unity of differences – his demonstration that “one body's motion has meaning only in relation to another body” – from which Bakhtin seems to have inferred that all meaning is relational, the result of a ‘dialogue’ between and among bodies – physical, political, conceptual.” (Zappen,1)

Regarding Francois Rabelais and Fyodor Dostoyevski, we know that both writers were preoccupied with depicting the philosophical and political concerns of their contemporaries, even if in different ways. The French writer from the 16th century used humor and social satire, pedagogic wisdom and political insight, emphasizing individual liberty and the enthusiasm for knowledge and life. The Russian writer from the 19th century (Golden Age) had a very complicated life under Tzar Nicholas I who arrested him and sent him to Siberia for his secret discussions of social problems and for what the Tzar feared to be revolutionary ideas. Dostoevsky's work is characterized by dark humor, and a direct and powerful attack on those who were, in his opinion, driving Russia to destruction by trying to build a society without God and therefore without genuine moral principles. (Lantz 1)

We should not forget that Bakhtin himself was forced to write under authoritarian regimes (Bolshevism, Stalinism, and Communism), which he opposed. From Rabelais he took the idea of ‘heteroglossia’ as “this vision of a language everywhere traversed by the energies of popular protest” (Norris 244), and from Dostoevsky, the idea of ‘heteroglossia’ in the novel, since the novel:

...is of all genres the most irrepressibly prone to generate a range of polyphonic meanings, voices, or subject positions whose sheer multiplicity cannot be reduced to any single omniscient narrative viewpoint. It belongs to a tradition – or counter-tradition – of anarchic and irreverent humor whose origins Bakhtin discovers in a certain (noncanonical) reading of the Socratic dialogues, and also, more directly, in the late Roman genre of Menippean satire. Thereafter it emerges at irregular intervals, mostly during periods when a strong (highly centralized) system of state or church control coexists with a folk-based culture wherein those dominant values are held up to mockery through forms of parodic inversion. (Norris 244)

I conclude my brief analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin by remarking how Physics, satiric French and Russian realist Golden Age literature, added to his experience as a teacher in cosmopolitan, multicultural Russian cities, helped him redefine the utterance so that he could oppose both extreme Formalism, that was only interested in technical devices, and Party Line literature that was only interested in the political context/propaganda. In Michael Green's terms: "It seems that the writings were of necessity 'double coded', though that quality and the celebration of difference has brought Bakhtin into the field of postmodernist thought." (Green 42)

Regarding Mira Nair, we don't really know very much about her life in India, what we do know is that she left her mother country under the rule of Indira Gandhi, India's third Prime Minister, from 1966 till 1981. Although there is no mention of the fact that Nair left India for political or economic reasons, her teenage years must have been marked by the economic and political crisis that took place at least until 1976, the year of her departure. Politically speaking, Indira Gandhi supported East Pakistani freedom fighters and in 1971 invaded Pakistan to liberate East Pakistan. In 1975, as a response to those who had convicted her for corruption, she jailed opposition politicians, censored the press, and took strong disciplinary measures against the corrupt bureaucracy. Even though she was successful at first, stopping the Hindu-Muslim riots, and stabilizing the prices, the stringent measures and corruption in the government continued, and she lost elections in 1977. Economically speaking she came to power during a severe crisis, she succeeded with the Green revolution (an effort to diversify and increase crop yields), and nationalized the wholesale trade in wheat in 1973. She lost support due to several unpopular moves after a worldwide crisis in 1975. (Oldenburg 1)

About her life in America we know that she loves to combine visual arts, theatre and the life as it is lived, in movies that depict, analyze and explore the lives of American-Asian-Indians. And how can an American-Asian-Indian be defined if not through this 'unity' in 'diversity'?

Another way of understanding the 'massala' would be the way Jacques Derrida's post-structuralism 'deconstructs' and 'reconstructs' one's identity. The only similarity between the Russian and the French theoretician is that they both formulated their concepts of 'heteroglossia' and 'deconstruction' as linguistic notions, and both were equally adopted and applied to ethnic movie studies. The first because of its mixture of utterances that influence one another, that is, a mixture of voices that make us wonder who is really speaking in a 'multiculturalist' movie, whose voice is heard and whose is silenced by what script writer and producer, against who is certain character defined and why and how. The second, because of his ideas about hidden hierarchies in language that helped minorities reverse these sort of binary oppositions like 'master/servant.'

However, according to Paul Norcross in his article from *A Dictionary of Literary and Cultural Theory*, Derrida is much more complicated than that.

Deconstructive criticism does not claim to resolve such textual conflicts and contradictions in some ideal Hegelian synthesis. Rather, it believes there to be something intrinsic to the structure of language (for Derrida-writing) which complicates any attempted textual unity. Derrida's terms "difference" and "dissemination" articulate both the possibility and the impossibility of pinning down a coherent, unproblematic meaning of a text. Derrida's modified concept of writing functions as a metaphor for the absence of both a unitary subject and a stable referent in any text, whether spoke or written. (Norcross 137)

If we read Nair's 'massala' from this perspective we may say Mina is a problematic character. She is an Indian, born in Uganda (Africa), and who lives in America. She speaks English with some Indian accent, she dresses like Americans except for special occasions when she becomes Indian again, she is an Indian but she has never been to India, she is in love with an African-American that her family disapproves of, and at the end, when she decides she is an American after all so she can do whatever she wants, race doesn't matter here, she gets dressed like an Indian and her black boyfriend like an African. We could say that Mina is an 'either-or' and 'neither-nor' at the same time: either an Indian or an American via Africa, neither an Indian nor an American, but a 'massala' of everything. In Sarita Coudhury's words: "Mina is someone who's mixed and matched until she's mixed up. When you have a mixed heritage, you can't be patriotic to any one place. The strength of that is that you're much more open-minded, but the downfall is that you have no home." (Freedman, 1)

I conclude my paper by asking once again: "What is Mina after all?" My answer would be: it depends on whether we are willing to go with Bakhtin in saying that she is an harmonious combination of different languages and cultures, (that would be Mira Nair's position), or we want to 'deconstruct' her and totally mix her up, like Sarita Choudhury defined her in the article from the New York Times.

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