



Mississippi Masala

Mira Nair, an Indian-born film director who has moved from New York to Kenya, says her films mostly focus on marginal groups -those who struggle to find their legitimate place in society. Nair's recent film, *Mississippi Masala*, is about the plight of Indians who were taken as indentured labour to Africa by the British. Through hard work they struggled out of poverty and became relatively well off.

One of the main characters of the film is Jay. He belongs to the generation for whom Uganda is home. Unlike other Indians settled in Africa, Jay has established fond relationships with the Ugandan Blacks — as symbolised by his exceptionally close relationship with Okelo. Yet this does not spare him or his family the humiliation of being driven out of Uganda after Idi Amin's rise to power along with the rest of the Indian community. He is heartbroken when his close friend Okelo tells him: "Uganda is not for you. It is only for Black Africans."

But instead of returning to India, Jay along with his wife, Kinu (played by Sharmila Tagore), and daughter, Meena (played by Sarita Choudhury), go and settle down even further away from India. The place they choose to go to is Mississippi, one of the southern states of the US. As in the case of most overseas Indians, theirs is not an individual migration. Like their first migration to Uganda, this time too they go along with other fellow Gujaratis, presumably of the Patel caste, and begin running a little liquor store

alongside the motel owned by a fellow Gujarati. the choice of business is in sharp contrast to the Indian "traditions" the Gujarati Hindus want to cling to — that of close family ties with domesticated, chaste wives guarding the sanctity of home and hearth. The motel's clients are not just travellers. A good number of them are whites who rent the relatively cheap rooms on an "hourly" basis because they come with prostitutes on a 'hit and run' binge.

Kinu, the devoted, loving wife of Jay, has to work in the liquor store run by their family — an "outrageous" task, given the taboos for women handling liquor in most middle class-upper caste Indian families. Their daughter, Meena, adds to the family kitty by cleaning toilets in motels — a much greater blow to traditional upper caste codes of purity and pollution.

Except occasionally, as through the conversations of Gossip 1 and Gossip 2, Mira Nair by and large presents a sympathetic view of the predicament of migrant Indians — their desperate desire to cling to Indian traditions even while their intellectual grasp over these traditions is fast slipping and their daily lives are getting increasingly divorced from old customs. For instance, the scene depicting the performance of the modern North Indian *aarti*, which has crossed regional and linguistic boundaries within India and among overseas Indians — thanks to Bombay films — is both funny, pathetic and moving. Their unharmonious singing is a metaphor for how much out of tune

their lives have become with the supposed tradition they are upholding.

Yet despite many touching moments and insights, the film does not rise above stereotyped sentimental depiction because it restricts itself to the politically "correct". The only absolute "baddies" are the whites. They are present only in brief glimpses, even though most of the film is shot in a country where they ought to be more visible. And even those brief glimpses show them merely as caricatures or stereotyped racists.

Despite the horror of Idi Amin's "Uganda for Black Ugandans" brand of counter racist politics, the Blacks are supposed to be the goody-goodies of the film. Carpet cleaner Demetrius and his family are depicted in the idyllic mode that middle class radicals reserve for the oppressed. So is the other important Black character, Jay's Ugandan friend. Despite the misunderstanding that occurs between them, we are led to believe that he valued the safety of Jay's family above his own and proved a genuine friend.

Even though Mira Nair does take liberties with the community by presenting some of them in the hilarious caricature mode, on the whole the main Indian characters are also presented with soppy sentimentalism as being unrealistically goody-goody. The horror of Jay and Kinu when they learn that their daughter wants to marry a Black American, Demetrius

(played by Denzel Washington), is presented with sympathy and explained away as being related to their trauma over being pushed out of Uganda.

But that is not the weakest point of the film. The complexities of the subject matter get diluted in the presentation of the love affair between Meena and Demetrius. The director seems very self-consciously convinced that she is making a major political statement, about race relations in showing an Indian woman not only in love with a Black American, but, horror of horrors, willingly getting into bed with him and obviously enjoying the sexual encounter.

What is this great love for which Meena is willing to elope with Demetrius — throwing all other considerations to the wind? On the face of it, it seems no more than a teenagerish sexual attraction. Consider how it goes. Meena goes to a disco with a young Indian male. Her family is very keen that she should get married to him. She shows no unwillingness in going out on a date with this guy, even though she says she doesn't much care for him. In the disco she meets Demetrius who asks her for a dance, not because he is interested in her but because he wants to make his girlfriend jealous because she is flirting with someone else.

She knows it all. Yet she delights in his attention. What is more she clings so close to him while dancing, that we know she is determined to "fall in love" with this Black man. The fellow who had originally brought her out on a date is left sitting alone while she seductively dances around with this fellow she has just met. The Indian guy naturally gets upset and suggests they go back. She tells him to go ahead and continues dancing with Demetrius, while her intended fiance walks off in a huff.

The whole scene suggests a rather inconsiderate person who is simply desperate for immediate sex, which she calculates she cannot easily get from the Indian men of her community. That's the spirit with which Demetrius dates Meena one more time, after which they decide to go off for a weekend together to some beach resort. Prior to this, we are shown a phone conversation between them — both lying half undressed and yearning to be sexually close to each other. A hot scene in a hotel room follows — there they get caught by Meena's Indian neighbours.

Demetrius soon turns bitter at the nasty consequences that he faces because of this inter-racial love affair. He loses his business as a result of the police case filed against him by Meena's relatives. In shame and distress, Meena's family decides to leave Mississippi. At this point, our heroine chases Demetrius much against his wishes. She seems desperate to have Demetrius in love with her even though she knows and informs him that she knows that he was dating her only to make his girlfriend jealous and for that reason took very little interest in getting to know her or her family/cultural background.

Having extracted a love confession out of him, she proposes they elope together — travel, see the world and seek to determine what they can make of their lives together. And off she goes after a tearful telephone conversation with her parents, having announced her intention of going away with Demetrius in his carpet cleaning (bank hypothecated) van to explore the big, wide world.

This is portrayed as a great love affair. Demetrius and Meena hardly know each other but there is a strong sexual attraction between the two. It is uncertain they know or understand each other. One is left with the uneasy feeling that if this is what most love

affairs are about, no wonder so many of them that translate into "love marriages" soon end up as fiascos.

The film offers another devious stereotype — that of virile, sexy Black men, as against rather clumsy and uncouth Indian men. Contrast Demetrius and Meena's love affair with that of a whiny young newly wed Indian couple whose sex life is caricatured in the film: the wife sleeping away on the wedding night, leaving the husband desperate and lost, left with nothing better to do than listen to Hindi film songs with headphones on.

A little more care in putting life and blood into characters would have made this a far more worthwhile film. The more powerful moments in the film are those when a point is made without resorting to sensationalism, as for instance in the scene in which Jay is shown going back to see his beautiful, almost idyllic home in Uganda. The entire story of the devastation caused by Idi Amin's politics is brought out poignantly through the camera silently lingering over what the entrance to Jay's former home looks like now. The disorderly way in which things are lying scattered around, a neglected looking buffalo tied up in what was once a picturesque courtyard and garden, convey without the use of any words or even human faces the tragedy of Uganda under Idi Amin. One can imagine how some poor peasant family came and took over this palatial home. But it is clear that the Ugandan family's occupation of the property of these expelled Indians did not bring about any substantial improvement in the peasant family's living condition. All it did was to reduce this upper class home to shambles. I wish there was more of such depiction and analysis in the film and a little less of domestic melodrama which brings down the film to the classic Bombay "Bobby" style soppy love story, with a few explicitly sexy scenes added to give it a Hollywood touch. □