



### **Transcreating Marginality, Alienation and Mobility in the Global South: A Brief Overview of the Select Films of Mira Nair**

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**Abstract:** The shifting terrains of political correctness and identity crisis demand that we reconfigure what is considered to be global in a world that is getting more homogenized due to advanced means of connectivity and technology. The Indian auteur Mira Nair's films are a good place to start this re-evaluation. In a filmography spanning decades, Nair has constantly questioned the concepts of globalization, migration, mobility and belonging. This is done through detailed character study in films such as *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012) and *Queen of Katwe* (2016). *Mississippi Masala* is a clinical study of the fluid nature of racism and shows how easy it is for the victim to turn into an oppressor. *Monsoon Wedding* is the perfect movie for understanding migrant sensibilities, a sensibility that is informed by aspiration and punctured by childhood trauma. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, Nair weaves a tale of identity crisis and reactionary violence. This particular film is most suitable for examining the heady nature of cosmopolitanism and how it shapes the world view of a postcolonial man in a western society. *Queen of Katwe* is essentially a narrative of upward mobility in a viciously unjust society. The film advocates for meritocracy and equal opportunity and is most vital for evaluating the evolution of the Self and how it is molded into an entity that cuts across the boundaries of race, class and gender. This paper wants to evaluate the lingering significance of these cinematic artifacts and how they can enforce an evolving notion of Cosmopolitanism that revolves around the edges of identity, racial sensibility and the quest for self-searching.

**Keywords:** *Identity, Globalization, Self, Cosmopolitanism, Racial Sensibility, Culture, Migration, Diaspora.*

#### **Introduction**

The Global South has often been understood as that geo-political region of Asia and North Africa that sided with the Non-Aligned movement in the decades following the fall of vast European Colonial empires. If we extend our understanding of the term, we will find that Global

South also refers to the deterritorialized geographies of capitalism's externalities and the impact it has had on the subjugated peoples within the borders of the wealthier countries.

The Global South also has an inherent nature of postcoloniality built into it, in the sense that it posits within itself a resistant imagery and iconography. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the term Global South conjures up images of transnational political subjectivity and a not-so-subtle resistance to Anglo-American capitalism that often sees the hitherto known third world countries take up socialist state policies and an overarching reluctance to give in to the temptations of foreign direct investment and cultural hegemony.

In critical and literary scholarship, Global South is invested in the analysis of the formation of Global South subjectivity, the study of power and racialization within global capitalism in ways that transcend the nation-state as the unit of comparative analysis, and in tracing contemporary South-South relations or relations among subaltern groups across national, linguistic, racial and ethnic lines. Global South may be understood as lateral categories of solidarities that arise out of political and ideological formulation. Often times, postcolonial scholarship gets conflated with a miscued sense of activism and tries to use the term Global South liberally and without any sort of nuance. This results in producing a hackneyed understanding of the term, one that is bereft of any scholastic and critical understanding. The pitfalls of using the term Global South are vast and varied and this paper aims to show that we can find beautiful instances of Global South subjectivity and existence in the films of South Asian filmmakers. The auteur that we are going to focus on here is Mira Nair, whose films have meticulously dealt with the trials and tribulations of the urban poor and the socio-politically disenfranchised. The four films that have been chosen for critical study in this paper deal with racial prejudices, migration and its challenges, political and ideological sidelining, economic upward mobility at the expense of individuality and three of the films have one thing in common, the characters emerge from the extraordinary circumstances that belie life in the variegated socio-cultural spectrum of South Asia. *Queen of Katwe* has been chosen because of its tale of female subjectivity, meritocracy and economic hardship in the Southern African nation of Uganda.

It would be judicious to initially talk about and define the concepts mentioned in the title of this essay, namely: Marginality, Mobility & Alienation. We have already talked about the multitudes of meaning incumbent in the term “Global South”.

**Marginality** is not just a socio-political reality but also a state of continued violence epistemic and cultural, mitigated on persecuted individuals. In the films that we will study, it is apparent that the protagonists are products of their environment and it is not easy for them to escape the trappings of their socio-cultural realities. Some of these characters get marginalized for their faith, some for their gender coupled with class biases, and some for their race. Marginality is not some static theoretical concept here but a lived reality for these protagonists and Nair does well to bring it out.

**Mobility** in Mira Nair films often go hand in hand with economic prosperity, actualization of sexual identity, erotic autonomy and an unabashed embracing of one’s faith. We see that happening on two levels, in the private sphere of the household as seen in various sections of the films- *Monsoon Wedding*, *Mississippi Masala* & *Queen of Katwe* and in the politically charged battlefield of Wall Street as seen in the character of Changez in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Nair transcreates this oscillating bind of the protagonist’s mobility and daily lived reality by strategically changing the background score or the colour scheme. This not only affects the *mise-en-scene* but also changes the way the audience perceives the cinematic vision behind such films, two of which has been directly adapted from literary texts, namely: *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* by Mohsin Hamid & *Queen of Katwe* by Tim Crothers. Nair does well to put the focus on the protagonist and not on their background stories, which can often result in losing sight of the real story ion hand, the actualization of their multifaceted identities and lived realities.

**Alienation**, as a cinematic trope has been around for quite some time now, and we have no dearth of films that pander to our postcolonial sensibilities of seeing the underdog protagonist who also happens to be a person of colour, achieve their goal in a brutally capitalist society. Nair avoids this trope by showing her characters not only as flawed individuals with shifting allegiances but also as men and women who are never truly in control of their fate. That is where

their alienation derives from, not as a consequence of being born in deeply unequal societies but as a sustained and somewhat accepted form of living.

This essay aims to show the racial prejudice of immigrants and how racism works as a double bind for immigrants as seen in the film *Mississippi Masala* and how that forces the director to transcreate the protagonists' anxieties and aspirations. In *Monsoon Wedding* we will see how class inequality enables gendered violence and contributes to the prolonged trauma for the protagonist. This dark misery unfolds in the background of an upper-class Punjabi wedding, so the director had to be mindful about treating the shifting parameters and sensibilities of each subplot judiciously and the transcreation as a process will be the object of study in this essay. In *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* Nair adapts a literary text into the cinematic form and here we have the most accurate example of transcreation out of the four films. Changez, the Pakistani protagonist moves across time and space to attain his career goals and witnesses firsthand the post 9/11 Islamophobia and gets imbued with a renewed sense of religious zeal and anti-western political inclination. Such disparate changes will have to be understood carefully as that is where the transcreation take place. *Queen of Katwe* is a story of punching above one's weight and maintaining grace in the face of abject poverty. This film is also a testament to meritocracy as the young protagonist undergoes marvelous transformation under the tutelage of an old chess prodigy. The transcreation in this film takes place in the protagonist's journey from the slums of Kampala to the hallowed stages of the international Chess tournaments.

Trying to do a critical appreciation of a select few films of a particular director is something that does not necessarily fall under any sort of clearly defined research methodology, but if we approach them from a theoretical point of view, the following techniques can be used to better understand the ways in which transcreation has taken place not just in the narration of the story, but also in the disciplines of cinematography, background score, scene arrangement and in the arc of the character growth.

1. **Visual Semiotics:** The films can be seen through the lens of visual semiotics as it yields satisfactory results as a theoretical tool. Studying the character's attire, the hues and textures of their apparel, the saturation of the colour palette in each scene, the composition of the background and the way the trajectory of each scene unfolds are

something that can be studied theoretically for understanding the directorial vision behind the movies.

2. **Close Analysis of the Films:** This paper aims to study the films meticulously with the help of genre theory for understanding how they subvert their generic categorization and how they offer up newer ways of meaning production and makes it possible for the spectator to formulate her own interpretation, which is what Transcreation is all about.
3. **Comparison between the texts and the films:** Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* was a Booker shortlisted novel and Nair's adaptation of it does justice to the book as it succeeds in bringing out the post 9/11 Islamophobia and xenophobia that had engulfed the upper echelons of Wall Street. Tim Crother's *Queen of Katwe* began as a piece of narrative reportage and was later given the form of a novel. Nair is mindful about the novelists' artistic vision as the films more or less qualify as faithful adaptations. Comparison between the novels and the films will help us understand how Nair has tried to adapt and lend her own voice to the text.
4. **Fusion of Distinct Musical Schools:** The films are all set in distinct geo-political spaces, which mandate that the director uses and applies the traditional musical schools and voices with a bit of contemporary touch for the pleasure of the viewer. WE see this in the opening credits of *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* in the rendition of the Classical Ghazal. Throughout the film we also get treated to soulful pop Punjabi songs. This is also true about the film *Monsoon Wedding* which makes generous use of Punjabi folk love ballads.

### **Transcreating Repressed Trauma & Healing in *Monsoon Wedding***

Centering one's discussion about *Monsoon Wedding* on repressed trauma and consequent healing might seem a bit antithetical, considering the fact this film has been hailed in the West as the epitome of millennial Indian Culture and upper middle-class sensibility. The mobility that we talk about in the title takes place when all of the bride's relatives start descending down at the Delhi Home, showing that post 1991 economic liberalization has resulted in the emergence of a strong affluent NRI community. As the festivities unfold and the story moves forward showing

the bride seriously considering whether she should go ahead with the wedding, we get a glimpse of Ria, the most economically disadvantageous character in the film. She grows extremely fidgety around Tej Puri, the bride's rich American uncle, who offers to pay for Ria's education in a American University, which Ria is unwilling, suggesting that all is not well between Ria and Tej. In one particular scene where we see the wedding parties dancing and carousing late into the night, Tej is seen trying to get into his car with a minor girl and drive off into the city. The scene reaches its crescendo when Ria blocks the car, gets the minor girl out of it who goes on to claim that Tej has been secretly grooming her for the last few days. This gives Ria the chance to narrate her own harrowing experience of being molested as a child by Tej, making clear the reason why Ria feels uneasy around the presence of Tej. In the following scenes we see Lalit, the bride's father asking Tej to leave the house stating that Ria's mental well-being is of utmost importance to him. Thus begins the healing of Ria and the repressed trauma of being a molested child is finally dealt with and expunged. Nair transcreates this through the festive tune of the songs such as *Kawa Kawa*, *Aaj Mera Jee Karda* and *Madhorama*, which are all Punjabi love ballads and they convey the much needed respite that Ria experiences. It is easy to lose track of Ria amidst all the wedding festivities, but her story and shines through.

Mobility as a direct outcome of one's social surroundings can be seen in the way Alice, the housekeeper of the bride's family gets romantically drawn towards Dubey, the wedding planner and decorator with a lively vocabulary, eccentric mannerisms and stars in his eyes. This uplifts Alice from his economically disadvantageous station and makes it possible for her to hobnob with the wedding guests of Lalit's daughter. The romance between Alice and Dubey is shown to be very passionate by centering lush marigolds and sensuous rain in the background. This makes the final scenes very stimulating and aesthetically pleasing for the viewer. Nair manages to bring out the aspirations, the sly glances of an early romance by placing the Alice-Dubey romance away from the main plot of Lalit's daughter's wedding, which is a minefield of class consciousness and pent-up rage. Such narratorial distance allows the viewer to fully appreciate the inherently emotional and upward mobile nature of Dubey's courtship of Alice. This heals Alice's class inferiority complex as shown in the scene when she is shown trying out the bride's expensive necklace. She can now fully revel in the joys of the wedding party as seen

in the loud and boisterous jig that she and her husband break into in the final scene with the rest of the wedding guests. Music & Dancing are shown as the ultimate transcreatory device by Nair.

### **Transcreating Double-Binded Racism & Alienation in *Mississippi Masala***

In 1991, Nair made a film starring Hollywood royalty Denzel Washington and Indian Belle Sarita Chaudhury. *Mississippi Masala*, a film much ahead of its time, talked about the notions of belonging, anticipatory nationality and finding romance in the unlikeliest of places. An Indian family, settled for decades in Uganda, has to leave for the US, after Idi Amin comes to power and orders the purge of South Asians, as they are not considered “African” by the ruling dispensation, even though the patriarch, Jay was born and raised in Uganda. After being forced to leave their homeland, the Indian family settles down in Greenwood, at the heart of rural Mississippi, a region rife with racial animosity and prejudice. Mina, played by Chaudhury, falls in love with Demetrius, played by Washington, a young ambitious, upright Black man who has his own Carpet-Cleaning business.

The youngsters are all too aware of the challenges that they face, both racial and cultural, and yet let their romance blossom. They sneak away for a romantic weekend together at Biloxi, where they are spotted by members of Mina’s extended family, who take the issue up with her parents. Jay is disgusted with the fact that her daughter has fallen in love with a Black man. This hypocrisy perfectly brings out the double-binded nature of racism, as Jay and his family were purged from Uganda as they were the victims of Amin’s racist citizenship policy. But this does not stop Jay from discriminating with Demetrius on the basis of race. This brings out the pugnacious nature of racism, as the victim can soon turn into the oppressor. Later we see Jay giving up his dreams of returning to Uganda as he realizes that his place of birth has changed beyond recognition. This shows us the pitfalls of anticipatory citizenship and proves once again that in the tortuous terrains of the Global South, one’s identity and citizenship always remain precarious and open to interpretation to the whims of those sitting in power.

Alienation in this film is not an outcome of forced immigration, but a result of one’s disillusionment with their lot in life. This is particularly true in the case of Mina, the spirited Indian girl, whom we see pulling away from her relatives because of their highly materialistic

lifestyle. She seeks solace in the company of Demetrius, as their world view aligns and we see them eloping in Demetrius's van after they experience massive hostility from both their families. This eloping is also an act of mobility, as it shows the characters finally taking control of their lives and unapologetically standing by their love for each other. Nair shows this transformation taking place by a heightened narratorial speed as this brings out the confusion and exhilaration that the lovers face. This is where the transcreation takes place and we see generous usage of Blues music that gives the film the rootedness that it demands from its setting in rural Mississippi.

### **Transcreating Capitalism, Exclusion and Transition in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist***

Capitalism can often be the great homogenizer and effacer of apparently discordant identities and Mohsin Hamid's 2007 novel *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, which later got turned into a movie of the same name by Nair in 2011, shows that the fault lines separating the East and the West are unbridgeable even for individuals who have sacrificed their identity and heritage at the altar of Capitalism. We are introduced to a self-conscious Pakistani young man named Changez Khan, who goes on to narrate his story of economic hardship and how he rises through the ranks in a valuation firm subsequently, to the American journalist Lincoln, who is an undercover CIA operative. Nair shows that distraught individuals experience political exclusion as Changez becomes the target of vicious Islamophobic attacks following the 9/11 tragedy. Xenophobia and Racism are shown as deciding factors in Changez's growing disillusionment with American Capitalism. This is readily visible when Changez refuses to disband the Turkish book publishing firm. He also undergoes a change after learning that his girlfriend, Erica has used the intimate details of their relationship as vignettes for her art exhibitions. Changez realizes that following the 9/11 attacks his Muslim identity has become the only thing that people perceive about him. He moves back to Pakistan, takes up a lecturer's job and regularly exhorts his students about the perils of American imperialism and meddling with foreign policy. This brings him to the attention of both the authorities and Islamist Fundamentalists alike. Changez realizes that both Islamist Fundamentalists and blind, unprincipled capitalists similarly simplify and exploit people for their own reasons and selfish gains. Nair shows this confusion and anxiety of her protagonist

by creating a claustrophobic setting. The scenes are punctured with background noise and an overarching sense of doom and gloom.

Nair is sensitive towards the way Changez undergoes his transformation. We are shown the pulsating debate that he has with the owner of the Turkish publication house, who also happens to be the man in charge for translating and publishing Changez's father's poems in Turkish. The publisher tells Changez that the totality of the human experience is greater than the sum of its parts, a philosophy that Changez's father echoes in the wedding reception of Changez's sister. This marks the start of our protagonist's disillusionment, which coupled with the rampant Islamophobia that he encounters in New York forces him to move to Pakistan. The transcreation in this film takes place in the juxtaposition of musical scores such as *Kaangana*, *Mori Aaraj Suno*, *Dil Jalane Ki Baat Karte Ho* & *Kaindey Ne Naina* with the tense and wiry storyline. Changez is the ideal "displaced individual" never at ease either in Lahore or in New York. The sensibilities of a feudal Pakistani society are at odds with the ruthlessly hedonistic lifestyle of the folks at Wall Street. We see Changez traversing both these worlds with noticeable discomfort and trepidation, at once symbolizing the price that ambitious individuals have to pay for mobility and ideological allegiances in the Global South.

### **Transcreating Female Subjectivity, Mobility and the Limits of Meritocracy**

In 2016, Nair adapted Tim Crother's novel *Queen of Katwe*, which began life as narrative reportage piece for ESPN. It is a sports novel minus all the visceral grit and gut-punching that we have come to expect from the American sports novels in the last decade, the struggle and the redemption is very cerebral and understated. At the heart of the novel is a story of female subjectivity, one that is blighted by economic hardships and social malaise that comes with living in one of the slums of the African mega cities. Phiona and her mother Nakku Harriet live in a Kampala Slum and dream of economic advancement and prosperity through hard work. In one of the local Chess tournaments, Phiona performs well and catches the attention of Chess prodigy Robert Katende, who, impressed by her mettle agrees to coach her, despite facing opposition from local sports authorities. Buoyed by Katende's constant support and guidance, Phiona performs well at a prestigious high school event and goes on to win the tournament. In

parallel, we see the struggles of living in Katwe and the family's dream of rising above their station by the means of Phiona's chess success.

In the final half of the film, we see Phiona leading the Ugandan team at the chess Olympiad in Russia, in the hopes of becoming a Grand Master. However, the competition proves too much for her and Phiona comes back home with a defeat. All is not lost however, as Phiona does manage to buy a home for her family and the family experiences some sort of material progress and comfort. This shows the limits of meritocracy in the Global South, where one's abilities are almost never enough to overcome inter-generational poverty and systemic marginalization.

The transcreation in this film takes place in two separate ways. Nair treats Crother's text as the reference point and the basis for formulating her narrative. Some artistic liberties were taken and Nair often pits the characters of Phiona and Katende up against each other in psychological stand-offs to heighten the tension of the film. Such stand-offs are symbolic of the upward mobility that Phiona is striving for. The vibrant colours and contours of Kampala heighten the feminine subjectivity of Nakku and Phiona. Nair's judicious eyes transcreates it all in deft touches and gesture.

## **Conclusion**

The films that have been discussed in this essay are at once delightful and didactic. They point toward something essential in the human experience. The variegated nature of the stories in these films all has one thing in common, they are stories of human redemption, be it Ria, or Changez or the much-maligned romance of Demetrius and Mina or the relentless pursuit of excellence by Phiona. These are individuals never at ease, their anxieties and ambition are co-related with them being born in the Global South, we see this in the case of Ria, who seriously rethinks and doubts her decision of going to the US for the Creative Writing program because of economic constraints. Nair treats all these stories with the sensibility and sensitivity that they demand, and the results are glorious. The films pass Roman Jakobson's definition of Transcreation and shine bright and seriously make the viewer rethink their ideological assumptions.

## References

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