

**Postcolonial Feminisms speaking through an ‘Accented’
Cinema:**

**The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira
Nair and Deepa Mehta**

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Submitted in partial fulfilment (50%) of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts (Coursework) in the Programme of Culture, Communication & Media Studies, Faculty of Human Sciences, University of KwaZulu-Natal (Durban).

DECLARATION

I affirm that this is my own work and that all references to other sources have been duly acknowledged.

Subeshini Moodley

20 January 2004

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the following people for their contribution to the completion of this thesis:

- The generations (past and present) of Indian women in my family, whose lives and stories have been the greatest inspiration in my choice of this topic;
- My late grandfather, whose faith and guidance has endured beyond his passing;
- My mother, Jay, and sister, Prevanya, whose love, encouragement and undying belief has supported me through the most trying moments during the production of this thesis;
- My father, Vivian, whose photographic memory I have very fortunately inherited;
- Dr. Lucia Saks and Prof. Daniel Herwitz, whose confidence in my capability and whose varied and broad knowledge have been constant reminders that this project had to be completed well;
- Nisha, whose intellectual conversation and copy editing skills have been invaluable;
- And, most of all, Liane Loots, whose patience, humour and dedicated supervision have been more than amazing over the past two years. Your assistance, Liane, has been greatly appreciated.

I would also like to thank the National Research Foundation (NRF) for their generous financial support. The opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at in this thesis, are, however, those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

Abstract

This thesis proposes that the merging of the theories of ‘accented’ cinema and postcolonial feminisms allows for the establishment of a theoretical framework for the analysis of (what will be argued for) an emerging postcolonial feminist film practice. In *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), Hamid Naficy argues that even though the experiences of diaspora and exile differ from one person to the next, films produced by diasporic filmmakers exhibit similarities at various levels. These similarities, he says, arise as a result of a tension between a very distinct connection to the native country and the need to conform to the host society in which these filmmakers now live. Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora whose films depict Indian women – in comparison with their popular cinematic construction - in unconventional and controversial ways. These characters, at some crucial point in the films, transgress their oppressive nationalist representation through the reclaiming of their bodies and sexual identities. This similarity of construction in Nair and Mehta’s female protagonists, as a result, facilitates a filtering of postcolonial feminisms throughout the narrative of their films. Even though the postcolonial feminist writings of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 1994, 1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990, 1994, 1996, 1999) do not relate directly to the study of film or cinematic practices, their works, specifically those regarding the construction, maintenance and perpetuation of nation and nationalism in postcolonial narratives, serve as a specifically gender-focused appropriation of Naficy’s theories. Mohanty and Spivak’s arguments surrounding the use of text and, particularly, narrative as tools for the representation and empowerment of Third world women, women of colour and subaltern women, work toward illustrating how postcolonial feminisms articulate through a specific moment of ‘accented’ filmmaking: that of women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora.

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Introduction

As an Iranian living in the diaspora, Hamid Naficy, in his book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), argues that even though the experiences of diaspora and exile differ from one person to the next, films made by diasporic and exilic filmmakers exhibit similarities at various levels. These levels range from stylistic/aesthetic to thematic concerns, from ideological to technical concerns. Expatriate communities, says Naficy, feel a strong connection to their 'homeland'. And, even though they may choose or feel pressure to conform to the new environment that they inhabit, this connection to their native country impacts on their self-representation, such that they portray themselves in specific and similar ways in their films. Naficy calls this an 'accented' cinema (Naficy, 2001).

Accented filmmakers, he claims, construct their films in the form of 'border-crossing'¹ journeys. These journeys are not necessarily physical or territorial; they can also be profoundly psychological and philosophical. In the latter instance, the most significant journeys are those of identity, during which old identities may be discarded while new identities may be reshaped or moulded. In this regard, Naficy asserts:

In the best of the accented films, identity is not a fixed essence but a process of becoming, even a performance of identity. Indeed, each accented film may be thought of as a performance of its author's identity. Because they are highly fluid, exilic and diasporic identities raise important questions about political agency and about the ethics of identity politics. (Naficy, 2001: 5-6)

Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are contemporary women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora. Their films, specifically those dealing directly with Indian people and the issues affecting their lives, depict Indian women in unconventional² and controversial ways. At some critical

¹"Border-crossing" is a term used by Naficy to explain that accented filmmakers, as diasporic and exilic beings, have already crossed many borders and will continue to do so in the future. As a result, they are involved in many "deterritorializing" and "reterritorializing" journeys (Naficy, 2001: 5-6). This notion of "border-crossing" will be discussed further in Chapter One.

² Unconventional is used here in a comparative sense to illustrate that Nair and Mehta's films offer a challenge to the stereotypical construction of Indian women in the narratives of Bollywood cinema, other forms of Indian cinema and, on the rare occasion, Hollywood cinema. These are popular forms of cinema that tend to portray Indian women – usually clad in some form of "traditional" Indian attire – as epitomes of duty and virtue. They are devoted to their fathers, husbands, brothers and children. And, even if these women are shown to be feisty and deviant at the beginning of the film, they are usually restored to duty and virtue, and contained by marriage and romance. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak offers the following critique of popular Indian Cinema, "[...] 'form' and 'content' split apart to put into the field of vision the fault lines in the self-representation of the [Indian] nation, precisely in terms of the woman as object seen" (in Landry & Maclean, 1996: 258), while Vrinda Mathur argues that,

point in the narrative³ of their films, an accepted and perpetuated notion of ‘Indian womanhood’ is established through the dialogue, actions and specific behavioural patterns of their female characters, only to be rejected and challenged by these very same characters, in order to refashion an identity that they are comfortable with or an identity that suits the context in which they find themselves. However, this rejection or challenge comes with great difficulty as these women are portrayed as existing in a state of tension between tradition and modernity, duty and self-fulfilment. In addition, the refashioning of these women’s identities assumes the form of rebellion, which, in turn, is often manifested in the crossing of sexual frontiers through either inter-racial, inter-religious, lesbian or pre-/extra-marital relationships.

This process of identity refashioning in Nair and Mehta’s characters is underpinned by Naficy’s theory of border-crossing journeys of identity, which, he argues, is evident in ‘accented’ films. In order to explain how and why Nair and Mehta’s characters experience these journeys of identity, this thesis appropriates discourses of postcolonial feminism. In this regard, two specific theorists of postcolonial feminism are considered: Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Both women, who have written extensively in the areas of postcolonial studies, feminism and Third World women, are academics of the Indian diaspora currently residing, teaching and writing in the United States of America.

According to Mohanty, in her article ‘Under western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses’ (1988), some forms of western feminist scholarship have conceived of “the ‘Third World woman’ as a singular monolithic subject” in many of their texts (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 196). To a certain extent, some of these texts have tended to assume that “Third World women” or “women of color” share a “*common context of struggle* [...] against specific exploitative structures and systems” (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 7). She argues that, “[j]ust as it is difficult to speak of a singular entity called ‘western feminism,’ it is difficult to generalise about ‘third world feminisms’” (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 4). She therefore proposes that western feminism be broadened or adapted to formulate a new type of feminist scholarship that incorporates notions of gender and womanhood that originate outside of the western world. This can be achieved through an inclusion of factors such as

[w]omen in Indian cinema, [...] continue to be portrayed and presented as either damsels in distress to be rescued by knights in shining armour or demented feminists, or just plain simple belly-shaking glamorous dolls, whose sole ambition in life is to attract the attention of males. [...] The women are shown as having no sphere of their own, no independent identity, no living space. (in Jain & Rai, 2002: 65 –66)

colonialism, race, nation, culture, class, history, state, citizenship, religion, consciousness, identity and economics (to name a few) in feminist theory.

Spivak, on the other hand, in her book *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (1999), engages in a discussion of postcolonial feminism with specific focus on the philosophy, literature, history and culture of postcolonial studies. Her section on literature places great emphasis on the reading and deconstruction of postcolonial texts. Subsequently, she offers the following with regard to the creator of the postcolonial text:

Postcolonial persons from formerly colonized countries are able to communicate to each other (and to metropolitans), to exchange, to establish sociality, because we have had access to the so-called culture of imperialism. Shall we then assign to that culture a measure of 'moral luck'? I think there can be no doubt that the answer is 'no'. This impossible 'no' to a structure that one critiques yet inhabits intimately is the deconstructive position, of which postcoloniality is a historical case (Spivak, 1999: 191).

In relation to this, Spivak speaks of the notion of the subaltern⁴. In many instances she applies this term to the postcolonial Third World Indian woman as subject. In her acclaimed article, 'Can the subaltern speak?' (1988), Spivak argues that the subaltern can, in fact, not speak (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994). The reason for this, she says, lies in the fact that the subaltern cannot be heard by the privileged groups of both the Third and First Worlds, for

[if] the subaltern were to make herself heard – as has happened when particular subalterns emerged, in Gramsci's terms, as organic intellectuals and spokespeople for their communities – her status as a subaltern would be changed utterly; she would cease to be subaltern. (Landry & Maclean, 1996: 5-6)

Spivak looks toward this goal: that oppressed and invisible groups might cease to exist as such. However, a change of this magnitude cannot be achieved through conventional means without fundamentalist thought emerging (Landry & Maclean, 1996: 5-6). It is at this point that she speaks of the significance of and distinguishes between the two forms of

³ Chapter One explains that the analysis of Nair and Mehta's films actually proceeds as an analysis of the construction of Indian female characters within the narratives of their films.

⁴Spivak has appropriated the term "subaltern" from the writings of Antonio Gramsci. However, she subscribes to Ranajit Guha's use of it. He conceives of the term as,

the space that is cut off from the lines of mobility in a colonized country. You have the foreign elite and the indigenous elite. Below that you will have the vectors of upward, downward, sideward and backward mobility. But then there is a space which is for all practical purposes outside those lines. (in Landry & Maclean, 1996: 289)

representation⁵: representing and re-presenting. The former refers to political representation when someone assumes the place of someone else and speaks for or on behalf of that person. The latter relates to portraying someone in some form or the other. She argues that these two uses of representation are complicit by nature and can therefore not be separated when applied to the notion of the subaltern (Spivak, 1990: 108–109).

It is therefore necessary, at this point, to provide an understanding of how Mohanty and Spivak's theories on postcolonial feminism relate to the analysis of Nair and Mehta's films. If Nair and Mehta are looked at as 'creators' (diasporic Indian women filmmakers) of 'postcolonial texts' (films that do not submit to the dominant modes of popular cinema), it could be argued that they are allowing the Third World woman and, in some instances, the 'subaltern' woman (Indian female protagonists) to be heard through the unconventional depiction of these characters. The unconventional depiction of character, as discussed earlier, becomes evident in the 'border-crossing journey of identity' that Naficy refers to and that the Indian women in the films undertake/undergo. However, in order to understand what informs the 'journeys of identity' that occur in the films, Mohanty's suggestion of a consideration of nation, race and history needs to be taken into account. This thesis aims to illustrate the manner in which this is achieved.

In this regard, Sangeeta Ray, in her book *En-gendering India: Woman as Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (2000), argues that notions of Indian womanhood have been tied to Indian nationalism for centuries. She says,

[Indian] women have been variously implicated in nationalisms. Even though they are often active participants in national struggles, the gendered and sexed female body is made to bear the burden of excessive symbolization – 'as biological producers of the boundaries of national groups, as active transmitters and producers of national culture [and] as *symbolic signifiers of national difference*' (355; emphasis added)⁶ (Ray, 2000: 135).

To further this point, Ray engages examples of Indian history to show how India has previously been a colonized space. The most significant example in this regard is the 1947 struggle for Independence that resulted in the partition of India. Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs

⁵Spivak refers here to the two uses/meanings of representation that Karl Marx discussed in his book *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (published in 1852 in New York): *vertreten* (represent) and *darstellen* (re-present).

⁶A quote from Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995) is included in this quote from Ray.

fought over land, and Indian women were implicated in this war when their bodies were raped and mutilated in revenge attacks. In relation to this, Urvashi Butalia says,

The conquering and abduction of women, meant the conquering and abduction of land; an homage to nationalism [...] [and] [...] the violation and rape of the body of the nation was mirrored in the violation and rape of the bodies of the women. (in Butalia & Sarkar, 1995: 69 - 74)

If, as Ray argues, the gendered or sexed body of the Indian female has operated as a symbol for Indian nationalism (in particular, the Indian land), and if the destruction of the Indian land was reflected in the destruction of the Indian woman's body, it stands to reason that the Indian woman's body in a similar fashion to the Indian land, has been a colonised space, on both a material and representational level. By the same token, if it took the reclaiming of land for the Indian people to regain their country and independence, it would take the reclaiming of body for the Indian woman to secure a personal space and assume control of her own sexuality. The one way this can be attained, as offered by the films of Nair and Mehta and as discussed in this thesis, is through the traversing of sexual boundaries.

With regard to Nair and Mehta, the connection to the 'homeland' that Naficy speaks of as characteristic of accented filmmakers is, for them, this remembered perception of the Indian woman as nation. However, having crossed physical/territorial and psychological/philosophical boundaries, they are more critical of this identity construction. Consequently, they reproduce these 'border-crossing' journeys in the representation of their female characters. Their characters are therefore also depicted as slowly growing more conscious and critical of their identities as Indian women and the symbolic status that these identities hold. For this reason, it can be argued that Nair and Mehta allow their female characters to rebel by challenging the expected sexual behaviour and habits of Indian women. In this way, postcolonial feminisms speak through their 'accented' films.

The thesis will therefore assume the following structure:

- Chapter One looks specifically at Hamid Naficy's theories of 'accented' cinema and diasporic filmmaking, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theories of postcolonial feminism. Focusing on what Naficy calls "border-crossing" journeys of identity, and Mohanty and Spivak's ideas on approaching postcolonial texts and representation, this chapter illustrates how the merging of

diasporic filmmaking and postcolonial feminisms offers an analytical framework for the reading of films by women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora.

- Chapter Two involves an analysis of Mira Nair's films using the theoretical framework established in Chapter One. The beginning of the chapter will provide a description of how the analysis will proceed, specifically in terms of the construction of character within the narrative. The films to be investigated are *Mississippi Masala* (Nair, 1992) and *Monsoon Wedding* (Nair, 2001).
- Chapter Three, similar to Chapter Two, involves an analysis of Deepa Mehta's films, *Earth* (1995) and *Fire* (1999), using the theoretical framework argued for in Chapter One.
- Chapter Four, a comparative chapter, will critique the viability of the theoretical framework, proposed in Chapter One, based on whether or not it proved to be a successful analytical structure or paradigm for the study of the films in Chapters Two and Three.
- The Conclusion draws together all the strands of this thesis and re-iterates the findings of the preceding chapters.

Chapter One

1.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on establishing a theoretical framework of analysis for the contemporary films of Indian-born Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta. The proposed analytical paradigm will comprise of two theories: that of ‘accented’ cinema and postcolonial feminisms. The section on ‘accented’ cinema interrogates Hamid Naficy’s (1999, 2001) conception of it, and the postcolonial feminisms section focuses on an appropriation of the theories of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 1994, 1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990, 1994, 1996, 1999).

Naficy, himself an Iranian living in the diaspora⁷, has researched diasporic and exilic Iranian communities in America and has written extensively about the media practices of these communities. These media practices, in terms of the television programmes, the films and the advertisements produced, are, he argues, an attempt at remembering the homeland (Iran) and either rejecting or retaining all that it stands for. In his most recent work *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), Naficy broadens his theories to include the filmmaking of other exilic and diasporic nationalities. For example, some of the films, referred to in his book, have been made by directors of Egyptian, Indian, Vietnamese, Chilean, Palestinian and Russian descent – to list a few. Through the study of filmmakers of such diverse backgrounds, Naficy illustrates the appropriateness of his theories to various filmmakers in the diaspora. His ideas are therefore significant for the purposes of this thesis, as they allow for the establishment of similarity between the character constructions of Nair and Mehta, through the identification of the cinematic practices characterizing the work of ‘accented’ filmmakers.

The postcolonial feminist writings of Mohanty and Spivak do not relate directly to the study of film or cinematic practices. Their ideas are important, however, because they provide appropriate strategies of analysis for the reading of Nair and Mehta’s female protagonists, through the consideration of narrative construction in relation to race, gender, geography and

⁷In this dissertation, the term ‘diaspora’ is used to describe those people who have moved out of their native country and who are living in a country external to or other than their homeland – most often in communities of people of the same ethnic origin. The diasporic move may have occurred due to a variety of factors – victimisation/refugeeism, labour/service, trade/business, imperialism/colonialism, culture/hybridism. The term ‘diaspora’ also extends to the offspring, and the offspring’s offspring (and so forth) of the first generation of diasporic people.

history. Mohanty and Spivak's works, specifically those regarding the construction, maintenance and perpetuation of nation and nationalism in postcolonial narratives, will serve as a specifically gender focused appropriation of Naficy's theories. Mohanty and Spivak's arguments surrounding the use of text and, particularly, narrative as tools for the representation and empowerment of Third World women, women of colour and subaltern women⁸, work toward illustrating how postcolonial feminisms articulate through a specific moment of 'accented' filmmaking: that of women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora.

For instance, Naficy posits that there are specific similarities in the filmmaking styles of diasporic filmmakers. He argues that these similarities emerge as a result of a tension between a very distinct connection to the native country and the need to conform to the host society in which these filmmakers now live. In the films of these diasporic filmmakers, says Naficy, similarities usually manifest themselves in the form of people or things that are representative of the homeland. This thesis argues that, for Nair and Mehta, the similarity they exhibit in their films is the manner in which they depict Indian women. The tension created by their diasporic existence is revealed through the unconventional depiction of the Indian woman in comparison to the portrayal of Indian women in the popular cinema of their native country, India. Furthermore, this unconventional portrayal has feminist leanings, and, in particular, postcolonial feminist leanings as understood by Mohanty and Spivak. Mohanty and Spivak's work provide the arguments necessary to illustrate how the representation of the Indian woman has been used to symbolise nationalism. This dissertation will argue that a subversion or transgression of this symbolic representation, as Nair and Mehta attempt and achieve through their work in cinema, is profoundly feminist.

This chapter, and the dissertation at large, proposes that the merging of the abovementioned theories will allow for a more coherent framework for the analysis of what could arguably be called an emerging postcolonial feminist film practice. The chapter will begin with a brief history of popular Indian cinema and a description of the manner in which Indian women are depicted in these films. This is necessary in order to illustrate the context from and/or against which Nair and Mehta are working. This introduction to popular Indian cinema will be followed by a discussion of Naficy's theory of 'accented' cinema which, in turn, will be followed by an appropriation and interrogation of Mohanty and Spivak's theories on

⁸The use of these terms/concepts will be explained further in this chapter in the section on Postcolonial Feminisms.

postcolonial feminisms. Although each of the theories is separated, the connections and links between them will be made evident.

1.2. Indian Popular Cinema

This brief section on the history of popular Indian cinema and its representation of Indian women is necessary as a contextualising tool for further discussion and comparison later on in this chapter. It lays the foundation for the argument surrounding the emergence of a different kind of Indian cinema. This partial history, therefore, does not form a major component of this dissertation.

1.2.1. History

The world's first motion picture was projected on 22 March 1895 by Auguste and Louis Lumière on a filmic device that they had perfected. This device could serve as camera, projector and film printer. They patented it as the '*cinematographe*' (Cook, 1996: 10). On 28 December 1895, the Lumière brothers opened this cinematograph to the public of Paris. Only six months after this event, Maurice Sestier, their emissary, screened a collection of their short films in Bombay on his way to Australia to exhibit the very same films. The primary audience present at this screening were British and European residents in India. These short films were well received and soon more and more screenings were arranged at larger venues to accommodate larger audiences. The audience grew to include anglicised Indians and, by 1897, films from around the world were being imported. Filming equipment was also purchased by both the British residents and the Indians. The films that they produced comprised of comic gags, operas, and documentaries about sports and other local events. A notably strong film distribution and exhibition network was established within India by 1902 (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 374). In fact, "[s]ince 1971, India has been the largest film-producing nation in the world, accounting for fully one-fourth of the total global output each year" (Cook, 1996: 860).

The first feature-length silent Indian film, *Raja Harishchandra* was made in 1912 by D. G. Phalke. Based on Hindu mythology, this film was inspired by another film called *Life of Christ* (Guy, 1906). Employing the magician-like techniques of Georges Méliès, Phalke's first

attempt was a success. As a result, he established India's first studio in his own home. In the beginning, all the actors were male as women's acting was associated with prostitution. Approximately ten years later, women began entering the acting profession. It was the women of Anglo-Indian descent, "despised by respectable society" (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 375), who first 'took the plunge'. To be better received by the Indian film-going public, these actresses took on Hindu names. Phalke and his actors were able to produce up to two silent films per year. He drew on familiar legends from Hindu mythology for the plots thereby making the films accessible to the Indian population. After his death in 1944, Phalke was named the 'Father of Indian cinema' (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 375). As more people followed in his footsteps, social and historical themes began to surface in the films.

The advent of sound in film was initially not favourably met. This meant that films would have to be produced in various regional languages, which would inevitably have led to the fragmentation of the large national audience. As a result, various studios in the major Indian towns - Bombay, Calcutta and, later, Madras - were established in order to cater for the needs of most other language groupings in India (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 375 - 377). The studio system in India was a huge success - having created a nationwide industry and established a sophisticated audience. Studios were responsible for the professional training of many actors, directors, producers and other technical staff. In many cases, graduates and recruits were taken under the wing of studio owners as apprentices and interns who later moved professionally into the industry (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 375).

However, the studio system drew to an end after the Second World War:

The war, in which India was an unwilling partner, necessitated an expansion of defence-related industries within the country. Rapid industrialisation brought in new money for investment in films. The reduced marine traffic between Britain and India led to a scarcity in essential commodities, and black marketeering flourished. This untaxed (or 'black') money found its way into films and established a covert relationship between money laundering and film finance, a relationship that continues to thrive even today. (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 377)

Independent producers, now having access to large amounts of money for themselves, were not eager to be burdened by the expenses incurred by studio overheads and staff. As a result, actors, musicians and technical staff were enticed away from the studios they belonged to by these producers. Actors soon learned that they could demand higher compensation for their abilities and producers discovered that creating a 'star' image for their actors would attract a

greater audience following. Suffering the financial consequences of this, studio owners were forced to rent out their facilities before having to shut down completely (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 377 - 378).

India, in the 1930s, was characterised by much political activity due to the struggle for independence from British colonial rule. The liberation movement, led by Mohandas K. Gandhi⁹, made a huge impression on the politics of the country. Subsequently, the censorship of film content increased. Films openly dealing with the political state of the country and the burgeoning nationalist feeling in India were heavily censored. Films that negatively portrayed the British military or the British-led government were banned altogether. Films handling social reform were, however, favourably received by the British because these films promoted the 'civilising' role - that Britain would like to have believed - they played in India at the time. Directors, however, still attempted to sneak in patriotic images and songs (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 378).

After independence had been achieved, films told stories of those people who had sacrificed or devoted their lives to the freedom of India. In this regard, Benedict Anderson, in his book *Imagined Communities* (1991), speaks of why nationalism assumed the form that it did in cultural products:

In an age when it is so common for progressive, cosmopolitan intellectuals [...] to insist on the near-pathological character of nationalism, its roots in fear and hatred of the Other, and its affinities with racism, it is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love. The cultural products of nationalism – poetry, prose fiction, music plastic arts [and film] – show this love very clearly in thousands of different forms and styles. (1991: 141)

The celebration of the heroes of the independence struggle was short-lived as a result of the partitioning of India in 1947. Indians, especially filmmakers, actors and technicians, living in the newly named area of Pakistan, moved into Bombay to eventually establish a thriving film industry, now referred to as 'Bollywood'. Censorship after independence became even stricter with the major concern being sexual immorality. For example,

Kissing is a sensitive issue. [...] the prohibition of kissing scenes was based on an unwritten rule; written rules prohibited excessively passionate love scenes, indelicate sexual situations and scenes suggestive of immorality [...]. Public kissing is associated

⁹Hereafter referred to as Mahatma Gandhi, a label by which he is more widely known.

with western life, so is alien to Indian culture. But the paradox is that the restrictions have never been applied in the censorship of foreign films (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 78).

Not being allowed to overtly show kissing, passionate embracing or anything that would be construed as sexual, directors improvised and found innovative ways to allude to desire and love. Thus song and dance, and symbolic elements such as flowers and birds were used to indicate and signify these aspects (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 379).

Films made in Bombay from the 1950s to present day Bollywood¹⁰ characterise the “the ‘golden age’ of Hindi cinema” (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 380). Although film industries belonging to other language groupings, such as Tamil and Telegu, still exist in India and reach a very wide audience, Bollywood cinema is known more widely internationally. It is the conventions of this particular cinema that people around the world are most familiar with and associate with Indian filmmaking.

Films falling under the Bollywood cinema category are characterised by loose storylines. There are often digressions in the narrative into various other subplots and numerous spectacular song and dance sequences. These song and dance sequences are significant as they often indicate the passing of time or illustrate the thoughts and feelings of characters within the storyline. The acting involves indulgence in heightened emotion that borders on melodrama. The films often belong to one of a few favoured genres: romance, family relationships, mythological, devotional, social, horror and suspect dramas. The plots are heavily formulaic and often involve a reworking of the plots of previously successful films allowing for easy recognition amongst Bollywood audiences. Finally, the actors of Bollywood films often belong to a highly developed star system (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996: 366 - 374).

Bollywood cinema, boasting an increasingly international status, conveys specific images of India and the Indian lifestyle, values and beliefs to the rest of the world. As a result, specific representations of the Indian female are also conveyed. Since this thesis aims to reveal that Nair and Mehta depict transgressive Indian women in their films in comparison to popular Indian cinema, it is necessary to explore first the construction of Indian women in popular Indian cinema.

¹⁰The term/name Bollywood is used interchangeably with the terms Hindi cinema and popular Indian cinema. What Bollywood actually refers to is popular Hindi (a specific North Indian language that has earned official status) cinema in India.

1.2.2. Women in Indian Popular Cinema

In traditional Indian society, there were definite and consensual norms of behaviour - that regulated the conduct of women - all of them handed down from the past. For example, the concept of woman as *Sita* is prevalent in Indian society as well as Indian films. *Sita*, immortalised in the *Ramayana*, is the ideal wife; she is steadfastly loyal to her husband and obeys his wishes unquestioningly. The *Ramayana* says that a wife's god is her husband: he is her friend, her teacher. Her life is of less consequence than her husband's happiness. Over the years, Indian popular cinema had perpetuated this ideal of a wife's selfless devotion.¹¹ (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 75)

Traditional Hindu Indian society maintained strict rules and regulations that were to be followed by Indian women. The lives of Indian women were thus defined primarily by the roles that they played as daughter, wife and mother. The *Manusmriti*, an old Indian brahmanical text, influenced extensively the values, morals and beliefs of Indian society. According to this text, a woman's life is never her own. She is always dependent on and devoted to the men in her life: her father, husband and sons. It is emphasised that a woman always be cheerful, hardworking (especially with regard to domestic affairs) and obedient. And, even after the death of her husband, a woman is expected to be devoted to his memory (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 75 - 76).

Often, the virtues and principles extolled in texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Manusmriti* were uncritically adopted as rules to govern the lives of Indian women. In relation to this, Deniz Kandiyoti, in her article 'Identity and its discontents: Women and the nation', argues that Indian nationalism has abused communal consciousness and manipulated an identification of nationalism with Hinduism (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 384). In addition, she says, the construction of communal identities were closely tied to ideas surrounding femininity. It can thus be argued that Indian nationalism worked toward the containment of Indian women by using them to uphold and preserve Hindu values and beliefs in aid of promoting nationalist ideals. The individuality of the woman was thus considerably restricted. Subsequently, these expected behavioural norms were expressed and depicted in Indian popular films. Of particular significance in these films, is the fact that "[w]omen who seek to live by traditional norms find happiness, while those who dare to transgress them are punished and victimised [...]" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 76).

¹¹This myth and stereotype is challenged by Mehta in her film *Fire* (1995). A more detailed analysis of this can be accessed in Chapter Three.

There are two female roles that are given great importance in these popular films: that of the mother and wife. The difference in the representation of these two roles should not be underestimated. Very often, the country of one's birth or heritage, is commonly referred to as the motherland. However, in India, any reference to 'mother' or the concept of 'mother' is heavily laden with religious meaning. Partha Chatterjee (1987), in 'The nationalist resolution of the women's question' (in Pecora, 2001), discusses how the Indian Nationalist Movement used the separation of the social space into inner/outer or Home and the world to resolve the women's question. In doing so, women were assigned to the home where they were expected to be responsible for the protection of Indian spirituality. The aim of this was to retain the essential "Indianness" in the inner realm of society while attempting to assimilate Western discourses of material advancement in the outer realm. Radhika Gajjala, in discussion about the work of Chatterjee (1987), and Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1990), says the following:

Woman was considered to be the keeper of the sanctity of the home. [...]. The woman, then is a visual, cultural symbol (object) preserving the spiritual essence of Indianness. And the colonizers cannot be allowed to encroach on the 'inner sanctum' symbolised by the woman. (Gajjala, date unknown)¹²

In addition to this, India, the country itself, is equated with the mother goddess called *Shakti*. *Shakti* is a representation of strength. Even the title of the Indian national anthem, *Vandemataran!*, literally translates into "Hail! Motherland!" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 77). In fact, *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan, 1957) is considered to be the 'all-time' classic Indian film. The lead role was played by an actress named Nargis¹³ who gained popularity because of what is constructed as her 'grace and beauty'. She epitomised what was considered to be 'Indian womanhood' (Kasbekar in Nelmes, 1996).

While the word *Shakti* is used to describe the role of the mother in Indian films, the word *Sati* is used to describe the role of the wife. *Sati* is a term describing a wife's extreme devotion to her husband. The *Sati* concept was popular in the films of the 1920s and 1930s. The point "was to portray women as stereotypical, unidimensional creatures with no personal ambitions of their own" (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 77).

¹²This is an article accessed through the internet. A reference date has not been provided. See the Reference section of the thesis for further details.

¹³Many Indian actors and actresses of note in the past used single name pseudonyms in an attempt to disguise their ethnic or religious descent. It has become increasingly popular in recent times, however, for stars to use both their names.

Kumkum Roy, in her article ‘‘Where Women are Worshipped, there the Gods Rejoice’ - The Mirage of the Ancestress of the Hindu Woman’ (in Sarkar & Butalia, 1995), analyses the manner in which the expected roles of contemporary Indian women have been influenced by ancient Hindu texts. She makes an interesting point about the restricted sexuality/sexual behaviour of married women and how this is connected to India, the land, as laid out in the *Manusmriti*,

[...] the womb is equated with the field, in which men sow seed, offspring being determined by the nature of the latter, with the former conceived as a passive supportive receptacle. The field, moreover, is ideally owned by a man, and by extension, the produce of the field is his. [...] It is also likely that the woman/field may have at least occasionally proved somewhat intractable. Hence, the ideal bride/procreative instrument had to be carefully selected following criteria which explicitly or implicitly ensured her subordination. (in Sarkar & Butalia, 1995: 170)

Although the contemporary popular films do not overtly subscribe to the *Sati* concept, it still exists on various levels. For instance, the ideal wife still has to be sexually pure, virginal and faithful to her husband. Often, these films depict the loyalty of a wife through the suppression of desires. In this way, patriarchal views, of the honour of the family being dependent on the behaviour of the females within it, are maintained by the popular cinema. Honour, as mentioned earlier, is perpetuated by the woman through her seclusion, her confinement to the domestic realm and her dependency on the men in her life.

There is another female role that stands in opposition to the role of the wife in these films. The ‘vamp’ (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998: 77) is usually depicted as a modern woman whose decadent behaviour is severely looked down upon. She, the ‘vamp’ or what Indian audiences refer to as a ‘common’ or ‘loose’ woman, rejects tradition and is shown to imitate the so-called ‘western woman’. This means that she engages in many sexual relationships, indulges in alcohol, smokes and frequents nightclubs. Her reputation is that of a morally degraded woman and her behaviour is almost always linked to the negativity of the western lifestyle¹⁴. The ‘common’ or ‘loose’ woman is always punished for all the unacceptable acts

¹⁴This seems to have changed in more recent Bollywood films – like *Kabhie Khushi Kabhi Gham* (Karan Johar, 2001) and *Kaho Naa Pyar Hai* (Rakesh Roshan, 2000) – such that an appropriation of the Western lifestyle is exalted. Partha Chatterjee, in this regard, speaks of the “new” Indian woman who is a combination of traditional Hindu values and Western material exploits which, as a result, make her acceptable. This does not mean, however, that she escapes oppression. Radhika Gajjala describes how this concept works,

[...] Indian Nationalist ideology made a place for the ‘new woman’ who was subjected to a patriarchy which was different from ‘traditional’ indigenous patriarchy (a patriarchy which was seen as possible only in the ‘backward’ families of the villagers and labourers, etc). When Indian

in which she engages. Chatterjee summarises the characteristics of the 'common' or 'loose' woman as: "coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, [and] subjected to brutal physical oppression by males" (in Pecora, 2001: 332).

Gokulsing and Dissanayake note, however, a crucial contradiction at this point in the popular cinema:

Indian cinema is a product of cultural modernity and it has accelerated the process of modernity in India as few other media have. Yet the woman who chooses to identify herself with modernity is almost always portrayed as decadent and punished for it (1998: 77).

Another contradiction regarding the representation of women in these films, is that even though great emphasis is placed on promoting acceptable female behaviour, innovative methods, involving the very same actresses, are used to allude to romance, lust and passion - elements construed as immoral by the Indian film censorship board. Female protagonists in popular films are always constructed as exceptionally beautiful. The camera, as a result, works hard to capture, in detail, every aspect of the sensuality that these women are supposed to exude. Inevitably, Indian women, in these films, become the objects of the male viewer's gaze - and, subsequently, their desire - as in American¹⁵ and European films. However, there are specific cultural ways in which her form is depicted. Female sexuality, in Indian films, is conveyed in very creative ways. If kissing and the nude female form are censorship bans, directors invent strategies for the illustration of female desire. One of these strategies would be the specific choice of garments worn during the song and dance sequences. These outfits usually reveal the female flesh from just below the woman's breasts to just below her navel. The tantalising effect of the exposed skin is accentuated by the choreography of the dance sequences. Another famous strategy, that is often spoken about, is the wet sari sequence. The woman, in her sari, is caught in a sudden downpour. The wet fabric thus clings to her body revealing the curves of her well-rounded Indian form.

Nationalists endorsed reform of 'degenerate' conditions of women, they meant they would be allowed 'modern school education' only to the extent that it would make the woman socially acceptable within 'modern' social circles and to the extent that it would make her a 'better' housewife and mother and so on (date unknown).

¹⁵Laura Mulvey, in her article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1988), making reference to psychoanalytic theory, speaks about Hollywood cinema and the manner in which the woman on screen is constructed as an object for the male gaze.

Gendered ‘Indianness’¹⁶, this thesis therefore argues, refers to Indian womanhood and its inscription in Indian nationalism. One of the elements of this inscription in nationalism is the body of the Indian woman and the manner in which it is symbolised in representation. In perpetuating the interests of Indian national discourse through her obedience in abiding by the Hindu values and beliefs ascribed to the ideal Indian wife and mother, the Indian woman is severely restricted in her behaviour – specifically regarding how she may or may not use her body.

Therefore, the construction of the gendered nationalised body of the Indian woman reveals a very specific powerful and potentially destructive relation between the colour of skin, sex and oppression. This thesis proposes that Nair and Mehta subvert this construction in their films through their own unconventional construction of Indian women. These women reject the confines of accepted behaviour and take control of their own lives and their own bodies. This manner of depicting Indian women raises questions around their representation, and the validity and necessity of Indian nationalist discourse as a regulative tool in their lives.

The following sections on ‘accented’ filmmaking and postcolonial feminisms will discuss why and how Nair and Mehta transgress the established notions of Indian womanhood. The theory of ‘accented’ cinema explains that it is the diasporic positions of Nair and Mehta that allow them to be controversial in their depiction of Indian women, whereas postcolonial feminisms will provide an understanding of how the use of text and a disruption of narrative, as tools of resistance against dominant forms, can be effective.

1.3 An Accented Cinema

My contention is that although there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialized peoples and their films share certain features, [...]. (Naficy, 2001: 3)

‘Accented cinema’ is a label given by Hamid Naficy (2001) to the films directed/produced by exilic and diasporic people around the world. His argument is based on the fact that diasporic and exilic filmmakers seem to exhibit specific similarities – at levels of technique, style, aesthetics and ideology - in the production of their films. Naficy says that if the dominant cinema (read: Hollywood) is considered by mainstream thought to be universal (and thereby

¹⁶The inverted commas accompanying this term serve to highlight the constructedness of the Indian national

lacking accent), diasporic and exilic films are ‘accented’. This notion of ‘accent’ does not simplistically emerge from “the accented speech of the diegetic characters” within these films, but from the “displacement of the filmmakers” (Naficy, 2001: 4).

Naficy uses the term ‘displacement’ in relation to its opposite, placement. He argues that the notion of place is expressed through spatial and temporal configurations. On the one hand, a place is a certain section of space to which a person or many people may attach special significance or value. So, be this place a house, region or country, it is not something singularly physical. It is, in addition, something that is characterised by our social relations to it. On the other hand, place is also characterised by its history, giving it a temporal dimension as well (Naficy, 2001: 152). Therefore, the ‘displacement of filmmakers’ refers not only to the physical movement of filmmakers from their own ‘place’ to another, but also to the timing of and the reasons for that move, and the social, emotional and psychological experience/expense that that very move incurs.

Naficy says that the ‘accented’ cinema is interstitial¹⁷ as a consequence of the films being produced in the transition between cultures and societies. Often, as a result, these films can be described as engaging in a dialogue between the home and host societies of the filmmakers (Naficy, 2001: 6). Naficy argues that

[e]xilic and diasporic filmmakers [...] are ‘situated but universal’ figures who work in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. A majority are from Third World and postcolonial countries (or from the global South) who since the 1960s have relocated to northern cosmopolitan centres where they exist in a state of tension and dissension with both their original and their current homes. (2001: 10)

There are basically three kinds of film that comprise ‘accented’ filmmaking: exilic, diasporic and ethnic. The distinctions between the three types (which will be discussed further in the following sections) are, however, not fixed or static and most films made by expatriate filmmakers reveal characteristics from all three types of film.

identity, specifically in relation to gender.

¹⁷‘Interstitial’ is an adjective derived from the noun ‘interstices’ which refers to a gap or small space between two things or component parts. The term ‘interstitial’ therefore describes the ‘in-between’, trapped or undecided position that finds expression in ‘accented’ films or that ‘accented’ films occupy as a result of the filmmakers’ personal and internal experiences of living either in the diaspora or in exile. Sometimes, ‘accented’ films are interstitial because they employ and rest between the filmmaking practices of both the home and host countries of the filmmakers.

1.3.1 Exilic Filmmakers

Exile can be understood as banishment from a country for a specific offence or crime committed. Prohibition of return to that country is usually the penalty exiles pay. Naficy, however, focuses on the concept of exile in the following sense: “individuals or groups who voluntarily or involuntarily have left their country of origin and who maintain an ambivalent relationship with their previous and current places of culture” (Naficy, 2001: 12). Exile can be either internal or external. Internal exiles are those people who have chosen to go into exile within their own country, to take a political stand and make a difference in their homeland. External exiles are those people who have opted to go into exile outside of their country where they feel that they have the freedom to articulate their political interests and where they feel that their position will be more beneficial to their country. However, this is not always the case - having the freedom to speak does not always ensure that the voice is heard¹⁸.

A good example of this situation would be the indentured Indian labourers who came to South Africa to work on the sugar cane fields. Even though they were not exiles from India, their experience of a foreign land is similar to those of exiled people. When they arrived in South Africa in 1860, they set foot on the soil with the hope of a better life. India, at the time, was under British colonial rule. Levels of oppression and unfair labour practices were thus very high in their homeland. The indentured labourers were lured to South Africa with the promise of employment and a better standard of living. They were indeed given employment, but their lives were by no means improved. They suffered racism, ill-treatment and exploitation – to name but a few injustices - and although a few attempted to speak out against the system, they were not heard. Their dream of an improved life in a foreign land was marred by the fact that they were not listened to or taken seriously. It was only much later when Mahatma Gandhi arrived in South Africa and mobilised large resistance movements, did the Indian get heard. It must be noted though that Gandhi came from a very privileged background in India and had a formal education with a law degree to his name.

Naficy, when speaking of exilic filmmakers, refers specifically to external exiles. Exilic filmmakers, in the narratives of their films, depict a strong desire to return home, even though they never do. Their homeland is thus fetishised in their films through the use and repetition of specific sounds, images and chronotopes¹⁹. In addition, exilic filmmakers, especially those

¹⁸ This sentiment is echoed in the discussion of Spivak and her work on the concept of the subaltern.

¹⁹ Naficy offers the following description of chronotopes:

who have been involuntary exiles, attempt to define their lives not only in relation to their homeland, but also in political terms. Naficy thus comes to the conclusion that, in most instances, the early films of exilic filmmakers portray their homelands and people as opposed to themselves (Naficy, 2001: 12). Although Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are not exiles of India, their filmmaking styles do subscribe to this particular aspect of exilic ‘accented’ filmmaking. It can be argued that the fetishisation of their homeland, India, occurs through the characterisation of the Indian woman in their films. This may seem to suggest that Nair and Mehta are falling into the trap of popular Indian cinema in which the female characters were given prominence through their virtuous and dutiful behaviour, which would eventually benefit and stand for the nationalism of the country. However, whereas in popular Indian cinema, women ultimately become symbolic objects, the women in Nair and Mehta’s films ultimately attain personal agency²⁰ beyond their symbolic representation. In attaining this agency, Nair and Mehta’s characters disrupt both the societal norm and the narrative of popular Indian film regarding the representation and construction of Indian women. Nair and Mehta maintain a political link to India, their homeland, through stories of Indian women who step outside of their prescribed roles and behaviour.

External exiles are in a sensitive and complicated position: they have no ties to their home country because, and they have no ties to their host country because it is not the place of their ethnic origin. They are, in other words, deterritorialized beings. However, their ethnicity continues to link them to their homeland, and their need to reterritorialise in their new environment binds them to their host country. These exiles are therefore forced to grapple with the process of hybridisation and the resultant feelings of deprivation, division and fragmentation that emerge (Naficy, 2001: 12).

Naficy summarises his point about exilic filmmakers:

As partial, fragmented, and, multiple subjects, these filmmakers are capable of producing ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-granted values of their home and host societies. They can also transcend and transform themselves to produce hybridised, syncretic, performed, or virtual identities. (2001: 13)

Mikhail Bakhtin proposed the chronotope (literally ‘time-space’) both as a ‘unit of analysis’ for studying texts in terms of their representation of spatial and temporal configurations and as an ‘optic’ for analysing the forces in the culture that produce these configurations. As a unit of textual analysis, cinematic chronotopes refer to certain specific temporal and spatial settings in which stories unfold. (Naficy, 2001: 152)

²⁰ This notion of agency will be developed further under the following section on diasporic filmmakers.

1.3.2 Diasporic Filmmakers

‘Diaspora’ is a term originally used to describe “the dispersion of Greeks after the destruction of the city of Aegina, to the Jews after the Babylonian exile, and to the Armenians after Persian and Turkish invasions and expulsion in the mid-sixteenth century” (Naficy, 2001: 13). The diasporic patterns of dispersal thereafter came to be characterised by the movement of Jews around the world. Many theorists (Naficy, 2001: 13), however, disagree with this restrictive view and argue that many different groups of people have undergone or have participated in diasporic dispersions historically and continue to do so on a large scale. As a result, the term diaspora has come to be used to describe various groups of dislocated/displaced people all over the world²¹.

The word diaspora has also become closely linked to the concept of exile. In his comparison of diaspora and exile, Naficy says the following,

Like the exiles, people in diaspora have an identity in their homeland before their departure, and their diasporic identity is constructed in resonance with its prior identity. However, unlike exile, which may be individualistic or collective, diaspora is necessarily collective in both its originations and destination. As a result, the nurturing of a collective memory, often of an idealized homeland, is constitutive of the diasporic identity. This idealization may be state-based, involving love for an existing homeland, or it may be stateless, based on a desire for a homeland yet to come. (Naficy, 2001: 14)

Furthermore, diasporic people tend to cling to notions of their ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness. Ethnic consciousness and distinctiveness are achieved through an awareness and perpetuation of elements specifically characteristic of or associated with the homeland - in Nair and Mehta’s case, India. Often, this is not favourably received by either the home or host societies of ‘accented’ filmmakers. The reason being that, on the one hand, the host country, in some instances, interprets a maintenance of tradition, culture or ethnicity as an assertion or imposition on their society, while, on the other hand, the home country may sometimes view a diasporic move out of their country as a betrayal or rejection of their tradition, culture and ethnicity whether or not the diasporic community attempts to maintain or is critical of these elements. This is where the controversy in Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta’s films arise. Both filmmakers have received unfavourable responses in India for the content of their films - Mehta more so than Nair. Nair’s film *Kama Sutra* (1996) was heavily criticised

²¹ Even though the Indians living in contemporary South Africa are the fourth or fifth generation after the indentured labourers arrived here, the community is still referred to and described as a diasporic one. The same principle applies to other Indians living in countries outside of India.

for the nudity it contained and its open references to sex. Even though she wove a fictional storyline around the ancient Hindu book on the art of lovemaking, her film was still considered unacceptable and a desecration of Indian values and principles. Each of the films in Mehta's trilogy was disrupted during their making. The first two, *Fire* (1995) and *Earth* (1999), were severely criticised, and the production of the third (*Water*, date unknown) had to cease due to the violent reactions its very concept elicited from Hindu fundamentalist groups. In addition, Mehta is overtly political and critical in her content and it is usually the women in her films who undergo or effect the greatest changes.

Unlike exiles, who establish and give prominence to their relationship to their homelands, people in diaspora maintain relationships with both their homelands and compatriot communities elsewhere. So, while exile can be characterised by duality and binarism, diaspora can be characterised by plurality, multiplicity and hybridity (Naficy, 2001: 14). These differences are reflected in the films of diasporic and exilic filmmakers. Diasporic films, for instance, focus more deeply on the plurality and performativity of identity than on highly political retrospection, loss, absence, a strict representation of a relationship to a single homeland and its people, as in the case of exilic films²² (Naficy, 2001: 14).

It has been mentioned that Nair and Mehta's female characters are constructed as women with agency and not just as symbolic icons of nationalism. It is therefore necessary, at this point, to clarify how the notion of agency is being used in this dissertation. In the discussion of women in popular Indian cinema, it has been explained that Indian women have been depicted in very distinct ways. This distinction developed as a result of the manner in which Indian women were expected to conduct themselves in daily society and life. This thesis argues that the rules and norms governing the prescribed roles and behaviour of these women stem from the upholding of Indian nationalist ideals through the maintenance of Hindu values and beliefs. What, consequently, occurred was the oppression and colonisation of the Indian woman such that her body and its representation became subject to the dominant hegemony of patriarchal nationalism. Similarly, popular Indian cinema, Bollywood - the dominant cinematic practice in India - perpetuates this control through the establishment of female dichotomies - the virtuous, dutiful, sexually pure woman versus the 'loose' or 'common' woman - and the oppression of the Indian woman's body. Hence, it is a rejection or transgression of this kind of inscription of the Indian woman and her body that this thesis refers to or offers as agency.

The female characters in Nair and Mehta's films rebel against their oppression through the exploration of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies. By stretching the boundaries of their sexual identities, these women speak out in resistance through the language of their bodies. In this sense, their bodies would be the marginal spaces that they occupy. Hence, these protagonists don't always begin as women with agency but grow and develop to that point. Their marginal spaces are first to be defined and highlighted in order to show how they later redefine or transcend its confines. The growth and development toward agency is not without its problems and difficulties, and the women often struggle with their Indian identities and revisit the unfair expectations placed on their roles as daughters, wives and mothers. This process involves much introspection and, at some point, these protagonists take an active step to reject the current inscription of their identities and to be participants in the creation and construction of their own identities. Their identities are performed through the process they undergo to become the subjects of their own lives.

1.3.3 Postcolonial Ethnic and Identity Filmmakers

Before, entering into a discussion of Naficy's postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers, it is necessary to understand how the word 'postcolonial' is being used in this thesis. 'Postcolonial' is a contentious term and various debates (Williams & Chrisman, 1994; Suleri, 1992; Mishra & Hodge, 1991; McClintock, 1992; Kandiyoti, 1991; hooks, 1990) have argued the merits and limitations of its use. This thesis, however, subscribes to the use of the term as explained and understood by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam in their article, 'Film theory and spectatorship in the age of the 'posts'':

What was once called 'Third World' theory has now largely been absorbed into the field 'post-colonial'. Post-colonial discourse theory refers to an interdisciplinary field (which includes history, economics, literature, the cinema) which explores issues of colonial archive and post-colonial identity often in highly theoretical work [...]. Post-colonial theory is a complex amalgam fed by diverse and contradictory currents; studies of nationalism (for example Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*), the literature of 'Third World allegory' (Ismail Xavier, Frederic Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad), the work of the 'Subaltern Studies Group' (Ranjit Guha, Partha Chatterjee), and the work of the 'post-colonial critics' *per se* (Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak). [...] The wide adoption of the term 'post-colonial' to designate work thematizing issues emerging from colonial relations and their aftermath in the late 1980s, clearly coincided with the eclipse of the older 'Third World' paradigm. [...] 'Post-colonial' tends to be associated with

²²The former of these two conclusions will be examined in Chapters Two and Three when analysing Nair and Mehta's films.

‘Third World’ countries that gained independence after World War 2, yet it also refers to the ‘Third World’s’ diasporic presence within ‘First World’ metropolises. (in Gledhill & Williams, 2000: 390 - 391)

In the context of what Shohat and Stam describe as the notion of postcolonial, Naficy’s concept of postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers becomes clearer. He explains that postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers are usually immigrants themselves or they “have been born in the West since the 1960s to non-white, non-Western, political émigrés” (Naficy, 2001: 15). The concerns of these filmmakers are centered on their ethnic and racial identity in their host society. They focus their attention on the contemporary issues of life within the country in which they reside. Their films therefore handle themes relating to the conflict between native origin or ethnic descent and the relationships that they have built in their host country. Naficy summarises this conflict as a conflict of being and becoming: that is, a conflict who you are because of birth, and who you are going to become because of situation/location.

Uddayan Prasad is a good example of a postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmaker. Born in India in 1953, Prasad immigrated to Britain with his family at the age of nine. He attended an art school there, where he was introduced to filmmaking. He later went on to pursue his tertiary education at the National Film and Television School. The documentaries he made after graduating dealt mainly with the experience of South Asians in Britain. In the late eighties, he was commissioned to direct several BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) films, and in 1995, he directed *Brothers in Trouble*, his very first feature about illegal Pakistani immigrants. His second feature, *My Son the Fanatic* (1996/7), earned much critical acclaim²³. Based on a short story by Hanif Kureishi, the film tells the story of a Pakistani immigrant taxi driver, Parvez, living in England with his wife and son, Farid, who has recently become involved in Muslim fundamentalist politics. Parvez, disillusioned by his life at that moment, falls in love and engages in an affair with a local prostitute that he usually transports (Kaufman, date unknown)²⁴.

It is evident that the concerns highlighted in the films of Prasad correspond to the issues raised in the works of postcolonial ethnic and identity filmmakers. These themes, argues Naficy, is a direct consequence of the immigrant status of the filmmakers.

²³The biographical details relating to Prasad up until this point have been taken from an insert to the 18th annual Durban International Film Festival Program (1997).

²⁴This information was accessed through an internet review. A date of reference has not been provided. See the Reference section of the thesis for further details.

1.3.4 The Accented Style

Naficy has identified various and specific elements of filmmaking that combine together to form an accented style of filmmaking²⁵. Those elements that relate to the topic and research of this dissertation are: accented structures of feeling²⁶, tactile optics, border consciousness/border subjectivity and themes.

Structures of feeling emerge out of the accented filmmaker's response to deterritorialisation. This response travels back and forth along a continuum of what Naficy refers to as dysphoria and euphoria (Naficy, 2001: 26 –27). These feeling structures arise out of a perception of “the homeland as utopian and open and of exile [and sometimes diaspora] as dystopian and claustrophobic”²⁷ (Naficy, 2001: 27). These feelings toward the homeland are sometimes manifested in the synecdoches, fetishes and signifieds of the homeland. These could be sounds, symbols or images that are reminiscent of the homeland. In Nair and Mehta's film, the elements of India (the homeland) that convey their structures of feeling, dysphoric or euphoric, are clothing, religious and cultural practices and ritual, language or accent, and, most times, the actual Indian setting. However, the most important of these signifieds, as discussed, is the focus on the Indian female. Nair and Mehta's storylines centre around their women characters. The attention given to the women in their films is not an attempt to conform to and maintain nationalist ideology, but rather an attempt to capture their transitions, their awakening and their agency. These women's lives, as Indian women in various contexts, are given prominence. In so doing, Nair and Mehta illustrate the manner in which symbolic representation maybe questioned, disrupted and reconsidered.

The notion of tactile optics, in ‘accented’ cinema, privileges issues surrounding the circumstantial experience of the human body. The experience can be external (in the sense of reflection, photographic and filmic representation, and the reactions of others) or internal (in the sense of self-perception). Either way, the certainty of the unity and entirety of the body (and, subsequently, the mind) are put into question when people in exile or diaspora are faced with negative experiences like racism or hostility. Naficy argues,

²⁵Naficy warns that the ‘accented’ style is an emergent category that it is not yet completely recognised or formalised (2001: 26).

²⁶ Naficy has appropriated this term from the work of Raymond Williams (1977), ‘Structure of feeling’, in *Marxism and Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 128 – 135.

²⁷In some instances, the ‘homeland’ is not always imagined or remembered as an ideal space. Often, this is the case with accented filmmakers “who have escaped authoritarian regimes and societies” or “who insist on

The body's integrity, requiring a coincidence of inside and outside, is threatened, as a result of which it may be felt to be separated, collapsed, fractured, eviscerated, or pithed. The [...] dislocation can be experienced simultaneously at both quotidian and profound, and corporeal and spiritual levels. (2001: 28)

The body and its senses are thus poignant signifiers of difference. The senses reinforce an unfamiliar environment and the body, being physical evidence of difference, emphasises the feeling of not belonging or the feeling of being uncomfortable with who you are and where you are. This notion of the body and the significant manner in which it is manipulated to maintain difference and perpetuate differential treatment will be discussed in the sections on postcolonial feminisms. In particular, there will be a focus on how the gendered Indian female body has been contained in the name of nationalism.

Vivian Sobchack makes interesting observations about the body and its experience of displacement and discord at both the physical and spiritual level. Her observations are appropriate in light of Naficy's ideas:

[...] the body can be seen as home, as house, and as prison - as, in the first instance, the place that grounds us in a felicitous condition of enablement, that provides our original and initial opening upon and access to the world, and that gives dimension and sense of value to our lives through its motility and senses and gravity; as, in the second instance, the place in which we live in a variable relationship of hermeneutic objectification, that we decorate and display for the edification of both ourselves and others, that confounds us with problems and expense but allows us still a certain familiarity, a place to hang our hats, to let it all hang out; and, in the third instance, the same but phenomenologically quite different place, that grounds us in negativity and denies us access to the world constraint and discipline, that locks us in a room everyone regards as ours but which we understand as really belonging to others. (in Naficy, 1999: 47)

This is important for the analysis of the films of Nair and Mehta because it is the bodies of their female characters that are used to make important political statements regarding the conventional perceptions and representations of Indian women. Their films illustrate the struggle that their female protagonists, as Indian women, undergo with regard to the patriarchal control of their bodies and the limitation of their sexuality. At some crucial point in the films, these women make a controversial decision to use their bodies and explore their sexualities in defiance of control, limitation and the norms governing their behaviour²⁸. These women, in other words, work toward establishing their bodies as their "homes" and not their

fighting oppression [intellectually, creatively or artistically]" (Naficy, 2001: 181). These filmmakers may often depict their homeland as a site of claustrophobia and control.

“prisons”. The active rejection of their physical and spiritual imprisonment reveals that these characters are not passive victims of their experiences.

In relation to this, borders are an important aspect: they can be either a connection or a division between the ‘home’ and ‘elsewhere’, or the familiar and unfamiliar. Borders are interesting locations (physical or imagined) where a variety of factors (race, class, gender, history and national identity) diverge and intersect. Border consciousness arises out of being situated at a border location and can be described as “multiperspectival and tolerant of ambiguity, ambivalence, and chaos” (Naficy, 2001: 31). Naficy therefore posits that the subjectivities emerging from these borders are interstitial. These subjectivities are often evident in the character types found within accented films. Characters are often split, doubled, crossed, and hybridised. Sometimes, they even perform their identities. In relation to Nair and Mehta, their characters often seem to be in a state of tension regarding who they’re expected to be and who they would like to be. Often, these characters transform through a crossing over of borders within themselves. These are evident in choices made against the grain, the satisfaction of desire or engagement in rebellious activity.

The themes of accented films usually relate to journeys that can be either actual or imaginary. According to Naficy (2001: 33), journeys are motivated. He identifies three types of journeys undertaken by the characters in the films. The first type relates to outward journeys of escape, homeseeking, and home founding. The second type relates to journeys of quest, homelessness and lostness. The final type relates to inward journeys of homecoming. Naficy adds a disclaimer to this categorisation:

Not all journeys involve physical travel. There are also metaphoric and philosophical journeys of identity and transformation that involve the films’ characters and sometimes the filmmakers themselves, [...]. (Naficy, 2001: 33)

While border crossing relates to the change over or refashioning of identity, journeys relate to the content of the transition that occurs during the processes of changing over and refashioning.

²⁸Chapter Two and Three will investigate in detail how the concept of the gendered body plays itself out in Nair and Mehta’s films.

1.3.5 Journeying, Border Crossing, and Identity Crossing

The notions of journeying, border crossing and identity that have been identified by Naficy in his theory of ‘accented’ cinema provide a vital link to postcolonial feminisms in this dissertation. Naficy argues that exilic and diasporic people have embarked and continue to embark upon many border-crossing journeys in their lifetime. As a consequence, they are in a constant state of deterritorialising and reterritorialising. These journeys, say Naficy, are not necessarily physical or geographic and can also be profoundly psychological and metaphorical (Naficy, 2001: 222).

Focusing on the latter type of journey, elements of normal physical journeys can be applied. For instance, psychological/metaphorical journeys can be heterogeneous and evolutionary. They can also be exploratory involving personal quests, wandering and searching, thereby altering individual targets, purposes and objectives (Naficy, 2001: 223). This type of journey is usually deeply philosophical venturing into the individual psyche and establishing subjectivity. This journey thus becomes one of identity. As a consequence of unrooting or being uprooted from one country and attempting to transplant the physical self into the new environment, necessary mental and emotional changes have to be made in order to exist comfortably in the new environment. Amidst all these changes, people in exile and diaspora begin to question who they are and who they have to become. They begin to analyse and measure the appropriateness of the influencing factors of both their homeland and their host country. Often, this is evident in the personal struggles of these filmmakers’ characters.

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

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

As discussed, Nair and Mehta’s female characters undergo a transformation of identity. This process could be referred to as a journey of identity. These women travel from being

obedient, dutiful, virtuous women that honour the family (and by implication, the country) to women who step outside of tradition to become empowered, decision-making beings. This thesis argues that the change emerges through a reclaiming of their bodies and sexuality, elements of the Indian woman governed by norms and rules in order to make her an acceptable, worthy being. However, an Indian women taking control of her body and sexuality through the transgression of the laws restricting it, is considered 'western'. And, this is where Nair and Mehta's own diasporic identities filter through. Taking advantage of the possibilities of their experiences as diasporic Indian women in the western world, these filmmakers present viable alternatives to the oppressive perceptions and representations of Indian women in their native country, India.

The actions of their female characters therefore disrupt mainstream convention, and re-define the nature of the margin on two levels. The margin becomes a site of resistance for the characters in the films, and also a site for the expression of that resistance for the filmmakers. Whereas the characters find themselves in the margins of the narrow confines of tradition and nationalism and react in rebellion to this, the directors find themselves in the interstitial margins of homeland and host country and respond politically to this in their films. bell hooks²⁹ supports the concept of the margin as a platform for resistance,

For me [the] space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance. [...] [I]t [the margin] is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives. As such, I was not speaking of a marginality one wishes to lose – to give up or surrender as part of moving into the center – but rather of a site one stays in, clings to even, because it nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers to one the possibility of radical perspective from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds. (1990: 149 –150)

When Naficy speaks of journeys of identity, he is referring to the internal transformational shifts in identity that displaced people (and specifically accented filmmakers) experience on arrival in their host country. As discussed, border crossing involves the negotiation of several identity impacting factors. These transformational shifts are thus reflected in the character

²⁹bell hooks is a pseudonym for Gloria Jean Watson, a feminist theorist. The decision to use a pseudonym was influenced by the fact that the name Gloria began to imply an identity with which she was not comfortable. She assumed the name bell hooks from her grandmother – a slave – in order to honour both her mother and grandmother. And, the choice to de-capitalise the name is informed by her desire to establish a voice separate from the 'Gloria' identity and draw attention away from the western practice of exalting a name as opposed to the significance of the work produced by the owner of that name (Shaughnessy, date unknown).

construction within the narrative of the film, whether or not the film depicts a story about living in exile or diaspora (Naficy, 2001: 237). Even further to this is the performance of identity concept that Naficy describes as:

Distanced from familial and familiar structures, the exiles [and people in diaspora] are in an enviable position of being able to remake themselves. If it can be constructed, identity can also be reconstructed, deconstructed – even performed. In recent cultural theory much has been made of minorities' [i.e. people in exile and diaspora] uses of certain defensive, resistive, and pleasurable performance strategies as creative means of fashioning new and empowered identities that counter their socio-political subalternity and cultural marginalization. (2001: 269–270)

The following section 'Postcolonial Feminisms' will enhance the aspects of Naficy's theory of 'accented' cinema that have been highlighted. The section on Mohanty will discuss the importance of narrative (like film) as a tool for the expression of gendered struggles with regard to race, history, ethnicity and nation. Spivak's section focuses on notions of political representation and proposes the use of margins as a platform for effective expression and resistance.

1.4 Postcolonial Feminisms

Postcolonial feminisms is a rich and diverse field of study that has arisen, in part, as a reaction to, and, in part, as a transformation of the various forms of Western feminism³⁰. And, just as Western feminism is a broad label categorising the different kinds of feminisms that have emerged in the West, so too is the concept of postcolonial feminisms. This dissertation will focus on two postcolonial feminist perspectives: that of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 1994, 1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990, 1994, 1996, 1999).

³⁰Western Second Wave feminisms is a term used in this thesis to describe all the various forms of feminism (e.g. radical, socialist, marxist) that have been developed in the West. The thesis does not aim to completely alienate or berate western feminisms, for they have earned their place. However, some forms of these Western feminisms have historically tended to speak, on behalf of all women, from a middle-class white perspective. In doing so, Western feminisms have unwittingly tended to assume that the struggle and plight of all women (no matter what their differences might be) are the same. In this way, the experiences of women of colour and women from underprivileged backgrounds are not given the importance they deserve. It cannot be assumed that all women experience the same things in the same way. Factors and influences vary depending on circumstance. As a result, Third World women and women of colour have begun to speak out and what has emerged are postcolonial feminist discourses that attempt a more realistic and holistic approach to the struggles of women.

1.4.1 Chandra Talpade Mohanty

Mohanty's ideas (1991, 1994, 1997) begin with a critique of some forms of western feminism, arguing that they can sometimes be too narrow to be applied to the plight of the Third World woman/woman of colour. The often universalist approach of these feminisms tend to assume that the Third World woman/woman of colour is a singular monolithic subject. However, says Mohanty, the principles of Western feminisms can be broadened to include issues of race, class, history, nationalism and gender in the analysis of and the struggle against the oppressions endured by Third World women/women of colour (1988).

Before engaging in any further into the discussion of Mohanty's ideas, it is necessary to qualify and explain the use of the terms "Third World women/women of colour". To use these terms would, indeed, be to perpetuate a homogenising category - the very practice that Mohanty is speaking against and aiming to transform. However, there is no way to escape this as Trinh T. Min-ha (1989) and Grace Poore (1998) argue. According to Poore,

The term 'woman/women of color' is widely accepted in the United States and Canada as a category to distinguish nonwhite women of European ethnicity. It implies the politicization of definition - where women whose legacy of oppression as a by-product of racism can assert their difference from the privileged norm of whiteness. In nearly the same way, other terms denoting identity have become a part of the nonmainstream and, in some instances, also mainstream vocabulary [...]. (in Dasgupta, 1998: 21)

Min-ha (in Eagleton, 1996: 394 - 398) speaks about the significance of the use of "Third World". Its use began as that of 'women of colour' - to acknowledge difference and to create an abstract category that was not 'western' or 'European'. The term usually referred to people in countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Thereafter, the term came to be used for people who were ethnically linked to these areas and people belonging to underprivileged societies. It further developed into a term that filled the lack that emerged when the notions of the First and Second worlds were no longer fashionable. And, depending on who used it, "Third World" also carried negative connotations like savage or uncultured. The point that both Min-ha and Poore eventually arrive at is that the "Third World women/women of colour" category emerged as a way of including or giving space to those women who were overlooked by white/western/European privilege and discourse. However, it has developed into a category that classes women of various backgrounds while simultaneously effacing their difference.

For the purposes of this thesis, the category ‘Third World women/women of colour’ can be understood as women of colour who are natives of or who have connections to Third World countries, and who have suffered gendered oppression influenced by ethnicity and/or a lack of resources.

Mohanty highlights a significant point regarding Western feminist scholarship. To the Third World woman, “[...] western feminist writing on women in the Third World [is] considered in the context of the global hegemony of western scholarship [...]” (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 199). She identifies and challenges certain analytical assumptions made in these feminist writings. These assumptions, argues Mohanty, neglect the fact that women in the Third World experience struggle and oppression differently to those in the western world for a variety of reasons. These reasons could relate to a lack of resources or even cultural diversity. The analytical framework for Western feminist scholarship can therefore not be transposed wholesale to writing on Third World women.

The first assumption that she speaks of relates to the presupposition that women (regardless of race, class, ethnicity) are a comprised and coherent category with identical needs and interests. This, she says, infers a concept of gender and sexual difference or patriarchy as universally and cross-culturally appropriate analytical structures. The second assumption occurs at the methodological level in terms of the comfortable and simplistic way in which “‘proof’ of universal and cross-cultural validity are provided” (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 199). The final assumption is political and underlies the analytical strategy and the methodology discussed above. This refers to the “models of power and struggle they imply and suggest” (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 200). In other words, as a consequence of the methodological and analytical mode employed by Western feminist scholarship, “a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group is assumed, which, in turn, produces the image of an average third world woman” (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 200):

This average third world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, [...], is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their bodies and sexualities, and the freedom to make their own decisions. (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 200)³¹

³¹This has implications for Nair and Mehta in the sense that they are changing the self-perception of women by firstly representing them in films and by secondly representing them with critical agency, identity transformation and the power to make decisions.

Mohanty is suggesting here that a change be made such that the representation of Third World women provides a truer reflection of their contexts/circumstances/conditions³². This can occur in two ways: Third World women, women of colour or women previously belonging to the Third World have to become active participants in their self-presentation, or Western scholarship has to become more open, taking into account that factors such as race, class and ethnic origin play a significant role in the lives of Third World women. Either way, both these options subscribe to elements of postcolonial feminist discourse.

Subsequently, the writing produced by Third World women has, thus far, been heavily concerned with,

(1) the idea of the simultaneity of oppressions as fundamental to the experience of social and political marginality and the grounding of feminist politics in the histories of racism and imperialism; (2) the crucial role of a hegemonic state in circumscribing their/ our daily lives and survival struggles; (3) the significance of memory and writing in the creation of oppositional agency³³; and the differences, conflicts, and contradictions internal to Third World women's organizations and communities. (Mohanty, Torres & Russo, 1991: 10)

The complex interrelationships between feminist, antiracist, and nationalist struggles are, in addition, a crucial consideration of these writings. Mohanty argues that history is an important aspect of feminist, let alone postcolonial feminist, discourses. Different groups of people have been subject to different histories due to time/period, location and the presence of other people. And, even if different groups share a particular historical moment, the roles and status positions that they occupied may have differed. For example, white and black people experienced the colonisation of Africa differently: in the rewriting of history, it becomes an issue of who was the coloniser and who was the colonised? This has been another area of focus in the writing of Third World feminists. They are arguing for a rewriting of history based specifically on the situation, history of struggle and the daily survival strategies of people of colour, third world and postcolonial peoples (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 10).

Naficy, in identifying 'accented' cinema, reveals that the dominant, "western" cinematic practices are not always applicable to all groups of people (specifically, those people who originate in countries considered to be Third World or non-western). The conventions of the Hollywood discourses and narrative are not sufficient to tell their stories or effectively capture

³²Third World women are not always powerless victims (Williams & Chrisman, 1992: 200).

³³This can be extended to filmmaking as well.

their experiences. However, when these people do move into the western spaces, the access to appropriate resources, the established frameworks and the ability to express the self, allow for the creation of new discourses like, for example, an ‘accented’ cinema and postcolonial feminisms. Similar to Mohanty’s argument, Naficy also proposes the consideration of factors such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, politics and nationalism in the understanding of where these filmmakers are coming from and where they are going. This is important in establishing a framework for the analysis of Nair and Mehta’s films. Being Indian is specific to these filmmakers and it is crucial to draw on the abovementioned factors in order to understand the Indian female experience of identity and how it takes form in their films.

A consideration of history will reveal the significance of race in feminist analyses. One of the most prominent criticisms of ‘Western feminisms’ has been their heavy concern with gender inequality at the expense of race and its inscription in gender injustice. Mohanty views gender and race as relational concepts. A woman, she says, is not a woman because she is biologically female. Historical constructions and ideologies of womanhood are linked as much to class and race as they are to sex, “[i]t is the intersections of various systemic networks of class, race, (hetero)sexuality, and nation, then, that position us as ‘women’” (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 12 - 13). This is a vital concern in the analysis of Nair and Mehta’s films. The journey of identity, that is characteristic of Naficy’s notion of ‘accented’ cinema, and that Nair and Mehta’s characters undergo, begins at the point when they realise that their identities are constructs of the ideology of Indian womanhood and how this has historically been tied to Indian nationalism. As Anannya Bhattacharjee points out,

A persistent theme of Indian Nationalism has been the re-processing of the image of the Indian woman and her role based in the family based on models of Indian womanhood from the distant glorious past. The woman becomes a metaphor for the purity, the chastity, and the sanctity of the Ancient Spirit that is India. As Chatterjee³⁴ puts it, the national construct of the Indian woman attributes ‘the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on’ to femininity, which then stands ‘as a sign for nation’ (1989a:630). Consequently, anything that threatens to dilute this model of Indian womanhood constitutes a betrayal of all that it stands for: nation, religion, God, the Spirit of India, culture, tradition, family. (in Dasgupta, 1998: 172)

It can be argued (Mohanty, Torres & Russo, 1991: 21) then that feminist struggles exist on two levels. The first level is that of ideology and discourse which confronts issues of

³⁴She is referring here to theorist Partha Chatterjee’s article, ‘Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India’ (1989) that appeared in *America Ethnologist* 16 (4): 622-33.

representation. These relate to notions of womanhood and femininity. The second level is that of materiality, experience and everyday existence, and places emphasis on the micro-politics of work, home, family and sexuality. These levels are interconnected and occur simultaneously (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 21). As a result, one can impact on and influence the other. For instance, representation could be a reflection of patterns of behaviour, while behaviour could be a reflection of patterns of representation.

As a result, Mohanty welcomes and encourages writing by Third world women; specifically writing related to history, the lives and communities of other Third World women and the writers themselves. This, she says, aids in “the creation of a discursive space where (self-) knowledge is produced by and for third world women” (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 34). Writing and the production of female (and feminist) narratives becomes a site of confrontation and conflict where discussions surrounding consciousness and subjectivity are engaged in, and where political identities can be established, formed or shaped. This has implications for both Naficy’s theories and Nair and Mehta’s filmmaking. Their films, falling under the category of ‘accented’ cinema and employing its techniques to defy convention and make controversial, political statements about the representation of the Indian woman, are creating discursive spaces for female and feminist narratives.

In addition, writing and writing about that which is remembered is a powerful and resistant act that promotes agency in the simple, daily concerns and struggles of Third World women. Resistance arises out of the very fact that Third World women are writing for and about themselves; a contrast to that which has been written for and about them by Western feminists and scholars. In other words, by creating their own narratives, they are foregrounding that which has been ignored or neglected by dominant hegemonic narratives of the West; “[t]he very practice of remembering the grain of ‘public’ or hegemonic history, of locating the silences and the struggle to assert knowledge which is outside the parameters of the dominant suggests a rethinking of sociality itself” (Mohanty, Russo & Torres, 1991: 38 - 39).

1.4.2 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Spivak has been extensively involved in both literary and postcolonial studies. Out of this arose her work on the notion of the ‘subaltern’. Her use of the term subaltern has had a

significant impact in the area of postcolonial studies (and, in particular, postcolonial feminisms), and it is this specific section of her work that holds relevance for this thesis.

Taking the term from the writings of Antonio Gramsci (1971), Spivak's main concern regarding the subaltern was: can the subaltern speak? This, in fact, became the title to one of her most quoted articles (Williams and Chrisman, 1994: 66 - 111). In response to her question, she posits that the subaltern is not heard and, as a consequence, cannot speak. Before venturing further into her theory, it is necessary to define and understand the concept of the 'subaltern'.

The Oxford Dictionary definition suggests that the term 'subaltern' has its origins in the military and was used to refer to an officer of lower rank. Developing from this, it has come to mean inferior or subordinate. However, Spivak subscribes to a very specific notion of the term. Although she appropriated the term from the work of Gramsci, she prefers Ranajit Guha's conception of it,

the space that is cut off from the lines of mobility in a colonized country. You have the foreign elite and the indigenous elite. Below that you will have the vectors of upward, downward, sideward and backward mobility. But then there is a space which is for all practical purposes outside those lines. (in Landry & Maclean, 1996: 289)

As mentioned, Spivak argues that the subaltern cannot speak because, as such, she is not heard by the privileged of either the First or Third worlds. She believes that the status of the subaltern would change completely, were she to make herself heard, such that she would cease to exist as a subaltern - "a most oppressed and invisible constituency". Spivak perceives this as the ultimate goal as she is not interested in preserving subalternity (in Landry & Maclean, 1996: 5).

However, "[s]uch a revolutionary change will not be brought about by traditional revolutionary means, nor by intellectuals attempting to represent minorities, nor worse yet, pretending merely to let them speak for themselves" (Landry & Maclean, 1996: 6). It is at this point that Spivak suggests the consideration of the two levels of representation³⁵. 'Representing', as it stands, refers to political representation in the sense that someone assumes the place of someone else and speaks for or on behalf of that person. The hyphenated

‘re-presenting’ relates to the portrayal of someone in some form or another, such as art. These two levels are complicit by nature and have to be considered in conjunction to one another when applied to the concept of the subaltern.

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

In this way, Nair and Mehta, work towards eliminating the subaltern (sometimes in the way Spivak conceives of it but also in the sense of inferior, subordinate and oppressed). In giving their characters agency, these directors are allowing the Indian woman to make herself heard. In this way, Nair and Mehta illustrate that the Indian women in their films, as re(-) presentations of others in society, are specifically not victims. They’ve always had a voice; they just required a space in which to project it.

Spivak often, in her writings and interviews, relates the story of Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, a teenage woman who committed suicide in Calcutta in 1926, because she was unable to carry out an assassination entrusted to her by a political movement - involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence - that she belonged to (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994: 103 -104). In an interview entitled, ‘The Problem of Cultural Representation’, she explains the complexity of the act of her relating Bhuvaneshwari’s story:

What I was doing [...] was really trying to analyse and represent her text. She wasn’t particularly trying to speak to me. I was representing her, I was reinscribing her. To an extent, I was writing her to be read, and I was certainly not claiming to give her a voice. So, if I’m read as giving her a voice, there again this is a sort of positionality between the Western feminist who listens to me, and myself, signified as a Third World informant. What we do to the texts of the oppressed is very much dependent on where we are. (Adamson interview in Harasym, 1990: 57)

³⁵Spivak appropriated these two particular meanings/uses of representation from Karl Marx in his book *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (published in 1852 in New York): *Vertreten* (represent) *Darstellen* (re-present)

This could also be said of Nair and Mehta (and other filmmakers falling under Naficy's concept of an 'accented' cinema): they are representing the texts of other Indian women, where the text would be the nationalism of India inscribed in the notion of the ideal Indian woman and the consequences that accompany this. They are not speaking for these women but are allowing them to be heard, and they are able to do this because of their 'privileged' position outside of India.

It is necessary at this point to resume Naficy's discussion of the displacement of filmmakers. The displacement of 'accented' filmmakers arises from the fact that they are situated in an interstitial space between their home and host countries. The confusion that they experience in having to retain their homeland lifestyles and in having to conform to the new lifestyle of the host country causes feelings of ambivalence. They begin to question the practices of the homeland because they are no longer situated in it. In this environment external and distant to the homeland, they are introduced to new ideas and experiences. They begin to view the world from a different perspective. Even though being in-between spaces causes an upset in the lives of the 'accented' filmmakers, they are situated in a very privileged position. They feel and experience two spaces simultaneously.

In a discussion earlier of hooks (1991) and her ideas surrounding the importance of being situated in the margins, it was argued that Nair and Mehta's character constructions allow for the margin to be a site of resistance at two levels. It is the level in which the directors use the margin as the site of expression for resistance that is of significance here. It may be argued that Nair and Mehta are not situated at the margins because they have decided to live in First World countries. But, as 'accented' filmmakers, they are situated at the margins because they occupy a space between their home and host country – a contentious space. Yet, they are still privileged because they are exposed to the proverbial 'best (and worst) of both of worlds' so to speak, and can be critical of them. And by allowing their female characters to use their bodies (in other words, their margins) to resist patriarchal nationalist representations, they are, indeed, allowing them to be heard.

1.4 Conclusion

This chapter has worked toward establishing a coherent framework that could be used for the analysis of the films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and that could possibly argue for an emerging postcolonial feminist film.

The theoretical framework argues that Nair and Mehta, because of their diasporic positions, portray Indian women in unconventional ways in their films. These unconventional ways result from a comparison of the construction of Nair and Mehta's female characters to that of popular Indian cinema or, in other words, Bollywood. To begin with, a brief discussion about the history of popular Indian cinema and its representation of Indian women was entered into. This allowed for a contextualisation of what Nair and Mehta are working against in their films.

It was discovered that Indian women maintained nationalist ideals through the perpetuation of Hindu values and beliefs. These religious rules governed the behaviour of Indian women and this ultimately led to the oppression of Indian women and patriarchal control of their bodies. It was the ideal wife, mother and daughter who respected and devotedly obeyed the rules governing their behaviour that were portrayed in popular films. Indian women thus became symbols of nationalism.

Nair and Mehta subvert this concept of the Indian women. They depict Indian women as reclaiming their bodies and sexual identities. It is at this point that Naficy is introduced to argue for the similarities in Nair and Mehta's work, and to attribute this to their displacement as diasporic filmmakers and all that this entails.

The postcolonial feminist discourses provide an understanding of how text and narrative – which is the medium of film in the case of this thesis – can become specific to a group of people, occupying the margins, through the incorporation of defining elements such as race, gender, history, geography, ethnicity and nation; and, in this specificity it can become a tool of resistance or subversion.

The next two chapters will employ this theoretical framework in the analysis of the construction of Indian women in the films of Nair and Mehta.

Chapter Two

2.1 Introduction

This chapter, using the theoretical frameworks established in Chapter One, serves to analyse the construction of the female characters in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2002).

Nair's characters often prove difficult to analyse within these frameworks, for the very reason that her films seem to outwardly comply with popular cinematic conventions. For example, *Mississippi Masala* (1991) can be said to subscribe to the Hollywood interracial love story genre, while *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) and its various subplots can be said to subscribe to the Bollywood narrative structure. As a result, Nair's characters appear, at first, to be constructed according to these popular conventions. The Indian women in her films may often seem to be contained³⁶ or as perpetuating nationalist ideals, whether or not they have undergone a journey of identity or experienced a border-crossing³⁷ moment that would have allowed them to attain personal agency - as proposed by the 'accented' aspects of the frameworks.

An interrogation of these women, however, their behaviour and the choices that they make within the context of their roles, lives and the film, reveals that embedded in their conventional and popular portrayal exists evidence of these very women 'speaking out' in creative ways against the traditional inscription of their roles and existence. This 'speaking out' refers to the characters' attempts at or ability to find an outlet within popular narratives through which to express themselves as opposed to allowing themselves to be expressed through the dominant ideologies of convention. In addition, 'speaking out' relates to the postcolonial theoretical discussions in Chapter One that encourage the attainment of personal agency through the projection of 'voice'. This voice is manifested in various ways in Nair's characters: they may speak, remain silent in resistance, claim/reclaim a space of expression or re-define pre-existing roles from their marginal positions.

³⁶This notion of containment is a reference to Tzvetan Todorov's *The Poetics of Prose* (1977) in which he speaks about the 'grammar of narrative'. This 'grammar of narrative' emerges out of a natural progression of events or choices; in other words, one incurs the other. One example could be that if a woman were to engage in an extra-marital affair, it would follow in narrative that she be punished for her actions. She has transgressed a law - the law of marriage - and it thus follows that she be contained for this behaviour. In popular narratives, this punishment or containment could take any form from being killed and imprisoned to being saved and rehabilitated by another male character.

³⁷Refer to Chapter One (pg 27) for a discussion of Naficy's theory regarding border-crossing journeys of identity.

It is the nature of this concept of ‘speaking out’ that will be investigated in this chapter to reveal how postcolonial feminisms indeed articulate through an ‘accented cinema’. Each of the female protagonists in the chosen films will be read in terms of the characteristics of the ‘accented’ style that Naficy identifies. These characteristics relate to the plurality of the characters in ‘accented’ films, and the journey of identity and the border-crossing experience that they undergo. The characters will thereafter be discussed collectively, but deliberately not as a collective, in relation to postcolonial feminist notions of agency, difference and representation in order to illustrate how Nair uses female/feminist narratives – specifically in film – to highlight the concerns of Indian women in a postcolonial context.

The chapter begins with a brief history of Nair’s background and an explanation of her current diasporic status. This will be followed by separate sections for *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) under the heading of “Articulating Space in the ‘Accented’ Style”. Each section will provide a synopsis of the films and an ‘accented’ reading of each of the main female characters within these films. The final section, “Speaking Out: The Articulation of Postcolonial Feminisms” engages in a postcolonial feminist discussion of the characters in relation to one another, in order to elucidate the manner in which Nair manipulates their construction such that popular narratives are re-defined as spaces from which women’s stories are told to be heard.

2.2 Mira Nair

Mira Nair was born in Bhubaneswar (Orissa, India) in 1957. Her father was a civil servant. She first studied Sociology and Theatre at the University of New Delhi. In 1976, after attaining a full scholarship, she continued her studies in Sociology at Harvard University. She was interested in radical experimental theatre and street protest theatre, and became involved in acting. This changed, however, and in an interview she claimed,

I [...] grew impatient with the lack of control one has as an actor. Actors are always at the mercy of directors and their vision of the world. I wanted to be the one in control – telling the story, controlling the light, the gesture and the frame. (Anbarasan & Otchet, 1998)

While at Harvard, her interest moved toward documentary filmmaking. Her career as a filmmaker began with *Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979), a documentary made in part

completion of her degree. She made several other documentaries³⁸ before making a transition into fiction/feature filmmaking which, she argues, afforded her more control over the outcomes of her films. Of her shift into feature filmmaking she says,

While I was working in documentary I often became impatient while I had to wait for something to happen and then not having it happen like I hoped it would. I wanted to have a lot more control over gesture and drama. So I shifted to feature films. (Anbarasan & Otchet, 1998)

While studying in the United States, Nair divided her time between Delhi and New York, evidently in a constant state of displacement. In 1996, Nair moved to Cape Town (South Africa) with her son and her husband who taught at a university there (Prakash, 1999). She resided in Cape Town until 1999. Her home is now in Kampala, Uganda – the country of her husband’s birth. She spends most of her time, however, travelling to Delhi, where her family lives, and New York, where she teaches at the University of Columbia and where her production company – Mirabai Films, Inc. – is based (Tresilian, 2003).

Some of Nair’s filmmaking awards and honors include: Best Documentary Prize at the American Film Festival and Global Film Festival in 1985 for *India Cabaret* (1985); an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Film, and the Best New Director, Golden Camera and Prix du Publique awards at the Cannes Film Festival for *Salaam Bombay!* (1988); and the Golden Lion Award for Best Picture at the Venice International Film Festival for *Monsoon Wedding* (2002).

Nair’s three biggest feature films *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) all deal with and reflect her ambivalent relationship to India and aspects of its culture, and her displacement as a diasporic identity. In this regard, she says,

I seem to be getting some sort of reputation for making films about exile. I didn’t choose this, it chose me. Distance from a community is something which used to confuse me but now I use it as a tool for my films. [...] You can find yourself on the other side of the world and yet still find a reminder or link to home. (Anbarasan & Otchet, 1998)

Nair has experienced many border-crossing journeys of identity and these are, in one way, evident in the transitions made in her studies and career. These borders, according to Naficy, are multiperspectival and ambivalent spaces that allow for a certain kind of border

³⁸For a full filmography, please refer to the appendix.

consciousness. This border consciousness gives rise to Nair's structures of feeling toward her homeland and host society. And, even though these structures of feeling are not defined or may not necessarily play out in the way that Naficy describes, they do filter through in the construction of the Indian women in her films. In this way, she attempts to understand these structures of feeling intellectually, creatively and artistically. Her multiperspectives manifest themselves in the different stories of each of her characters and their plural identities, and her ambivalence is explored through her characters' questioning and re-fashioning of their cultural identities.

2.3 Articulating Space in the 'Accented' Style

2.3.1 *Mississippi Masala* (1991) - A Synopsis

Mississippi Masala (1991) is a film overtly about diaspora and exile. The story centres around a 24-year-old Indian girl named Mina, living in Greenwood (Mississippi, USA). Like her father, she was born in Uganda. Her grandfather was an indentured labourer brought to Uganda to work on the railways. On completion of the railway, Mina's grandfather opted to remain in Uganda as a resident. Mina and her family, as a consequence of this, formed part of a large diasporic community living in Uganda until 1972 when General Idi Amin forced the Indians into exile. Mina's family, subsequently, emigrated to England and thereafter to America.

Mina's father, considering himself Ugandan first, having been born there, and Indian second, had great difficulty reconciling the fact that he had been forcibly removed from 'his' country. Hence, when the new Ugandan regime came into power, he began writing letters threatening to sue the government for his unlawful removal and the property that he had to leave behind.

The film is set in 1990 and, at this time, Mina, her father, Jay, and her mother, Kinnu, live in a motel called the *Monte Cristo*, owned by their extended family. Mina works at the *Monte Cristo* cleaning rooms and toilets, and as a receptionist. Her mother now owns a liquor store. After leading a more than comfortable life in Uganda, Mina's family now lives in debt.

The plot begins when Mina drives into the back of a carpet cleaner's van. Demetrius is a young African-American man who has worked hard to establish his own business amidst

racist sentiment in Mississippi. After a subsequent meeting in a nightclub, Mina and Demetrius begin seeing each other and soon fall in love. Mina, however, keeps her relationship with him a secret from her parents and family. When her parents do eventually discover the truth, they try to keep them apart and, in the process, destroy Demetrius' business.

2.3.1.1 Mina

In *Mississippi Masala* (1991), the character of Mina is shown at two stages of her life: as a child and as an adult. The life of the child is provided as a background to the life of the adult allowing for a better understanding of the construction of Mina's character.

Mina's plurality of identity at each of these stages is quite evident in the different roles that she naturally or uncomfortably assumes. As a child, she is a daughter who is obedient, slightly mischievous, observant, perceptive and scared. She is also a caring friend to the child of their domestic worker. In her interaction with Okelo, her father's best friend, Mina is portrayed as a kind of 'surrogate' child who is spoilt, sad, hurt and curious.

The first borders that the young Mina crosses are physical and are characterised by her family's movement from Uganda to England and then to America. The effect of these changes in environment is evident in the character of Mina as an adult. Her concepts of home and identity are confused and not very coherent. This is noted in her plurality as an adult in the United States. Mina still occupies the role of a daughter. In this new context, however, she seems to have grown into a feisty, fiery, free-spirited, temperamental young woman who is dependent on and protective of her parents. She is also a worker/employee who is content with having to do a very functional and menial job for someone else. She does not seem to be very motivated in this area and is quite settled in what she does. In fact, she does not show much interest or enthusiasm when her father mentions acquiring an education.

To her mother, Mina is not just a daughter, but a woman of marriageable age. Mina, in this particular role (bestowed upon her by her mother) is quite uninterested, unwilling and very realistic about her merits as a marriageable woman. This is influenced by the most important aspect of Mina's plurality, at this stage in her life; her status as a diasporic being. This role or part of her identity sits very uneasily for her. She is uncertain about who she is, having had to

negotiate her Indian identity with the cultural influences of the various places in which she has resided. She sees herself as a hybrid (“a mixed masala”).

Mina’s journey of identity is therefore reflective of this plurality. In her life thus far, she has lived in places where her physical difference has been and still is noticeable. This refers directly to Naficy’s notion of tactile optics in ‘accented’ films and the particular significance of the experience of the human body. Her body and, more specifically, her brown skin have been the ultimate signifiers of her difference from the people belonging to the other cultures in which she has lived. In Uganda, she was an unwelcome, privileged Indian among the Africans. Her life in England is not explored in the film, so it is unclear what she experienced there. In the United States, however, her difference is made evident on many levels. To the other Indians in her community, she is too dark to be the typical Indian girl and to the African-Americans, she appears to be Mexican. As a result, Mina often seems to be explaining away her difference and struggling with questions surrounding her very diverse background and identity.

In her explanations of the many sides to her identity, Mina appears to be uncomfortable in attempting to create an understanding of herself. To do so, would be to define herself, to define a position, and in defining a position that she belongs to, she would be forcing her being, on a spiritual level, and her body, on a physical level, into a mould of something that her surrounding world wants or expects her to be. She can’t help that she’s different and not a few shades lighter, and she can’t help that, after all the varied cultural influences that she’s been exposed to, she does not want to follow a tradition that is external to her lived experience. Mina seems to be culturally displaced as opposed to personally displaced. She is secure in herself and her convictions but she is not secure in her negotiated identity. This is an instance in which Nair’s personal response to being situated in the interstices of cultures is expressed through her character.

At this point in her life, Mina crosses an important border during her journey of identity. It is indicated physically by the bus trip that she takes from Greenwood to Biloxi (Mississippi) to spend a secret weekend away, alone with Demetrius. Her border-crossing is her engagement in an interracial, pre-marital affair. The significance of this border-crossing lies in the fact that she uses her body to transgress sexual boundaries. Her body being that physical part of her being that people are trying to control by constantly attempting to define it culturally and thereby forcing it to conform to a model of something that she clearly is not or does not want

to be. Her transgression of these sexual boundaries is a metaphor for more profound metaphysical borders in her life and identity.

Her interracial relationship is a boundary because her family wants her to marry a 'good Indian man'. In doing so, Mina's parents would be maintaining or perpetuating good Indian values through their daughter, an Indian female. Pre-marital sex is also a boundary because to engage in an act of that nature would be to reduce her marriageability. Marriageability for an Indian woman depends on her virtue before marriage. In this regard, the stakes are higher for Mina: as discussed earlier, she is dark and has no money or wealth, so the only redeeming quality for her, as an eligible Indian woman, is her virginity.

By transgressing these sexual boundaries, Mina reclaims her body as her own space and assumes self-determination over it. She makes her body her personal space through which she can express herself or speak her being. She does not allow cultural values and beliefs to dictate to her when and how her body should be used. She is not restrained by sexual principles governing her behaviour as an Indian woman. She has defined her body and her existence on her own terms, through self-motivated actions. Her body, in its attempted containment, becomes a site of rebellion and develops into her personal home. Reflecting on Vivian Sobchack's argument (in Naficy, 1999), an enhancement of Naficy's notion of tactile optics in Chapter One (pg 25), Mina's body, at the beginning of the film, can be understood as her house. She was uncomfortable with India being her cultural referent because she had no context in/from which to understand it, and she was similarly uncomfortable within her Indian body because it symbolised ideals that she was not accustomed to. India and her Indian body were 'houses' to her Indian heritage. They housed her ethnicity and cultural inscription. There seemed to be little room left for her personal fulfilment or a self that was truly hers, unmediated by imposed external forces. It therefore became imperative that she discover for herself a home that allowed her freedom of choice and expression. She found that home in her body once she acted on her impulses and fulfilled its needs. And, now that she has made her body her personal space, she will never be culturally displaced, no matter where she finds herself geographically, because her home lies within her.

After her border-crossing, Mina's life choices are based on her own reflection, needs and desires. For instance, she chooses who to love and spend the rest of her life with. She makes a very liberated decision to leave her family because she understands that this will help her grow. She also exhibits the ability to confront her parents and justify the reasons for her

action and her wanting to leave. Ultimately, Mina comes to terms with who she is and discards notions of who or what she is not.

Her plurality, by the end of the film, is not vastly different in the roles that she plays, but is substantially different in how she plays those roles. As a daughter, she is rebellious and independent. She is now a partner and lover who is expressive, free, uninhibited, explorative and sexually knowledgeable because she is speaking out against and pushing the boundaries of her previous identity/plurality through the fulfilment of her personal desires and urges. Nair reveals, at this point, that a woman's sexual knowledge is not necessarily destructive, as has been portrayed by mainstream Hollywood and popular Indian filmmaking. Sexual knowledge can also lead to the accessing of a greater sense of being, as in the case of Mina's character.

Mina's journey thus becomes one of cultural self-discovery in which she crosses a border into her own sense of being. Naficy speaks about hybridity - in conjunction to plurality - being a large concern of diasporic filmmakers because of their own struggles or difficulties with reterritorialisation in the host society. This notion of hybridity is quite evident in and relates directly to Mina's journey of cultural self-discovery and sense of being. By the end of the film, Mina exerts this hybridity as the only way she knows how to exist. She acknowledges her Indian descent, but she also acknowledges that it is not all that she is. She is American as well and thus integrates aspects of the western experience with her physical existence as an Indian woman.

2.3.1.2 Kinnu

In Uganda, Kinnu seemed to exhibit characteristics of an Indian nationalist symbol in the roles that comprised her plurality. As a wife and mother, she was devoted to and concerned for her husband and daughter. She maintained Indian tradition and values through dress, the home that she kept, the people she sometimes socialised with, and her disciplining and upbringing of Mina. As a friend to Okelo, she was caring and non-judgemental, even when her husband rejected Okelo's friendship. Even though she was a privileged employer in comparison to her domestic helpers, she treated them kindly and with respect. Kinnu was a good example of an ideal Indian woman who behaved as she was expected to. This, however, began to change when the political situation in Uganda became detrimental to the safety of Indians living there.

Kinnu's journey of identity begins at this point. Life in Uganda was good for her. She was a woman with a home of her own: a 'kept' woman who 'kept' a good home. Everything she needed was fully provided for by her husband - a lawyer at the time - who supported her financially. It was, therefore, not necessary for her to work. A linking together of the flashbacks in the film reveal that Kinnu was free to entertain, to bring her child up the way she so desired and to look beautiful. At that stage in her life, her only concern was the safety of her husband and child, living in Uganda during such a turbulent period and her husband being a lawyer with strong oppositional political views.

Kinnu crosses a border, literally and symbolically, when she and her family are forced to leave Uganda. Attention is given to this moment with a focus on their bus trip to the airport and the boarding of an aeroplane out of Uganda. Nair emphasises this movement even further with a tracking shot across a map of the world from Kampala (Uganda) to Greenwood (Mississippi, USA). It is evidently a very difficult move for Kinnu to make, but she had no other choice. She had to leave with her family and her life had to be packed into one suitcase with all trace of privilege left behind.

In the United States, her life becomes a question of survival. As a result, she becomes a self-employed woman who owns a liquor store. This makes her fairly self-sufficient and independent, but she still owes money to Anil, a nephew, and his family. From being a woman who was kept, she now becomes a woman who keeps. While attempting to support the family, Kinnu has also to fulfill her duty as a wife and mother. She does, however, change her approach to these roles slightly.

Even though she is still devoted to her family, she is often consumed by trying to make a living. Consequently, she is more vocal about her opinions and feelings, both positive and negative, regarding her husband and her daughter's behaviour. With her husband, she no longer unquestioningly accepts his actions. She confronts him about them, sometimes reproaching him about issues relating to his lack of involvement in the upbringing and disciplining of Mina. Kinnu, now responsible for a large part of the family's finances, realises that she cannot possibly be completely involved in the matters of the home. Her time and her identity are now mediated between the private (her home) and the public (her work and business). She, therefore, expects her husband to assist her. She is not asking for a complete reversal of roles but a sharing of the parental responsibility.

She does try to maintain Indian values but it's difficult, for her, living in America: her daughter has a mind of her own and an identity that refuses to be tied down, and her husband is always on a mission writing letters to the Ugandan government. For instance, she tries to arrange a good marriage proposal for Mina. Mina, however, is not very open to the idea. Mina, who has never been to India and who has spent a large part of her life in the western world, does not understand her mother's insistence and persistence with this issue. For Kinnu, being Indian is a part of her identity; a part that she would rather not lose. Being Indian, in addition, makes her a part of something. Having had to - in Naficy's terms - territorialise, deterritorialise and reterritorialise more than once has left Kinnu feeling dislocated, as if she is existing between places and cultures. The only constant factor in her life has therefore been her Indian heritage. Her need to hold on to it and pass it on to her daughter is a kind of 'grounding' tactic; an attempt to secure and retain her own identity. In a sense, this is justified as it allows her a sense of home, something that she can return to.

Kinnu's need to retain her Indian culture also relates to Naficy's concept of 'accented' structures of feeling (Chapter One, pg 24). To Kinnu, Indian tradition is her salvation amidst her struggles in America. This is shown quite clearly in a scene in which she is singing in Hindi at the wedding of Anil. The religious music seems to put her at ease and she looks completely content and relaxed. India and the manner of living that it signifies are familiar and safe, and she therefore feels euphoric and open; an imagined space in which she can find refuge. America seems more dysphoric and claustrophobic: financially, they are not coping very well, her husband is always distracted and her daughter, with whom she finds it difficult to communicate, seems to lack ambition and motivation.

Kinnu, however, does not explain her bond with India to Mina or her reasons for wanting to hold on to its memory. Kinnu has immediate knowledge of India and appears to forget that her daughter has no context from or in which to understand the Indian culture and possibly assimilate it. If Mina were to adopt the culture without a context, she would be performing an identity (Naficy, 2001) as opposed to living her own. For Mina, the 'accented' structures of feeling work in reverse: the imagined India is claustrophobic for her the very fact that she has to imagine it. She does not understand its culture and ideologies because she does not understand where they come from. This however, does not automatically mean that America is euphoric for her because she has not, as yet, decided what her cultural space is.

In America, Kinnu is also the unfortunate object of gossip. Even though it may seem as if Kinnu's border-crossing journey has been a relatively positive one - in terms of the woman she has been forced to become - women in the community see it as a step down from her previous 'privileged' life in Uganda. She is judged on the basis of her class, economic status, and the appearance and behaviour of her family. Kinnu is frowned upon because after leading a very privileged life in Uganda, she now belongs to the lower/working class. She is seen as a joke because she supports a husband who is continuously attempting to sue the government of Uganda. Her family is struggling financially and owing money to other people. To add to this, her daughter, Mina, is an outspoken young woman (very unappealing in an Indian girl) and she is dark. These superficial elements make Kinnu the object of gossip. The irony in all of this is that she is discriminated against by other Indian women who are also displaced beings in America.

Her attempts to arrange a marriage for Mina, to discipline her, and her constant concern about what other people will think are all justified in the context of her experiences in America. Consequently, she does not receive Mina's relationship with Demetrius very well.

Kinnu crosses a second border when Mina decides to leave. It hurts her to have to say goodbye to her daughter, her only child. At first, she is resistant to the idea of Mina going away, but she finally realises that it is a journey that Mina has to make on her own. At this point, a re-interpretation of Naficy's notion of border consciousness (2001) will lend an understanding into how Kinnu comes to this realisation. In Kinnu's instance, her border consciousness is multiperspectival, ambivalent and chaotic as she has arrived at a highly pressurised border situation as opposed to location: that is, being forced to come to terms with possibly never seeing her daughter again. Mina explains to her mother that if she does not go now, she will never leave. As a result of her border consciousness, Kinnu, out of time constraint and necessity, has to consider all the issues from Mina's perspective.

In doing so, she recognises and understands her daughter's need to grow and be independent of the cultural bounds that restrain her. Being an Indian wife and mother, Kinnu could never have left even if she wanted to; her loyalty and devotion to her family would be placed in question. For that moment, she and Mina, woman to woman and mother to daughter, share a mutual understanding of their identities as diasporic Indian women and the external expectations that accompany that. She lets Mina go with the hope that her daughter will experience life in the way that she never had the opportunity to. Even though leaving Uganda

allowed her to become a stronger woman who supported her family, she was in no way financially independent or in control of her own life. Her first priority had always been the well-being of her family. Kinnu's second border is therefore crossed through her daughter. By allowing Mina to leave, she allows herself to let go of India and all that it signifies for her.

This is reiterated at the very end when her husband is invited, by the new regime, to return to Uganda. Kinnu refuses to join him immediately because too much is at stake. She has her business in America and she has to make sure that she is available in the event that Mina may need her. She is not the woman that used to blindly follow her husband wherever he went, disrupting her life whenever necessary. She realises that her husband does not always know best. She tells him to go while she takes care of matters in Greenwood. Her border has been crossed and she is therefore unwilling to re-cross it.

On his return to Uganda, Jay realises that it is no longer his home; it is not the place he remembered. He writes to Kinnu explaining that he will not be making a move back to Uganda: "*Home is where the heart is and my heart is with you*". This is sad because after all that Kinnu has been through and after all that she has done and achieved in her life, her presence is still equated with the home. Even though, in her life, she has stretched the boundaries of her symbolic representation, it all comes back to her being an Indian woman and the cultural inscription that accompanies it.

Taking into consideration the other side of this, however, illustrates that this last time when her husband asks her to go with him, it is not she who follows, but he who returns to her. This is an important and powerful position for her to be in because she can now survive on her own in America, but it is he who needs her and is dependent on her. She, as a woman, has already spiritually crossed a border over into her own sense of herself and she cannot, as a result, go back. Jay, on the other hand, has to physically go back in order to understand this.

2.3.2 Monsoon Wedding (2002) - A Synopsis

As mentioned, *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) is a film comprised of various subplots, each of which is character-driven. The synopsis for this film is, therefore, very brief and will be expanded upon in the individual readings of the female characters. The primary storyline of the film is, however, the upcoming wedding of a young Indian woman named Aditi.

Set in Delhi (India), this film explores the heights and depths experienced by the Vermas, an upper middle class Indian family, in the last four days before their daughter's wedding. Tensions run high with botched plans and preparations, extended family arriving from all over the world, personalities clashing and romances blossoming.

There are four women characters in this film whose constructions will be interrogated in the following sections: Aditi, Ria, Pimmi and Alice. Ria is Aditi's older, unmarried cousin who wants to study creative writing in the United States and who was sexually abused by a family member when she was younger. Pimmi is Aditi's mother and Alice is their domestic worker. Each of these characters is very distinct in their different embodiments of the Indian woman.

2.3.2.1 Aditi

Aditi's border-crossing journey of identity seems to occur in reverse: she begins with sexual knowledge and thereafter appears to make a transition into containment. This containment, however, seems to be of her own making.

Since *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) is a film about a large family event, Aditi is shown interacting with many different people. Her plurality of identity, as a result, becomes quite overt. To begin with, she is a daughter who is seemingly sweet, obedient and well-mannered. It is noticeable that her family status and her upbringing have also allowed her to be spoiled, independent and 'modern'. There are moments, however, when this role of daughter becomes too much to bear and she seems to indicate a sense of claustrophobia in her life and home. Aditi is also a cousin and niece who is attached, fun-loving, mischievous and, sometimes, slightly snappish. As a sister, she is extremely impatient, nasty, rude and, on occasion, violent with her younger brother. He seems to receive all the frustration that results from her having to portray a certain image and behave a certain way.

Aditi also leads a secret life. In addition to the above aspects of her identity, she is a lover or - what would be considered - a 'loose' woman. She keeps this part of her life hidden from everyone but her older cousin, Ria, whom she turns to for advice. She is having an affair with an older married man, Vikram. This side of her is very sneaky, secretive, dreamy, wishful and passionate. She realises that what she is doing is wrong but there is something about the relationship that allows her to escape her own life - and other roles perhaps. She is able to

express and fulfill her desires. She is idealistic about what the relationship offers her and how it makes her feel, but she is also realistic about the circumstances and is fully aware that there is no guarantee that Vikram will ever leave his wife.

One other aspect of her plural identity, at the beginning of the film, is that of a wife-to-be or an in-law to-be. On the outside, Aditi appears to be sweet, demure, innocent and ideal because she seems willing to engage in all the traditional Hindu bridal rituals. She is, however, slightly reticent and scared - possibly due to the guilt that she feels. She is uncertain and overwhelmed because she knows that she is being dishonest in using this arranged marriage as an escape from her escape, a dead-end pre-marital affair.

Aditi has therefore, from the outset, not been constructed to be the typical Indian woman. The first few scenes highlight the fact that she is having an affair. Pre- or extra-marital affairs are forbidden for young Indian women, especially those of marriageable age like Aditi. Aditi has thus already stretched the boundaries of the rules governing the behaviour of an Indian woman at the beginning of her journey of identity.

Aditi has agreed to the arranged marriage because she is uncertain of a future with Vikram. He has his wife and could string her along for a very long time. Being an intelligent and modern young woman, Aditi is aware of all this and wants to ensure her future. To her, the best way to do this is to settle down. In the midst of the wedding preparation, however, Aditi becomes painfully aware of what this marriage is going to mean for her. She thus begins to experience feelings of doubt and uncertainty.

Her secret life seemed to afford her a sense of pleasure and, possibly, freedom. It allowed her a moment or space away from the claustrophobia of home, family and the expectations that accompany these concepts. In addition, the affair was something that was her own. Her home seemed to be continually mediated by family. The affair belonged to her and no one else knew about it. Those that did (her cousin Ria) expressed concern for her, but never judged her for it.

She has made her decision (to marry) her safety net between her home and her affair. This safety net is an ambivalent space, however, because she is not sure of whether or not she's made the right decision. She does not love Hemant, her fiancé, and there are too many questions that she has not answered for herself. Will she learn to love him? Is she really ready or willing to surrender all that the affair offers her? Is she being fair on Hemant and her

family by leading them to believe that she is pure and virtuous? Is she ready to give up the ability to decide how she will use her body and what for? As it stands, she has complete control of her body and can do with it as she pleases. If she were to marry, she would have to exercise restraint and be confined to the sexual boundaries that define the role of a 'good Indian wife'. This scares her and is quite evident during her engagement when Hemant's grandmother indicates that she will be expecting great grandchildren soon. Aditi is not even married and she is already feeling the pressure that is placed on the life and body of the Indian wife.

Unlike *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *Monsoon Wedding* (2002) is not primarily³⁹ about diaspora. It is therefore interesting to note the ways in which aspects of Nair's diasporic identity emerge through the female characters in this film. Just as Nair, a diasporic entity, is positioned in the cultural interstices of her home and host societies, Aditi as a wife-to-be is situated in the interstices between her home and her affair. While Nair uses her position to question the cultural inscription of Indian women, and to what extent it relates to India and Indian tradition, Aditi uses her position to question her cultural inscription as an Indian daughter and bride, and to come to terms with an identity that she is comfortable with.

In this regard, Aditi's structure of feeling toward India and its traditions surrounding the duty of a wife is claustrophobic, even though she did not mind the tradition of an arranged marriage. She sees living in the diaspora as euphoric - one of her personal reasons for agreeing to marry Hemant. When he approaches her about her feelings toward living in the USA after they're married, she responds as if it would be a relief to leave India. Hemant is slightly confused and perturbed by her response, assuming that Aditi is a conventional Indian girl who is unquestioningly devoted to her family. When he confronts her about this reaction, she brushes it off saying that she loves India but that America will be a change for her. Clearly, Aditi feels trapped in India and all that it symbolises, and somehow she feels that living in America will be more open and free.

Aditi crosses a border when she realises that Vikram's investment in their relationship was not the same as her own. She was not expecting a commitment from him, but she was expecting him to feel as strongly about her as she did about him. As an 'affair-ing' woman who agreed to an arranged marriage, Aditi was straddling the line separating the identities of

³⁹*Monsoon Wedding* (2002) does handle some issues surrounding diaspora in the characters who jet in from all over the world to attend Aditi's wedding. This will be discussed further in the section on Ria.

the 'whore' and the 'virgin'. This distinction relates to the dichotomies established in popular India cinema regarding the behaviour of Indian women. The 'whore' identity is mirrored by the 'loose' or 'common' woman while the 'virgin' identity is reflected in the pure and virtuous woman. Although Aditi enjoys and takes great pleasure from the affair, she cannot help seeing herself as a deviant woman because this is what popular representation has perceived of Indian women who have engaged in the activities that she has. This, she feels, is her reality.

She is aware as well that the virginal identity is what her family, and society at large, prefers and accepts. There are two reasons that bring her to this understanding. Firstly, in playing the virginal role to her family and the rest of the world, she is favoured and considered worthy. Secondly, Vikram chooses his wife, the pure and virtuous woman, over her, the 'loose' and 'common' woman, once the affair becomes uncontrollable. This is evident in the scene in which he does not even bother to protect Aditi when a couple of policemen begin harassing them at a vacant plot during one of their secret meetings. His greatest concern is that his wife not find out about the affair. It is at this point that Aditi decides that for all the merits of the affair, she could not lead a life of lies, deceit and danger. Even though it was a life that she has consented to and that has allowed her a very attractive knowledge of herself, it could potentially be a life detrimental to her personal well-being and sense of self. These two reasons indicate to her that the patriarchal context in which she exists chooses the virgin. Based on this, she makes the decision to end her affair with Vikram.

While a part of her border-crossing is the absolute termination of her relationship with Vikram, the other part includes the revealing of her secret life to Hemant. By telling him the truth, she does not ask for his forgiveness, she just wants to be honest. She knows what the consequences could be: people could find out and she could be judged and ostracised for a very long time, the wedding could be cancelled, and her family could be shamed and disgraced. She does not, however, want to begin a life based on lies.

Aditi's border-crossing was a very strong and difficult decision to make, especially for a young Indian woman with so much at stake, having broken the rules governing her behaviour. And, even though Hemant is, at first, angered by Aditi's confession, she later gains his respect and appreciation because he realises the strength of her honesty. He reveals to her that he has also been in a relationship in which he was hurt very badly. It is her bold move to be honest with him that urges him to allow her to make her own decision about their future. He sees that

it is really not his choice to make; she has to decide whether or not she can love him. In other words, she has earned her space and should therefore have control over her own destiny.

Aditi chooses to marry - a move that appears as if she is containing herself. This choice, however, is not containment as such because Aditi is going into the marriage with sexual knowledge; she is not 'pure' but experienced. She and Hemant are beginning their lives together as equals. Their marriage is based on honesty and openness. Aditi, in this way, actually re-defines the role of the Indian wife by merging the traditional notions surrounding the sanctity of marriage with the 'modern/western' values surrounding the notions of sexual independence and choice.

Another point to be noted is that even though Aditi had complete control over her body when she was involved with Vikram, her body was her house and never really her home because she hid her activities from those around her. She sneaked around trying to keep her difference as a young Indian woman with sexual knowledge away from her family. But, once she crosses her border and reveals her secret to Hemant, her body becomes her home. She is no longer hiding her difference because it has ceased to exist. Her truthfulness makes her comfortable within herself, and Hemant thus accepts her for who she is.

2.3.2.2 Ria

Ria is a character whose plurality is manifested in roles that are not often defined or considered as roles in everyday life. For example and to begin with, she is an 'adopted' daughter. As the narrative unfolds, however, it becomes apparent that she is not really 'adopted': after her father's death, she was brought up by his younger brother. As an 'adopted' daughter, Ria is respectful, obedient, caring, well-behaved, honest, appreciative and helpful. Another aspect of her plurality is that she is a 'child whose father has died'. This distinction may seem strange but it is, in actual fact, very significant because Ria has grown up according to the behaviour expected of a child whose father has died and traces of this are seen in her character as an adult. In this regard, Ria is loved, but is still lacking and needing support. She is, as a result, considered emotionally disadvantaged and therefore depends on her uncle, especially in relation to the realisation of her dreams for the future. She also seems to know her 'place' and has, therefore never spoken of her abuse as a child. Not having a father and being dependent on her extended family, Ria knows when and how she is supposed

to act. A stepping out of her 'designated' place would lead to judgement and accusations of disobedience. This would then be attributed to her not having a father or strong paternal figure to discipline her or put her back into her place.

Ria, on the other hand, is also an aspiring writer or a woman with ambition. This dream or goal reveals her passion and desire to study, be independent and travel. She seems to want more out of life and does not want to be confined like her cousin who has chosen to marry. She wants an education - a trend, according to her uncle, many young women in India seem to be following. Relating to this is the fact that Ria is of marriageable age. While she is not really interested, her mother thinks that it might be a better idea than studying - a husband would support her. Ria believes in marrying for love and is not open to the idea of an arranged marriage.

Another part of Ria's plural identity, is that of a 'non-speaker'. Ria keeps her childhood sexual abuse a secret for the benefit of keeping the family together. She knew that Uncle Tej, the man who abused her, is a very important figure because he financially supported the entire family when her father died. Revealing anything negative about him would thus tear the family apart. She did not want to be responsible for that and had to remain silent about her sexual knowledge, as she knew that it would be destructive. Even as a young girl-child, Ria understood why she could not speak – the burden of keeping the family together was already upon her. She probably based this decision and self-imposed responsibility on the manner in which her mother and aunts behaved or were expected to behave. And, the fact that she aspires to be a writer suggests that she is looking for an alternative platform of expression in order to heal herself.

Ria is also a supportive and caring cousin to Aditi. She listens to and advises her, expressing her candid criticisms of the decisions that she makes in her life and her concern for her. Ria is not surprised by Aditi's affair; it does not shock her because while Aditi is still gathering her sexual knowledge, Ria already possesses her own. She understands that Aditi feels more freedom to experiment with her sexuality because she is young and has urges, and, unlike Ria, has not been silenced by abuse. Ria's sexuality, as a consequence, is more sacred to her. She does not need or want to experiment because the sexual experience that she does have, has left her feeling soiled and unpleasant.

Naficy's notion of tactile optics apply here because Ria's body is a symbolic signifier of difference to herself: even though she is the only one who is aware of the abuse, she continues to feel damaged and unclean, different from the other young women in her family. At this point in Ria's life, her body is her prison. She is trapped in it because she cannot speak about her abuse. And, she is also trapped in it because she cannot use it to fulfill her own needs. The people around her think that she's happy within it, but she is, in actual fact, too occupied prioritising the interests of the family at the expense of her own.

When Ria's journey of identity begins, she is a modern and seemingly confident young woman who is fun to be with. She reveals maturity and intellect in both her approach to life, in terms of the dreams and ambitions that she holds, and in her interactions with Aditi and their other younger cousins. She is plagued by taunts and suggestive remarks regarding her older, unmarried status. Aditi insults Ria at the beginning of the film when Ria offers her a very honest reading of her agreement to an arranged marriage, "Yes, my older, unmarried cousin, Ria - what would she know about passion?". Aditi quickly retracts this realising how hurtful it is, but the fact remains that she has said it and must therefore think and believe it. Ria's mother also harps on about her marrying and settling down instead of dreaming about becoming a writer. Her mother seems quite orthodox and is not fond of the idea of young Indian women studying (especially abroad) and being independent. She sees Aditi's decision to get married as a very sensible one. In addition, Ria's aunt through marriage is hoping that Ria and her son in the United States⁴⁰ will like each other and eventually get married. As a result, Ria experiences all these pressures about settling down. She, however, is not ready at this point in her life because she has so much she wants to achieve and also many personal issues to work through.

The loss of her father when she was younger has affected her immensely; she was left vulnerable and unprotected. This was possibly one of the reasons she was the target of abuse

⁴⁰It should be pointed out that all the families in this film who have chosen to live in the diaspora have sons. What is interesting is that one of these boys returns to India to get married, another falls in love there and the mother of the last one is hoping to find him a 'nice girl' to marry there. So, these boys have been allowed to go out and see the world but they all return to India to find 'good Indian women' who will uphold values and traditions. This may be a misconception of people living in the diaspora that Nair is unwittingly attempting to highlight. She herself in an interview says, "Indian communities living abroad form their own circle, perhaps to maintain a certain cultural and sometimes religious purity. In the process, they become more frozen in their 'Indianness' than those living in India" (Anbarasan & Otchet, 1998). The women that these young men come to find are, however, not as conventional as they think. Aditi, for example, sees living in the diaspora as an escape from her expected roles in India. And, Ria sees living in the diaspora as an opportunity to live out her dreams. An opportunity that she may never stumble upon in India because she may be forced to succumb to its cultural traditions. Her structure of feeling toward the United States is thus euphoric and open.

as opposed to the other girl-children in the family: she was a defenceless female without a protective paternal figure. She, subsequently, grew attached to her uncle Lalith, who she perceives to be a father figure or 'surrogate' father. And, he, having supported her and her mother financially and emotionally after the death of her father, has brought her up as if she were his own daughter. She feels safe enough with him to share her dreams of studying and becoming a writer. And he does take her seriously, hoping to help her realise her potential.

Even though Ria, at first, appears to be a well-balanced and carefree young woman, it is much later discovered that she has been the victim of child sexual abuse. She seems to have repressed these memories, but they begin to surface with arrival of Uncle Tej. She becomes a completely different person whenever he is around; she is edgy, defensive, agitated, angry, over-protective of her you cousin, Aaliyah, and, sometimes, sad and withdrawn.

Naficy speaks about the performativity of identity that sometimes occurs in the films of 'accented' filmmakers in their attempt to reconcile their previous identities with their current identities. This concept is most evident in the character of Ria. Her identity before her border-crossing is performed. That is why she does not occupy any clear or easily distinguishable roles. In attempting to keep her secret hidden and portray a level of normality, Ria filled roles that the people around her expected her to fill, and she filled them in the way that these people expected her to fill them. But since they were not roles she necessarily wanted to fill, they were mediated by her awkwardness in them and were therefore not clearly definable.

Ria's border-crossing comes at the point when she realises that Aaliyah has become prey to Uncle Tej's deplorable fantasies. She becomes incensed and is determined to put an end to it immediately even if it means causing a spectacle and ruining the festivities. She attempts to stop Uncle Tej from taking Aaliyah away alone by standing in front of his car in the parking lot. Her body has been abused and violated, and her innocence, as a child, had been prematurely stolen. For all these years, she has not been pure to herself, and it is this impure body that has become her margin. In this margin, she was silent, a non-speaker of the hurt and shame that she had suffered. But, that night before the wedding when she realises that another girl child could suffer the same fate that she has, she chooses that margin to speak out against the abuse of innocence and the violation of body. She uses that very same 'impure' body to stop Uncle Tej's car, and to resist his exertion of power over and further abuse of a defenceless little being. Ria's body is thus symbolically being used to put an end to the destruction of future women's bodies.

In crossing this border, Ria makes a noise. She speaks out loudly about the truth, not bothering who hears about Uncle Tej's sick, perverse fantasies and behaviour, and who finds out about the shame that she has endured for so long. She refuses to feel ashamed anymore and she wants him to now be shamed and humiliated. It does not matter to her that, by doing so, she is opening herself up to possible judgement, ridicule, ostracisation, doubt and interrogation because she is accusing a very respected member of the family of a very heinous crime.

It is sad though that she is not immediately believed. After all the years of growing up with Lalith and his family, there was still doubt that she might be lying or making up the story. Tej had been so hero-worshipped in the family because of his success and financial support, that the family found it difficult to believe that he could have done something like this. How could a man so generous with a heart so big, commit such an act? It came down to Ria's word against his: a young woman's word against that of a respected and powerful man in the family.

Hurt and distressed by the family's lack of faith and belief in her, Ria leaves. This forms another aspect of her border-crossing. After having spoken out and made a stand, she believes herself and in herself enough to leave. She will not remain and exist in silence in a family that doubts her. She does not want to be a part of a family who wants or expects her to be silent. To do so, would be to perpetuate her victimhood. She has been a victim for long enough and no longer wants to assume that position or allow other women to do so either. Her physical leaving is thus synonymous with her symbolic shedding of a previous identity to reveal a new one. It does not suit her anymore to repress that troubled part of her identity. She has crossed a difficult border and has been transformed in the process. In Naficy's terms, she has re-fashioned her identity.

After her border-crossing, Ria is forced to return to her uncle's home because he cannot conceive of the wedding proceeding without her. He validates her importance in the family and the fact that she has suffered, but he feels that there is nothing that he can do about what has happened. It is impossible for him to choose between family, especially at a time like this. It once again becomes the responsibility and burden of Ria to keep the family together as if she is the one tearing it apart. And, even though Aaliyah verifies Ria's story, it is Ria, the woman, who has to put aside her pride and conviction for the benefit and greater good of the family. Ria, however, cannot step back after having crossed the border as she has already

spoken out and released her burden. So, she steps toward the side to allow her uncle to do what he has to do. Although it may not seem so, Ria is actually in a very powerful position at this point; the success of the wedding is dependent on her and if she did not decide to step aside, the entire occasion could have been destroyed. She chooses not to let this happen.

Before the actual wedding begins, Lalith speaks out on behalf of Ria by asking Tej and his wife (Lalith's sister) to leave and have no part of his daughter's wedding. He cannot allow his daughter's wedding to continue based on lies, he cannot allow the memory of his brother (Ria's father) to be disrespected, and, most of all, he cannot allow Ria's pain and suffering to go unacknowledged. Even though Lalith, in doing this, plays the typical male by protecting the innocence of his family from evil, he also, in a strange way, seems to become an aid to Ria's agency.

Aided agency: this is a contradiction in terms. The notion of agency is personal and allows a person to become the subject of their own lives. Agency is usually something that cannot or should not be aided. But, Ria is operating under a patriarchal system and even though she has already reclaimed her body and her personal space she does require assistance in maintaining that space. It may seem as if Lalith's bold decision to ask Tej to leave was an act of silencing Ria by not allowing her to enjoy her ability to speak out. But, he understands that within the system of patriarchy, she needs to be aided, she needs support of her convictions. This does not at all detract from Ria's very courageous act. It does not matter that the attainment of her agency is shared because her subversion of the patriarchy that surrounded her would not have been at all possible had she not, on her own in the first place, spoken out and drawn attention to her suffering.

Therefore, by the end of the film and her journey of identity within the context of the film, Ria's plurality is slightly different. She is still an 'adopted' daughter, but she is now shocked at and in awe of the love, respect and admiration that her 'surrogate' father has for her. He risked separating his family forever in his decision to speak out for her. If ever she doubted his loyalty and devotion to her, his actions after her border-crossing speak otherwise. In this role, she is now grateful and proud. She is still a fatherless child, but it is no longer about lacking, dependence or disadvantage. She is sad, settled and accepting of this fact because she cannot change what has happened in the past, but she can be the maker of her own destiny.

Ria is now a marriageable woman as opposed to a woman of marriageable age. This is not because she needs to be saved but because she is now open to the idea of marriage after having saved herself. Ria's body is no longer her prison because she is no longer trapped in its awkwardness or claustrophobia. Whereas, before, she may have felt that she was not worthy of love or that she had to prove herself first, now that her body is her home, her space of resistance, she realises that she is free to explore and experiment with love. At the very end of the film, for instance, she is comfortable enough in her body to flirt with Umang - the young man with whom the family would like to arrange a marriage for her.

She is also now a speaker, rather than a non-speaker. She is strong, unafraid and vocal. She will no longer tolerate an imposition on her body or a denial thereof.

2.3.2.3 Pimmi

Pimmi is Aditi's mother. She is always under pressure and in a state of tension about the way things are going on around her. She is a wife and mother who is devoted to her family. In fact, she 'babies' them, constantly concerned with their well-being. She is traditional, in terms of her expectations of marriage and the roles that need to be played. For instance, she expects her husband to provide the financial resources whenever she requires it. For her, she has to be fully supported if she is to ensure that her family functions properly and if she is to serve them well. She is modern in her thinking and, sometimes, in her behaviour. For instance, she smokes to relieve stress and she urges her husband to buy a computer to sort out his finances, even though he protests that he is "*too old for that computer nonsense*".

Pimmi, as a hostess, is stressful to watch. She is always well-groomed, but completely occupied entertaining family. To her, the more family, the better. But it is obvious how much this takes its toll on her because she has to be friendly and likeable all the time in an attempt to keep up appearances. Most often she looks happy but stressed.

As a future in-law, she is a perfectionist organising everything down to the last painstaking detail. She spends lavishly because of this and is all for impressing the in-laws, as if the amount of time and money she spends on arranging a wedding and entertaining the in-laws will reflect Aditi's upbringing. She is also quite competitive, or possibly slightly insecure, because, at times, she compares Hemant's family to her own. When her husband, Lalith,

teases her about her smoking in the toilet, she defends herself by picking on Hemant's mother, Saroj, who drinks.

Amidst trying to impress people and put things into perfect order, she tries not to detract from being a good wife - by making sure Lalith's needs are seen to - and being a good mother to her son - by checking up on him making sure that he bathes regularly and changes his clothing. However, with her daughter, things seem to be different. There is never much interaction between the two. They go shopping together but that's as far as it goes. Pimmi does love and care for her daughter, and this is evident in the fact that she has collected saris and wedding gifts for Aditi ever since she was born. And, even though it is Aditi's wedding and Pimmi indicates that she is saddened at the thought of losing her daughter, she never really spends any quality time with Aditi before she leaves home forever. In fact, her concern seems more focused on the men in her life. For instance, she worries about Lalith's health and her son's happiness, but she hardly notices her daughter's stress, confusion and reticence in the run-up to the wedding.

There could be many possible reasons for this lack of interaction with her daughter. Perhaps, she is distanced from Aditi because she understands and respects her independence, and is confident that Aditi can take care of herself unlike the men in her life who, she feels, cannot function without her. Perhaps, she is letting go early, so that the parting, once her daughter is married, is not so difficult. Or perhaps, she is subconsciously in the mindset that privileges men over women in the family. This may seem hard to believe but, as mentioned earlier, she does have certain expectations of the roles of wife and husband in a marriage.

She has also been preparing for Aditi's marriage from the day she was born. Her collection of saris and cutlery sets reveal that she has been preparing for her daughter to be a wife, and, more specifically, a traditional wife who will be home-bound and who will maintain Indian cultural values and beliefs. She may not have consciously been preparing for her daughter to be contained, but for her daughter to be provided for and taken care of in the 'true' Indian tradition.

Although Aditi is a modern young woman, the role that Pimmi has unwittingly defined for her, and the ritual and ceremony that she has to go through before the wedding are all intimidating and restrictive. If this is the dream and expectation that she has had for her daughter, then it is most likely that this is the way that she has lived her life. It is possible then

that she has also, at times in her life, felt controlled and restricted. Why else would she be so concerned about appearances? And why else would the toilet/bathroom be the only space in which she could express or expel her frustrations through smoking? She hides so that nobody will think ill of her and judge her; so she withdraws into one of the smallest spaces in her very large house, because she has no other space; her house is not her home. Subsequently, her body is not her home because she is not comfortable in it when trying to be the perfect wife, mother and hostess and she is not comfortable in it when engaging in an activity that would be construed as deviant or 'common' for an Indian woman.

Pimmi is so steeped in certain values and norms of behaviour for an Indian woman that her border-crossing is not so much a transgression of boundaries as it is an awakening or realisation. This awakening occurs when she tries to initiate intimacy with Lalith and he declines. She feels hurt and rejected, as if she is no longer able to capture and hold the attention of her husband or please him. Her look of disappointment suggests that she feels that she is not desirable to Lalith anymore and is thus unable to fulfill her wifely duties effectively and as expected. It is as if they have drifted apart in all the madness of family and life and don't know each other anymore. It could also be that, after all these years of marriage, it is just not natural for her, as a woman, to initiate intercourse because she is not supposed to have control over her body and its desires or urges. Maybe it still is that her body is there to serve her husband and his needs.

After Pimmi's realisation, there is only one instance that shows that she has actually undergone some kind of change. She retaliates when her husband suggests that their son be sent away to boarding school to toughen him up and make him a man. Lalith argues that their son is too effeminate and even suggests that he might be homosexual. Pimmi does not take kindly to this idea and is not very happy with the way that Lalith treats their son. She thinks that their son is still young and that they need to be patient with him. Lalith confronts their son about the issue and the boy who clearly feels hurt, rejected and unloved tells his parents that he hates them both. And, Pimmi, being the devoted mother that she is, cannot bear having her child hate her and reproaches Lalith ordering him not speak to her. She silences him (as he had silenced her when he rejected her sexual advances) because she is unsatisfied with his approach to her child. She speaks out against her husband in aid of her child.

Things change, however, when the issue of Ria's abuse surfaces. Lalith is at a loss. At the head of the family, he was unable to prevent what had happened and does not know how to

rectify the situation. He seems weak, vulnerable and disillusioned, and turns to Pimmi for physical contact. She readily reciprocates, glad that he has returned to her and that they have not, in fact, lost their connection to each other. He, on the other hand, assumes that she will always be around willing and waiting to comfort him in his time of need. But, unfortunately, he cannot do the same for her. Pimmi does not mind this because she is comfortable with life returning to the way it used to be even if it is not necessarily the way she would like it to be. For her, her body and the comfort that it provides for him when he is desperate and defenceless puts her in a powerful position of control.

Even though Pimmi's body is her house and not her home, she is content because it is a position, as opposed to a space, that she is familiar with. Her roles are defined and she knows where her boundaries lie. She has the same approach to the Indian tradition, cultural values and beliefs: she does not mind them even though they tire her out sometimes and do not really give her the satisfaction she desires. But, yet again, they are familiar to her and she knows where she stands in relation to them. Her structure of feeling toward India, her homeland, and all that it signifies for her, as a woman, is not so much euphoric as it is settling.

2.3.2.4 Alice

Alice's character exhibits a very simple and sedate plurality. She works as a domestic helper for the Verma family. In this role, she is indispensable to the family. They call on her all of the time to assist with the simplest and most difficult of tasks. She is always busy, quiet and unobtrusive. Most of the time, she is in the background and can be counted upon to be available when needed. In the context of the film, Alice's role is important in establishing the class difference between her and the other female characters, and how this impacts on her life as woman.

Alice, like Aditi and Ria, is young and of marriageable age. She, however, seems older than they do, as if she's aged prematurely due to the responsibility of having to work. She is aware of aspects of modern life but, unlike the other two young women, she cannot herself be a part of it because she lacks the resources. Her kindness, humility and sweetness are all endearing in her approach to people and all that she does. And, often, she fantasises about marriage and having family, but the reality is that she doesn't know when or if this will happen.

Alice also fills the role of ‘someone’s daughter’. She is always portrayed as being alone and on the periphery⁴¹ of whatever is going on. She belongs to the Verma family and possibly a biological one too, but this is never made evident. She, therefore, seems to belong to no one in particular. As ‘someone’s daughter’, she is dreamy, always wandering about where nobody will and nobody does notice her. She is demure, coy and respectful.

Alice’s journey of identity is understated just like her character. She tends to waft in and out of spaces unnoticed. Everybody knows that she is around but she is never heard and almost never seen. Her assistance is heavily relied and depended upon by the family. Alice tends to come across as rural, traditional or old-fashioned, particularly in her loyalty and dedication to the Verma family. In her obedience, she is sometimes quite shy and nervous.

Just as she is often in a dream-or fantasy-state, she is portrayed as dream-like and calm, as if she is of a completely other world. This may be the reason her difference from the Verma family is so overt. This is the quality that Dubey, the wedding planner, seems so attracted to. Somehow, when he is around her, he literally becomes a blithering idiot. Her tranquillity seems to excite and fluster him. Whereas she is always nervous and anxiously bustling around trying to do things right for the Vermas, Dubey is always anxious and nervous around her in his attempts to impress her. Normally, she exists on the periphery to everyone else, but with him she exists in the centre and has the upper hand.

Alice is very aware when it comes to Dubey; she knows that he is attracted to and admires her, but she acts oblivious. Sometimes, she is even quite amused and flattered by his attempts to get her attention. She is kind to him but doesn’t really let him know that she may feel the same way. In relation to him, she is in quite a strong position and this is where her power lies. As a subaltern subject, Alice exists outside the lines of mobility and is therefore rendered unworthy of the attention and consideration of those in society who enjoy economic privilege. She has no power and is perceived to exist to serve these people. The only power that she possesses lies in what is really her own. And, that is her body and her person. She uses this to play and toy with Dubey’s affections. She indulges in his fixation with her, without revealing to him that she actually enjoys his attention. As a subaltern identity, she performs her identity of disinterest and ignorance, but, at the same time, speaks through her body, keeping Dubey completely rapt in her signals.

⁴¹This relates to Alice’s economic class. Discussion around this issue, illustrating the manner in which she overcomes or deals with these aspects of her identity will be resumed further on in this section.

Alice crosses a border when she puts on Aditi's wedding jewellery while cleaning. This is one of the few scenes in which Alice is given complete focus and attention. Nair probably does this to give her a space that is not crowded or completely taken over by the other overpowering characters in the film. For a little time, Alice is the centre of her own world. Two issues are dealt with in this scene.

Firstly, Alice, being of marriageable age and existing, most times, in a kind of fantasy state, is unable to resist trying on Aditi's wedding jewellery. She understands the reality of her situation. She belongs to the working class and will most probably never be able to afford or have a wedding on the scale that Aditi will. The excitement that is running through the Verma household is enough to make anyone wish or dream, especially a young woman like Alice who has probably never had much in her life. When she's alone in Aditi's room, she, in an almost ritual fashion, carefully puts on each piece of jewellery. She lets down her hair and rearranges her sari to look like a bridal garment. She thereafter strikes various poses to see how she would look. For that moment, she is another woman – a privileged woman. It becomes evident at this point that Alice understands completely the power of her body - she may not be materially wealthy but physically she could be anyone she wanted to be. In this regard, she had the power and control.

Reality, however, sets in and she begins to 'dis-robe' feeling slightly dejected, painfully aware of her 'place' in the world. Her placement, as Naficy appropriately labels it, is within the boundaries of her class. Attached to this place are social values and historical significance. She understands why she occupies that space and it is familiar territory to her. Putting on Aditi's jewellery displaces her; and for that moment during which she feels uncomfortable and awkward, she realises that she cannot live a fantasy.

During this entire 'ritual', Dubey watches her in absolute awe and admiration. Unfortunately, one of his rather loud and raucous assistants also watches or, more accurately, spies on her and assumes that she is stealing. He calls in all the other male assistants and they all spy on her. After which, they create a ruckus accusing her of thieving. This leads on to the second issue. Realising that the men have been watching her and that they think she's been stealing, she feels scared and hurt. On a deeper level, she also feels violated because in her most private moment when she was using her body to realise and experience her dreams and fantasies, she was being watched and judged for her mistaken actions. Their seeing her use her body in that special way takes away her power; amidst everything that she did not have,

this was the one thing that belonged to her. She is absolutely distraught by all that transpires because now that people know of her small power, what little that was once hers is gone.

Even though Alice has little and is so oppressed by her economic status, her body, unlike the other women in the film, has been her home. It does not matter to her that it signifies economic difference because she held something more powerful and something that was worth more than all the privilege that the other women possessed: she maintains personal control within her body. She realised that her body was her space long before the other women had even crossed their borders. But, in an instant, this is taken away from her and that is the reason she is so affected by the incident.

Further to this, she thinks that Dubey, the man that she was beginning to trust and feel attracted to, is involved in the whole mess. She is confused and upset about this. In addition, the men who accuse her, are men who belonged to the working class as well. They do not understand or even take the time to understand what she was doing and why she was doing it. They simply assume that if she is a domestic worker and if she is trying on expensive jewellery, she has to be stealing.

Alice learns from this incident that her world of economic disadvantage is a reality and that it is filled with hypocrisy. She can't assume to want to go beyond its confines. She is oppressed by the people, especially the women, in the economic class 'above' her because she is exploited in having to serve them tirelessly and is thereafter marginalised by their lack of interest in who she really is. She is also oppressed by the men of her own class, who judge her based on the very fact that she belongs to the working class, as if a different set of rules and privileges, or a lack thereof, applies to her. She cannot dream – and subsequently cannot want to rise above her station in life – because she does not have the money or resources to make these dreams materialise. These men don't see the possibility of this and, as a result, destroy Alice's hopes of anything better. She is being forced from all directions into a mould of who she should be because of her class. The jewellery of the privileged women don't sit comfortably on her body – because she is meant to wash and care for their adornments and not wear them – and the men of the working class can't even imagine the privileged women's jewellery on her body because it looks out of character to them. Alice's body, at this point, feels like her prison. Her difference is made abundantly clear by her lower working class status and all that it signifies for those around her.

After her border-crossing awakening, Alice is despondent, yet angry. She is hurt and disappointed and, consequently, completely alienates Dubey and his assistants. She stands her ground and refuses to talk to them because they have humiliated her when she has actually done nothing wrong. Alice retreats into herself and becomes withdrawn – she does not want to face a world that is so harsh and cruel. This silence, however, holds the power of choice - that is, the choice to speak or not to speak, to forgive or not to forgive, and to love or not to love.

Alice only relents when Dubey's assistants realise the error of their ways and apologise to her for their unforgivable assumption. They try to make right a situation that could have been prevented. She also forgives Dubey when he professes his love for her and proposes marriage. His action makes true the dream that she thought she could never have because of the bracket of society that she felt and others made her feel she was assigned to.

Alice makes the decision to marry and this decision does not indicate a surrendering on her part. Neither does this decision indicate a desire to be contained. The fact remains that the men came to her and that she held the power to forgive. Had she chosen not to forgive, she would have allowed them to spend the rest of their lives guilt-ridden knowing that they wrongfully accused her and thereby destroyed her life and her potential relationship with Dubey. She held the power of choice with Dubey. She could choose how she wanted to spend the rest of her life. If she chose not to be with him, she could possibly have destroyed him, but it would still have been her decision.

By ignoring and rejecting the men for their hurtful actions, and by refusing to accept their judgement and their intrusion on and destruction of her hopes and dreams, she made them vulnerable to her anger and disappointment. After her border-crossing, she moved from the periphery to the centre. Her margin, as a young woman of the working class, became her centre, her space of resistance.

In this way, Nair uses her marginal space in the interstices between cultures to express her resistant ideas regarding how issues of class oppress Indian women; she does this through the construction of characters like Alice who use their own margins to speak out against their own oppression.

2.4 Speaking Out: The Articulation of Postcolonial Feminisms

Discussions of postcolonial feminist discourses in relation to the resistant potential of narratives tend to occur on more than one level. Nair, for example, tells the stories of Indian women in her films. Deconstructing this statement alone reveals two levels of postcolonial concerns that are prevalent in Nair's films. Nair, as already discussed, is a diasporic being formerly of India, a Third World country, and currently residing in Uganda, a Third World country as well. Even though she has spent a large part of her life in, and still travels back and forth from the United States - a First World country - she is still considered a Third World woman. In addition, her films give prominence to and highlight the lives of other Indian women, living in India or in the diaspora, all of whom are also considered to be of the Third World.

A merging of these levels in film, illustrate how Nair's concerns as a Third World diasporic identity are reflected in and explored through the construction of other Indian women. For example, Kinnu and Mina in *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and their dislocation and confusion as women in the diaspora relate directly to Nair's displacement as a filmmaker. While, in *Monsoon Wedding* (2002), the discomfort that Aditi, Ria, Pimmi and Alice experience in their attempt to fit into their prescribed roles emphasise not only the clash she experiences between First and Third World values, but also her conflicted bond toward her homeland and its previous nationalist representations of Indian women.

This is one aspect of how postcolonial feminisms speak through an 'accented' cinema. Mohanty (1988) argues that one way to curb the homogenous representation of Third World women is if Third World women become active participants in their self-presentation; that is, if Third World women tell stories for and about themselves and other Third World women. Nair may not physically represent herself but it could be argued that by representing other Indian women, she is speaking through her characters. These characters share with her their identities as Indian women and in telling/directing their stories, she is making herself heard. Their construction tells of her feelings of ambivalence, as an Indian woman in the diaspora, toward her homeland, India. Naficy argues that because diasporic filmmakers occupy the interstices of cultures they have a dialogic relationship between their home and host society as if existing in a state of tension and dissension. This is often reflected in their films in various ways. The nature of Nair's personal connection to her homeland comes through in the construction of her female characters. She explores different types of Indian women in

different situations and places in their lives, who all, at some critical point, question, re-define, reject or come to terms with their cultural inscription.

This corresponds to Spivak's notion of the two levels of representation. Spivak (1988) argues that the subaltern would cease to exist if she were to make herself heard. She then draws attention to the concepts of 'representing' and 're-presenting': in the first instance, she speaks of political representation such that one person assumes the place of another and speaks for them or on their behalf. While, in the second instance, she speaks of the portrayal of a person in one form or another. Nair may not be subaltern in Spivak's terms⁴², but she definitely makes herself heard as a Third World woman in both senses of the word 'representation'. Nair does not technically speak for or on behalf of Indian women but rather tells (represents) their stories by depicting (re-presenting) them in her films.

Mohanty's argument (1988) that Third World women/women of colour are not 'singular monolithic entities' leads on to the next aspect. Using Naficy's concept of the plurality of identity that is evident in the characters of 'accented' films, it has been established that each of Nair's female characters exhibit more than one role as Indian women. In Chapter One, the brief history of popular Indian cinema showed that a very limited representation of Indian women occurred and continues to occur in film. Indian women are often established as dichotomies of 'pure' and 'virtuous' or 'loose' and 'common'. Mohanty warns against limited representations; she argues that representation needs to take into consideration factors that comprise the context of an individual and the manner in which these factors influence the condition of that particular individual. According to Mohanty, this is important specifically in the representation of Third World women and women of colour for the very fact that their struggles have tended to be universalised or homogenised in western feminist scholarship.

A comparison of the characters of Kinnu and Pimmi, and Mina and Aditi reveal how Nair has constructed her characters as embodying plural identities that have developed as a result of factors specific to their contexts. In fact, even the mother-daughter relationships between Kinnu and Mina, and Pimmi and Aditi are portrayed differently. The only common factor among these four characters is the fact that they are Indian women. This common factor distinguishes them from other Third World women/women of colour in order to highlight their unique gendered experiences, but in no way does Nair represent them to be exactly the

⁴²Refer to the Postcolonial Feminisms section of Chapter One (pg 35) for alternative considerations of the notion of the subaltern.

same as one another. They don't share the same plural identities, and even if they do, the constitution of these identities is different in each case.

Kinnu and Pimmi are both mothers to fairly independent young women. But, while Pimmi was able to bring her child up in a stable and secure environment, Kinnu was forced to bring Mina up under circumstances that changed with each of their moves into or out of a country. Pimmi, having always had India as her context, has been able to instil Indian values and beliefs in Aditi with much greater ease than Kinnu has with Mina. Even though Aditi eventually acts out against these values and beliefs with her pre-marital affair, she still does agree to an arranged marriage. Mina, however, doesn't. Aditi has a context in which India and its traditions make sense to her; she knows how far she can stretch the bounds. Mina, however, has never had a context in which to understand India and all that it stands for. That is why, when its culture and norms are forced upon her, she falls back on a context she knows in order to act out against its bounds.

Another point to take into consideration is how Kinnu and Pimmi have developed differently in their different contexts. Kinnu becomes financially independent because their economic privilege is lost in their move to the United States. Kinnu is forced to alter her identity as an Indian woman who is dependent on the financial support of her husband, because it becomes a question of survival for her family. Pimmi, on the other hand, has never had her economic situation change, and has never had to question whether or not it would. Her faith in her husband's financial support has never had to falter and she has thus remained completely financially dependent on him.

This filters through to the lives of their daughters. Even though Mina was never very ambitious, she did work to help support the family, and when she does decide to leave and spend the rest of her life with Demetrius, she makes plans to work and own a business. Mina has seen what her mother has been through and wants to ensure that she does not endure the same struggle. Aditi, on the other hand, does not mind being supported by Hemant, because that is the way her mother has lived. It is also much easier for Pimmi to let go of her daughter knowing that she will be supported by her husband. Pimmi has every faith that her daughter will be taken care of because they have arranged her a good marriage and husband. For Kinnu, however, letting go of Mina is not as easy or simple because she is not sure of Mina's future. Firstly, she knows nothing about Demetrius and secondly, based on her experiences, she is aware of what happens when you follow unquestioningly the one you love.

Mohanty (1988) also argues that one of the assumptions prevalent in western feminist scholarship is that Third World women are victims of their gender, sexual difference and patriarchy, and that they experience these circumstances/aspects in the same way. This, she says, is not always true because not all men are evil and oppressive, and not all women are victims of that oppression. In fact, even oppression is experienced differently by different women depending on the patriarchal and hegemonic control specific to their contexts. As discussed in Chapter One (pg 32), related to this is another misconception that Third World women are “sexually constrained [...], ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated [and] family-oriented”. Third World women and women of colour themselves need to correct these assumptions in their texts, says Mohanty. An interrogation of Ria and Alice in relation to these assumptions illustrates how Nair highlights the mistaken nature of these perceptions.

An investigation of Ria’s life experiences and the male influences that have contributed to them reveal that Nair is careful not to portray men solely as evil oppressors. For instance, Tej and Lalith, and their relationship to and interactions with Ria, are good examples of this. Lalith is very protective of Ria after her father’s death and he treats her with much love and respect, honouring her dreams and ambitions of becoming a writer. Tej, on the hand, takes advantage of Ria and harms her, for the very fact that she does not have a father and therefore does not have anyone to turn to for assistance. He violates her innocence and thereby silences her for a large part of her life. While Lalith attempts to uplift Ria, Tej oppresses her by abusing her and thereby renders her a victim.

This leads on to the next assumption that Third World women are victims of their economic and social circumstance. Using Ria and Alice as examples, it becomes evident that Nair does not want to convey this assumption in her films. Ria grows up in an upper middle class home. She may not have had a biological father, but she was never short of love, food, shelter and education. The one problem in her life is that she was abused as a child. Alice, on the other hand, is alone, works hard for living and has absolutely no access to the resources enjoyed by the family she works for. The inclination is thus to assume that both Ria and Alice are victims even though they are both operating in completely different circumstances. A closer interrogation, however, shows that Ria has lived her life as a victim but Alice has not. While Ria has borne the burden of her abuse from childhood, Alice has learned to understand and accept her status and to exist contentedly within it. Ria, however, chooses not to remain a

victim and speaks out against her suffering as soon as she is ready to do so. In these two constructions, Nair highlights the fact that women are not necessarily victims if they belong to the Third World, and in the event that they are, they make a conscious decision not to be.

The experience of oppression is depicted by Nair as differing from character to character. This is, yet again, clarified in the construction of Ria and Alice. As already discussed, Ria experiences one form of oppression. Alice, however, experiences quite another even though she chooses not to be a victim. In fact, Alice's oppression occurs on more than one level. Alice is oppressed by the men of her own social and economic standing who can't seem to understand her act of trying on Aditi's jewellery. They immediately come to the conclusion that she is stealing. She is also oppressed by the women she works for who exploit her by expecting her to be available whenever they may need her. To add to this, these women don't even acknowledge her existence if she is not serving them. Just the fact that Ria and Alice belong to different levels of the class structure, means that their oppressions are experienced in different ways.

Nair also effectively dispels the misrepresentation of Third World women as sexually constrained, ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated and family-oriented. Alice may be poor, domesticated and possibly uneducated; in fact, she may even be referred to as subaltern in the way that Spivak understands it, but she is by no means sexually constrained or ignorant. She uses her body and her sexuality to lure Dubey and maintain his interest in her. These are not the characteristics of a sexually constrained and ignorant woman. In fact, it is Dubey who is shocked when she reveals that she knows about 'e-mail'. Just before that, he indulges in an awkward description, using simplistic language, in an attempt to explain to her what e-mail actually is. Yet again, this does not indicate ignorance.

Ria, on the other hand, may be sexually constrained due to her past experiences, and she may be religious due to her upbringing, but she is definitely not ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound or domesticated. She comes from a financially stable and comfortable family, she has had an education that she hopes to continue, she is aware of social matters and is able to advise her cousin Aditi, and she has no plans to marry young and will not agree to an arranged marriage. In fact, when she does decide to settle down, she plans to do so for love.

Nair, in dealing with the diverse issues experienced by Indian women and the diversity of the experience of these issues, re-defines the representation of Third World women and illustrates how assumptions previously made on their behalf can be rectified.

In Nair's 'accented' construction of Indian women in her films, she deals with a concern - that has been raised in the writings of Third World women - of the significance of narrative in the creation of oppositional agency. The character of Mina in *Mississippi Masala* (1991) is a good example to illustrate this point. The narrative of the film is structured according to the Hollywood mainstream interracial love story genre. Belonging to a popular and dominant cinematic practice, this genre has certain conventions that have to be complied with in order to make it appealing to the mass market. Nair, however, uses this popular mode to create oppositional agency. This is particularly clear in the construction of Mina. The Hollywood narrative structure tends to privilege white males as lead characters, especially during the period in which this film was made. But Nair deliberately uses this narrative to tell the story of an Indian woman. In addition, this Indian woman has a plural identity as opposed to belonging to a female character type. Also, Mina defies tradition and charts her own destiny, and is not contained or punished for her defiance.

By giving Indian women a space within the mainstream, Nair is re-defining their construction in popular modes of representation. These women are no longer flat, uni-dimensional types that extoll preferred patterns of behaviour. As plural beings, these characters are not only marginal within the context of the film, but also within the actual popular narrative. By placing Mina within a popular narrative, Nair has made the marginal space controversial. By representing Mina, an Indian woman who defies cultural values and beliefs in order to define her own identity, Nair has made the marginal space resistant. And, by using her own interstitial margin between her home and host society to merge a Western mainstream narrative with characters of her own cultural ethnicity, Nair has made the marginal space confrontational.

Nair also uses aspects of the Bollywood narrative structure in *Monsoon Wedding* (2002). These aspects include many subplots, music, dance, colour and the characteristic wedding. It is not, however, a Bollywood film or a popular Indian film because the female characters do not fit neatly into the dichotomies of the pure and virtuous woman or the 'loose' and 'common' woman.

Aditi does battle with these identities in her attempt to understand her own plurality, but she eventually comes to a compromise within herself about where she is situated in relation to them. Unlike the usual conclusion to a Bollywood film, Aditi is not punished for her so-called deviant behaviour by being killed, imprisoned or subjected to eternal ridicule, neither is she saved through marriage. Instead, Aditi chooses to be honest about her activities which could have been detrimental to her emotional well-being in the long run, but which, she realises, were not wrong because she acted in response to her own needs and desires. Her honesty gained her the respect of her fiancé and the power of choice. In this way, Aditi re-fashions the roles of the traditional Indian wife in Bollywood cinema. Nair, in this kind of construction, has proposed a new way of representing Indian women in popular narratives. Breaking the rules governing behaviour does not automatically equate to deviant, 'loose' or 'common' behaviour.

Spivak (Adamson interview in Harasym, 1990) speaks about writing women to be read and not pretending or assuming to give them a voice. In this regard, she refers to the subaltern. This subaltern, she states, belongs to that space in society that is cut off from all lines of mobility. And, in occupying this space, argues Spivak, the subaltern is invisible and oppressed, and actually does not own a space in which to speak. She is, consequently, not heard by both the First and Third worlds. As this description stands, it applies only to the character of Alice across both of Nair's films. This is strange because the ideas that Spivak offers to ensure that the subaltern is heard so that she may cease to exist as such, are also applicable to the other female characters in the films.

This notion of the subaltern is reworked by Radhika Gajjala (date unknown) who acknowledges the female subaltern's difficulty in trying to speak or be heard in dominant discourses, but also argues that even the female "not-subaltern" also experiences difficulty in finding a non-ambiguous and non-problematic space from which to speak. This re-interpretation of Spivak then takes into consideration those women who were not necessarily subaltern but who, like the subaltern, were not heard because they did not occupy a space that was conducive to their speaking. Nair's other female characters would now fit into this new understanding. Mina, Kinnu, Aditi, Ria and Pimmi, like Alice, were all in their own right not heard until or after their border-crossing moment.

Even though Nair, in constructing these characters, gave them each a marginal space within popular narratives in which to speak, these women, as their stories were told, found their own

spaces within themselves, within their Third World brown bodies. Like Spivak who was not claiming to give Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri a voice when she represented her and wrote her to be read, Nair was not aiming to give Mina, Kinnu, Aditi, Ria, Pimmi or Alice a voice, but she was giving them a resistant, controversial, confrontational marginal space in which to find their own.

2.5 Conclusion

This unit has served to illustrate that Nair's films subscribed to aspects of 'accented' filmmaking, particularly with regard to the construction of the Indian women in her films, and in doing so, her characters exhibit and deal with issues, as highlighted by Mohanty and Spivak, that are prevalent in postcolonial feminist discourses.

Each of the characters was read using aspects of the 'accented' style identified by Naficy. It was not possible to understand every character in terms of every aspect of this style because some were not appropriate, but there were, however, some aspects that applied across all or most of the characters. The first and most significant of these were the plurality of identity, journey of identity and the border-crossing moment. Each of these aspects explored notions of space. In other words, how each of the characters experienced, re-fashioned or charted out new spaces in which they could speak out and make themselves heard. These explorations of space that the women embarked on highlighted their structures of feeling toward their cultural inscription and expected patterns of behaviour.

The presence of these factors in Nair's films shed some insight into her experience of living in the diaspora. It becomes evident that her female characters provide her with a vehicle to confront and examine her own displacement in her situation between cultures and societies. Postcolonial feminisms thus emerge as a result of this.

In constructing Indian women with plural identities, Nair dispelled assumptions that Third World women formed a homogenous entity in which they were all victims of male oppressors. Nair revealed that their experiences, trials and triumphs were all dependent on their varied contexts and factors affecting their circumstances. And, she allowed them a space in popular narratives such that they may find their own in which to voice and express

themselves. While Nair found her space in 'accented' filmmaking, her characters found theirs within themselves.

Chapter Three

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, as in Chapter Two, the theoretical frameworks of analysis established in Chapter One will be appropriated in a reading of Deepa Mehta's female characters in the films *Fire* (1995) and *Earth* (1999).

Mehta's films are openly critical - she pointedly challenges hegemonic practices in India in order to give expression to the (preferably) untold and unheard stories of Indian people, and Indian women in particular⁴³. Mehta's filmmaking has garnered criticism and sparked much controversy⁴⁴ amongst Indians living in India. She has been accused of desecrating the Indian culture with the inclusion of a lesbian relationship in *Fire* (1995), of re-visiting a best forgotten traumatic period in Indian history in *Earth* (1999), and of depicting Indian culture, tradition and religion in negative light by revealing the ostracisation suffered by Indian widows in the 1930s in *Water* (date unknown)⁴⁵. Subsequently, *Fire* (1995) was banned in India for the violent reaction it caused and *Earth* (1999) was subjected to heavy censorship laws but was approved with a single cut for profanity. Production for *Water* (date unknown) had to be stopped when religious political parties destroyed the film sets. Even though the Indian Prime Minister intervened allowing the filming to continue in West Bengal as opposed to Varanasi (where the practice of widow houses still existed), *Water* (date unknown) was still in production in 2003.

The most noticeable non-conventional aspect of Mehta's filmmaking⁴⁶, as discussed in relation to Nair in Chapter Two (pg 39) is her creation of resistant narrative spaces for Indian women using the very same nationalist discourses that have previously been - and in some

⁴³This relates, in a sense, to Spivak's notion of the unheard 'subaltern' (Chapter One, pg 35). Mehta's characters are not all subaltern, but do suffer at the hands of oppression in some form or other. Mehta, however, makes great effort to ensure that the stories of the women in her film are heard. She achieves this through the construction of her characters with personal and political agency.

⁴⁴Refer to article, "Deepa Under Fire" by Uma Prakash (2000) in *Indigo*, p. 16 – 20; and website insert, "Deepa Mehta" by Morli Desai (2001) at <http://www.emory.edu/ENGLISH/Bahri/Mehta.html>.

⁴⁵The production of *Water* has been riddled with disruptions and apparently remains incomplete (Chapter One, pg 21).

⁴⁶Mehta's films have often interchangeably been categorised under 'art' or 'alternative' filmmaking. Even though each of these terms are very distinct in their definition, it can be argued that Mehta's filmmaking exhibits a combination of each of their characteristics. While 'art' cinema refers to "films where the director [...] clearly exercise[s] a high degree of control over the filmmaking process [...] thus [allowing] the films [to] be viewed as a form of personal expression" (Knight in Nelmes, 1996: 395), 'alternative' cinema "[p]rovides an alternative to the codes and conventions of mainstream, narrative cinema, often both thematically and visually" (Nelmes, 1996: 229).

instances, continue to be - used as representational tools that symbolically oppress and silence Indian women. Mehta, however, appropriates Indian nationalist discourses to a point at which she can confront and reject the symbolic representation that they encourage. As a result, she constructs Indian women as *metaphors for the resistance* of nationalist ideals as opposed to constructing Indian women as *symbols* of nationalist ideals. This unique approach relates to Naficy's argument (2001) surrounding the ambivalent relationship that 'accented' filmmakers experience and maintain to their homeland. This ambivalent relationship is usually characterised by the production of ambiguity and doubt about the taken-for-granted values of the home society. In Mehta's instance, living outside of India, as will be discussed further in this chapter, has allowed her to interrogate the values inscribed in India's history and religious myths, and the manner in which this contributes to the constructed notion of Indian womanhood.

This chapter assumes the same structure as that of the previous one. After a brief biography discussing Mehta's career in film and the impact that her diasporic status has had on her filmmaking, the chapter will proceed into a section titled "Telling 'Her'-stories in the Accented Style". This section reveals how Mehta tells the histories, and not just the stories, of women through the weaving of the discourses of Hindu mythology and Indian history into the layers of *Fire* (1995) and *Earth* (1999) respectively. Naficy's notions (2001) of the plurality of identity, journeying, border-crossing, tactile optics and structures of feeling discussed in Chapter One (pg 17 - 29), that characterise the experience of home and body in the films and protagonists of 'accented' filmmakers, will be applied to the readings of Mehta's female characters.

The final section of the chapter titled "Resisting Time: The Articulation of Postcolonial Feminisms" argues that Mehta's subject construction of Indian women not only allows them a resistant, expressive space but reveals that these Indian women, even though they have suffered with history and myth having been inscribed on their bodies, have the power of choice. This choice is made possible through the re-definition of the meaning imbued (1995) in their bodies and sexuality in the private (the home, religion and myth) as in *Fire* (1995) and the public sphere (the land, religious political rivalry and history) as in *Earth* (1999). This section, as done so in Chapter Two, will appropriate Mohanty and Spivak's postcolonial feminist notions of representation, Third World narrative potential, marginal resistance and the significance of nation and gender in the understanding of Third World women's struggles,

in order to engage in a comprehensive reading of Mehta's characters in relation to one another.

3.2 Deepa Mehta

Deepa Mehta, born in Amritsar (India) in 1949, obtained both her Bachelors and Masters degrees in philosophy at the University of New Delhi. While studying there, she met Canadian filmmaker and producer, Paul Saltzman, who she later married. In 1973, she immigrated to Canada, and even though she later got divorced, she continues to live there with her daughter (Prakash, 2000).

Mehta's father was a film distributor and theatre owner; so, film was large a part of her life from a young age. In fact, she says, "By the time I was in university I knew I wanted nothing to do with film! I had been saturated with it" (Desai, 2001). Her deep interest in film peaked after she completed both her degrees. She was going to pursue a doctorate when a friend offered her a part-time job at the Cinematic Workshop⁴⁷ and her career developed from that point on.

Mehta admits that being raised in India and living in Canada was problematic as it raised questions surrounding her identity,

I've never felt Canadian. I used to be upset about being called an 'ovisible' minority, that's what they called coloured people there. I used to come to India and was called an NRI [Non-Resident Indian] [...]. The problem was not about belonging anywhere; it was a dislike for labels. Now I feel very happy being who I am, Deepa Mehta. (Desai, 2001)

Mehta argues that she is a cultural hybrid and refuses to choose between an Indian or Canadian identity. This claim of Mehta's is interesting in terms of Naficy's (2001) 'accented' theory as he argues that the interstitial positions 'accented' filmmakers are conducive to the maintenance of dialogues between their home and host societies, fostering an environment for their hybridisation. Uma Prakash explains,

Mehta seems to be at the crossroads of traditional and the modern – a situation faced by many Indians living abroad. Are tradition and the modern flip sides of the same coin?

⁴⁷The Cinematic Workshop was a small company that made documentary film in Delhi. Mehta learned sound, camera work and editing here, and thereafter proceeded to produce her own documentary film.

This is one issue that Mehta examines in all of her films. The search for her own identity also finds expression in her body of film work. (2000: 16)

Some of Mehta's awards and honours include⁴⁸: the critics' Honorable Mention at Cannes for *Sam and Me*; guest-direction of George Lucas' *Young Indiana Jones' Chronicles* (1992 & 1994); *Fire* tied for the Air Canada People's Choice Award at the 1996 Toronto International Film Festival where it opened the Perspective Canada Programs section; and *Earth* was awarded the Prix Première du Publique at the Festival du Film Asiatique de Deauville (France) in 1999 and the Critics' Award at the Schermi d'Amore International Film Festival.

Mehta argues that the choice of natural elements as themes for her trilogy was influenced by the fact that these elements, with the potential to nurture and destroy, exhibit passion on various levels (Prakash, 2000 & Ramchandani, 1998). *Fire* (1995), says Mehta, arose from the fact that even though she had moved away from India and considered herself a liberal woman, her choice to divorce her husband was riddled by feelings of guilt for not having fulfilled her duty as an Indian woman. She explains that in *Fire* (1995), "[I]t was fascinating unravelling the whole exploration of traditional values and how they play on you" (Prakash, 2000: 18). *Earth* (1999), on the other hand, originated out of her personal interest in the partition between India and Pakistan. Her father had been one of the thousands of people who had been displaced during that period. Bapsi Sidhwa's novel, *Cracking India* (1991), provided the perfect impetus for the telling of these people's stories through film.

3.3 Telling 'Her'-stories in the Accented Style

3.3.1 Fire (1995) - A Synopsis

Fire (1995) is the story of Sita and Radha, two Indian women married to two brothers of a very orthodox Indian family. In this household, Sita and Radha gracefully endure the role expected of them as Indian wives who cook, clean, care for their husbands and in-laws, and produce children to ensure the continuance of the family line. Sita and Radha discover, however, that while they attempt to do right by their duty as wives, their husbands are virtually 'absent' from their lives, and do not even fulfill their own roles as husbands.

⁴⁸A full filmography will be provided in the appendix.

Sita is newly married to Jatin, who is in love with a young, modern and very Americanised Chinese woman that he's been seeing for a very long time. If he's not working in his Kung Fu video rental store - a front for pornographic video rental - he is spending time with Julie, the woman with whom he is having an affair. He married Sita because Julie declined his proposal and he needed to satisfy the family who were becoming anxious about the lack of grandchildren.

Radha, on the other hand, has been married to Ashok for over thirteen years. In all this time, she has led a quiet, passionless existence. After discovering that she is infertile, Ashok puts an end to any intimate contact or connection between them. He joins the *ashram* (a place of worship) and devotes his life to prayer, the teachings of the resident *swami* (a Hindu religious teacher), and to the removal all trace of desire from his mind, body and soul.

In the private sphere of their husbands' home, Radha and Sita grow conscious of the patriarchal oppression dominating their lives and find salvation in one another. Their lesbian affair transgresses completely both the sexual and political boundaries governing their status as Indian women. A status that endures across the levels of nationalist representation through to the home space. The home/ private sphere thus becomes, for Radha and Sita⁴⁹, a resistant space in which political and personal agency are accessed.

Mehta weaves two Hindu myths into the narrative of this film, and before proceeding with the analysis, it is necessary to provide a brief plot for each of these myths. The first comes from the *Ramayana*⁵⁰ and tells the story of the Goddess Seeta⁵¹. Seeta is taken hostage by Ravana, the evil ruler of Lanka. During this time, she remains faithful to her husband, Lord Rama (Ray, 2000: 69 – 70). On her return, however, Lord Rama accuses her of being an impure woman. She questions his distrust of her and he responds saying that even though he believes

⁴⁹The naming of these two characters is ironic. As explained by Gayatri Gopinath,

In Hindu mythology, Sita proves her chastity to her husband, Ram, by immersing herself in fire; she thereby embodies the ideals of womanly virtue and self-sacrifice. Radha, similarly, is the devoted consort of the god Krishna, who is famous for his womanizing. The irony in the film's naming of the two female protagonists lies in their refusal to inhabit these overdetermined roles of women as devoted, chaste, and self-denying. (note 29 of Gopinath in Braziel & Mannur, 2003: 278)

The mythological significance of each these characters' names is reversed in the film: it is Radha who undergoes the 'trial by fire', while it is Sita's husband who, arguably, womanises. This is elucidated through Mehta's deliberate interlacing of two Hindu myths into the film's narrative.

⁵⁰A series of Hindu mythological texts.

⁵¹The spelling of the name Seeta, at this point in the discussion has been appropriated from Ray (2000). All references made in this chapter to the myth of Seeta will subscribe to this spelling, while all references to the actual character in the film will subscribe to the spelling 'Sita'.

in her purity, it is still his duty to subject her to the 'trial by fire'. Seeta takes the challenge and asks the fire to be her witness; fire being the 'discerner of truth'. She then proceeds to walk through the column of flames with absolute devotion, and emerges unscathed, proving her purity. Lord Rama, nevertheless, sends her into exile in the forest of the Kingdom of Ayodhya.

The second myth relates to the ritual tradition of *Karva Chauth*. *Karva Chauth* is observed once a year by married Hindu women⁵². It involves a fast for an entire day without food or water. The fast is a sacrifice made to ensure the long life of their husbands. On this day, Hindu wives dress as they would have on their wedding day with beautiful saris, heavy jewellery and henna on their hands and feet. They are thus, not allowed to partake in any work during the fast. The story behind this practice tells the tale of a handsome, wealthy king who had a beautiful wife. The gods envied him and this made him proud. His arrogance, the gods felt, could therefore not go unpunished. One night, the king's entire body was covered by millions of fine needles. The queen, being a devoted and loyal wife, spent a year pulling them out. When there were only two needles left, one on each eyelid, the 'maid servant' interrupted the queen telling her that a holy man at the door insisted on speaking with her. While the queen was out, the 'maid servant' proceeded to pluck the remaining needles from the king's eyelids. When the king opened his eyes, he embraced the 'maid servant' assuming that she was responsible for the removal of all the needles from his body. On the queen's return, the king demotes her to 'maid servant' and promotes the 'maid servant' to the status of the queen. The queen attempts to convince him of her devoted service to him, but the king had already made up his mind. The holy man, having observed all that had transpired, suggests to the queen that fasting an entire day from dawn to moonrise without food and water would break the spell. The queen obeys, and the king, realising his error, recognises his true wife and dismisses the 'maid servant'. The keeping of the fast thus proves the loyalty and devotion of married women to their husbands.

Mehta challenges blind tradition with the use critical use of these myths in the film. She claims, "I wanted to break the stereotypes of India, the 'exotic' India of the Raj and the princes and the mysticism. Exotic India doesn't really exist" (Desai, 2001).

⁵²*Karva Chauth* was originally observed by a particular Indian grouping (the Punjabis). The ritual has, however, become romanticised and glamourised through its depiction in Bollywood films.

The relevance of these myths becomes clear in the character readings of Sita and Radha that follow.

3.3.1.1 Sita

The first aspect of Sita's plurality, at the beginning of the film, is the fact that she is a newly married woman. This distinction is important because she is not, at this point, a wife as she has not yet had the opportunity to be so. Jatin, her husband, is so detached from her, and does not, in the least, allow her to function as she has grown to understand that a wife should. She attempts to be dutiful and devoted to him, having been made aware of the significance of the *Karva Chauth* and *Ramayan* myths to the 'proper' conduct of an Indian wife, but this does not sit comfortably with her because he keeps her at a distance.

Sita is also a 'girl': she is still very young. Although her age is not provided in the film, it is evident from her impulsive reactions and slightly insecure behaviour that she is still learning about the world around her. Her mind is new and open, and she exudes a combination of energy and a zest for life. She is aware of the modern world out there where she is not. In fact, the first thing that she does in her husband's home, after returning from a joyless honeymoon, is put on Jatin's pants and pretend to smoke his cigarette while she dances to disco music in their bedroom. At another point in the film, she convinces Radha to role-play/ act out a Hindi song as if they were a couple in a Bollywood film. Sita, again, is the one who puts on men's clothing. The only difference is that this time it is beyond the confines of the bedroom. These acts and her youth, in the film, foreground the uneasiness that emerges from the clash between tradition and modernity, and expected and transgressive sexuality. On the one hand, Sita is aware of duty and her required devotion to it, but, on the other, she desires life, new experiences and passion – elements that are unattainable in a world where traditional ideals have to be upheld and values maintained.

For instance, the morning of the *Karva Chauth* fast, Radha and Sita discuss what needs to be done for the day. The conversation develops to the point where Radha says,

You don't have to keep the fast if you don't want to.

and Sita replies:

Are you kidding? My mother would kill me and Biji would never stop ringing the bell. Isn't it amazing? We are so bound by customs and rituals. Somebody just has to press my button; this button marked 'tradition' and I start responding like a trained monkey. (pause) Do I shock you?

In this dialogue, Sita reveals that tradition is not an aspect of her life that she chose to participate in or abide by. It is instead, in her perception, a *controlling* mechanism (*controlled* by external forces) that has been built into her existence for the very reason that she is a woman. Sita's cross-dressing is significant in two ways: it reveals her understanding of sexuality as a performance of identity while, simultaneously, allowing her to transgress oppressive gender roles. Her role-playing is therefore an image of expression that is not about desiring to be a man, but about exploring a sexuality that is not expected of an Indian woman, but that is possible within that identity. Ultimately, Sita's exploration of an alternate female sexuality through cross-dressing and role-playing leads to an acting out against or a subversion of the traditional sexual confines of an Indian woman. She does not change or reject completely her gendered identity, but rather re-defines and refashions it through a process Naficy (2001) refers to as a border-crossing journey of identity.

Another part of Sita's plurality is the fact that she is an 'in-law'. This is significant because just as being a wife holds gendered patterns of behaviour that need to be adhered to, so to does being an 'in-law'. As a daughter-in-law, she is expected to be devoted to and at the service of the family. For instance, she has to care for Biji, the ill mother of Jatin and Ashok. Sita, in this role, has to respect family wishes even if it means surrendering her own, like, for example, working in the family take-away in and amongst fulfilling her other duties.

Sita's border-crossing moment occurs when she kisses Radha in a way that only intimate partners would. This act arrives as a result of Radha comforting Sita after finding her crying about wanting to return home. For Radha, it was an almost maternal instinct that led her to embrace Sita. But, for Sita, the kiss followed as a natural impulse to the attention and affection that she received. Attention and affection that Jatin could not and would not provide her with.

Diana Fuss, in the introduction to *Inside/Outside: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (1991), discusses the semiotic and symbolic difference established by the 'language' of

heterosexuality; such that all heterosexual practices and activities enjoy the 'privileged' and preferred space on the inside, while all practices and activities relating to its opposite – homosexuality – occupy an excluded, peripheral space on the outside. In an attempt to understand why and how these boundaries are created and maintained, Fuss argues that homosexuality is perceived as a transgression of heterosexuality. She thus explains the emergence of sexual desire as follows:

Read through the language of psychoanalysis, sexual desire is produced, variously and in tandem, through acts and experiences of defense, ambivalence, repression, denial, threat, trauma, injury, identification, internalisation, and renunciation. (Fuss, 1991: 2)

Sita's sexual desire for Radha is clearer in light of Fuss' argument. For instance, some of the factors contributing to the production of Sita's sexual desire are ambivalence (her confusion at having to adapt to a restricted life in her husband's home while desiring a different life), repression (her need to return home to the familiar), trauma (a failed first sexual experience with her husband), identification (realisation that Radha shares her pain and anguish) and renunciation (of the expectations placed on her in her husband's home). Sita's transgression of the sexual boundaries restricting Indian women therefore marks the crossing of a border in her identity.

The crossing of this border empowers Sita to confront and question Jatin about his lack of investment in their marriage. For example, she openly raises the issue of Julie; to which he reacts by physically abusing her. This does not deter her and she continues with her upfront and honest expression and her progressive emotional detachment from their relationship. Sita, consequently, becomes an 'absent' wife in the same way that he has been an 'absent' husband.

It is peculiar though that Jatin, after striking her for confronting him and questioning his behaviour, finds her candid spirit and her disinvolvement attractive, and only desires her after her border-crossing. He seems to find the strong-willed and rebellious woman in Sita appealing, even though these are not the reasons for which he married her. It is in this contradictory aspect of his character that the selfish patriarchal attitude finds expression. Jatin married Sita under pressure from his family. They required an obedient Hindu woman that would serve both him and his family. On one occasion, however, Jatin asks her why she never

wears short skirts, and, on another, he tells her that he really does not care whether or not she abides by all the religious rituals and traditional practices.

Jatin: ... *you don't have to suffer on my account.*

Sita: *I don't have a choice.*

Jatin: *Go right ahead, then!*

In contrast though, when he is in the company of Julie, he is less dominant. For example, in one scene, he paints her toenails, while she mocks and teases him about his desire to marry her. His act, in one sense, could arguably be considered a romantic gesture or progressive ideal for female equality. In another sense, however, the situation could be read as Jatin allowing himself to be put into a position of gendered or sexual subordination.

Jatin's selective behaviour with regard to the two women in his life indicates a level of confusion on his part. As a husband, his role has, also, to be performed (evident in his interaction with and treatment of Sita), but as a male, he is also afforded the opportunity to experiment with or play out the possibilities of his role without fear of judgement (as he does with Julie). Sita, however, is only recognised in her role as a wife; that is why her cross-dressing/role-playing is so significant as a resistant act. Her sexual experimentation relates directly to that of Jatin: the physical donning of his clothing allows her the same level of explorative possibility, but within her identity as an Indian woman.

The home or private sphere has come to be considered a woman's space⁵³. A woman's space in which familial and spiritual values are expected to be upheld in the production and

⁵³Second Wave Marxist feminism argues that the home, before industrial capitalism, served as the domain for production. Families (nuclear and extended, including both young and old) worked collaboratively to ensure the perpetuation of contemporary and future generations. As a result, within this practice, 'women's work' (cooking, canning, planting, preserving, childbearing and childrearing) was considered as economically significant as the work that men did (Tong, 1989: 51). The introduction of industrialisation, however, witnessed the movement of the production of goods from the private to the public arena, with most women remaining at home in order to continue producing and raising future generations of workers. Private property and private ownership of the means of production, initially by a few males, encouraged the perception that 'women's work' was non-productive in comparison to the productive, money-earning activities of the men. Subsequently, in the private sphere, women were rendered economically dependent and socially subordinate (Tong, 1989).

In order to understand, however, the Indian woman's experience of the private/public distinction, Kumari Jayawardena (1986) draws on the thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi regarding women's rights. She argues that even though Gandhi, considered one of the most liberal thinkers in history, believed in the equality of women; this equality, as he conceived of it, was still situated within the religious and patriarchal system. As a consequence, the Indian women's social functioning was understood as complementary to that of man (Jayawardena, 1986). This claims Jayawardena, is most evident in his conception of female education:

In framing any scheme of women's education this cardinal truth must be kept in mind. Man is *supreme* in the outward activities of the married pair and, therefore, it is the fitness of things

upbringing of future generations for the greater good of the nation. A space to which Radha and Sita have been assigned. Patriarchy, however, permeates this so-called ‘woman’s space’ in two ways. To begin with, the woman’s space that Radha and Sita occupy, is actually their husbands’ home, and upon entering it, rules pertaining to their roles as wives have to be adhered to. Appropriating Naficy’s ideas (2001) at this point, Sita and Radha can be referred to as diasporic entities in their husband’s homes; ‘foreigners’ or outsiders to this space. Their ‘woman’s space’ is, in actual fact, a woman’s space on their husbands’ terms. Their functioning within the home is therefore determined by their servitude to their husbands.

The second manner in which patriarchy permeates their supposed ‘woman’s space’ is through the character of Biji. As an agent of patriarchal control, Biji⁵⁴ maintains and closely guards the oppressive laws embedded in religion and myth. Although frail and weak, having suffered a stroke, Biji, in her silence, is critically observant of Radha and Sita, expressing disapproval at the slightest hint of the subversion of patriarchal ideals on the parts of Radha and Sita. An example of this occurs when Sita expresses her thirst for a glass of water during the *Karva Chauth* fast. Biji, unable to speak, immediately begins ringing her bell, illustrating her offence at Sita’s lack of concern for Jatin’s life. The bell, a communicative tool, doubles up as a mechanism of control, like the ‘button marked tradition’ that Sita speaks about. *Karva Chauth*, in essence, perpetuates the deprivation of the Indian wife’s body in aid of ensuring the long and healthy life of her husband.

In the language of Naficy (2001), as diasporic entities in their husbands’ home and feeling pressure (through Biji) to conform to its ideals, Sita and Radha experience their woman’s space as an ambivalent, contentious location. It is an interstitial position between the women that they are forced or pretend to be and the women that they desire to be. The ambiguity that emerges at this level is conducive to the refashioning of their identities and the space in which they are housed. Sita and Radha, as a result, transform their ‘woman’s space’ in a manner that does not allow for the permeation of patriarchy.

that he should have a greater knowledge thereof. On the other hand, home life is *entirely* the sphere of women and, therefore, in domestic affairs, in the upbringing and education of children, women ought to have more knowledge. (*emphasis added*, Prabhu in Jayawardena, 1986: 96)

[the above quote is taken from M. K. Gandhi’s *India of my Dreams*, compiled by R. K. Prabhu (1962)] Jayawardena’s aim here is in no way an attempt to expose Gandhi as a perpetrator of gender inequality in India, as his intentions were noble. She does, however, provide an interesting context for the ideas (sometimes deliberate, sometimes misconceived) that have informed the gendered roles and identities of Indian women in the home sphere. It is at this point, that an interrogation of Sita and Radha’s functioning within the realm of their husbands’ home can begin.

Sita's structures of feeling⁵⁵ are experienced at two interacting and interrelated levels of home: the physical space that she inhabits and her body. Structures of feeling, as explained by Naficy (2001), is the diasporic experience of space that is evident in the films of 'accented' filmmakers. It is obvious at the beginning of *Fire* (1995) that Sita's marriage has been arranged: she and Jatin barely knew each other. The act of arranging a marriage inevitably involves the passing of the bride-to-be (and by implication, her body) from the ownership of her father to the ownership of her husband. Sita, therefore, never experiences home as that of her own. Her body is thus prisoner to the homes in which she is owned. Her imprisonment, as a result, is enforced and maintained by the 'button marked tradition' (religious myths and practices that idealise preferred female behaviour). These homes are understandably never utopic for her. For instance, her arrival at Jatin's home was traumatic because there were new aspects of ownership (like the abuse of her body) that she had to reconcile. Feelings of ambivalence subsequently emerge and Sita, as a result charts a new space, within patriarchal confines in which to express her sexual desire. This space is manifested in her cross-dressing which, as already noted, does not signify a desire to be male, but rather an exploration of an alternative sexuality that does not oppress and regulate the possibilities of her body. In this space, which she invites and allows Radha to enter, Sita experiences an openness and freedom of being.

Her plurality at the end reveals a woman as opposed to a girl. Her border-crossing allows her to gain sexual maturity. And, in doing so, Sita learns not to perform her identity like the '*trained monkey*' she described herself as. The taking of control of her body is a metaphor for the defiance of the expectations placed on her by tradition and myth. Being Radha's lover is therefore so fulfilling for her. Unlike being a wife to Jatin, a role she played and in which she was expected to be subservient and subordinate, she is respected and no longer subject to control. Her dreams and desires are shared and understood, as she and Radha are synchronised in their thoughts and feelings.

⁵⁴The label 'Biji' is a term of respect meaning grandmother.

⁵⁵ Refer to Naficy's discussion of this concept (Chapter One, pg 24)

3.3.1.2 Radha

Part of Radha's plurality is that of a typical middle class Indian woman. Firstly, she is a wife who is devoted, dutiful, graceful, quiet, obedient, traditional, hardworking, tireless, inherently good, religious, and contained by her role and the rules governing it.

She is also, in another aspect of her plurality, a 'childless mother'. She does indeed 'mother' all the members of the family, but has no children of her own. She would like to be a proper mother but she is infertile. Even though she is the perfect wife and caretaker, her infertility as an Indian woman seems to reduce her virtue, as if she has lost any definition of a woman. Neither her goodness nor her complete dedication to her duties can redeem her as her husband completely rejects her intimately. His treatment of her seems to suggest that her only worth lay in her potential or ability to produce a family line. Her body, to him, was just an instrument for his use. It is inconceivable to Ashok that she, as a woman, experiences desire, as this is not possible within the realm of her existence that binds her to servility.

A strange aspect of Radha's plural identity is the fact that she allows herself to be used as an 'object of desire' by her husband. To Ashok, having children seemed to be the main objective of being married. Once this was taken away from him, the marriage came to represent something dead and extraneous. So, he decided to devote his life, energy and finances to the *swami* at the *ashram* who extols religious life lessons. He seems to find satisfaction in these teachings. One of which argues for the removal of temptation from life because it is "*the root of all evil*" (Fire, Mehta, 1996). This, argues the *swami*⁵⁶, can be achieved by allowing the objects of your desire to be ever-present in your life and then spending the rest of your life resisting them. This is the true test of faith and, eventually, you become immune to all temptation and desire, and those objects become invisible and meaningless to you.

Ashok explains this to Radha and asks her to play the role of his 'object of desire'. In this role, she is required to lie next to him in bed whenever he feels a sexual urge. He then spends the entire time attempting to resist her. Once his urge disappears, she has to return to her own bed. Radha agrees, believing that her inability to have children has disappointed him and has driven him to such extreme choices. She, in her absolute devotion, truly believes that she is helping him, and indeed she was; thirteen years later, she was helping him remove her

⁵⁶ It can be argued here that the *swami* represents the infiltration of patriarchal law in Hindu religious teachings.

significance and existence from his life. At one point in the film, Radha questions him about this,

Ashok: *Go to sleep.*

Radha: *Ashok?*

Ashok: *Hmmm...*

Radha: *If we had children, would you need me the way you need me?*

Ashok: (without hesitation) *Probably not. Perhaps it was my destiny. A sign to seek union with the universal truth. And each day swamiji helps me to come closer to that truth.*

Radha: *And who will help me?*

Ashok: (sits up in bed and answers after a long silence) *By helping me, you are doing your duty as my wife.*

As this object of desire, Radha feels frustrated, hurt and resentful of both herself and her husband. He cannot see her as a sexual being with her own physical needs. Instead he treats her as a test of his own endurance and uses her to render himself without the 'evil' of sexual desire.

As a daughter-in-law, Radha gives of her life completely in order to please. As a sister-in-law to Sita, she is welcoming, kind, caring, understanding and attempts to set an example of conduct for the young and naive Sita.

Unlike Sita who crosses her border at the moment of the kiss, Radha's border-crossing is catalysed by the kiss. Her actual border-crossing moment is her first sexual encounter with Sita. Her consent to engage in an act of that nature marks the point at which she begins to come to terms with her body as a site of pleasure for herself as opposed to an object of desire for someone else. This transformation can be noted in her rejection, after her border-crossing, of Ashok's request, once again, to use her body as a tool in the test of his temptation and desire. Radha is no longer comfortable being an object and gains a sense of self through the exploration of sexual desire. In this sense, sex, for Radha (and possibly other Indian women like herself) becomes a metaphor for identity. Within the sexual confines of being a wife,

Radha experienced a controlled and sometimes imprisoned identity; but with sexual freedom, she experiences pleasure, fulfilment and completion within her identity as an Indian woman. A transgression of sexual confinement thus implicitly illustrates the transgression of a constructed identity.

Oddly enough, when Ashok realises that Radha is serious about leaving, he attempts to rape her to prevent her from leaving. It is not that he suddenly finds her so desirable that he is incapable of controlling his sexual urges. In the first instance, this act is an attempt at silencing Radha; preventing her expression of self and, consequently, the exposure of his oppressive sexual demands on her. It is, secondly, an attempt at subduing and oppressing her loyalty to her own desires and needs (the discovery of her own ‘*universal truth*’) because, if she is true to herself, it means that she is no longer an object under his control. By disrupting the accepted paradigm of sexual behaviour for the Indian wife on two levels – committing the taboo act of an extramarital affair with another woman – Radha has made herself a visible entity and has, in the process, attained personal and sexual agency.

During the attempted rape⁵⁷, Radha manages to wrestle herself free from his grip – an act of defiance that illustrates her rejection of her role as a sexual object. In the scuffle, however, her sari catches alight on the stove. In an amazingly constructed scene that captures the essence of the film, Radha is engulfed by a column of flames similar to that of the one that Seeta, Lord Rama’s wife, had to endure to prove her loyalty to him. Ashok, present during the entire disaster, just looks on making no attempt to rescue her as her sari continues to burn. To him, the incident represents ‘divine intervention’⁵⁸ aimed specifically at punishing Radha for her transgression of the ‘sacred’ laws of marriage. Radha, however, as the mythological Seeta,

⁵⁷Refer to the following section on the character of Biji for a discussion of the significance of her role during this scene.

⁵⁸Radha’s burning can be read in many ways, in relation to various Hindu practices of the past (and, in some instances, of the present). The first would be the practice of *agnipariksha* – a ‘trial by fire’ purificatory process for initiation into Hinduism. The second would be the practice of *sati* – the burning of widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands in order to prove their life’s devotion to him (Jain in Jain & Rai, 2002). In the *Fire* (1995), Ashok is not physically dead, but spiritually, as a husband, he is non-existent to her. Radha being engulfed by flames may just have been testament to that. Her survival of the fire illustrates that her unconditional devotion to him is no longer necessary. And thirdly, the fire at the end also highlights the practice of dowry murders,

When a Hindu wife is killed or driven to suicide by her husband and his family she becomes a victim of ‘dowry death’, as such occurrences are popularly described. Because of the nature of the crime – almost always a death by burning that is made to resemble a domestic accident – the central and often sole source of information about the circumstances of the death is the victim herself. [...] Wife-murder as a widespread social phenomenon in India expresses the socially sanctioned violence against women that reinforces and is reinforced by the ideology of husband-worship (*pativrata*). (Sunder Rajan, 1993: 83)

emerges unscathed because she was never disloyal to Ashok. The only victim of her betrayal has been herself: she has not been true to her being.

In terms of Radha's structures of feeling, the film begins and is interspersed with scenes from Radha's childhood. These scenes show her sitting with her parents in a field of yellow flowers that seem never-ending. Her mother relates a story to her about people living in the mountain who have not seen the sea and would like to do so. The point that Radha's mother makes is that it does not matter where you are; to imagine something and to believe that it exists, makes it real and tangible. Radha is shown to understand that in her husband's home, she has to perform her identity. She understands her structure of feeling of claustrophobia as part of her duty. But, even though she understands that her identity as a wife has to be performed, she holds on to that memory of her parents in the field with her and the lesson that was shared that day. Her dream is open and euphoric. She is displaced in her husband's home, but, in her thoughts and dreams, she believes that she will find her way.

Her lesbian relationship with Sita does afford her that, and when she and Sita leave their husbands' home, it is ironic that they find sanctuary in a temple. The temple – home to religious myths and practices – offers them shelter from the rain after the fire. The temple neither judges nor condemns them showing that their acts of transgression have place in the discourses that it embodies.

3.3.1.3 Biji⁵⁹

Biji represents that group of Indian women whose lives have been so deeply entrenched in patriarchal politics that they eventually buy into the hegemony of the system. In the home, Biji, as a patriarchal agent, plays keeper to the interests of her sons. She monitors the activities of their wives, demanding unconditional respect and service, and reprimanding them for any digressions in duty. Biji's 'all-knowing' and 'all-pervading' presence serve to contain Radha and Sita's existence.

⁵⁹This is not a character reading of Biji as the film provides only enough information of her to understand how her presence in the lives of Sita and Radha, assisted in their oppression. The discussion of Biji's character therefore raises issues surrounding women who subscribe to the system of patriarchy because they understand no other way of protecting themselves.

In occupying this position, she, as a woman who has very likely experienced a similarly restricted married life, aids in the oppression of other Indian women. Even though Biji understands Radha and Sita's subversion of the sexual laws of marriage as a betrayal of the duty to their husbands, it is actually she who betrays them.

A telling example of this appears at the very end of the film during the confrontation between Radha and Ashok. Biji uses her bell to call Radha over to her. She then proceeds to gently cup Radha's face in her hands and, after a long pause, spits in it. This scene captures appropriately Biji's patriarchal affiliation – she is so steeped in tradition, culture and religion that she cannot see beyond its boundaries.

3.3.2 *Earth* (1999) - A Synopsis

Earth (1999) is a film about the 1947 partition of India, and highlights and works through issues surrounding “why war is waged [...], why friends turn enemies, and why battles are invariably fought on women's bodies” (Mehta, 1999/2000)⁶⁰. It is therefore necessary to first discuss briefly the historical circumstances under which the story unfolds.

The strained relations between Muslims and Hindus in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the end of the 17th century when the Mughal leader Aurangzeb imposed harsh Islamic rule over Hindus. By the 18th century, this Mughal Empire dissipated and the British, seeing the opportunity, seized full power over India by the 19th century. As a result, the Hindus and Muslims joined forces against them. By the end of the 19th century, the Indian National Congress (INC) was formed comprising Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs (Hindus in the majority). Together they fought for freedom and equal opportunity. Seeing the Hindu educated class as a threat to their rule, the British attempted to draw the Muslims onto their side by enforcing the idea that the Muslims should be a separate political entity and by providing them with separate local government electorates. Many Muslims though remained with the INC. By the 1920s, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs rejoined forces in passive resistance, led by Mahatma Gandhi. In order to end the resistance, the British gave more political power to the INC (which was still very much so Hindu-dominated). Towards the 1930s, Muslim leaders under the guidance of M.A. Jinnah felt that the Hindus were enjoying too much influence in the

⁶⁰A quote from the online article, “How the film *Earth* came about” (1999/2000), written by Deepa Mehta. See bibliography for website address.

decision making of British India, and this fostered the notion that the Islamic heritage would only be safe if the Muslims had their own state, Pakistan. This marked the beginning of the struggle for land in India. Hindu-Muslim relations began to deteriorate from that point on and, on 16 August 1946, a day of “Direct Action” was called for by the Muslim League in their fight to secure Pakistan. This day saw unrest among thousands of Hindus and Muslims in mixed areas. By this time, the British decided to leave India as the inter-ethnic conflict escalated exponentially. At midnight, 14 August 1947, the borders of India were demarcated and Pakistan celebrated its independence; India celebrated its own the following day even though there had not been much to rejoice about. During the partition, close to 12 million Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs were displaced in the migration across borders: the Muslims to Pakistan, the Hindus and Sikhs to India. In addition, with all the violence and unrest characterising this period, over a million people – the majority of whom were women – were slaughtered and maimed; “since then, Pakistan and India have fought three wars. With both countries now nuclear powers the stakes today are much higher [...] but the roots undoubtedly lie in the 1947 conflict” (Mandhyan, 1999/2000).

The story of *Earth* occurs at this moment in Indian history and is told through the eyes of an eight year old Parsee⁶¹ girl, named Lenny, who gives prominence to the experiences of her *ayah* (nanny), Shanta, in the narrative. Each of the women, portrayed in this film, is depicted at a different stage of self-realisation that seems to have been catalysed by the tense political circumstances of the time.

Mehta, in discussion about *Earth* (Mehta, 1999), acknowledges the contribution of both her own and Bapsi Sidhwa’s (the author of the novel *Cracking India* (1991) on which *Earth* (1999) was based) diasporic identities to the telling of this story, “The irony of our situation hasn’t escaped Bapsi or myself. Bapsi is from Pakistan and now a US citizen. I’m from India and now living in Canada. If neither of us had moved from our respective homelands, the film just wouldn’t have been possible” (Mehta, 1999/2000).

⁶¹Also spelt ‘Parsi’ - “During the ninth century, the Parsi community fled from Muslim rule in Persia to India. Under colonial rule, they enjoyed a close relationship with the British and were not allied with any particular ethnic group during the partition.” This quote is taken from Ruchika Mandhyan’s article, “Historical Background to the Partition of India” (1999/2000) that appeared on the official *Earth* website. See bibliography for reference.

3.3.2.1 Shanta⁶²

Shanta, first and foremost in the film, is an *ayah* or nanny to Lenny. In this role, she is protective and very much like a surrogate parent. She often disciplines Lenny who is very mischievous. But even though she is stern with her at times, she is also very soft, caring and patient. She is watchful and often concerned in a way that a mother would be. She is undoubtedly very attached to Lenny. As an *ayah*, Shanta is also, in a sense, instructive because she occasionally teaches Lenny small but valuable life lessons during their time together.

To Lenny's mother, Bunty, Shanta is a domestic worker. In this aspect of her plural identity, she is not as candid as she is with Lenny. She is more obedient, respectful and almost childlike because she looks up to Lenny's mother, a very graceful and sophisticated woman. Even though, however, Shanta and Bunty come from different backgrounds – Shanta, a subaltern subject (Chapter One, pg 35) of Indian descent, and Bunty, of upper middle class social standing and Persian descent – they identify with each other on some level. Bunty, living in the diaspora, knows and understands the implications of displacement, while Shanta, knowing only one homeland, fears it.

This leads on to her next role: that of a friend. All of Shanta's friends are lower working class men of various religious faiths. Although Shanta feels that she is a friend to all these men, she is aware that to them she is the 'desired woman'. At some level, they are all in love with her. They are captivated by and drawn to her, and it appears as if she is the clasp that brings and holds together their diversity. She enjoys the affection and admiration of the entire group, humouring them with a little playfulness. She is, however, still wary. Their attention is undivided and it is almost as if she is worshipped, being showered with little trinkets every time they see her. They surround her, and one friend even says that when she's around, they are "*like moths to a flame*". A phrase that alludes to the destructive position that Shanta occupies.

Mehta's construction of Shanta is careful and clever in this aspect of her identity. By placing Shanta, one Indian woman as the focal point within a group of men from the different religious faiths in India at the time, she foreshadows and exposes the Indian woman as

⁶²Again, Mehta's naming of this character is important. *Shanta*, a variation on the name *Shanti* (peace), is Sanskrit for peaceful. The irony of the name *Shanta* becomes apparent further in the analysis of the position occupied by the character in relation to the land conflict.

territory that is marked, divided and/or overcome. In appropriating and manipulating the nationalist image of woman as a symbol for India, Mehta foregrounds existing nationalist discourse in order for it to be challenged.

There are two particular men in the group, Hassan the 'Masseur' and Dil Navaz the 'Ice Candy Man', both of whom are Muslim and who both show her the most affection. They would each like to marry her. This adds another dimension to her plural identity which is that of a marriageable woman. This identity is sometimes interchangeable with that of a 'conquest'. Each of the men is aware of the other's intentions and, at some points, become competitive, secretly at war, in their attempts to secure her love. As a marriageable woman or 'conquest', she is beautiful, hypnotic and available because she is not betrothed. In this identity, Shanta experiences the different kinds of love between Hassan, who is gentle, romantic and passionate, and Dil Navaz, who is temperamental and erratic.

In the experience of these kinds of love and the territorial quality of her body for these men, Shanta learns not only of the different sides of war and people's investment in it, but also of her symbolic role as an Indian woman in the inter-ethnic and political land conflict. She understands herself as a woman apart, just as India is a land apart. In the same manner that India, the land, becomes the battleground of possession for the warring religious factions, Sita finds that her Hindu body becomes the battleground of affections for Dil Navaz and Hassan, two Muslim men. While India endures the destruction of the conflict between these groups, Shanta experiences the splitting of her being in the tension between these men. She is, however, not comfortable in this position. Shanta's body begins to become her prison when she realises the strength of Hassan and Dil Navaz's feelings toward her. As the country's situation becomes more and more serious, so to does her relationship with these men. With everybody's future being uncertain, these men are desperate to secure their future with her.

Shanta is also a Hindu woman who is scared but proud and unyielding in her belief of personal choice and identity. She is also uncertain because her religious choice together with her gender marks her as a target for destruction and violence in the political pursuit of land during the partition.

Shanta's border-crossing moment is catalysed by her refusal of Dil Navaz's proposal of marriage; her decision is influenced by the enjoyment he expresses at the senseless killing of Hindus. She realises that he cannot be trusted when his passions and anger are running high. It

was not so much his bias toward the Muslim community that upset her, but more his excitement and sheer thrill at the destruction of human life. It is at this point that she is awakened to how deeply entrenched winning is to him; how overcome he is by fury and bitterness. Just as he cannot imagine life anywhere besides Lahore and will do anything to retain possession of it, he cannot imagine his life without Shanta and will do anything to gain possession of her. Conscious of her symbolic status to him, Shanta perceives her interstitial position between both men to be potentially dangerous. This knowledge assists her decision of a partner and her decision to leave Lahore.

With all the uncertainty of the political situation in Lahore and Dil Navaz's frightening behaviour, Shanta imagines and feels her spiritual and physical beings torn apart by opposing forces. She engages in pre-marital sexual intimacy with Hassan. Her choice to allow her body to be loved signifies her rejection of her symbolic territorial status. Traditionally, the sexually pure Indian woman provided the ideal representation of the land and the nation. Shanta's transgression of these traditional sexual boundaries before marriage illustrates her challenge to these conventional perceptions during a period of land struggle. She will not allow her body to be fought on or for. The irony of this, however, becomes clearer toward the end of the film.

For Shanta, the most significant part of her plurality, after her border-crossing, is the fact that she is a wife-to-be. In this role, however, she will not be duty-bound in the traditional sense, as Hassan is prepared to enter the marriage on equal terms: whereas it is usually customary for the Indian wife to assume the cultural, religious and linguistic practices of her husband upon marriage, Hassan offers to compromise his religion, Islam, for her.

This adds another dimension to her status as a Hindu. In fact, her Hindu identity becomes more deeply entrenched after her border-crossing. Yet again, unlike the land, she exhibits the power and the ability to choose to retain her identity. She will not be conquered by patriarchal domination in the same way that the land and nation will be.

By the very end of the film, Lenny unwittingly betrays Shanta to Dil Navaz. Both Dil Navaz and Lenny had spied on Shanta and Hassan the night they engaged in sexual intimacy. Lenny did so out of curiosity and Dil Navaz out of jealousy and anger. Shanta's choice of Hassan signifies, for Dil Navaz, a betrayal on Shanta's part and a defeat on his. He is deeply hurt by her decision and therefore channels his sorrow, at the loss of her, into the fight for land. At

which point, he begins to exert his Muslim politics with complete abandon. The irony is that Shanta's defiance of the symbolic representation inscribed on her body, only deepens Dil Navaz's pursuit for land as compensation for losing her.

Dil Navaz becomes almost obsessive about the conflict in Lahore and moves into Muslim fundamentalism. Winning Shanta and her body become, to him, symbols of gaining political control of Lahore, the land. He sees her rejection of him as both a personal and political affront, and thus returns the action by betraying her to the other Muslim fundamentalists. Once she is captured, her clothes all ripped and torn, her body dragged, flung, contorted, kicking and screaming, the only fate that can be imagined for her is torture, rape and murder. In fact, the adult Lenny, at the end of the film, says that the last she heard of her *ayah* was that she had either resorted to prostitution, had married Dil Navaz or had been raped and murdered. Whatever the fate of Shanta was, Lenny "*had never set eyes on her again*". Wherever and however Shanta ended up, her body could be nothing else but her prison.

Mehta, at this point, exposes the symbolic construction of the Indian woman: woman equals land. Shanta's body, both before and after her transgression of its symbolic status, marked her as a site for destruction. Dil Navaz's capture of her illustrates the manner in which the violence, arising out of the strained political and religious relations of the country, is physically meted out on the bodies of Indian women.

3.3.2.2 Lenny

Even though Lenny is only eight years old, her plurality of identity is quite complex, because for someone so young, she has grown up in and is living through a very turbulent period in India's history.

To begin with, she is a daughter. Lenny wears a leg brace because she has been afflicted with polio since birth. She is fairly independent and has the potential to be quite carefree if she were not inhibited by the leg brace. As a consequence of being slightly crippled and an only child, Lenny is very spoiled, manipulative and precocious. She is lonely and this is augmented by the fact that her father, Rustom, does not give her the attention that she requires. Rustom treats Lenny as the 'girl-child'. He 'baby-talks' to her, as if she is not a thinking, reasoning being, in addition to condescendingly dispelling her concerns about the conflict. He expects

that she, as a young girl, spend her time as a ‘trainee’ of her mother, until she is sixteen. At which point, she will be married.

To their domestic workers, Lenny is both their employer’s daughter and their surrogate child. They find her to be naughty, exploratory, mischievous and demanding. In relation to them, she is aware of her power and wields it. They do love her though and find her quite refreshing and charming when she is not being inquisitive. They understand that she is still a child. They pity her youth and its uncertainty during such a highly charged political situation in their country. She is quite observant, intuitive and insightful being very attuned to the undertones of the anxiety that overwhelms the adults around her. She is confused by the political climate because she is not aware of the full thrust of the situation. The grown-ups in her life think that it’s best if they protect her from the truth. They probably feel that too much knowledge would be dangerous for her; so she resorts to picking up bits of information through spying, eavesdropping and spending time with Shanta and her friends.

All this confusion, causes her to question her identity as a Parsee. All she knows is that when the conflict begins, she’ll be safe because the Parsee community has decided to remain neutral in all aspects of the country’s politics. They will only support the ruling party. This is slightly disconcerting because her parents are constantly changing their identities to suit the political climate. So even though they may choose to be neutral, they are in no way stable – and Lenny tends to register that.

At one point in the film, a frustrated Lenny asks her mother to clarify what her cousin Adi meant when he called the Parsees “bumlickers”. Bunty, concerned by what her daughter was learning, explains to her that they (the Parsees) are actually chameleons who take on the ‘colour’ of the land in which they live and the people who inhabit it. She proceeds to relate a traditional story of the Parsee’s arrival in India:

[...] an Indian prince sent Zoroastrian [Parsee] refugees fleeing from Islamic expansion a messenger with a glass of milk signifying that the Indian people were a united and homogenous mixture that should not be tampered with. In response, the Parsees dropped a lump of sugar into the milk, saying that they would blend in easily and make the culture sweeter. It followed that they [the Parsees] were granted a home in India because Parsees neither proselytized (sic) nor entered into politics. (Wilder, 1998)

Relating these stories, in an attempt to comfort Lenny, Bunty raises and unconsciously perpetuates certain aspects of the Parsee woman’s experience of home and body. As diasporic beings, Parsee women are displaced on Indian soil. But, with their husbands’ (the Parsee

decision-making community) decisions to remain neutral in and blend into the land they inhabit, these women inadvertently assume the ‘temper’ of the land and, subsequently, its symbolic status. In addition, like the sugar that blends with the milk, these women’s bodies become invisible against the land on which the war is waged. In addition, like the sugar that is supposed to blend with the milk, these Parsee women work hard to make their bodies invisible against the land⁶³. To be visible, would alter the ethnic constitution of the country and would consequently add another dimension to the land conflict. A dimension that would be detrimental to the Parsees’ security of place within India. If they were to be displaced again, Parsee women would have no place to go. The tale of the ‘sugar and milk’, as a ‘feasible’ myth, influences them to continue maintaining their invisibility through silence and neutrality. As a result, since the fight is no longer about the land, but about religious and ethnic pride and ownership, the Parsee woman (and her ‘historically’-established relation to her host land), experiences neutrality as a state of being torn. Lenny reflects on her mother’s stories and metaphors and begins to understand her position as divided.

In this regard, Lenny’s lame leg is also of importance. As a little girl, her body is already broken; and she has come to experience and understand her disability as imprisonment. It would be expected that Lenny – in a sense, damaged and, by implication, impure – be excluded from the symbolic realm of the land’s representation. It is that very exclusion, however, together with the added metaphors related by her mother that serve to deeper instill the experience of brokenness and division within her, projecting a hopeless future.

That is why she often attempts to be like Shanta, a stable (and whole) force in her life. This leads on to another aspect of her plural identity - that of Shanta’s disciple/ follower. Lenny has to spend time with Shanta because Shanta is her nanny. Lenny, however, loves it and finds every opportunity to be with Shanta because she has many interesting friends who talk about and do interesting things. Shanta, in addition, exudes a quality that people love and are drawn to. Lenny notes this and, as a result, wants to be just like Shanta. Apart from following her around, Lenny mimics her behaviour and her actions, and echoes her words. For example, Lenny sometimes flirts with Shanta’s male friends in just the same way that Shanta does, sometimes using the very same words. She attempts to get the same attention from Masseur and Ice Candy Man, that Shanta gets from them. In being Shanta’s disciple, Lenny is

⁶³This relates to Naficy’s notion (2001) of tactile optics, with which he explains that the ‘accented’ body is experienced as the most poignant signifier of difference. This experience, he argues, is one that that is

somewhat sexually knowledgeable. Her curiosity always leads her to watch, spy on or look at Shanta when she is spending private moments with Hassan or Dil Navaz.

Lenny is still young and her mind is still open to life lessons. Experiences that slightly alter her state of being or that affect her emotions are all life-changing for her at this point. She therefore undergoes many border-crossing moments throughout the film. In the opening sequence, Lenny is colouring-in a map of India. In the middle of this, she gets up and goes into the next room where she picks up a kind of ornamental plate and flings it to the ground so that it shatters into many pieces. For a few moments before her mother and Shanta rush in, she stares at the broken plate in shock and disbelief. This is Lenny's first border-crossing moment.

Nobody has taken the time to explain the partition to her because they all want to protect her. She understands from this that whatever is going on will affect her even if not directly. So, she decides to work it out on her own. The best way that she as a child can do this and be heard, is if she finds a physical metaphor or analogy of the larger political situation. To an impulsive child like Lenny, a plate is the best option. From this border-crossing, she realises that the partition is not just the splitting of land but the separation of it. The map that she was colouring in showed a whole India whose different parts were joined together. The broken plate, however, told a different story – a story that scared her. Lenny's border-crossing helps her understand the seriousness of the situation.

The next metaphor that she finds is a fabric doll. She asks her cousin Adi to pull on one end of it while she pulls on the other. Naturally, the doll splits down the middle. This upsets her further because it is at this point that she realises that the war is not just about a land apart, it's also about people apart. That is, people being torn from one another and also being torn inside themselves. In order to come to terms with this, she had to, yet again, find a physical metaphor.

Lenny's body, already damaged, as a result, experiences – what she has conceived of as - the destruction of the land: being neutral means being broken like the plate, and being a chameleon means changing constantly and this ultimately means being torn apart like the doll. She learns how women's bodies are territorialized and this contains her.

highlighted in the characters of diasporic and exilic filmmakers. For a detailed discussion of this concept, refer to Chapter One (pg 25).

Lenny's border-crossing moments also allow her to understand, in her child's logic, her identity as a Parsee. She feels tortured because being in the middle no longer feels safe to her. Just like with the plate and the doll, it always ends up that the middle is either broken or split by the loyalties within, or torn or pulled apart by the external forces on the sides.

At the very end of the film, Lenny crosses another very significant border. Believing that the Ice Candy Man wants to help Shanta, Lenny betrays her to the Muslim fundamentalists. Her perceptions misguided and her trust betrayed, Lenny's confusion regarding her Parsee status is highlighted at this crucial moment. After being repeatedly told that she is a Parsee, and that she is a neutral entity that surrenders to the identity of the dominant power, Lenny assumes this role and acts out precisely what is required of it. Dil Navaz and his party of Muslim fundamentalists were clearly a dominant force at that stage, and not realising the danger and fragility of her position to Shanta, she capitulates the information their anger and bitterness hungered for. This moment also highlights the use and abuse of women by men during the war and political struggle. Dil Navaz manipulated her.

Lenny is shocked and hurt, and attempts to retract the secret information the instant in which she divulges it. It is at this point, that she understands what she has been protected from; friends betraying and hurting one another for love, religion, history, power and nationalist beliefs. And, Lenny, as a young girl, becomes a pawn in all of it. Her innocence is violated and her naiveté scrutinised. Fulfilling her symbolic status, Lenny unwittingly aids in the destruction of a fellow woman⁶⁴.

Lenny seems to have known only one home, Lahore. Being Parsee and, by implication, assuming a neutral position, she is apparently safe in this home. This, however, does not make Lenny feel safe because being neutral does not afford her an identity of her own. As a consequence, Lenny has no sense of where she belongs and who she's supposed to be. All she learns from her physical metaphors is that her home, Lahore, is cracking under her feet and that she has many questions. She may be neutral but, as already mentioned, she is by no means stable. Her home that was once euphoric and open becomes dysphoric and claustrophobic.

⁶⁴Refer to the section "Resisting Time: The Articulation of Postcolonial Feminisms" further on in this chapter, for a discussion of the manner in which the 'narrator-status' of the adult Lenny gives expression to Shanta and her story.

3.3.2.3 Bunty

Bunty is Lenny's mother. Her plurality reveals that she is an unlikely combination of Eurocentricism and Indian tradition which, oddly enough, seems to augment both her dedication to duty and, at the same time, her awkwardness in fulfilling that duty.

To begin with, Bunty is an upper middle class woman whose husband's work (not really mentioned) affords them money, privilege and affiliation in the right social circles. Bunty knows her place in her home and social class and is very quiet, soft-spoken and non-confrontational. As already mentioned, she is quite Eurocentric appropriating all the Western influences and materialist trappings, like music, the English language, the structure and design of her house, the activities that she engages in and the manner in which she engages in them such as the serving of meals, driving and the wearing of sunglasses in 1947. Bunty is very hybrid, displaying a fusion - and arguably a confusion - of two different worlds. Her husband, Rustom, in comparison, is an absolute colonial product down to the sporting of the colonial explorer's garb on his days off.

The construction of the character of Bunty is typical of 'accented' filmmaking according to Naficy. Bunty has already, in the film, been displaced once and is attempting to successfully adapt to life in a host land, by merging aspects of her own traditional culture with that of the dominant culture in India. This is not as easy as would be expected as the country is in turmoil, and it becomes progressively worse as the turmoil worsens.

This affects her relationship with her daughter. Bunty is a devoted and very protective mother. She is soft and emotionally indulgent with Lenny, and often spoils her as a result. To Lenny, Bunty has a soothing effect and tends to know how to quell her fears. This is because Bunty understands Lenny not just as a mother would a daughter, but also as a woman would a 'woman-to-be' (especially one forced to prematurely grow up due to forces beyond her control). Bunty understands also the uncertainty that plagues the neutral position of the Parsee woman and the feelings of imprisonment that emerge.

As a wife, Bunty is devoted and dutiful. She appears to be contained by her role as she is always aiming to please Rustom and seeks his approval constantly. She often smilingly endures his harsh and snide remarks because she is a kept woman and understands her duty as

such. A strange aspect of her identity as a wife is that she often 'mothers' Rustom, treating him as a boy in need of comfort and support for his efforts. In fact, even though she appears so demure, elegant and graceful, and depends on her husband for protection and financial support, her husband is depicted as quite effeminate and ineffectual.

Yet, Rustom still makes the decisions regarding their role in the partition. Even though she inhabits the private sphere, she experiences the partition at a quotidian level. Bunty is witness to the difficulties of the conflict experienced by her friends and domestic workers. The conflict has permeated the private sphere thereby providing her with essential knowledge. Bunty, however, is unable to act on this knowledge because she has been paralysed by her duty as a wife who is not supposed to question her husband, and by her identity as a Parsee. Neutrality traps Bunty in a position of submission, just as the land, neutral territory, has been imprisoned by its divided citizens.

Bunty expresses to Rustom, one night in bed, her discomfort at having to occupy a neutral space. Rustom, pretending that he does not know what she means, patronises her by suggesting that she turn on to her side. This scene serves to emphasise the patriarchal perception of her husband, and the nationalist perception he most likely subscribes to, that a woman's interest or desire to be involved in the affairs of the country is only as significant as her physical being and potential.

Bunty is a displaced being in Lahore because her homeland is actually Persia. So, in Lahore she is a guest and, as such, she has chosen to be neutral there because she believes her husband when he says that that's their safest option. But, just as she is neutral about the political circumstances of Lahore, she occupies a very neutral position on the continuum of euphoria/openness and dysphoria/claustrophobia. That is why she is so uncomfortable being neutral - it's an inability to decide on an identity or to understand her structures of feeling toward her so-called 'home'.

Bunty's body begins as her prison in the film and only becomes more and more deeply entrenched in a state of imprisonment as the film proceeds. In the beginning, her physicality is controlled by her husband because she does as he pleases, she absorbs the influences that he does, she follows his decisions because that's her duty as his wife. By the end of the film, her confinement in her body reaches another level: her plurality, so dictated to by external forces and completely uninfluenced by her own thoughts and opinions, physically paralyses her

during Shanta's capture such that she is incapable of responding in an appropriate manner. Another aspect to Shanta's capture, is that Bunty may perceive the occurrence of the event as her own fault. The story of the chameleon that she shares with Lenny, ultimately leads to Lenny assuming the colour of the Ice Candy Man when he shows her a little kindness. This leads to Lenny betraying Shanta. It is probable, that Bunty feels an element of regret for the period and manner in which she is forced to raise her child. The confused lessons that she has taught her female child has resulted in the destructive fate of another innocent woman. Yet, neither she nor Lenny is to blame.

3.4 Resisting Time: The Articulation of Postcolonial Feminisms

A poignant element of postcolonial feminisms evident in Mehta's films is the interlinking of levels of resistance. The first level of resistance relates to her use of her marginal position as an 'ovisible' minority⁶⁵ and NRI (Non-Resident Indian) to redefine discourses, that have been used to establish Indian women as nationalist symbols. The redefinition of discourse affords her the opportunity to represent other Indian women, situated in different marginal positions, as self-standing and, when necessary, resistant nationalist beings. In doing so, she gives expression to a second level of resistance: characters who gain agency through the challenge of the inscription of their bodies in nationalist discourses such as history and myth.

Mehta, as already discussed, acknowledges her interstitial diasporic position as a major contributing factor to the issues she chooses to confront in her films. Her interstitiality allows her to be an external, yet involved, observer and critic of the, sometimes, blindly accepted values of her homeland, India. This is evident in the characters of Shanta in *Earth* (1999), and Radha and Sita in *Fire* (1996). Shanta, for example, realises, in her interactions with her male friends, that her body signifies territory that they all compete for. She challenges this traditional perception, however, by choosing the one she loves, instead of allowing herself to be won, and by engaging in pre-marital intercourse. These actions illustrate Shanta's exercising of choice, and her rejection of that which makes her an idealised symbol of land and nation: her sexual purity. Her engagement in sexual intercourse before marriage reveals Shanta's reclaiming of ownership of her body and in doing so, she finds a space of resistance within the historical context of war and land conflict.

⁶⁵ Refer to page 79 for Deepa Mehta's discussion of this term.

The character of Radha, on the other hand, introduces sexual desire and pleasure into the realm of the Indian woman by engaging in a lesbian affair. This act proves that Indian women, as opposed to their cultural and religious construction, are self-contained sexual beings who experience passion. They can therefore, not be treated as objects that are meant to serve and that are under the control of their husbands' sexual needs. This proof is solidified by Mehta's re-fashioning of the myth of Seeta in the *Ramayana*, when, at the end of the film, Radha, engulfed by flames, as a symbolic test of loyalty to her husband, emerges alive because her transgression of the sacred laws of marriage did not signify unfaithfulness to her husband, but truth to her own being.

Sita, who also engages in a lesbian affair, does not defy convention in the same way that Radha does. Instead, Sita's transgression marks the exploration of alternate sexuality within the traditional Indian home. Sita's experiences reveal that heterosexuality within a marriage can be quite oppressive for the woman in the relationship and her choices reveal that same-sex love has the potential to provide a liberating, resistant space within its boundaries.

In so constructing these Indian women, Mehta confronts different levels of feminist struggle. She begins by depicting the relation between ideology and discourse, and materiality, experience and everyday existence. Sita, Radha and Shanta all come to understand at some point that their identities are, in part, dictated to by the larger constructs of national discourse – history and myth. Mehta, however, reverses this process showing that if ideology can influence (and ultimately control) behaviour and choice, a connection between the two has been established – a connection that Mehta illustrates to be dialectical.

In *Fire* (1995), it would have been rather easy, for the women characters, to unquestioningly subscribe to the religious doctrines governing their roles as wives. In that way, confrontation and punishment would be avoided. Instead, these characters, at the material level of everyday existence, choose to subvert the ideological inscription of their bodies with a lesbian love affair. Similarly, in *Earth* (1999), Shanta, realising that Hassan and Dil Navaz's competitive love imposes on her body a territorial status – a status that drew from and held symbolic association with the greater discourses of land conflict and nation – disrupts the narrative of condoned female sexual behaviour. In so doing, Shanta began to map out a destiny she assumed would be untainted by dominant ideology. Mehta's manipulation proposes that Indian women do not have to passively accept or live up to the discursive expectations placed

on them, and that they can access agency through the charting of resistant spaces within discursive confines.

Mehta, illustrating the manner in which the struggle/suffering of the Indian female has emerged from the discourses informing her existence, reveals in her films that western feminist frameworks are not completely applicable to the condition of Indian women. This is evident in her layering of Hindu myths (the story of Seeta in the *Ramayana* and the story of *Karva Chauth*) and Indian history (the 1947 partition of India) into the multifaceted identities of her female characters. Once she establishes Indian women as distinctive from the very general category of women, she distinguishes each of her female characters as separate and different from each other. For example, she depicts Indian women from different class backgrounds, as in *Earth* (1999). Shanta and Bunty occupy spaces on opposite ends of the class spectrum, but they are both equally affected by the political turmoil ravaging the country. And even though Bunty has had the benefit of education and has access to resources, she is less forceful than Shanta in asserting her womanhood, especially in the context of the political struggle. Perhaps Bunty has more to lose materially. Shanta, on the other hand, is a subaltern in the sense that Spivak argues (in Williams & Chrisman, 1994). She has very little to lose, but, at the same time, refuses to be a victim, even though she is physically made one. Bunty, however, resigns herself to being a victim by making the preferred choices of an Indian woman (being a Parsee woman, she has no choice but to assume this identity), but does not experience the level of victimhood and marginality that Shanta does because she is protected by privilege.

In terms of Mohanty, Mehta combats the assumptions of western scholarship by actively representing other Third World women, being previously of the Third World herself. And, even though she does not open up western modes of representation as does Nair, she does unpack and reconstitute Indian nationalist discourses to reflect a more comprehensive perspective of the Indian woman as opposed to doctrines that she should abide by. For instance, in *Fire* (Mehta, 1995), Mehta critically assesses the impact of Hindu myths and tradition in shaping and confining the lives of married Indian women. She lays bare the story of Seeta (from the *Ramayan*) and reveals the lack of choice that it reinforces. By the end of the film, Mehta re-tells the myth through Radha and shows that the 'trial by fire' is not a test of loyalty and devotion to her husband, but a test of being true to herself. She is indeed pure; pure because she exhibited the courage and strength to confront her husband (and, by

implication, tradition) in order to free herself. The column of fire enveloped her and she emerged unscathed.

Mehta, in the construction of her narratives and characters, shows evidence of the concerns prevalent in the writings of Third World women. To begin with, the experience of social and political marginality as a simultaneity of oppressions. Using the character of Shanta once more, it can be argued that her plurality of identity allows for an understanding of the various oppressions that she experiences. As a Hindu, she is oppressed by the political circumstances of the country (the partition); as a Hindu woman, she is oppressed by the violence her body is made to endure in the name of nationalism; and as a woman, she is oppressed by the 'trophy' or 'prize' status that she comes to represent for competing male lovers, Dil Navaz and Hassan.

This leads on to another Third World feminist concern that Mehta subscribes to: the grounding of feminist politics in history. In *Earth* (Mehta, 1999), Mehta makes clear and overt the Indian woman's role in the partition. She highlights the fact that the struggle was fought on their bodies and written in the blood that they shed. Bapsi Sidhwa reiterates that the most damaging effect of the partition was the destruction of the bodies of Indian women on either side of the inter-ethnic conflict, "Victory is celebrated on a woman's body, vengeance is taken on a woman's body. That's very much the way things are [...]" (Wilder, 1998). Mehta, as a result, draws attention to resistant women like Shanta in an attempt to rewrite Indian history to include women; to draw attention to the Third World feminist concern that argues that the hegemonic state has a crucial role in circumscribing the daily lives and survival struggles of Indian women. Even though the majority of Indian women in 1947 occupied the private sphere, it has to be acknowledged that they were active members of the struggle. While their men made crucial political decisions and fought for the honour of the country, women were responsible for the protection of the future generations and the daily survival of their families, even though their lives were uprooted and their bodies bore the physical destruction of the land.

The final Third World feminist concern that Mehta handles in both films is that of the significance of writing and memory in the creation of oppositional agency. *Earth* (Mehta, 1999) is based on memory; that is, the experiences of a young girl during the 1947 Indian partition told through her adult self. For the character of Lenny, the process of relating the story of another (Shanta) through her own was cathartic. She was thus able to work through

the guilt of her betrayal while, at the same time, give life to both Shanta's story and her story; stories that revealed the true impact of national turmoil on Indian women. Memory allowed Sidhwa to write a novel that Mehta would convert to a film; a film that is critical of colonial domination, narrow and fanatical nationalism and gendered violence. It is this critical approach that fosters oppositional agency in the construction of Mehta's women characters; specifically in terms of the choices made by these characters and the impact of the alternative/non-conventional nature of the film.

Fire (Mehta, 1996) also has an element of memory that ultimately leads to the accessing of oppositional agency. The memories of the *Ramayan* or *Karva Chauth* myths shared among Indian women provide a precedent or mould that can be resisted or that opens itself up to opposition. An element of memory also plays itself out in the character of Radha who constantly remembers a specific moment in her past when her mother taught her the power of dreams and belief. It is the recurrence of this memory and a reiteration of its message that gives her the strength and courage to break the confines of her role and to fulfill her desires.

3.5 Conclusion

Although Mehta has a distinctively unique approach to filmmaking, her work exhibits aspects of 'accented' cinema, illustrating her belonging to a group of filmmakers whose contexts have direct relation to the films they produce. The notions of the plurality of identity, journeying, border-crossing, tactile optics and structures of feeling, identified by Naficy as characteristic of 'accented' films, are very evident in the construction of Mehta's female characters.

The uniqueness of Mehta's approach, however, comes through in her layering of the very nationalist discourses that have oppressed Indian women, into the 'accented' processes undergone by her characters. The layering not only overtly lays bare the destructive symbolic representation of Indian women, but also affords Mehta and, subsequently, her characters the opportunity to challenge these hegemonic ideologies.

In doing so, these women are able to re-write myth and history such their already existing voices have a space in which to be projected. This re-definition of national discourse is profoundly postcolonial and feminist. Firstly, Mohanty speaks of Third World women being actively involved in their own and other Third World women's representation. And secondly,

Spivak speaks about altering representation in text and narrative in order that women's voices be heard. In other words, Mehta places Indian women into dominant nationalist discourses not so they may be imprisoned, but so that they may subvert the constraining gendered boundaries of these discourses. As Jasbir Jain argues (and Mehta achieves through the construction of her female characters),

[When] a woman is rendered homeless, it is her body which is her home, her present and her future, her possession, her capital and her labour. An act of transgression breaks the control of others over the body and compels society to reformulate its boundaries in whatever limited measure. It draws attention to the nature of human will. It is not the act but the questions it raises which acquire significance in the larger social discourse. (In Jain & Rai, 2002)

Consequently, the appropriation, in this chapter, of the theoretical framework of analysis (the merging of 'accented' and postcolonial theories) established in Chapter One has served, once again, to argue for an emerging postcolonial feminist film practice. The use of this theoretical framework proves that Mehta's films subscribe to this potential practice.

Chapter Four

Postcolonial Feminist Film

The necessity for a theoretical framework of analysis for the reading of Nair and Mehta's films arose for many reasons. They are, firstly, both Indian women who have earned international fame for the unconventional and, often, controversial nature of their films. Secondly, there are very few Indian women involved in the making of popular Indian films⁶⁶, let alone films subscribing to other popular and non-popular cinematic practices. Lastly, Satyajit Ray, a male, was one of the few other Indians, together with Shyam Benegal (another male), previously known for breaking the conventions of popular Indian filmmaking. In other words, Nair and Mehta have transcended the boundaries of Indian women in film on many levels, and this, as a result, deserves investigation.

It is therefore necessary to examine the common factors between these two directors and the ways in which their work is informed or influenced by these elements. To begin with, their 'Indianness' is the most obvious common factor between them, as it forms a major part of the concerns dealt with in their films. But, besides being Indian, both Nair and Mehta share the fact that they live in the diaspora. Naficy's theory of 'accented' cinema, at this point, provides an interesting context from which to begin to understand and question the cinematic choices made by Nair and Mehta. He argues that filmmakers living in exile or the diaspora exhibit in their films various levels of similarity. These characteristics of similarity, he claims, are a direct reflection of the 'accented' filmmakers' positions outside of the homeland. This is a result of these external positions being riddled with emotional difficulties relating to displacement.

Although Naficy's theory is not solely applicable to Nair and Mehta⁶⁷, various notions of 'accented' cinema hold significant relevance to their films. Clearly evident were the elements of plural and performed identities, border-crossing, journeys of identity, structures of feeling and tactile optics. Although Nair and Mehta's films do not always deal with diaspora and

⁶⁶This is changing rapidly, however, in recent years.

⁶⁷As discussed in Chapter One, Naficy (2001) applies his theories to the films of diasporic filmmakers of varied ethnic backgrounds. Some of these include: Atom Egoyan (of Egyptian/Armenian descent), Michel Khleifi (of Palestinian descent), Trinh T. Min-ha (of Vietnamese descent), Andrei Tarkovsky (of Russian descent) and Miguel Littin (of Chilean/Greek/Palestinian descent) - to name but a few.

exile, the above elements are noticeable in the construction of their characters (specifically their Indian female characters).

These aspects drew attention to the characters' conflicted relationship to issues of nation and identity transformation. In this way, the possibilities of 'accented' film, that Naficy argues for, allowed Nair and Mehta a platform from which to privilege and engage non-conventional, yet truer, reflections of the experiences of Indian women in varied conditions. It is at this point however, that Naficy's ideas proved too broad (or possibly not broad enough) to cover the specificity of Nair and Mehta's character constructions. Fortunately, Naficy, in proposing that 'accented' cinema offers diasporic and exilic people an alternative to the limited expressive potential of dominant and mainstream narrative structures (such as that of Hollywood and Bollywood), opens up his own ideas to dialogues with other theories.

Only after a further evaluation of the dimensions of the specificity of Nair and Mehta's character constructions, is it possible to decide on an appropriate theory with which to merge 'accented' cinema in order to refine a more coherent framework of analysis. This interrogation reveals that the female characters in these films endure and, in most instances, overcome gendered oppression that has been steeped in tradition and representation. The most important concern arising from this and giving rise to other concerns is the establishment of the Indian woman as a symbol for the Indian nation perpetuated through the values and codes of conduct in ancient Hindu texts. This symbolic status, although sexually oppressive to the Indian woman, is maintained through the re-iteration of nationalist discourses such as history, myth and tradition in her daily life.

Nair and Mehta, however, on providing this contextual understanding of the norms governing the behaviour and, subsequently, the sexuality of the Indian woman, proceed to challenge these expectations. Postcolonial feminist discourses thus offer an intersecting point of engagement in an attempt to decipher the very nature of the resistance that these women exhibit.

Third World women and women of colour, argues Mohanty, need to be considered as diverse individuals whose experiences are dependent on the diversity of their contexts. For instance, it cannot be assumed that South Asian women and Latin American women experience the same contexts of struggle. Similarly, the women within each of these ethnic categories cannot be assumed to experience the same kinds of oppression because oppression exists at various

levels based on history, social and economic class, access to resources, educational background and so forth. As a result, the forms of resistance that these Third World women and women of colour assume vary among each individual female.

This sheds interesting light on Nair and Mehta's characters. Even though all of their characters experience sexual oppression for the very fact that they are Indian and women, it is evident that sexual oppression is experienced differently by, for example, married and single women, by mothers and daughters, by working and middle class women. All these Indian women are represented in their corresponding circumstances, and their attainment of agency and their transgression of the nationalist inscription of their bodies occur in response to these very circumstances.

Both Spivak and Mohanty promote the use of text and narrative in the representation of the Third World woman/ woman of colour. In this way, they argue, the Third World woman/ woman of colour is given expression or is heard. Nair and Mehta both use the film text as an expressive space for the narratives of Indian women such that their stories are heard. They do, however, approach the use of this text in different ways.

While Nair adopts a more mainstream approach to the construction of her female characters, Mehta can be considered more alternative and artistic⁶⁸ in her approach. In other words, Nair appropriates the narrative structures of Bollywood and Hollywood cinema in the two chosen films. She, however, constructs her characters in a manner that allows them to chart a new resistant space within the limited representational confines of these cinemas. Mehta, on the other hand, appropriates specifically Indian nationalist discourses (such as history and myth) and weaves them into her cinematic storytelling. Her characters, in their resistance, don't chart a space but rather completely re-define the patriarchal and hegemonic discourses of nationalism that have placed constraints on their bodies and existence.

This framework, beginning with Naficy's theory of 'accented' cinema and ultimately drawing on the postcolonial feminist ideas of Mohanty and Spivak, offers a way of reading films made not only by Indian women in the diaspora, but also by other Third world women in the diaspora. The reason for this is the fact that both an 'accented' cinema and postcolonial feminisms offer alternative ways of understanding the lives of Third World peoples – alternative ways untouched by the limited assumptions of Western discourses and modes of

⁶⁸Refer to Chapter Three for a discussion of these terms.

representation. This framework thus proposes the potential of an emerging postcolonial feminist film practice; a film practice that does not boast universality but malleability - that is, a film practice that allows Third World women to make films for and about themselves and other Third World women, and a framework that is flexible enough to capture the ethnic specificity of their struggles and resistance, and their individual diversity⁶⁹.

⁶⁹Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, in her book *Women Filmmakers of the African and Asian Diaspora: Decolonizing the Gaze, Locating Subjectivity* (1997), identifies women filmmakers of African descent who have been successful in the creation of an oppositional female gaze in the films they have made while living outside of Africa. Some of these filmmakers include: Zeinabu irene (de-capitalisation deliberate) Davis, Ngozi Onwurah, Julie Dash and Maureen Blackwood. She argues that these female directors

are aware of the politics of postcolonialism, and all take their own approaches to diasporic cinema [like Nair and Mehta in their appropriation and manipulation of discourse]. These women challenge dominant cinema [...] [and] they resist and disrupt racism, sexism, and homophobia, which are ever-present in most world cinema. (Foster, 1997:3)

Conclusion

The research area for this thesis emerged out of a personal interest in the work of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, filmmaking in general, feminist politics and issues of diaspora. An exploration of these areas led to a focused research question that aimed to argue for a theoretical framework of analysis for a specific moment in ‘Third World’⁷⁰ filmmaking.

Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora. Both directors are widely known for making films that do not (always) subscribe to mainstream cinematic practices. Convention is inevitably challenged on many levels in their films. One of the most distinctive transgression of convention occurs in the often controversial manner in which they depict the Indian female in their films, in comparison to her popular construction in Bollywood and, on occasion, Hollywood films.

This popular construction is based in Hindu tradition and ultimately aids in the promotion of the Indian woman as an ideal symbol for nationalist ideology. More specifically, Indian women are always depicted as upholding the values and morals imparted by religious myths. These values and morals impose rules and codes of conduct onto the functioning of Indian women in their roles as wives, mothers and daughters. As a consequence, these women experience the containment of their sexuality. The patriarchal hegemony embedded in this inscription infiltrates popular narratives, like Bollywood cinema, such that character dichotomies of condoned and condemned female behaviour are established. The ‘virtuous’ woman who devotedly subscribed to preferred behaviour would be revered and rewarded for her efforts. The ‘loose’ or ‘common’ woman who challenged expected norms of conduct would be shunned and punished for her ‘wrongdoings’. Indian women were thus subjected to very limited and very limiting representations of themselves.

Nair and Mehta, however, in their films, give prominence to Indian women and the diversity of their identities. In addition, at some critical point in the narrative, these women choose to traverse the oppressive confines of their gendered roles and existence. Their personal and political agency is thus achieved through the exploration of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies.

⁷⁰ This is specifically not in reference to Third Cinema, a very distinct category of filmmaking.

In order to conceptualise the analytical possibilities of Nair and Mehta's character constructions, Chapter One of this dissertation, therefore, proposed and illustrated that the merging of the theories of 'accented' cinema and postcolonial feminisms would establish an appropriate theoretical framework for the reading of their (and, potentially, others') films.

Hamid Naficy's theory (2001) of 'accented' cinema states that the interstitial locations occupied by diasporic and exilic filmmakers are conducive to dialogues between aspects of their home and host societies. As a result, they are able to question and/or idealise the taken-for-granted values of both contexts. This consequently incites, in these filmmakers, similar feelings of ambivalence, ambiguity, nostalgia, claustrophobia and openness, that emerge out of specific processes of identity (trans)formation during the acts of reterritorialisation and deterritorialisation. As discussed in this thesis, these processes – plural and performed identities, journeys of identity, border-crossing, tactile optics and structures of feeling – find expression in the films produced by 'accented' filmmakers (whether or not about diaspora and exile). For Nair and Mehta, these processes are articulated through the construction of their women characters. It is these aspects of Naficy's theory that serve to establish the similarity between Nair and Mehta's work.

A closer investigation of the nature of the processes, discussed above, revealed, however, that they were informed by postcolonial feminist concerns. To this end, elements of the theories of Chandra Talpade Mohanty (1991, 1994, 1997) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1990, 1994, 1996, 1999) were appropriated.

As explained in Chapter One, Mohanty's argument is underpinned by the fact that Second Wave Western feminist scholarship has tended to neglect the diversity of women's experiences and struggles. It had previously been assumed by western scholars that western feminist analytical strategies could be transposed and used in an understanding of the lives of Third World women/women of colour. This, claims Mohanty, does not allow for a true reflection of Third World women. For this to change and for the experiences of Third World women to be taken into account in any form of feminist work, factors such as race, ethnicity, class, access to resources and history need to be considered. Acknowledging these circumstances, argues Mohanty, will reveal the varied oppressions suffered by Third World women, thereby allowing for the creation and/or adoption of appropriate resistive strategies. At the level of feminist scholarship, Mohanty proposes greater representation of Third World

women by Third World women in dominant narrative structures as one form of resistive strategy.

Spivak's notion of the subaltern is at the fore of the assimilation of some of her ideas. She argues that the subaltern is not able to speak because she is, in fact, not heard by the privileged of the First and Third Worlds. With this point, Spivak illustrates that even though the subaltern may be a victim of her circumstance, *she* is in no way a victim. The subaltern has a voice. Spivak is careful not to deny this. The subaltern, she asserts, just isn't heard. This, however, suggests Spivak, can be changed through the re(-)presentation of the subaltern in spaces where she's occupied a marginal position; because it is in these very spaces that her voice needs to be projected and heard. In this regard, Spivak speaks about writing the narrative of the subaltern to be read; so that her story may be told. Even though Spivak's theories relate to a very specific group of Third World women, her ideas are open enough to be applied to other groups of oppressed women.

Mohanty and Spivak's ideas together confront the interrelated levels of feminist struggle: discourse and daily existence, which correspond to ideology and materiality respectively. Since these levels are able to influence one another, a challenge to discourse and ideology could very likely catalyse a resistive change at the material level of daily existence and vice versa. The point is: if the ideology of dominant discourse has the power to oppress, can a challenge to its content or resistance to its subscription, by implication, not be empowering?

Although, the postcolonial feminist discourses appropriated do not directly apply to the analysis of film, a consideration of Mohanty and Spivak's thoughts have been useful in elucidating the manner in which Nair and Mehta have integrated its concerns into their filmmaking.

Chapters Two and Three thus examine the feasibility of the 'accented' cinema/ postcolonial feminisms theoretical framework through a detailed reading of Nair and Mehta's female protagonists. The framework proved suitable in this instance of analysis but also flexible enough to be adapted to other instances of analysis. The application of the framework did indeed confirm the predicted similarity of Nair and Mehta's filmmaking based on and in their experiences of diaspora and displacement. It was discovered, however, that while Nair constructed her characters such that they charted unique spaces of resistant expression within

the narratives of mainstream film practices, Mehta's characters were constructed to re-define the structure of dominant discourses such that oppressive confines could be transgressed.

The analytical frameworks that exist for the Hollywood and Bollywood cinemas therefore prove to be inappropriate for films of this nature. This is what Chapter Four attempts to argue when it proposes the emergence of a postcolonial feminist film practice. This practice does not offer a category for the classification of film, because it is distinctly not a category. To label it as such would be to deny and alienate that which the theories informing its theoretical framework stand for. Rather it offers an analytical strategy for the reading of films made by diasporic Third World women.

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APPENDIX

A. FILMOGRAPHY OF MIRA NAIR⁷¹

Completed Films

- (2002). *11.09.01*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (2002). *Hysterical Blindness*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (2002). *Monsoon Wedding*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (2000). *The Laughing Club of India*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1998). *My Own Country*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1996). *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1996). *The Perez Family*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1993). *The Day the Mercedes Became a Hat*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1991). *Mississippi Masala*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1988). *Salaam Bombay!*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1986). *Children of Desired Sex*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1985). *India Cabaret*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1983). *So Far From India*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (1979). *Jama Masjid Street Journal*. Mirabai Films, Inc.

Upcoming Films

- (2004). *The Impressionist*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (2004). *Homebody/Kabul*. Mirabai Films, Inc.
- (2003). *Vanity Fair*. Mirabai Films, Inc.

⁷¹ This filmography appeared in the Mirabai Films, Inc. website. See References for details.

B. FILMOGRAPHY OF DEEPA MEHTA⁷²

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(2003). *The Republic of Love*. Tryptich Media, Inc.

(2002). *Bollywood/Hollywood*. Hollywood/Bollywood Productions, Different Tree Same Wood, iDream Productions.

(1999). *Earth*. Cracking the Earth Films Inc., Goldwyn Films.

(1995). *Fire*. Trial by Fire Films.

(1994). *Camilla*. Camilla Films, Shaftsbury Films, Skreba Creon.

(1991). *Sam & Me*. (name production company unavailable).

(1988). *Martha, Ruth & Edie*. (name of production company unavailable).

(1975). *At 99: A Portrait of Louise Tandy Murch*. (name of production company unavailable).

Television Series

(1996). *Young Indiana Jones: Travels with Father* (Greece segment). Lucasfilms.

(1992). *The Young India Jones Chronicles* (episode: "Benares, January 1910"). Lucasfilms.

In Production

(date unknown). *Water*. (name of production company unavailable).

⁷² The details of Mehta's filmography have been taken from the IMDb, movies.com and Hollywood.com websites. See References for details. Even though extensive research has been conducted, the production companies for her first three films remain unavailable.