

**CROSSING OVER: THEORISING MEHTA'S FILM TRILOGY;  
PRACTISING DIASPORIC CREATIVITY**

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## **DECLARATION**

### Candidate's Declaration

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## ABSTRACT

This project, titled “Crossing Over: Theorising Mehta’s Film Trilogy, Practising Diasporic Creativity” articulates a critical-creative research discourse. It crosses over in terms of traversing critical scholarship on genre and audience, assuming multiple cultural positions, as well as in bridging the theory/practice divide. The most critical theoretical intervention made by this project is to insist on a more nuanced (rather than homogeneously “transnational”) account of situated diasporic practice.

The thesis comprises the critical component, and consists of a preface and five chapters on the theory, location, genre, audience and remixing of diasporic creative practice. In addition to the critical component, the project consists of a 20-minute visual essay and a web-log of production notes that constitute the creative component.

The aim of the critical section is to theorise the intertwining of personal, political, and poetic attributes of diasporic creative practice through the conception, development and distribution stages. Such a theorisation demonstrates the situated nature of diasporic production and reception, and its crossover potential is exemplified through the study of Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta and her well-known “elements” film trilogy. The critical approach is an epistemological and methodological convergence of the auteur, genre, and audience/cultural studies approaches, and hence a theoretical crossover.

The visual essay, titled *I Journey Like a Paisley* is itself a crossover of various textual genres, as well as creatively manifesting the multiple cultural positions of diasporic practice laid out in the critical component. It documents the lives of a group of young Indian-Australians residing in Adelaide through the personal-political-poetic specificities of my diasporic lens. Production choices and screening responses are discussed briefly at the end of the critical component. For a more comprehensive understanding of the production of the theoretical and visual components and their cross overs, entries from the web-log maintained throughout the project (<http://over-exposed-image.blogspot.com>) have been included in the appendix. Significantly, the research discourse is established as a remixed, theoretically informed practice that crosses cultural and genre/audience boundaries.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| TITLE PAGE .....   | 1  |
| DECLARATION .....  | 2  |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....   | 3  |
| ABSTRACT .....   | 4  |
| <b>1. <u>PREFACE</u></b> .....   | 7  |
| 1.1 “Crossing Over” and “Settling Down”: The Shifting Contours<br>of a Diasporic Journey.....                                | 8  |
| 1.2 Personal-Political-Poetic: Theorising Crossover Diasporic<br>Practice .....  | 11 |
| 1.3 <i>Firangs</i> and <i>Slumdogs</i> : Towards Crossover Conversations .....   | 15 |
| <b>2. <u>CHAPTER ONE</u></b><br><b>GENEALOGIES: DIASPORIC PRACTICE AND SCHOLARSHIP<br/>FROM ORIGINARY TO CROSSOVER</b> ..... | 18 |
| 2.2 Diaspora Theory .....  | 19 |
| 2.3 A Case Study of the Indian Diaspora .....  | 22 |
| 2.4 Diaspora Practice (through the medium of film) .....   | 25 |
| 2.5 Genealogies of Diasporic Creative Practice .....   | 28 |
| 2.6 Contemporary Relevance of Diasporic Practice and Scholarship   | 20 |
| 2.7 Conception of Diasporic Practice and Future Trajectories .....   | 32 |
| <b>3. <u>CHAPTER TWO</u></b><br><b>LOCATIONS: THE SITUATED INFLUENCES OF MEHTA’S FILM<br/>TRILOGY</b> .....                  | 37 |
| 3.1 Mehta and Me: Towards a Reflexive and Situated Reading of<br>Diasporic Practice .....                                    | 40 |
| 3.2 Mehta and B/Hollywood .....  | 42 |
| 3.3 Mehta and Canadian Cinema .....  | 46 |
| 3.4 Mehta and Diasporic/Exilic Cinema.....   | 48 |
| 3.5 Mehta and World Cinema.....  | 51 |
| 3.6 Conclusion: Towards a Crossover Location .....   | 60 |

|  |            |
|--|------------|
| <b>4. <u>CHAPTER THREE</u></b>   |            |
| <b>ELEMENTS: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GENRES IN INDIAN</b>                     |            |
| <b>DIASPORIC FILM .....</b>  | <b>62</b>  |
| 4.1 Reading Diasporic Practice: The Appropriation of Postcolonial          |            |
| Discourse .....  | 64         |
| 4.2 Towards a Situated yet Crossover Reading of Diasporic Practice         | 67         |
| 4.3 Diasporic Confluence of Postcolonial and Feminist Concerns.....        | 68         |
| 4.4 Reading the Spaces Within/out the Diasporic Frame.....                 | 70         |
| 4.5 Towards a Crossover Genre of Diasporic Cinema: Beyond                  |            |
| Ethnic and Women’s Themes .....  | 75         |
| 4.6 Towards a Syncretic Visual Ecology of Indian Diasporic Film....        | 76         |
| 4.7 Towards a Transgression of Colours in Indian Diasporic Film ....       | 81         |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>5. <u>CHAPTER FOUR</u></b>  |            |
| <b>AUDIENCES: DIASPORIC FILM RECEPTION FROM THE <i>WATER</i></b>           |            |
| <b>CONTROVERSY TO THE <i>SLUMDOG</i> PUBLICITY .....</b>                   | <b>86</b>  |
| 5.1 Mehta’s Elements Trilogy: Western Reviews.....                         | 90         |
| 5.2 Mehta’s Elements Trilogy: Indian Reviews.....                          | 94         |
| 5.3 Jasbir Jain’s Edited Volume: An Inadequate Attempt to Collate          |            |
| Responses to the Trilogy .....   | 97         |
| 5.4 Crossover Audiences in the Aftermath of <i>Slumdog Millionaire</i> ... | 98         |
| 5.5 The Economics of Independent Transnational Distribution .....          | 107        |
| <br>   |            |
| <b>6. <u>CHAPTER FIVE</u></b>  |            |
| <b>REMIXES: PRACTISING THE PERSONAL-POLITICAL-POETIC IN</b>                |            |
| <b>A CROSSOVER VISUAL ESSAY .....</b>                                      | <b>111</b> |
| 6.1 Theorising the Crossover Visual Essay .....                            | 112        |
| 6.2 Pre-production.....  | 113        |
| 6.3 Production .....   | 122        |
| 6.4 Post-production .....  | 125        |
| 6.5 Screenings: New Crossover Conversations .....                          | 126        |
| <br>   |            |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....  | 129        |
| <br>   |            |
| APPENDIX.....  | 142        |

# **1. PREFACE**

I am a 26-year-old woman of Indian origin who came to Adelaide seven years ago to study, work and materialise my passion for words, images and stories. Through the course of my adult life on this island-continent and business and leisure trips to India, Canada and other cities in Australia, I have found countless global-local narratives invested in the idea of home. My own personal tale of displacement has come to be reflected in the wider politics of the twenty-first century, as well as in the poetics it is bringing forth in terms of border-crossing creative practice.

I find it necessary to articulate the personal, political and poetic aspects of this creative practice that is originating in the in-between space that is the diaspora. A holistic understanding of such practice is essential for mapping the future trajectories of an increasingly diasporic planet. Moreover, such an understanding can only take place in a framework that is itself holistic and integrated. The framework of this project then, is a crossover conversation in an academic context that intertwines different discourses of theory and various genres of practice. Such a framework is apt for considering the cultural crossovers of diasporic creative practice, exemplified in this thesis by the elements film trilogy of Deepa Mehta. A reading of the thesis concludes with a listing of the web-log notes that elucidate the workings of an integrated diasporic project. A screening of the visual essay then completes the journey as it creatively manifests the cultural, genre and audience crossovers theorised in the critical section.

This project is an integrated exercise – a critical theorisation of situated diasporic creative practice, as well as a remixed diasporic creation in the form of a situated visual essay. The aim of this preface is to establish the critical-creative discourse of the project by initiating a crossover conversation.

### **1.1 “Crossing Over” and “Settling Down”: The Shifting Contours of a Diasporic Journey**

One of the most confronting questions I have faced as a young Indian woman who has chosen to live in the west is that of “settling down”. Settling down is my parents’ shorthand for marital and social security. To me, settling down has thus far symbolised compromise, sacrifice and a generally trapped existence – values as antiquated to my generation as the



notions of ordinary homelands, arranged marriages, and suburban bliss. Yet, I have existed in suburbia for most of my seven years in Australia, and only recently moved to the Adelaide city fringe. I have also, until a year ago, reluctantly agreed to be introduced to friends and acquaintances of the family – young Indian men living in the west who have been equally ambivalent about the generational and cultural impositions of the process. And, I have only begun to recognise the pragmatic need for my potential position in the Australian academy to override nostalgia for the country of my birth. I cannot return. Not yet. I will go back for inspiration, for research, for family. I will cross over every year.

My cross overs are not symbolic of a radical politics of rebellion against obsolete traditional ideas of gender roles, domestic spheres and national politics. Not anymore. I see too much conservatism in the west to believe that it is necessarily better here than anywhere else. Yet I have decided to apply for full-time work and permanent residency, allowed myself to dream of a future here, at least for now. Is this not a “settling down” of sorts, the very antithesis of what brought me here in the first place? It is a personal decision that has been negotiated over time after weighing the constituent emotional and practical pros and cons. My father is quite happy now that I am showing some semblance of stability, but asks, ‘Will you be able to find someone there on your own?’. I say what I can only say in the context of a Skype conversation – ‘I’m finding myself on my own, so that’s a start’. This performative mode arises from my perception of my economic and social independence in Australia. It could look very different if I were having the same conversation in India - I may pretend to comply to keep the peace during my brief stay. But I may not.

The option of not complying, of asserting my voice in personal and socially performative contexts has been enabled by the articulation of my diasporic ambivalence through the web-log <<http://over-exposed-image.blogspot.com>> and the visual essay (*I Journey Like a Paisley*) that together constitute the creative component of this project. The ambivalence has indeed taken a positive turn through the recognition of my ongoing interest in Indian aesthetics (such as the paisley pattern and street photography/videography), and facilitated the creation of my own cultural practice in the diaspora.

In the critical component, I have theorised this conception of diasporic creative practice in Chapter One to reinforce my own experience through the examples of established diasporic practitioners of South Asian origin like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha,

Salman Rushdie and others. Existing scholarly models of thinking about diasporic identity and productions are called upon and updated in light of recent transnational crossovers.

Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta's "elements" film trilogy consisting of *Fire* (1996), *Earth* (1999) and *Water* (2005) is used throughout the rest of the critical section to examine the production, reception and distribution of diasporic creative practice. My choice of Mehta and her most well known body of work as a case study of diasporic practice is informed both by the overlaps and differences in our diasporic journeys, and the crossover content and form of her films. The relationship with Mehta, and the situated nature of my readings of her life and work are explicated in Chapter Two. While Mehta is considered an auteur in this chapter, it is important to note that the genre and cultural/audience studies approaches of the subsequent chapters attempt to present a holistic view of contemporary Indian diasporic cinema. I examine Mehta's diasporic location, and that of her films in relation to their various nation and genre-based affiliations. Such a demonstration of Mehta's situated creative practice helps establish the production of diasporic practice within the framework of a rooted transnationalism (see Appiah, 2004: 232 for "rooted cosmopolitanism" which is described as a composite project).

In Chapter Three, Mehta's films (and those of comparable Indian diasporic filmmakers like Gurinder Chadha and Mira Nair) are subjected to a situated content analysis to look for common themes, motifs and form. While postcolonial and feminist theoretical tools are used as aids in generating these readings, the gaps in these theories are also highlighted. These gaps pertain to the subaltern narratives of traditional postcolonial and feminist scholarship, and are addressed through a reading that crosses theoretical and national cinematic borders. Thus, what is established is both a suggestion for a different reading practice for diasporic creative productions, as well as a demonstration of this practice by highlighting the cosmopolitan turn of formerly subaltern protagonists in the films under examination.

Chapter Four then deals with the often dialectical responses to Mehta's film trilogy in the popular media of the homeland and the liberal west, and compares the publicity posters and box office performance of *Water* with that of Danny Boyle's India-based commercially and critically successful film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). This analysis addresses whether appropriating commercial devices of cinematic distribution is a viable means of gaining audiences for otherwise marginal diasporic creative practitioners. The aim of the above

comparisons of reviews and publicity material is to help understand the reception of diasporic productions in the contemporary global economy, and explore the potential of their crossover audience appeal.

Chapter Five consists of a narrative of the diasporic production that is the visual essay accompanying the critical text. It includes a theorisation of the crossover genre that is the visual essay, as well as an account of the pre-production, production and post-production stages. I conclude the chapter with an overview of the responses to the two public screenings of the visual essay, and an indication of the new crossover conversations being initiated. This chapter is the logical conclusion of the critical section in that it shows the realisation of a situated critical-creative voice that aims to cross over by using personal and political diasporic experiences to create a poetics.

The following section lays out the theoretical framework for the critical section. It explains the need to simultaneously consider the personal, the political and the poetic for a holistic understanding of diasporic practice, and uses a combination of relevant scholarly aids. The preface then concludes with an experiential anecdote of my own diasporic belongings in context, thereby demonstrating the personal-political-poetic and laying the groundwork for conversations that cross over, culturally and discursively.

## **1.2 Personal-Political-Poetic: Theorising Crossover Diasporic Practice**

In an essay titled ‘Ethnicity in an Age of Diaspora’, diasporic Indian scholar R Radhakrishnan begins with a personal scenario where his eleven-year-old son asks him whether he is Indian or American (2003: 119). Terming the scenario ‘both filial and pedagogic’, Radhakrishnan tells his son that he is both (2003: 122), and embarks on a polemical journey about diasporic identity and the shifting contours of its relationship with ethnicity and location. Such an autobiographical, yet contextually relevant beginning mirrors my own introduction to this preface. It also leads us to question the use of the personal narrative or anecdote as a springboard for reflections on the diasporic condition that otherwise adhere to traditional academic discourse.

The answer to this question lies in the nature of contemporary diasporic formations, which, like Radhakrishnan's filial-pedagogic scenario, are both experiential and theoretical. For this reason, Sunil Bhatia and Anjali Ram recommend a process-oriented approach to acculturation research 'where the focus is on understanding how immigrants living in hybrid cultures and diasporic locations are constantly negotiating their multiple, and often conflicting histories and subject positions' (2001: 3). Similarly, in the introduction to an edited volume titled *Theorizing Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur call for a need to move beyond the construction and consolidation of diasporic identities to ask how these identities are 'practised, lived, and experienced' (2003: 9). Therefore, as my beginning story and that of Radhakrishnan's illustrates, I contend that for a well-rounded understanding of diasporic practice, it is crucial to examine the ongoing performativity of the self.

In addition to considering the personal through its performativity, it is important to remember that the diasporic selves that are performed display affiliations to two or more cultures or nations. The politics of these belongings are deeply intertwined with the performativity of the personal. Gina Wisker notes this entanglement of the personal and the political in her explication of diaspora writers:

as they dialogue with the adoptive homeland, they change themselves, the new homeland, and their versions and memories of the other homelands, and as they dialogue with the other homelands they renegotiate meaning in their minds and actions (2007: 29).

Migrant scholar Ien Ang theorises her own identity through a similar consideration of performativity and context when she notes, 'if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent. When and how is a matter of politics' (2001: 51). While the postcolonial notion of "negotiated belonging" and postmodern conceptualisation of "performativity" help to adequately theorise the political and personal elements of diasporic creative practice, these do not aid in moving beyond the two entities represented by the nation of origin and the adoptive homeland. The idea of "hybridity", theorised by Homi Bhabha as the "Third Space of enunciation" (1994) is useful in amalgamating the two entities, but it does not necessarily entail the formation of an identity and accompanying practice that transcend the sum of their parts. This idea is reinforced by Pnina Werbner who, in her introduction to a collection of essays on cultural hybridity, proposes "critical self-distancing from their own cultural discourses" as an alternative to Bhabha's "interruptive hybridity from the margins" (1997: 14). In other words, it is crucial, especially in the light of a society that is not just

postcolonial and marginal, but increasingly global and local, to employ a theory of resistance that both examines the discourses of constitutive cultures, and is able to transcend these through distanciation or the creation of a mode of its own. Therefore, I consider it essential to examine the poetics of diasporic creative practice, or a “both and” approach.

The “both and” approach is not new in the field of diasporic studies. It has been adopted by scholars like Ann-Marie Fortier who, in her study of the Italian emigre culture in Britain, concludes that cultural identity in migration is both deterritorialised and reterritorialised (1999: 42). In a similar vein, Wisker cites the example of British-Indian writer Meera Syal whose ‘satiric and comic voice steers a course between gentle mockery and farce, undercutting the Othering and ignorance which stereotyping feeds by dramatising examples of Asian culture’ (2007: 98-99). What I propose in this project, therefore, is recognition of the personal-political voice as a manifestation of the poetics of diasporic creative practice, and its holistic consideration.

To theorise the poetics, I have appropriated Gregory Ulmer’s notion of “heuretics” which has so far been used to understand the discourse of method in electronic texts (Ulmer, 1994). I propose that heuretics is especially useful for theorising the poetics of diasporic creative practice as it is concerned with both how a work is made, and the design of a rhetoric/poetics that leads to the production of new work (Ulmer, 1994: 4). Reinforcing the poetics and practising this invention in his Wordpress blog, Ulmer defines heuretics as ‘the use of theory for the invention of new texts (poetics of any sort)’ (‘HEUretic\*’). In line with this definition, the theory of heuretics is used throughout this project to underpin the analysis of Indian diasporic cinema, and also for the creation of my practice. It is especially useful when used in combination with genre readings in Chapter Three to produce a new theory of reading situated yet crossover diasporic creative practice. Heuretics is also most explicitly manifested in the web-log which examines the process of making theory and practice.

Diasporic creative practice then, because of and not despite its difference from national, religious, gender, class and other reified conceptualisations of production is a “new invention” and usefully theorised through “heuretics”. It is important to reiterate, however, that the poetics cannot stand alone or it risks being apolitical. It is the contention of this project that while heuretics is an important theoretical tool, the theorisation and creation of

new diasporic inventions must be grounded in due consideration of its personal and political belongings.

The simultaneous yet contextual consideration of the personal, the political and the poetic aids in the generation of situated readings and practice. In their edited volume of essays by diasporic scholars, Braziel and Mannur perform the crucial task of theorising diaspora in a holistic manner, while emphasising the historical and cultural specificity of any new becomings:

Diasporic traversals question the rigidities of identity itself – religious, ethnic, gendered, national; yet this diasporic movement marks not a postmodern turn from history, but a nomadic turn in which the very parameters of specific historical moments are embodied and – as diaspora itself suggests – are scattered and regrouped into new points of becoming (2003: 3).

Commenting on the representation of the black postcolonial subject in the “Third Cinemas” of the Caribbean, Stuart Hall performs a similar theorisation of diasporic identity and representation in his specific Jamaican-British context. He suggests, ‘Perhaps instead of thinking about identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a “production”, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation’ (1996: 110). While Hall refers to identity itself as a production, this projects takes the specific becomings embodied in diasporic creative practice (which is inextricably linked to identity) as its focus. This is not done to emphasise creative practice over identity formation, but is a pragmatic choice as creative practice renders the process of performing, negotiating and inventing explicit for theorisation and re-creation.

An example of a situated performing, negotiating and inventing is evident in *Shooting Water* (2006), a memoir written by Deepa Mehta’s daughter Devyani Saltzman. It combines the writer’s own tales of self-discovery during the filming of *Water* with observations on the wider socio-political situation in South Asia. Mehta’s films are similarly considered in the critical component of this project as embodying the personal journey of the director and other crew, manifesting the turbulent politics prevalent at the time of their inception, and enabling new meanings for worldwide audiences. Such an entangling of the personal, the political, and the poetic, of the process of filmmaking with the final product is reminiscent of Laurel Richardson’s adoption of the creative analytic process, or CAP ethnography which ‘displays the writing process and the writing product as deeply intertwined’ (2005: 962). My

methodological approach therefore adapts CAP ethnography to diasporic creative practice to produce situated knowledge (textual readings, review analysis and new practice) that aims to cross over. This approach underpins the entire project, including the thesis, the web-log, and the visual essay, and it acknowledges and mixes the personal and the political (while heuristics invents from these). Distancing this approach from the triangulation characteristic of social science, Richardson refers to it as “crystallization”, and adds that it ‘provides us with a deepened, complex, and thoroughly partial understanding of the topic’ (2005: 963). Donna Haraway also upholds situated knowledge in a feminist context, arguing that “only partial perspective promises objective vision” (1988: 583). The following section performs this methodology discursively in that it is both creative and analytical, and produces cultural understandings that are situated (hence partial), yet with the depth and potential to cross over.

### **1.3 *Firangs* and *Slumdogs*: Towards Crossover Conversations**

On reaching the mid-point of my three-year PhD in 2008 and after spending more than five years (almost my entire adult life) pursuing tertiary studies in Australia, I decided to visit India during the non-holiday season – that is, the Indian monsoon and the Australian winter. What led to the specific time and nature of this journey? It came about for a combination of reasons – not teaching during the semester in question, feeling overwhelmed by the multiple theoretical underpinnings of my project, seeking visual inspiration for the visual essay I was about to begin filming, but most importantly for making sure that I was not growing apart from my family, my home, my childhood version of India.

The last reason reminded me of Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Michael Ondaatje’s temporary return-journey to his homeland to come to grips with his family and nation, poetically documented in his memoir, *Running in the Family* (1984). Given the context of my reasons, I was slightly taken aback when my mother, habitually quick to comment on any changes in physical appearance, pointed out that I appeared *firang* (Hindi for foreign). She explained that it was obviously not my skin colour or clothes and jewellery, but something in my accent and general demeanour that was not quite her lived understanding of “Indian”.

A visit to my youngest sister’s boarding school (also my alma mater) and a brief conversation with her 16-year-old friends led them to conclude that I looked like an Australian

tourist. Again, I was surprised because I made a point to wear chic Indian fusion garb while in India – three-quarter black pants with a sleeveless ethnic tunic, silver necklace and earrings and kohl-lined eyes. Perhaps it was the digital video camera always slung across my right shoulder, giving the impression I was constantly documenting moments and sights that were ordinary to all those around me. Both my mother's and my sister's friends' observations made me wonder if my Indianness had already been hyphenated, if not usurped by the act of living, studying and working in Australia. I like nearly twenty million people of Indian origin living in the diaspora, had not necessarily grown apart from India but acquired an additional layer of cultural identity. This newly acquired layer led me to foreground my old (yet not fixed) layer in some scenarios, and relegate it to the background in others. I am, therefore, becoming different from my India-based family and friends even as I share my originary history and ongoing yet varying interest in Indian cultural and political events with them.

On my return to the Adelaide summer after two months, I interviewed members of the Indian diaspora in Adelaide for the visual essay, wrote the bulk of my thesis, and continued to work my way through familial and social pressures to settle down. It is perhaps no coincidence that my personal-political negotiations and poetic re-creations, although ongoing, peaked at the same time as the release of Danny Boyle's film *Slumdog Millionaire* which traverses national and cinematic boundaries. The release and success of the film renewed my confidence in the scholarly, cultural, and creative significance of the project at hand. Although the film is not exemplary of diasporic creative practice such as Mehta's, it provides a significant model of cross-cultural cinematic content and talent that has also successfully crossed over into mainstream audiences.

Given the currency of crossover creative and distribution discourses, my choice of a doctoral dissertation topic that considers the crossover potential of diasporic creative practice and its conception as well as consumption seemed validated. Also, questions about the transnational popularity of Third World-based, First World-produced films that I was facing with regards to Deepa Mehta's *Water* (nominated for an Academy Award in 2006 at the start of my PhD research), resurfaced. However, there are two crucial differences between the films. While the publicity material of the two films is comparatively analysed in Chapter Four, what must be mentioned here is that there is already a shift taking place in erstwhile marginal creative processes, and the reception of the products.



The diasporic and other cross-cultural creative realms may no longer be rendered marginal. While *Water* was a nominee in the Best Foreign Film category of the Oscars, *Slumdog Millionaire* was nominated in the Best Drama section (stripped of its marginality to an extent). A British auteur filmmaker directed the latter film, and it employs cast and crew from both India and the Indian diaspora.

Perhaps the notion of a creative practice that crosses over in terms of culture and genre need no longer be a novelty or an anomaly. It may be a phenomenon that is gaining wider acceptance in mainstream film culture as well as film and culture scholarship. It may also be an indication for creative practitioners coveting transnational and mass audiences that there are means to achieve the same. With this crossover potential in mind, I continue to find myself talking about *Slumdog Millionaire* with family and friends in Adelaide, in India, and in other parts of the world. While my reading of the film is situated in specific Indian, Australian and cinematic institutions, it somehow also transcends these locations so that our mutual film discourse becomes a crossover conversation itself, something to be celebrated (albeit critically).

## **2. CHAPTER ONE**

# **GENEALOGIES: DIASPORIC PRACTICE FROM ORIGINARY TO CROSSOVER**

In this introductory chapter, I will trace the genealogies of the term “diaspora” to understand how diasporic practice and scholarship has evolved. This mapping exercise will lay the conceptual foundations of diasporic beginnings and trajectories for the examination of the production, reception and distribution of diasporic practice, particularly Indian diasporic film, in the rest of the thesis. It will demonstrate that since the nature of diasporic movements, and ways of associating with the homeland and the host society have transformed in the wake of globalisation, it has become imperative to examine the new diasporas and their practices as “crossover” rather than “originary”. While originary tendencies to associate current cultural practices solely with the homeland persist in sections of diasporic communities, I consider only those diasporic creative practitioners who aim to cross over through their implicitly or explicitly stated objectives to “write/visualise back” or “write/visualise into being”. This writing/visualising back and writing/visualising into being, or the conception of situated diasporic practice, manifests the intertwining of the personal, the political and the poetic theorised in the preface. Not only does it imply crossing over in cultural terms (examined through the example of Mehta in Chapter Two), but also underpins the crossing over of genre in diasporic practice (see Chapter Three).

## **2.1 Diaspora Theory**

To understand the relevance of “diaspora” in contemporary culture (and cultural studies), I will first look at the origin of the term diaspora, followed by its current usage in scholarly and public discourse. This is explicated with a case study of the Indian diaspora as it is both my location as a researcher and creative practitioner, and that of the diasporic creative practitioners like Deepa Mehta who are examined in this thesis. Then, an overview of diasporic practice (through the lens of film) will be undertaken to demonstrate the theoretical understanding of diaspora and reinforce what I argue are its personal-political-poetic attributes.

Tracing the genealogy of “diaspora”, postcolonial theorist Avtar Brah notes that it is derived from the Greek “*dia*”, meaning “through”, and “*speirein*”, meaning “to scatter” (2003: 616). Comparing these roots to *Webster’s Dictionary’s* meaning of “dispersion from”, Brah highlights that the word “diaspora” embodies the notion of a central home

from which the dispersal occurs, and also invokes images of multiple journeys (such as those of the Jews after their exile from Babylon) (2003: 616). Although contemporary academic and popular usage of “diaspora” may derive from its Jewish point of origin, it is not a replica of it. Considering the wide range of economic, political and socio-cultural factors that have led to mass migrations in the post-global world and the greater communication with home and host societies enabled by technological and policy changes, it would be simplistic to assume that unaltered and homogeneous notions of the homeland persist in the diasporic imagination. Moreover, there is increasing emphasis on establishing links with the host society, and on how this co-exists with homeland ties. In recognition of these transformations, Kachig Toloyan, the editor of the journal *Diaspora*, underlines the widening cultural usage of the term “diaspora”:

Where once the term was used to refer to the migrations of Jewish populations, it now refers to a broad range of dislocations experienced by several groups of people...Toloyan attributes the expanding usage of this term in part to the acceleration of immigration to the industrialised worlds; to the lack of assimilation of many immigrant groups; to institutional links with the homeland; to sustained work by many immigrant groups to create and maintain their own religious institutions, language schools, community centres, newspapers, radio stations; and to the American university itself where many diasporan elites have converged to forge theoretical sites to address immigrant identity and transnationalism (cited in Bhatia and Ram, 2001: 12).

Therefore, in the contemporary context of diasporas brought about by varied kinds of migrations and involved in complex sets of cultural and institutional relations with the place of origin, it is important to distinguish between “exile” and “contemporary diaspora”. “Exile” is the preferred term of critical race theorists, Afro-centrists, multiculturalists, some versions of difference feminism, nationalist and ethnic movements (Peter, 1999:32). On the contrary, the attributes of contemporary diasporas are similar to “nomadism”, discursively constructed as the antonym of exile in that it is the attitude of poststructuralists, many liberals, cosmopolitans and postmodernists (Peter, 1999: 32). The primary difference between exile and nomadism lies in the conceptualisation of the homeland by members of diasporic communities. It is my contention that contemporary diaspora, with its alternatively nostalgic and alienated relations with the place of origin, can be construed as heterogeneous in its composition and lying between the extremes of “exile” and “nomadism”. This is extrapolated through the example of the Indian diaphora in the next section.

Although contemporary diasporic individuals and communities vary in their attitudes to the homeland, it is this relationship, with some exceptions, that retains primary significance in diasporic theory and representation. Vietnamese-American scholar and creative practitioner Trinh Minh-Ha is not explicitly referred to as a diasporic theorist, but her theoretical and creative work clearly demonstrates a leaning towards the politics and poetics of the diaspora. For instance, in an interview with Marina Grzanic published on Minh-ha's website, she mentions that when asked by a Vietnam government official at a conference on how she could be useful for the country, she replied that would she would be glad to devise tools that serve the larger context of Third World non-alignment, or of hybridity in the diaspora (Grzanic, 'Inappropriate/d Artificiality'). In the following section,, she poetically articulates the dilemma of settlement for those displaced from their place of origin:

In the Home, no one escapes the spectacle of Happiness, it's the Rule! Yet, for those who remain strangers in their homeland and foreigners in their new homes, feeling repeatedly out of place within every familiar world, it is vital to question settlement, as well as to make it easier for the diversely unsettled ones to bear the anxieties of unwonted seclusion. Home and language in such a context never become nature...Edward Said reflecting on exile, and on the necessity to refuse a state of affairs where everything one says or thinks, as well as every object one possesses is ultimately a mere commodity, quoted these lines from a twelfth-century monk from Saxony, Hugo of St Victor: "the man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land" (1991: 194).

While Minh-Ha's and Said's definitions of displacement seems to favour a questioning of the very idea of settlement, others (like Sandhya Shukla) advocate a view of diaspora based on the transnational model where transnationalism acts as the link between origin and settlement. Following the project of anthropologists Nina Glick Schiller, Kinda Basch and Cristina Szanton Blanc who found limitations in the language of immigration, Shukla suggests, 'by living their lives across borders, transmigrants find themselves confronted with and engaged in the nation building processes of two or more nation-states' (2003: 12). In a similar vein, Dirlik argues that highlighting the culture of origin as the ultimate identifying feature of the transnational or diasporic formation amounts to perpetuating an ahistorical culturalism (2002: 228).

This project is based on a conceptualisation of diaspora that recognises links to both the home and host societies. However, unlike Shukla, I will use the term "diaspora" rather than "transnationalism". This is because transnationalism favours the global over the local,

while a contemporary articulation of diaspora adequately addresses the ongoing home-host link or crossover, as well as the situatedness of each diasporic genealogy and trajectory. I also incorporate poetic elements of Minh-Ha's conception of diaspora in so far as questioning the idea of settlement demonstrates the invention of a diasporic experience and practice that transcend the sum of their constituent cultures. Therefore, adding on to Dirlik's argument, I contend that it is not only identifying with the homeland that perpetuates as "ahistorical culturalism", but also limiting one's experience and creative practice to the home or the host as the only available choices. In other words, a situated diasporic practice that truly crosses over is one that has ongoing links with the home and host societies, but is also its own evolving entity.

## **2.2 A Case Study of the Indian Diaspora**

The Indian Diaspora is undoubtedly heterogeneous due to originary differences in caste, region, religion, language, profession and the like, as well as the range of socio-economic situations in the host society. Therefore, it becomes difficult to arrive at a manner of construction of identity and practice that is applicable throughout to all members at all times. The personal-political-poetic attributes theorised with the aid of postmodern, postcolonial and heuristical tools are especially useful in this regard, as they help account for historical and contemporary differences, as well as new constructions within the Indian diaspora.

The issue of differences within the Indian diaspora notwithstanding, many diasporic creative practitioners of Indian origin, like Deepa Mehta, are expected to be authentic representatives of their ethnic community in the host society. At the same time, they are maligned by conservative elements in the homeland for the alleged inauthenticity of their representations. The critiques in the homeland arise not only because Mehta left India in her early 20s due to her marriage to a Canadian documentary-maker (Paul Saltzman), but because, as part of the intellectual and creative elite, she may not be considered representative of the large numbers of working class Indians in the diaspora. Due to Mehta's privileged upbringing in India, and her choice of a Canadian partner, she may be regarded as disengaged from both the vast Indian populace and the large proportion of Indians struggling to feel at home in a foreign land. This question of authenticity of the

relatively privileged diasporic creative practitioner, as Assayag and Benei point out in their edited volume of essays by South Asian intellectuals in the West, is rather like the representative dilemma of the intellectuals themselves:

The writers of most of the present essays occupy positions of privilege in their working lives – that is, by American standards. In this sense, although they may be perceived as representing the voice of most other migrants, they are representative neither of those who are supposedly globalised yet much less secure in their positions as nomads, nor of the millions of South Asians who are too poor to leave the soil on which they have been toiling for generations. The position of the present contributors thus illustrates the inequality of displacement found in many instances of migration, whereby access to global mobility often reflects and further reinforces social stratification and inequality both within and beyond national boundaries (2003: 7).

If Mehta is not representative of a large section of the Indian diaspora, which is the context being used here for a theoretical analysis of her work, it is important to define this diaspora and its parameters despite its apparent heterogeneity. Such an exercise will draw out the similarities, and not the differences within this diverse group. Hence, my objective is to demonstrate that Mehta, and comparable diasporic creative practitioners of Indian origin like Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha, have common ground with their fellow diasporic citizens. This common ground is also a crossover platform for creatively articulating the situated experiences of the changing Indian diaspora.

To substantiate this demonstration, I will use Sandhya Shukla's scholarly work on the history of the Indian diaspora in the UK and North America, and supplement this argument with Arif Dirlik's theorisation of the Chinese diaspora. As the Indian diaspora in Australia, which is my diasporic location, has a more recent history, I will reflect on its shifting interactions with mainstream Australian society in the narrative of my diasporic production in Chapter Five.

Despite the association, in popular consciousness, of diaspora with a geographical displacement that results in a condition of belonging nowhere and maintaining nostalgic relations with the homeland, it is more useful to envisage contemporary diasporic populations as global but located (as demonstrated in the section "Diaspora Theory"). Shukla describes the "Indian Diaspora" as simultaneously a concept and a set of social formations, and highlights its globally located character:

The term diaspora also conveys an affective experience in a world of nations, through its proposition of global belonging as a means of self- and group representation. Yet

neither globality nor diaspora should be interpreted to mean the absence of location. The Indian diaspora of this book is read very much through its locatedness, in space and time, however shifting the coordinates provided by the many movements of Indians across Asia, the Americas, Africa, and Europe (2003: 4).

Similarly, in his study of Chinese diasporic literature in North America, Dirlik points to the importance of historicity in the sense both of time and place in the use of terms like ethnicity, diaspora and culture (2002: 227). The dual spatio-temporal location of diasporas in general, and the Indian diaspora in this instance, implies that it is subject to the forces of nationalism and internationalism to a larger extent than “native” populations. Such a diasporic figure, in Shukla’s opinion, is embodied in the NRI, or the Non-Resident Indian who retains political and economic benefits at home by virtue of being abroad (2003: 10). She adds that the category was created by the Indian government in the 1970s, to encourage foreign investment, and bestows the non-resident with the right to own property as well as political affirmation of a continuing relationship with the homeland (2003: 10).

In other words, the privileged diasporic citizen enjoys the dual benefits of being valued because of residing overseas, and yet being regarded as an Indian national. This dual belonging, of continuing links with the homeland through the economic and cultural capital acquired in the host society, demonstrates the crossover attributes of the Indian diaspora. It shows this is a diaspora that is best conceptualised as lying between the exile and nomadism models described in the previous section.

Due to its global connections, and the high economic and cultural capital accruing to it in late modernity, the Indian diaspora is described as a “quasi-postmodern” rather than an originary diaspora. To illustrate the quasi-postmodern multiplicity of nations, communities and expressive modes within the Indian diaspora, Shukla distinguishes it from the Jewish and black diasporas ‘which are very much premised on a rehearsal of originary forms of suffering and persecution that have created dispersals, and that construct a compensatory nation’ (2003: 13). While the Indian diaspora is not originary in nature, the use of the term “postmodern” in its definition ascribes it the characteristic of “deterritorialization” most commonly associated with post-structuralism (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1993). According to Dirlik, ‘The notion of “deterritorialization” ignores that even transnationals live in places (though they may move from one place to another); and that what they understand by transnationality...or their cultural-identification may be impossible to grasp without



reference to the particular places they inhabit and the particular trajectories of “transnationality” (2002: 228). Thus, in line with the earlier definition of the Indian diaspora as global yet located (glocal), it is important to underline the impact of both roots and routes in its fluid formation.

In addition to re-conceptualising the relations with the homeland, or the question of roots, equal attention must be given to the journey of migration and the multiple routes that are charted thereafter. Shukla presents a new model of diasporic Indianness by envisaging its migration from one geographical point to another as not a line, but as a constant to-and-fro motion between these points and via other points. She writes, ‘Just as a history of migration is a history of nations, the histories of India that migrants reimagine are also histories of multiple nations. A central quality of diasporic Indianness, then, is its discursive arrangement in transnational space, ordered not by a line from one point to another, but by a circularity of movements’ (2003: 28). This circularity of movements represents ongoing crossovers between the home and host nations, as well as encompassing new experiences and practices realised through contact with other cultures, in the new site.

According to Fortier, Gilles Deleuze’s oft-cited notion of the rhizome is an apt metaphor for diasporic trajectories as, ‘The rhizomorphic pattern of diasporic dispersal posits a distinctly multilocal mapping of “homes”, breaking the simple explanatory sequence between consciousness and location’ (2005:183). The metaphor of the rhizome is useful in that it helps recognise both the movement and the situatedness of diasporic trajectories. It is these trajectories comprising roots and routes that are manifested (and formed) through diasporic creative practices like film.

### **2.3 Diaspora Practice (through the medium of film)**

After briefly considering diaspora theory and studying the Indian diaspora as an example, I will now highlight a particular kind of diasporic production, film. Film is used throughout this project as a case study of diasporic practice. It has been chosen because through the stages of its conception, production, reception and distribution, it demonstrates the personal, political as well as poetic attributes of situated diasporic formations. Due to the association of film with popular culture, diasporic film also acts as a medium through

which the crossover potential of diasporic creative practice can be explored. Azade Seyhan prefaces *Writing Outside the Nation* with the statement that, 'Ultimately, every theory of postcolonial, transnational, or diasporic literature and art is most convincingly articulated and performed by works of literature and art themselves' (2001: 7). I argue that while diaspora practice articulates diaspora theory, it is also relegated to the margins of creative practice, thereby limiting its crossover potential.

In his essay titled, "'Start Narrative Here": Excess and the Space of History in Asian Diasporic Films', Amit Rai attempts a definition of the loosely-bound genre of Asian Diasporic Cinema by suggesting that it is 'a non-dominant cinema that is not unified racially, culturally, or aesthetically. Rather, the grouping of these films itself is a form of effective solidarity that causes us to rethink the limits of these very categories' (2003: 14). While this definition clearly elucidates diaspora theory's transcendence of national spaces and the corresponding cultural conventions, it seems to render diasporic cinema as a marginal representative practice.

I challenge the above definition by proposing that diasporic cinema is not marginal. Rather, it manifests as an excess of roots and routes. Such excess refers not to the dominance of diasporic creative practice, but to its very pervasiveness in widespread locations. The notion of excess also connotes the multi-faceted nature of diasporic practice in that it includes performativity, negotiation of belonging, and the invention of new practices.

Hamid Naficy, in his edited volume on exilic cinema and its politics of place, seems to gesture towards such a non-marginal definition of diasporic film as he writes:

Transnational exilic filmmakers inhabit the interstitial spaces of not only the host society but also the mainstream film industry. It would be inaccurate to characterise them as marginal, as scholars are prone to do, for they do not live and work on the borders, margins, or peripheries of society or the film and media industries. They are situated inside and work in the interstices of both society and media industries (1999: 133).

From Naficy's description of the work of diasporic and other kinds of transnational filmmakers, it appears that they not only cross national, cultural and cinematic boundaries, but also create interstitial spaces. It is in these spaces that diasporic creative practice is

conceived, produced and distributed to other territories, thereby exhibiting an excess of roots and routes.

The situated creative location of Deepa Mehta is an example of an interstitial space. This is amply demonstrated through the last film of the elements film trilogy, *Water* which was produced by the in-house company Hamilton-Mehta Productions, and subsequently distributed worldwide through independent situated distributors like Dendy in Australia, Fox Searchlight in the US, Mongrel Media in Canada and BR Films in India.

The interstitial spaces of diasporic creative practice, although not marginal, represent an alternative to hegemonic creative industries like Hollywood and Bollywood. Following postcolonial theorist Paul Gilroy, James Clifford describes these spaces as ‘alternate public spheres, forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference’ (1997: 251). The notion of solidarity is crucial to the maintenance and development of interstitial diasporic creative spaces and their alternative representations. It enables the diasporic creative practitioner to articulate his/her roots in the home and host societies, but also transcend these through the routes and links with other ethnic groups that are being forged in the new site. Analysing the diaspora-themed films of Indo-British director Gurinder Chadha and Indo-American director Mira Nair, Shukla notes the routes of solidarity being formed with other cultures in these films:

Diaspora is always incomplete, as is ethnicity here in these films; what is important to consider is the very process of construction. The films construct a dialogue between different groups of people who imagine some similarity of experience and in fact often organize for many different and varied purposes around such identities, be they “Indian”, “South Asian”, “Black”, or “Female”, or something else altogether (2003: 245-46).

Hence, it is evident that the charting of future routes for the creation of solidarity amongst ethnic minority groups in the host society is as crucial an element of contemporary diasporic films as the imagining of links to the home society. Minh-Ha argues for a recognition of these ongoing crossovers ‘because of the heterogeneous reality we all live today, in postmodern times – a reality, therefore, that is not a mere crossing from one borderline to the other or that is not merely double, but a reality that involves the crossing of an indeterminate number of borderlines, one that remains multiple in its hyphenation’ (1991: 107). The next sections will trace the beginnings of these hyphenations in diasporic

creative practice, examine their contemporary relevance, as well as discuss future trajectories. This will further demonstrate the evolution of these practices from originary to crossover.

## **2.4 Genealogies of Diasporic Creative Practice**

Older diasporas (those created by colonialism, like the African-American diaspora, or the Indian-Fijian diaspora) or diasporas in exile (like the Jewish diaspora) have been theorised as being different from the new diasporas created by post World-War II forces of globalisation and transnationalism. While the latter tend to have greater agency as they have generally higher standards of education and have primarily migrated for economic reasons, the same is applicable to second and newer generation members of old and originary diasporas. The latter groups, through assimilation or integration, have greater socio-economic privilege than their predecessors. While this agency and privilege enables them to create and represent themselves anew, it can also lead to other extremes – like pandering to Western notions of the “exotic” and capitalising on the same (this often creates hostility in the home nation), or reinforcing sectarian and tribal notions of ethnic identity that are essentialist and problematic for those living in both the home and host societies. In the case of the Indian diaspora, diasporic theorist Sujata Moorti examines current critical scholarship and notes that there are those writing about the sectarian sections of the diaspora, as well as those who theorise the enabling aspects of diasporic creative expression:

Scholars such as Biju Matthew and Vijay Prashad, Sandhya Shukla, and Arvind Rajagopal have examined the particular ways in which diasporic populations help shape and re-craft the contours of the nation-state. This school of thought has emphasised the forms of religious fundamentalism or Yankee Hindutva that are made possible by the economic support of the NRI population. Others such as Vijay Mishra, Ketu Kartak, and Gayatri Gopinath have examined how the diasporic imagination, or what Salman Rushdie calls access to a second language, has enriched creative expression (Moorti, 2005: 50).

Moorti’s observation leads to the question: Are there only two dialectical ways of understanding diaspora and two kinds of fundamentally opposed diasporic creative discourse? Given the multiple roots and routes of diasporic experience, I contend that

diasporic creative discourse itself is likely to manifest this multiplicity instead of being confined to two oppositional understandings of being in the diaspora.

In his keynote address at a seminar on the Indian diaspora and its creative (especially literary) discourse, Indian academic Kapil Kapoor named the three kinds of diasporic literary discourse, that is, enunciatory, renunciatory and denunciatory. According to him, those who overstate the case of their own country enunciate, those who imagine the home romantically yet flinch on seeing the slums renounce, and those who paint a negative picture of the homeland denounce (2004: 39-40). While most members of the diaspora (creatively-inclined or otherwise) do not belong to a singular category of discourse for the entire duration of their migratory experience, it is the “renunciatory” discourse that comes closest to describing the ambivalence (sometimes positive) experienced and expressed by later generations and contemporary diasporas. The changing contours of this diasporic ambivalence are evident in the character of the football-loving, Indian-British Jess in Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend it Like Beckham*. While the film begins with Jess’s mother being interviewed on a British sports talk show and denouncing her daughter for exposing her legs in shorts, it ends with Jess winning a match and changing into a sari for her sister’s wedding. As the credits roll, the entire wedding party is on the football field, singing and dancing to a *Hinglish* (Hindi and English) composition in traditional Indian garb.

The ambivalence experienced by contemporary diasporic creative practitioners is also manifested in the mutating and crossover form of their creative works. According to Regina Lee, newer diaspora makers, in this case writers are more likely to exhibit the understanding of diaspora as an excess of roots as well as routes. This is evident in their narrative form, which is transitional and transformational (2004: 68). She adds that ethnicity may still be commodified in the creative works of the new diaspora, but their agency enables them to represent themselves anew (2004: 69). In a similar vein, Ritu Birla, a diasporic scholar in her late twenties reflects on the changing representations of Indian identity in western mass media during her lifetime and observes that although there is a “modern” difference, some colonial moulds persist:

Our first introduction to being represented was Merchant/Ivory. There is a dynamic of people going through phases of being represented in different ways. First you are Dr Aziz in *A Passage to India*. That’s the person that you associate with. And then maybe you become a more modern person, you read *The Buddha of Suburbia*, and then comes *Mississippi Masala*. Now you have a new kind of cultural production which, I think, is

responding to the kind of space which Indians inhabit in the Merchant/Ivory world, and that is a kind of neo-colonial world (1999: 212).

Hence, I argue that the evolution of contemporary diasporic practice into a crossover discourse need not be celebrated in an uncritical manner, but its positive difference from erstwhile exotic or nostalgic models needs to be recognised.

The next questions to consider concern the specific attributes of this positive difference and whether the new diaspora can resist assimilation into the dominant essentialised national identities of both the home and host societies. In her examination of South Asian cultural performance in the diaspora, Carla Petievich argues that the cultural landscape of the Anglo-West is expanding as a consequence of diasporic performances such as Bhangra in Britain, cultural shows at New York University, Eid functions in northern New Jersey or Montreal, with Tyagaraja festivals, Nusrat or Jagjit at Alice Tully Hall being part of it (1999: 167). She adds that these creative and evocative assertions ‘reflect a generation of youth fiercely resisting the efforts of various groups to inscribe them into any particular definition of “Indian-ness” or “Pakistani-ness” while at the same time holding onto some aspect of that essential identity also recognised by their parents in order to sustain some acceptable notion of cultural continuity’ (1999: 167).

While recognising the cultural continuity, or what he terms “conjunctures” in the real and imaginary spaces inhabited by contemporary diasporas, diasporic anthropologist Arjun Appadurai writes that the new diaspora is also distinguished by its “disjunctures” (1996:199). I argue that the disjunctures suggested by Appadurai prevent an essentialist approach to the creation of newer diasporic experiences and practices, thereby highlighting the significance of routes in addition to roots in the new localities. Therefore, the contemporary relevance of diasporic creative practice will now be examined in light of its personal-political resistance to essentialised notions of cultural identity, as well as its multiple poetic interpretations of diasporic ambivalence.

## **2.5 Contemporary Relevance of Diasporic Practice and Scholarship**

It is likely that the current pressing need to create in the diaspora and theorise about these new spaces arises from the desire to understand and bridge the fissure between the often-

oppositional forces of a cosmopolitan versus a vernacular identity. In other words, it appears that the older models of originary diasporic creative discourse persist in some sections of the diaspora, and the transition to crossover discourses is often met with hostility due to fears that the authenticity of originary national and religious dogmas will be watered down.

Hostility of the above kind was at its peak in the condemnation of Indian-British writer Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*. It has also been witnessed more recently in conservative opposition to Deepa Mehta's questioning of the gender-family-nation association in *Fire*, as well as her reprisal of obsolete Hindu customs in *Water*. According to Evans Braziel and Mannur, the urgency of Diaspora Studies arises from the new diasporic members' contestation to the 'the rubrics of nation and nationalism', and to 'the hegemonic, homogenizing forces of globalization' (2003: 7).

This project is therefore based on the premise that creativity and scholarship in the situated diasporic space is ideally positioned to hyphenate the global and the local in a manner that does not pit one against the other. It has the potential to be a poetic crossover medium among varied cultural practices at the global and local levels, while also enabling a personal-political solidarity amongst historically repressed ethnic communities. In these crossovers lies the relevance of contemporary diasporic creative practices and theoretical formulations of the same.

With the contemporary relevance now established, a pressing question to ask is why contemporary diasporic members conceive certain kinds of cultural products, and how diasporic and non-diasporic scholars theoretically position these creative works. Are these creative and critical discourses merely a continuation of postcolonial literary, cinematic and scholarly resistance? While Diaspora Studies continues to employ postcolonial terminology such as "subalternity" and "hybridity", there is a case to be made about diasporic individual and communal occupation of a different space than postcolonial natives, and hence the need to use postcolonial terminology with qualification (this will be explicated in Chapter Three). I propose a theorisation of contemporary diasporic practice that is grounded in postcolonial theory, but also accounts for the situated interactions in the new home.

## 2.6 Conception of Diasporic Practice and Future Trajectories

The purpose of this section is to understand the conception of contemporary diasporic creativity. I therefore propose that influenced by the cultural products and processes of both the home and host societies and the routes represented by contact with other ethnic groups, new diasporic members create with the desire to “write/visualise back”, and to “write/visualise themselves into being”. The writing/visualising back is an attempt at undoing historically orientalist representative discourse, as outlined in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), that continues to underline western representations of “ethnics” at home and abroad. This dialogic phenomenon is reminiscent of the postcolonial theoretical and literary endeavour to “write back” to the former colonial power, as reflected in the title of an early and influential postcolonial studies tome, that is, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures* (Ashcroft et al 1989). The notion of “writing/visualising back”, as used in this chapter, borrows from the above volume’s usage of the term in a postcolonial context, but also explains its specific diasporic attributes.

In the case of the diaspora, the act of being geographically positioned in an erstwhile seat of empire brings them into everyday ongoing contact with western representative practices. As mentioned above, there can be a range of responses to this contact, including pandering to the west or engaging in xenophobic nostalgia for the homeland. This project, however, considers only those intellectually and creatively-inclined diasporic members (and their works) who, regardless of how their creative practice/products are received in the home and host nations, implicitly or explicitly explain their critical-creative impulses through the desire to write/visualise back and write/visualise into being. Such a situated conception of diasporic practice exhibits greater potential to cross over than ordinary conceptions.

One such diasporic creative practitioner is Deepa Mehta, whose cinematic texts (especially the elemental film trilogy comprising *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water*), as well as the contexts of their conception, production and reception will be used throughout the critical component as springboards for observations about diasporic creativity. During my interview with Mehta on the Toronto-based production set of her latest film *Heaven on Earth*, she spoke about the genesis of her creative process, commenting that it often began with questions that sprang from contemporary media and socio-political phenomena:



When I wrote *Water*, the environment was rampant with questions about the place of religion. When I wrote *Heaven on Earth*, I was reading the papers every day in Toronto about spousal abuse in the Punjabi community (cited in Khorana, ‘Maps and Movies’).

Mehta’s attempt to make feature films that talk back to representations in the mainstream media of both the home country (India), and the host nation (Canada), therefore exemplify the situated diasporic practitioner’s impulse to write/visualise back.

The authenticity and representativeness of diasporic creative practitioners like Mehta and Nair has been critiqued by scholars like Paranjape who refers to them as ‘doubly privileged’ (2004: 55). However, it is the contention of this thesis that not only is the notion of representativeness irrelevant with regards to the heterogeneous Indian diaspora (as discussed in the section “A Case Study of the Indian Diaspora”), but also the relative privilege of these makers can be viewed as enabling.

In other words, higher levels of education and access to resources can facilitate the diasporic impulse to write/visualise back. Citing the case of British novelist of Indian-Pakistani origin Salman Rushdie, Trivedi notes that he was roused to write back to the metropolis after being discontented with the misrepresentation of India in western visual media like the British TV series *The Far Pavilions* and *The Jewel in the Crown* and Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi* (2008: 208). Therefore, it is Rushdie’s access to the above visual media, as well as his Cambridge education that enabled him to critique misrepresentations of his homeland. The focus in this project, therefore, is on those diasporic makers who may be privileged, but have a clear socio-political imperative to create. When representing the homeland, this imperative often takes the form of writing/visualising back to western/colonial discourse. At the same time, the impact of the new society on their transforming individual and collective consciousness is often expressed through the imperative of each practitioner writing/visualising themselves into being.

The writing/visualising themselves into being by contemporary diasporic creative practitioners is a manifestation of heuristics, that is, the poetic invention of situated new practices with crossover potential. It also represents a personal and political response to the marginal ambivalence accorded to diasporic experiences in public and academic discourse.

For example, diasporic scholar Magdalene Ang-Lygate, a Malaysian Chinese woman who migrated to Britain, talks about the need for articulating the diasporic location or (un)location and its experiences despite the lack of suitable vocabulary: 'I have had to use permutations... words such as "black",... diasporic, immigrant, visible minority, ethnic, non-white, women of colour, "Third World" women,... native (female) Other – all of which are individually wanting and inaccurate' (cited in Brooks, 2004: 27). At the same time, Lee notes that hybrid theorist Ien Ang views diasporic ambivalence as a positive state enabling the ongoing creation of diasporic identity itself:

Like Bhabha, Ien Ang attributes to this space subversive and destabilizing potential, while reading into it unlimited creative possibilities, in terms of the trajectories along which diasporicity may unfold. Ang points out that "diasporic imagination is steeped in continuous ambivalence", and this is an ambivalence that "highlights the fundamental *precariousness* of diasporic identity construction, its positive *indeterminacy*" (2004: 70).

It appears, therefore, that the very indeterminacy of contemporary diasporas can enable creative practices that allow practitioners to write/visualise themselves into being.

While access to western representative practices creates imperatives for diasporic practitioners to write/visualise back, contemporary diasporas are also exposed to the media of the home nation. This media, although dislocated from their new geographical location, is often as pervasive a part of their daily mediascape as the media of the host society. An example of such a media source is the India-based Zee Network which has exclusive channels devoted to national news and current affairs, home-produced serials and Bollywood films and now claims to be 'the largest media franchise serving the South Asian Diaspora' ('About us', Zee TV). I argue that the home media (including diasporic media in the new home) performs a different function for the diasporic individuals and communities than the host media, in that it enables them to imagine ongoing cultural and spiritual links with the land of origin. In addition, interactions with both kinds of media produces new experiences for diasporic members, often enabling them to imagine and create new routes.

While the media of the home nation enables diasporic connections to maintain links with the homeland as well as create new ones, it may also be considered unrepresentative of their diasporic situation. This lack of contentment adds further fuel to the fire to write/visualise themselves into being. For instance, in interviews and focus group sessions conducted amongst London's South Asian and Greek Cypriot communities, Roza

Tsagarousianou found that respondents resented being treated as an extension of the home audiences, and demanded more situation-specific programming (2001: 167). Another example of discontent with the media of the homeland can be found in Deepa Mehta's *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002) which not only satirises the stereotypical representations of Indians in Canada, but also pokes fun at older migrants' identification with the fantasies and values perpetuated by Bollywood. The writing/visualising into being, in the case of the above film is most effectively performed by the character of Sue, a second-generation Indian who likes Bollywood cinema as much as the films of Armenian-Canadian Atom Egoyan. This leads Amy Fung to pronounce her a 'non-essentialised citizen' (2005/2006: 79), and demonstrates her situated personal-political-poetic response to diasporic ambivalence.

In addition to writing/visualising themselves into being as a response to the tropes of the home media, diasporic practitioners also appropriate these tropes and devices in their own practice. Referring to the growing Indian diaspora in the west, Jigna Desai notes that cultural products, like 'diasporic and Bollywood films, and also videos and DVDs, satellite television, and live performances, greatly contribute to the production of transnational ties as well as ethnic, gender, and class identities' (2006: 117). She adds that these cultural productions from the homeland and its diaspora are not only ongoing negotiations of identity, but also impact the content and form of the creative works of diasporic practitioners:

Additionally, the impact of Bollywood extends beyond the content of films, appearing often in the filmic conventions that are reflected in the aesthetic forms and narrative structures in a variety of films. *Masala* and *Bhaji on the Beach* employ musical sequences, while *Mississippi Masala* and *Fire* feature Bollywood music both as background music as well as part of the narrative structure. *Bollywood/Hollywood* literally and figuratively merges the two cinemas with its psychosocial dialogue accompanying romantic comedy, family drama, and musical numbers (Desai, 2006: 117-118).

The use of multiple national cinematic conventions in the works of Indian diasporic filmmakers will be explored in detail in Chapters Two and Three. It is evident so far that the practices of contemporary diasporic creative practitioners manifest both roots and routes, and are conceived to write/visualise back as well as write/visualise into being.

In light of the above discussion on the importance of diasporic routes, it is now essential to map their possible trajectories. Many scholars have characterised diasporic identity as a becoming, but Indian-Canadian scholar and writer Uma Parameswaran recognises four distinct phases of diaspora and creativity encompassed in this becoming. She notes:

The four phases were one, fear of the new land and nostalgia for the old; two, an immersion in the rat race of the workplace or school that precludes creative work; three, involvement in one's ethnocentric community which energises creative work; and the fourth and final phase of settlement which is when an immigrant starts taking an active part in the public life of the national community (2001: 291).

While the above stages may be played out in individual diasporic lives depending on the reasons for migration and the socio-economic state in the host society among other factors, they unequivocally equate settlement with a role in the public life of the "national community". I contend that such a definition of settlement precludes the possibility of crossover routes by confining the settled diasporic citizen to the geographic and discursive territory of the new nation, thereby essentialising the new settler by assimilating him/her. Ideas of settlement and their creative manifestations must, therefore, continue to consider personal-political-poetic routes in addition to the originary roots of the homeland and the essentialised roots of the new nation. The following chapter exemplifies this position by examining the roots and routes that make up Deepa Mehta's personal, cultural and creative filmmaking influences as a diasporic auteur.

### **3. CHAPTER TWO**

## **LOCATIONS: THE SITUATED INFLUENCES OF MEHTA'S FILM TRILOGY**

As explored in the introductory chapter, the evolving relationship between location and culture, which is increasingly crossover rather than originary, is key to a holistic understanding of situated diasporic practice. This practice itself crosses over in terms of culture and genre. This will now be examined in relation to a contemporary diasporic practitioner, that is, Indo-Canadian writer-director Deepa Mehta. While there is arguably a range of diasporic filmmakers, including those bracketed as commercial, arthouse, crossover, and experimental, Mehta has been chosen for several reasons. She manifests the diasporic intention to write/visualise back and write/visualise into being (as outlined in Chapter One). Also, the enmeshing of her personal diasporic journey with cinematic poetics and cultural politics brings about the genre crossovers and audience crossover potential of her practice (examined in detail in Chapter Three and Chapter Four, respectively). In other words, even though her elements trilogy is based on “Indian” stories, it is Mehta’s location and global influences, the mixing and transcendence of multiple genres, and the reception of the the trilogy that render it “diasporic”. Additionally, the similarities and differences in our diasporic trajectories make her creative practice a useful springboard for my own developing cinematic art. My own visual essay, theorised in Chapter Five, is neither entirely located in India nor fictional. However, what it shares with Mehta’s trilogy is its diasporic filmmaking location and genre crossovers.

Mehta’s *Water* has already proved a springboard for the memoir written by her daughter Devyani Saltzman. As outlined in the preface, it is a good example of a situated diasporic reading that performs, negotiates, and invents diasporic belongings. Following is a passage from the memoir about the furore over the shooting of *Water* in India that invokes the personal-political-poetic in Mehta’s diasporic journey, and Saltzman’s own similarities and differences from it:

The smoke from the havan rose in a thin column toward the sky. It was a windless day and it remained almost motionless, suspended in the air. I didn’t know that the space between two worlds, two cultures, could be such a painful place for her. I wondered what it was like to be a young, newly married Indian woman in Toronto in 1973, separated from friends and family and everything she knew. I felt it myself at times, adrift between communities, lost without a sense of belonging. It was clear that everything that was happening had much deeper roots than opposition to a story about Hindu widows (Saltzman, 2005: 62).

A reading of Mehta's influences, therefore, must be undertaken with due consideration to the specificities of my diasporic trajectory and their points of dispersal and convergence with that of Mehta.

This chapter, while beginning with an explication of my reading framework, will then locate Indo-Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta, the director of the elements film trilogy, in relation to the various cinematic traditions that have influenced her personally, culturally, as well as creatively. For this, I draw on primary and secondary sources that reference Mehta's own voice to locate her and her work, but do not always reflect on how their own locations affect the readings they produce. The sources include *Shooting Water*, Saltzman's memoir about the making of *Water*; filmed interviews that I conducted with Mehta and her partner and producer, David Hamilton, on a film set in Toronto in December 2007; as well as secondary material on Mehta and other filmmakers in the popular press and in refereed publications.

Mehta may be considered representative of a growing breed of privileged South Asian intellectuals and artists in the diaspora whose lives and work are receiving increasing coverage in the home countries, in the diaspora and in the "liberal" west. While the complex location of such individuals and of their creative and critical work may at first seem difficult to theorise, they have been preceded by other "ethnics" (diasporic and non-diasporic) who appear to disturb the east-west binary and cross over in terms of the content and form of their cultural products. For example, Chinese cinema in the mid 1990s is symbolic of such a disturbance as it was considered to be 'undergoing a tension in redefining nationalization and internationalization' (Wah Lau, 1995: 22). The same may be said of recent Indian and Indian diasporic cinema, even though there are differences in the respective cinematic styles.

In light of the Chinese precedent, I will inspect the local and global contexts that have produced, and are continuing to produce, cinema like Mehta's. I contend that Mehta is directly comparable to a director like China's Chen Kaige for an investigation of whose work, Wah Lau considers it 'necessary to consult, rather than conceal, the different tropes, both cultural and cross-cultural' (1995: 22). Moreover, due to the social and political critique embodied in their films, both practitioners are considered controversial in their home countries, while being applauded in international festivals and independent film

circuits. The cultural and cross-cultural tropes evident in Mehta's elements film trilogy will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate that these crossover tropes have been conceived as a result of the situated contexts of her filmmaking influences, and therefore merit more attention. The contexts considered here are broadly - transnational commercial cinemas represented by Hollywood and Bollywood, the national cinema of the host society that is Canada, South Asian diasporic film practice, as well as the category of transnational (albeit independent) world cinema.

### **3.1 Mehta and Me: Towards a Reflexive and Situated Reading of Diasporic Practice**

The Bemba of Africa have a ritual for when a girl comes of age. It's called the Chisungu, and they talk of it as "growing the girls". I mulled over the Bemba, and a famous anthropologist's argument that all rites of passage involve three stages: separation from one's old state, a liminal period where one is without definition, and a reincorporation into society in a new form (Devyani Saltzman, 2005: 142).

The above rites of passage applicable to womanhood can also be used to describe the various stages of the creative process, as well as the states one goes through as a migrant. It is from the located becoming of this shared female-creative-diasporic rite of passage (which incorporates the personal, the poetic and the political) that I look at Mehta as a diasporic creative practitioner and consider her body of work as already crossing over in terms of nation and genre, and with the potential to cross over from arthouse to mainstream audiences worldwide.

As a fellow member of the Indian diaspora and a cultural critic/maker (albeit belonging to another generation), the migratory and cinematic trajectories of my life often parallel those of Mehta's. It is useful, therefore, that I map our "mimetic" similarities as well as differences before setting out to examine her cinematic affiliations from a situated perspective.

Firstly, I will explain our connections in terms of inherited privileges in India and young adult diasporic journeys. Deepa Mehta, the daughter of a film distributor and a Philosophy graduate from the University of Delhi (Mongrel Media, 'Water'), married Canadian filmmaker Paul Saltzman and migrated to Canada when she was 23 years old. I, after a childhood of relative privilege and English-medium school education in northern



India, enrolled at the University of Adelaide at the age of nineteen to study Media and English. After four years of undergraduate studies and lessons in young independent diasporic life, I commenced a PhD dissertation and documentary on the crossover potential of diasporic cinema, using Deepa Mehta's elements film trilogy as a case study.

Secondly, I will elaborate on our explicit and indirect training in various film genres. In an interview, Mehta speaks of growing up watching Hindi films, viewing a Satyajit Ray film at the age of sixteen, and falling into filmmaking by chance (cited in Nadkarni, 'Elements of Enlightenment'). In my interview with her, she mentioned that as her father was a film distributor and cinema-owner, she grew up with a very healthy dose of Indian commercial cinema, but was exposed to non-Hindi and non-Hollywood cinema at university (Khorana, 'Maps and Movies'). I grew up with Bollywood classics and commercials as well as Hollywood blockbusters, was influenced by crossover and new age *Hinglish* (that is, combining Hindi and English) films as an adolescent, and have recently transitioned from studying postcolonial literature to examining and making diasporic film.

Thirdly, I will discuss Mehta's filmography and my different viewing contexts for each film of her elements trilogy. This helps highlight our generational differences as well as our diasporic privileges and connections. Mehta's first feature-length directorial venture was *Sam & Me* in 1991, followed by two episodes of *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, a Canadian-UK feature film called *Camilla* in 1993, *Fire* (the first film of the elements trilogy) in 1996, *Earth* in 1998, *Bollywood/Hollywood* in 2002, *Republic of Love* in 2003, *Water* (the film that completes the trilogy) in 2005, and Toronto-based *Heaven on Earth* in 2008. While the trilogy is her most acclaimed set of films yet, with *Fire* winning several international film festival awards, *Earth* being selected as India's nomination for the Academy Awards, and *Water* making the cut at the Oscars as a Canadian entry in the Best Foreign Film category, it also undoubtedly represents her most controversial body of work (in addition to being the work she is most identified with). The opposition of the Hindu religious right in India to all three films, but *Fire* and *Water* in particular, caused Mehta to remark in an interview, 'I really felt hurt by what had happened to me in a country that I considered my own' (cited in Thandi, 'Tumultuous *Water*').

While I was still in *my* country in 1996, I wasn't legally allowed to watch *Fire* because of its adult rating, but heard rumours of its taboo-breaking content from older friends and

cousins who had managed to get hold of the pirated version after the film was prematurely taken off cinema screens in India. *Earth*, released in 1999, seemed more accessible and real as it appeared to be a cinematic rendition of our history chapters on the partition of the subcontinent. I had also, by that time, entered adolescence and was moving away from commercial Bollywood and Hollywood fare. I saw *Water* on DVD in my suburban Adelaide home in 2005, and was moved in an entirely different way – as a young diasporic Indian woman, I was viewing a story based in India, and written and directed by a woman who lives in Canada, but from a position that is geographically outside of both India and Canada. Although the film was eventually released in India in March 2007, it never reached my hometown of Jammu in the terrorism-torn state of Jammu and Kashmir. And therefore, I feel privileged to be examining these works outside *my* country, aware that the honour comes with its share of responsibility. My privileged research position is comparable to that of other South Asian studies scholars in the diaspora like Purnima Mankekar who writes of her engagement with South Asia as being shaped by a politics of location that stems from multiple subject positions, and adds:

My positioning *vis-à-vis* South Asian studies as practiced in the US has been shaped by my understanding that a politics of location, far from nostalgically seeking one's roots or being complacent about where "one belongs", involves interrogating one's privileges and blind spots (2003: 53).

In this sense, then, my "burden of representation" (like that of other South Asian researchers in the diaspora) as a contemporary Indian diasporic cultural critic/maker working from the west is similar to that of Mehta's. According to Kobena Mercer, this burden is ever present 'whether one is making a film, writing a book, organising a conference or curating an exhibition, this "sense of urgency" arises because the cultural reproduction of a certain racism structurally depends on the regulation of Black visibility in the public sphere' (cited in Foster, 1997: 235). It is with this in mind that I will set out to explore Deepa Mehta's filmmaking location in relation to the two commercial film traditions that hold the most sway in the public spheres of her home and host societies – that is, Bollywood and Hollywood.

### **3.2 Mehta and B/Hollywood**

In this section, I will examine Mehta's complex relationships with the two major commercial cinematic traditions of the world, broadly classified as the Bollywood and Hollywood film industries. This complexity is evident on a personal performative level, as well as in Mehta's discomfort with the political ideologies and the often essentialist cultural poetics embodied in these hegemonic film industries. I contend that it is necessary to examine Mehta's association with Bollywood and Hollywood to examine the discomfort, and to highlight her use and appropriation of particular commercial devices to enhance the crossover appeal of her films.

Commenting on the fiery response to *Fire* from orthodox Hindu elements in India, Moorti reasons, 'Mehta's status as a Canadian resident and the film's disavowal of traditional norms were used to mark the product as "western"' ('Inflamed Passions'). While Mehta may not construe her films as "western", she nonetheless appears to be distinguishing herself from Indian popular cinema, or Bollywood as she remarks in an interview after the stalling of *Water*: 'The situation in India at the moment is that if you produce films with song and dance routines or unserious films, you are fine. It doesn't matter how violent and vulgar they are. But if you want to make something even slightly introspective it is a no-no' (cited in Phillips, 'Deepa Mehta speaks out').

Elsewhere, Mehta talks about her passion for Indian films: 'Was crazy about movies, my first film I ever saw was *Mamta*, I saw it forty times, and have named my daughter Devyani after Suchitra Sen's character' (Rediff, 'Deepa Mehta Chat'). Mehta's disavowal or selective appreciation of Bollywood indicates that she is aware of the impact of her Indian upbringing and film-viewing on her own filmmaking, but also nostalgic for a certain era in Indian cinema. Significantly, Indian cinematic culture has evolved since her childhood and adolescent days spent in the homeland, and this evolution needs to be mapped to help better locate the personal, political and poetic facets of the trilogy. Not only have there been a series of independent films on "serious" subjects from Indian and diasporic female directors in the last decade (Verma, 2005), but mainstream Indian cinema itself seems to be moving towards making films that 'present an India with deep political and social flaws' (Galloway, 2007: 8). This necessitates a re-examination of Mehta's relationship with contemporary Bollywood cinema.

The recently instituted IIFA (Indian International Film Academy) Awards take place outside India, and are especially targeted at the vast Indian diaspora that are regular patrons of Bollywood. Despite Bollywood's nonchalance towards expatriate directors like Mehta, she received the award for the brightest Indian director abroad at the 2007 IIFA awards held in Yorkshire (Jha, 'IIFA is my first Indian award'). Ghosh mentions that although Mehta's father had just passed away, she came out of her seclusion to receive the award on the insistence of Amitabh Bachchan, a Bollywood stalwart (also the brand ambassador for IIFA) to whom she could not say no ('Amitabh Bachchan writes a letter to Deepa Mehta').

Jha notes that winning the award made Mehta lose her discomfort with Bollywood, especially after her experience of being hounded out of Varanasi during the shooting of *Water* as she mentioned, 'This was my first award from home, the first bona fide Indian award. And I'm very happy. Sure beats burning my effigies', (cited in Jha, 'IIFA is my first Indian award'). However, despite Mehta's acceptance within Bollywood, her work practices seem different from the more lackadaisical attitude of the subcontinental film industry. For instance, Saltzman notes in *Shooting Water* that John Abraham, the Bollywood actor who plays the character of Narayan in the film reduced his rehearsal days and explains that this was the Bollywood system at work (2005: 220). She adds, 'John was involved in three other films at the same time...Most actors and actresses worked on multiple films simultaneously, changing roles as many times as they changed costumes. On average a Bollywood film took two years to complete because of juggling actors' dates. Rehearsals and tight shooting schedules were a Western phenomenon' (Saltzman, 2005: 220). At the same time, when I probed Mehta regarding her claiming not to be a Bollywood director, yet continuing to use Indian actors, she replied:

The talent of Indian actors in the west will grow with time, but is sadly very limited. One is stuck with Navin Andrews and Jimi Mistry, and that's it. There aren't many roles, so the opportunities are extremely scarce. There is an incredible pool of talent in India, so I feel fortunate to be able to tap into that (cited in Khorana, 'Maps and Movies').

Therefore, it appears that Mehta's decision to use Bollywood talent in her films is driven by circumstance, as well as a possible strategy to raise the profile of her films amongst mainstream Indian and diasporic audiences, thereby facilitating the crossover.

Mehta's attempt at appealing to a wider audience is most evident in the second film of her trilogy, *Earth* which 'spoke the languages of India...and seems to be primarily directed

to an Indian audience because of its choice of well known actors and a popular composer and lyricist as well as its use of unexplained visual clues' (Levitin, 2003: 279).

Commenting on the rather mainstream trope of melodrama in the film that is based on a literary work, Levitin adds, 'Partition becomes both backdrop to and catalyst for the love triangle's tragic outcome, an emotional narrative that, in contrast to Sidhwa's understated novel, is reminiscent of popular Hindi cinema's sensationalism' (2003: 279). Therefore, it appears that despite Mehta's disavowal of certain ideologies, practices and styles characteristic of commercial Bollywood, she is both influenced by a certain era of Indian cinema, and willing to use Bollywood talent and tropes in her films.

If we cast a glance at Mehta's filmography outside the elements trilogy, what emerges is an equally, if not more fraught relationship with the dominant film industry-institution of the world, or Hollywood. Using provocative descriptives for her "Indian" films, Majumder contrasts them with her "white" films, namely, *The Republic of Love* and *Tuscan Soup*:

After a lesbian bombshell, a smouldering partition saga and a stormy confrontation with India's political masters over filming the story of Benares widows, Ms Mehta seems to be in no hurry to pick up another Indian theme. Her two forthcoming films are entirely on "white" subjects and targeted mainly at a Western audience ('Stop seeing red').

Associating Mehta with a Hollywood/western sensibility rather than a hybrid cinematic discourse, Majumder adds that according to Mehta, 'she had lived in the West long enough to handle a "white film"' ('Stop seeing red'). At the same time, it is note-worthy that the one-time documentary maker's first foray into Hollywood, *Camilla*, occurred before she conceived the trilogy, and it proved disastrous for her career.

Soon after its failure, Mehta commented, 'Hollywood's so seductive. Before you know it, you're sucked in. Hollywood is not called the kingdom of smoke and mirrors for nothing' (cited in Randoja, 'Deepa Mehta'). Cormier seems to have foreseen Mehta's independent streak as during the filming of *Camilla*, he noted, 'With her plainspoken style and her passion for character and dialogue, Mehta is unlikely to convert to the kind of frothy star vehicles that power the Hollywood glamour machine' (1993: 62). In other words, it is clear that despite Mehta's geographic location in the west, she does not associate herself, her politics, or her poetics with the practices of Hollywood.

Mehta's incomplete seduction by Hollywood, or rather her appropriation of multiple film traditions is evidenced by the fact that while making *The Republic*, she used music by Tavleen Singh, a renowned Indian composer who specializes in "fusion" music (Majumder, 'Stop seeing red'). While taking a break from "serious" cinema after the halting of *Water*, she wrote and directed a romantic comedy titled *Bollywood Hollywood*, which 'tackles the influence of both Hollywood, and Bollywood on the lives of Indians living abroad' (Kapoor, 'A matter of humour'). Musing over the "nationality" of the film, Kapoor asks, 'Is *Bollywood Hollywood* an Indian film directed by an Indian or a Canadian film made by a director who is settled in Canada?' ('A matter of humour'). Deepa Mehta seems dismissive of critics' and reviewers' traditional adherence to nation-bound film categories as she remarks that when *Earth* won an award, both Indian and Canadian convoys were present and there was confusion over who should have collected the award (cited in Kapoor, 'A matter of humour'). She adds that she considers her films to be universal entities that belong to everyone (cited in Kapoor, 'A matter of humour'). At this juncture, it becomes crucial to inquire into Mehta's location in the national cinema of her host country and examine whether her ambivalent relationship with both Bollywood and Hollywood is echoed in her association with Canadian national cinema.

### **3.3 Mehta and Canadian Cinema**

Mehta's relationship with Canadian cinema reveals an evolution from a stage of considering her work as "ethnic" to a more open approach in terms of funding and ownership. However, as this section explicates, such a change does not mean that Mehta's films have necessarily become more "Canadian" in content and form and hence she is more suitably located within the national film canon. On the contrary, it shows a re-definition of the national cinema itself which is now more accommodating of films with proven cultural capital and crossover appeal.

When *Fire*, the first film of Mehta's elements trilogy about the relationship between two sisters-in-law in a joint middle-class family in India opened the Perspective Canada program at the 1996 Toronto International Film Festival (Randoja, 'Deepa Mehta'), eyebrows were raised in India and overseas as contrary responses abounded. In a review of the film, Randoja talks of the Toronto-based filmmaker as having 'survived the threadbare

rigours of Canadian moviemaking and the seduction call of Hollywood to make *Fire*, her finest and most personal film to date' ('Deepa Mehta'). However, if *Fire* neither conforms to the tenets of Canadian Cinema nor Hollywood, why was it selected for a program like Perspective Canada? According to Liz Czach, the program traditionally includes films 'because they are "representative" and adhere to a political agenda of what is good for the nation and good for Canadian film – not necessarily driven by quality, value, or good taste' (2004: 84). She adds, 'the film's Canadianness was called into question by numerous institutional bodies, including the media, which questioned the "ethnic" slant of the programming choice' (2004: 86).

If *Fire's* rootedness or lack thereof in what is officially defined as Canadian national cinema remains under a cloud, it is not the same with *Water*. While the latter film is also based in India as it centres on the plight of widows during the pre-independence era and uses Indian actors, it was nominated by Canada as the country's official entry in the Best Foreign Film category of the 2006 Academy Awards. The recognition can be attributed to both an expanding definition of what constitutes Canadian cinema as well as recent changes in Academy Award rules. Commenting on the huge success of *Water* at the Canadian box-office compared to domestic English-language films, Vlessing points out that in order to resuscitate the native film industry, 'the Canadian government is financing more home-grown movies that are "Canadian" without being about Canada' (2006: 15). At the same time, while 'In the past, the Academy only allowed a country to submit a film in one of its national languages; this year, that rule has been waived, paving the way for Canada to submit Fox Searchlight's Hindi-language *Water*' (Galloway, 2007: 8). Mehta herself seems to view the film as Canadian, as she says regarding the film's surprise Oscar nomination, '*Water* changed the way Canadians looked at their own films' (cited in Khorana, 'Maps and Movies'). At the same time, in the opinion of Mehta's partner and the producer of her films, David Hamilton, Telefilm Canada's decision to consider non-English and non-French films is not just an economic decision, but reflective of the changing attitude of Canada which is finally living up to its multicultural nature (Hamilton, 2007: transcript).

It is worth noting that prior to the acceptance of *Water* as a Canadian film, Mehta felt as rejected by Canada as she did in the case of India:

I find that I don't know what defines Canadian film anymore. Because I think that the definition is difficult as far as a person like me is concerned, a hybrid person who can

move from continent to continent...I make those films – whether it's *Fire*, *Earth*, or *Water*, and they are not considered Canadian films. So what am I? I feel like I've been really rejected and marginalized by Canada because I don't fit into any of the categories that are laid out by the government that defines what a Canadian film is (cited in Levitin, 2003: 277-78).

The overlooking of ethnic filmmakers in the Canadian film canon is reflected in George Melynk's book titled, *One Hundred Years of Canadian Cinema*, which (despite being published in 2004) divides the nation's cinema into the English-Canadian and the Quebec traditions and devotes only a few pages to Mehta's work. In a statement which possibly indicates that Melynk perceives Mehta's "real" cinema as more Indian than Canadian, he says, 'Her films about Canada are a Mehta "lite" version of her vision, while India gets the full brunt of her personal crusade' (2004: 180). However, despite the dismissal of her Canadian-themed films, Mehta is recognized by the author as 'English-Canada's pre-eminent immigrant female director, just as Lea Pool is Quebec's pre-eminent immigrant female director' (Melynk, 2004: 180). Notwithstanding the recent eminence bestowed upon Mehta by Canada through the nation's Academy Award nomination, she is still regarded by a renowned film historian like Melynk as an "immigrant female director", and not just a Canadian filmmaker. An examination of her work in relation to diasporic filmmaking will now be undertaken to establish whether that element takes precedence over descriptions of her cinema as either Indian or Canadian.

### **3.4 Mehta and Diasporic/Exilic Cinema**

Mehta's trilogy is part of a recent spate of Indian diasporic cultural productions, both in the cinematic and literary fields. While comparisons by postcolonial theorists and South Asian studies scholars to other expatriate Indian creative practitioners like Mira Nair and Salman Rushdie are inevitable, it is important to remember that unlike most diasporic film/literature that reflects on the diasporic condition alone, the trilogy is a return to the homeland. One of these returns, *Earth*, is the result of the inter-diasporic relations between filmmaker Deepa Mehta and writer Bapsi Sidhwa (author of the novel *Cracking India* on which *Earth* is based). Noting this, Mehta remarks, 'The irony of our situation hasn't escaped either 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' ('Zeitgeist Films'). Therefore, members of the South Asian diaspora are capitalising on their location for creative collaborations.

While Jeanette Herman (2005) and others have examined the diasporic element of Mehta's filmmaking position as contributing to the sense of loss in her narratives, I would argue that her cinema also exhibits exilic, and hence inevitably political and poetic (in addition to personal) attributes that have been largely overlooked. According to Hamid Naficy,

exilic filmmakers are not so much marginal or subaltern as they are interstitial, partial and multiple. And they are interstitial, partial, and multiple not only in terms of their identity and subjectivity but also in terms of the various roles they are forced to play, or choose to play, in every aspect of their films – from inception to consumption (1999: 133).

Not only did Mehta conceive the trilogy when she returned to the homeland and was moved by the plight of widows in Varanasi (Nadkarni, 'Elements of Enlightenment'), she also arguably 'wrestled to occupy the position of author-ity in relation to the Shiv Sena's Bal Thackeray' (Desai, 2004: 185), thus making her akin to an exilic director. In *Film and Politics in the Third World*, Downing points out a dilemma that is unique to filmmakers in exile: 'How should they function in relation to their native lands?' (1987: 69). Given Mehta's rejection by her homeland, her location in diasporic/exilic cinema is not as unproblematic as might first appear to be the case, and needs further probing.

To understand Mehta's positioning in diasporic and exilic filmmaking, it is important to examine the perception of these kinds of cinema, especially in the homeland. How is Mehta and her India-based cinema received in the public sphere in India? A detailed analysis of the reception of Mehta's trilogy will be undertaken in Chapter Four, but it is important to preempt the argument here by pointing out that despite the growing transnational acceptance of Indian expatriate writers and filmmakers, they are often viewed suspiciously in the homeland. This is especially if their texts reflect critically on the historical or contemporary conditions prevalent in the country they are presumed to have voluntarily forsaken for the more liberal west. Such association with western practices and values creates hostility and prevents an effective crossover.

For instance, when *Water* was an Academy Award nominee in 2006, and competed with *Rang De Basanti*, a new-age Indian film in the Foreign Film category, many India-

based filmmakers did not hesitate in backing the latter over the former on the grounds that it was a truer representation of their nation. Among these was Kunal Kohli, a successful Bollywood director who opined, 'I would rather an RDB wins over a Water. RDB deals with India and its problems and not with something that happened a hundred years ago' (cited in 'Why water finally went down the Oscar drain'). Even Naseeruddin Shah, an exponent of alternative cinema within India, is critical of diasporic practitioners like Mehta as he comments that they lack intimacy in terms of both distance and time (cited in Ansari, 'Interviews with Deepa Mehta and Naseeruddin Shah').

Despite the hostility in the homeland due to her association with diasporic cinema, Mehta appears to enjoy the privilege bestowed upon her through her position outside the creative and legal restraints of the Indian body politic. Notwithstanding her run-in with a Hindu fundamentalist mob during the making of *Water*, which is most likely attributable to her perception as an "inauthentic" Indian, it is this very lack of authenticity or hybridity that allows her an unprecedented degree of artistic freedom. Apparently conscious of this privilege, she remarks, 'I can be uninhibited about subject. Whether it is about choices for women (*Fire*) or Partition (*Earth*) I did not have to think about the repercussions as I would have in India. Nor did I have to wonder about the censor board' (cited in Ansari, 'Interviews with Deepa Mehta and Naseeruddin Shah').

After having established the benefits and perils of Mehta's association with diasporic and exilic filmmaking, I will now examine whether this is the case with other South Asian diasporic filmmakers, like Mira Nair. This is to highlight the individually and collectively enabling aspects of being a creative practitioner in the diaspora, as seen in the case of Mehta and Sidhwa. Nair's most renowned films range from *Salaam Bombay* (a documentary-style tale about street children in Bombay), to *Monsoon Wedding* (a low-budget family musical), to her latest release, *The Namesake* (an adaptation of a literary story about a Bengali immigrant family in the US). It is noteworthy that Mehta and Nair knew each other from a young age (their mothers hail from the same Indian town), and Mehta recently penned a piece on her contemporary in *The Times of India*. In this brief memoir, she recalls six-year old Nair's courageous strides in their family swimming pool: 'Her impetuous and fearless jump into the deep end of the pool earned her a kind of grudging admiration... To this day, Mira continues to surprise me in different ways with her ingrained "chutzpah". Her work, for me, reflects dauntless spirit' ('Deepa Mehta on Mira

Nair'). It appears that there may be more solidarity between the two Indian diasporic rivals as Mehta further adds that *Salaam Bombay's* triumph in Cannes was as much celebrated in Toronto as it was in India ('Deepa Mehta on Mira Nair').

As regards the current status of their personal and professional association, Mehta remarks, 'I never hesitate to call her, if I need either feedback regarding my films or just plain help, and she always responds. To this day, *Salaam Bombay* remains one of my favourite films' ('Deepa Mehta on Mira Nair'). It therefore appears that in the absence of whole-hearted support from either their homelands or their adopted homes, filmmakers like Mehta and Nair must find their home in a community of fellow diasporic creative practitioners, and help sustain the other members of this location which is privileged and privileging in its own right. It is the situated becomings of this location that lend Mehta's work a crossover dimension, and necessitates an examination of her personal-political-poetic location in world cinema.

### **3.5 Mehta and World Cinema**

An examination of Mehta's location within the broad category of world cinema is essential to prevent the diasporic label from hindering her crossover potential, as well as to recognise the influence of other situated yet internationally renowned filmmakers on her work. In *Shooting Water*, Saltzman comments on the eastern and western cinematic influences on her mother's work:

The actors didn't lip-sync to the songs in *Water*. It was a creative choice of Mom's, and one that reflected the influence of both East and West on her work. Bollywood had influenced her enough to insert six song situations in the film, but a love of Japanese director Yasujiro Ozu's restraint and Ingmar Bergman's meditations on psychology had made her leave room for silence. She chose to let the characters experience their songs, not sing them (2006: 231).

Since there is no secondary literature directly comparing Mehta's trilogy to the works of any major international director-auteurs, I will attempt to both evoke the similarities in content and technique between her films and the films of those she cites as her influences, as well as use the filmographies of these directors to locate Mehta in the annals of world cinema.

The following section consists of italicised pieces that are anecdotal and perform situated readings comparing Mehta's trilogy with the works of those she cites as influences. The segments that immediately follow the italicised pieces contextualise these readings within a critical framework.

Yasujiro Ozu's *Tokyo Story*:

*There is a serenity about the film that is also present in Mehta's Water. Mehta has commented that she was influenced by Ozu's restraint, and often cut out dialogue at the last minute while shooting Water. Also, just as the relatively still camera and the aesthetically-pleasing visuals of Ozu's film stand in stark contrast to the collapse of the joint family, the mental turmoil of the aged parents and the war widow in post-war Japan, the starkness of the widows' lives in Mehta's film stands out against the sheer magnificence of the Ganges and its ghats. When I watched the elderly couple in Tokyo Story, banished to the modern resort of Atami Springs by their hassled city children, I was reminded of a scene in Water. The Japanese pair sits in close proximity and comment on the calmness of the sea (this image also appears on the DVD cover), while Kalyani and Narayan stealthily meet by the riverbank. There is a cross-cultural and cross-generational similarity here that is particularly poignant. It is difficult to predict to what extent this scene influenced Mehta, but the evocation of enduring love through the image of flowing water is not lost on a viewer. Another similarity is the image of the train at the end in both films. While Chuyia, the seven-year old widow in Mehta's film is bound for a more certain future as she has been handed over by her self-appointed guardian Shakuntala to Narayan, the destiny of Noriko, the widow in Ozu's film who is closer to her in-laws than their blood relatives appears uncertain. As Noriko gazes at the antique timepiece given to her by her father-in-law as a souvenir of her recently deceased mother-in-law's memory, I hear the cinematic Gandhi chant on the railway platform in Benares – "Truth is God". Perhaps both widows are not forgotten. The subaltern figure of the widow is given agency and poetically invoked in both films.*

While both Ozu and Mehta may be put within the boundaries of world cinema due to the independent transnational distribution of their films (in addition to the hybrid content and form), it is worth noting that they are often associated in critical and mainstream western film discourse with "Japanese" and "Indian" cinema, respectively. Is this then, not

only a similarity between the two filmmakers, but also a contradiction in the terms that define their work? Commenting on the style of Ozu's body of work, consisting of about fifty-five films over more than three decades, Donald Richie comments:

Ozu's method, like all poetic methods, is oblique. He does not confront emotion, he surprises it. Precisely, he restricts his vision in order to see more; he limits his world in order to transcend these limitations. His cinema is formal and the formality is that of poetry, the creation of an ordered context that destroys habit and familiarity, returning to each word, to each image, its original freshness and urgency. In all of this Ozu is close to the *sumi-e* ink drawing masters of Japan, to the masters of the haiku and the *waka*. It is this quality to which the Japanese refer when they speak of Ozu as being 'most Japanese', when they speak of his 'real Japanese flavour' (1974: xiii).

At the same time, Catherine Russell writes that Ozu's association with a distinctively Japanese filmmaking sensibility ignores 'his appropriation of the breezy style of Hollywood comedy and the dramatic realism of American melodrama' ('Tokyo Story'). She particularly notes the amalgamation of cross-cultural and local themes and styles in one of Ozu's most celebrated films, *Tokyo Story*, opining that, 'On many levels this is a "universal" story with deep currents of humanist emotion... *Tokyo Story* is also very much about one city at one moment in time, and dwells on a level of historical specificity that is equally crucial to its lasting effects' ('Tokyo Story'). Despite being specific to Indian conditions, Mehta's trilogy, like Ozu's films, appeals to worldwide audiences as she comments, '*Fire* is about particular individuals, but it is also a universal question, not unlike *Earth*' (cited in Phillips, 'An interview with Deepa Mehta'). Mehta further adds that she believes in the ideology put forth in filmmaker Luis Bunuel's autobiography, *My Last Sigh*, where he 'talks about the importance of characters being rooted to a place. He says that any character that is honest and rooted to a place immediately becomes universal because human emotions are universal' (cited in Phillips, 'An interview with Deepa Mehta').

Besides intertwining crossover and situated elements in their films, both Ozu and Mehta meditate on the modernizing aspects of their respective home countries through the use of water and train imagery as well as the formal appropriation of natural settings. Reflecting on the national allegory that is *Tokyo Story*, Russell comments, 'This is not just a story set in Tokyo; it is the story of postwar Tokyo, a tale of the family of Japan trying to find the way forward after the twenty-year turmoil of war and occupation' ('Tokyo Story'). One could argue that Mehta's elements films, if considered chronologically (from the period when the stories are set rather than the order of their release dates), move from the

“foetal modernity” symbolised by Gandhian ideals in *Water*, to the “infant modernity” of a partitioning sub-continent in *Earth*, and finally to the “adolescent modernity” depicted by an identity crisis-ridden middle-class India in *Fire*. Like Ozu, Mehta personalises, politicises and renders poetic the wider socio-political context as she says of *Earth*, ‘I wanted to tell this really large story from the standpoint of an intimate group of friends from different ethnic groups and trace out the process of partition through them’ (cited in Phillips, ‘An interview with Deepa Mehta’). Both directors also juxtapose the material austerity of their characters’ lives with a visual acuity that is at odds with the aesthetics of contemporary Indian and Japanese cinema. In the case of Japan, Philip Lopate observes:

I once asked the knowledgeable Kyoko Hirano, film programmer of the Japan Society, why Japanese films of the prosperous, Sony period were not as deep as in the golden age of Mizoguchi, Naruse, Kurosawa, and Ozu. Very simple, she said. Japan used to be a poor country, and that poetic sadness was an outgrowth of material sparseness (‘Yasujiro Ozu’).

The most visible symbols of material sparseness-poetic sadness in Ozu films are trains, boats and water. Remarking on their recurrence in *Tokyo Story*, Russell notes, ‘Ozu’s real achievement is to have taken the “sweet sadness” of classical Japanese poetry, and applied it to the perception of modernity as an unstoppable train’ (‘Tokyo Story’). While water has a strong visual and metaphoric role in Mehta’s *Water*, trains figure strongly in both *Water* and *Earth*, thus symbolizing a country whose inhabitants are embarking on the journey of modernity. This journey embodies both the despair of partition and the hope of a new nation and is therefore imbued with the same kind of poetic sadness as Ozu’s resignation to the onslaught of time. Modernity and poetic austerity are also themes evident in the films of Ingmar Bergman, another world cinema director whose work Mehta claims to be influenced by.

Ingmar Bergman’s “Faith Trilogy” consisting of *Through a Glass Darkly*, *Winter Light* and *The Silence*:

*I like the idea that when we are young, we see things (particularly pertaining to faith and religion) quite clearly, but as we grow into adulthood, the same view becomes as if looking through a glass darkly. Perhaps I like it because it resembles the contours of my relationship with faith.*

*Did Mehta have a similar relationship with the religious traditions of her homeland, keeping in mind that she wrote a Masters thesis on Hindu philosophy and married a non-Indian? She has mentioned in her interviews that Hinduism is about transformation and humaneness, yet this is not how it is manifested in the contemporary Hindu religious institutions that have resisted her films like no other element in India. Could this possibly have shaken her faith? Perhaps her relationship with religion (not spirituality) is like Bergman's ambiguous treatment of the subject in the trilogy – God is light, love and a foreign language; but he/it is also incest, death and silence. In the midst of this doubt over faith, Mehta seems to choose individual choice and social justice over repression disguised as tradition. Besides the thematic links between the two trilogies, there are also certain similarities in the overall visual style and the incorporation of particular elements. According to Mehta, she is moved by Bergman because he has a deceptively simple style of telling a powerful story. This is certainly apparent in *Water* which has minimal dialogue and uncluttered yet moving scenes. One could argue the same is true for *Earth* where the personal, like the little girl's breaking of plates in the opening scene and the later pulling apart of her doll are used to signal the magnitude of the larger political story, that is, the partitioning of the subcontinent. At the same time, the play of light and shadows, or outdoor and indoor light in *Fire* evokes the same sort of juxtaposition between liberation and repression as it does in *Through a Glass Darkly* and *Winter Light*. As in *The Silence*, the train/journeying figures as a metaphor for both creation and destruction, hope and despair, rebirth and death in Mehta's films.*

Although the dark and colour-deprived early films of Ingmar Bergman may not at first glance appear to have anything in common with the “exotic” fare that is Mehta's elements trilogy, a closer examination reveals several similarities in terms of dominant visual and thematic motifs. One of these is the recurrence of the train/journeying myth in Bergman films, a symbol which also has great significance in both *Earth* and *Water*. Commenting on the importance of this metaphor in *The Silence* as well as other Bergman films, Brightman argues that we cannot lose the thematic unity provided by Bergman's favoured myth of the journey because ‘although it proves elliptical in *The Silence*, in many of his earlier films it serves to draw character along an arduous path of discovery and development, for better or worse’ (1964: 7). As mentioned before in the comparison of Mehta's work to Ozu's, her films similarly use the trope of the “modern” train to indicate an ambivalent journey which may lead to better or worse circumstances for the protagonists.

Despite the overpowering presence of despair over hope in Bergman's films, especially the faith trilogy, several critics have recognized the catharsis provided by the presence of children. Alexander, for instance, notes of *Winter Light* and *The Silence* that although the major characters are adults, 'the ethical base and much of the limited hope derives from the children' (1974: 25). He further reasons why Bergman's children (and by implication, the children of this world) are not necessarily doomed:

In *Through a Glass Darkly* shimmering water was often seen through windows; in *Winter Light* one sees only fog and isolated barren branches, chillingly adequate symbols for the central figures. There are three exceptions, however, and in two of them children appear beyond the glass...some relation to these children is suggested as a substitute for the fog and barren thoughts of [Tomas's] soul (1974: 26).

The characters of Lenny in *Earth* and Chuyia in *Water* similarly embody hope in a world torn apart by patriarchal and self-serving interpretations of religion. Both question the cruelty of their changed surroundings and represent the possibility of a less oppressive future for their generation.

Bergman and Mehta are also preoccupied with the themes of religion, the conflict of faith with knowledge, and the relevance of tradition in modern society. Phillips argues that partly due to Bergman's early upbringing as the son of an Evangelical Lutheran pastor, he has 'used his camera to compose a continuing essay on man's relationship to God in the context of the problem of evil' (1975: 45). While it has been observed that *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water* concern the politics of patriarchy, the politics of nationalism and the politics of religion, respectively, the boundaries are arguably less distinct in that the religion-nationalism-patriarchy nexus is present in all three films and the politics depicted within them. The anti-conservative (yet not irreligious) ideology portrayed in the films also seems to reflect Mehta's own views on the subject of religion. While neither an atheist nor agnostic, she believes in the liberal Hindu philosophy of Vedanta 'which means the end of knowledge or the ultimate knowledge' and does not follow any rituals (Mehta, 'I am').

Bergman's cinema reflects his own ambiguity about faith and Phillips concludes that when we look at his body of work, he seems to be saying 'that the coexistence of good and evil is all that we can hope for from our fragmented existence' (1975: 54), and also indicating that, 'One cannot hope to establish a relationship with God by bypassing fellow



human beings' (1975: 54). Mehta's trilogy also seems to gesture towards the greater morality in community-spirit and justice for marginal groups than in devotion to deities. At this juncture, it would be useful to view Mehta's trilogy alongside the work of fellow Indian and renowned humanist filmmaker Satyajit Ray, who is also noted as an influence.

Satyajit Ray's "Apu Trilogy" consisting of *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito* and *The World of Apu*:

*Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)*

*The first film of the trilogy, and the foremost chapter in the life of Apu, this is a fascinating chronicle of life and death, the pleasure and pain of childhood, as well as the mundaneness and unpredictability of domesticity. Several international film critics have appreciated the humanitarianism of Ray's cinema, commenting that such scenes of rural bliss can be witnessed in a wide range of contexts. At the same time, the Academy Award-winning director was often criticised by the mainstream Indian film industry for highlighting the poorer aspects of the country. Is this similar to the dilemma confronting Deepa Mehta's elements trilogy? Would it be accurate to propose that all the serious Mehta films received better reviews and reception from overseas viewers? Mehta has acknowledged Ray's influence on her own work in a number of interviews, but the question remains whether she is a mere follower. One of my favourite images from Pather Panchali is the reflection of the sweet-seller and the brother-sister duo in the water as they walk along the riverbank. Mehta seems to have appropriated this imagery, especially in Water which, not unlike Pather Panchali, tries to balance stylised cinematography with the sheer austerity of the widows' lives.*

*Aparajito (The Unvanquished)*

*The adolescent phase of Apu's life is also likely to resonate with film viewers the world over. His migration from the Bengali countryside to the buzzing city of Calcutta for higher studies and a wider horizon does not initially sit well with his widowed mother, but is a social-intellectual turning-point of sorts. One could argue that this is the archetypal "coming of age" film tale, and is mirrored in the self-discovery undergone by the*

characters of Radha in *Fire*, Lenny in *Earth* and Shakuntala in *Water*. Also, the battle between the forces of home/tradition/stability and those of homelessness/modernity/instability is being inwardly and outwardly staged in both Ray's *Aparajito* and in all of Mehta's elements films (notwithstanding the particularities of their historical and geographical circumstances). One of the scenes in the film, however, that directly evoked the memory of *Water* in my mind was the image of the dying father who asks for water that Apu just about manages to get from the banks of the Ganga in Benares (Varanasi). In *Water* (also set in Benares), Chuyia does the same for the ailing Patiraji, but the elderly woman expires before the water arrives.

#### *Apur Sansar (The World of Apu)*

Does this title imply that Apu, now an adult, has finally become worldly? The idealist that is university-educated Apu, is rather like the Gandhian Narayan of *Water* in that both young men are driven to the women they come to love by their unconventional (and somewhat naive) nobility, and are in turn shattered by the untimely loss of this love. Another noteworthy parallel is that just as Apu and his son Kajal are rescued by each other towards the culmination of the trilogy, Narayan and Chuyia are arguably saved by one another at the end of *Water*. Again, it is ostensibly easy to typecast the Apu-Aparna and Narayan-Kalyani love sagas into a universal (read Eurocentric) typecast of tradition-defying romantic passion that climaxes tragically. While this may aid identification with the male and female protagonists, their specificities of time, place and cinematic treatment must be kept in mind. Whether by virtue of their own artistic limitations or due to flaws in the script, John Abraham and Lisa Ray, as Narayan and Kalyani, fail to achieve the emotional finesse of Soumitra Chatterjee and Sharmila Tagore as Apu and Aparna. At the same time, the attachment of the latter couple is moving precisely because of its middle-class everydayness, and is thereby different from the grand love of *Romeo and Juliet*.

In *Shooting Water*, Devyani Saltzman compares the mob faced by Mehta during the filming of *Water* in India to the criticism confronting Satyajit Ray in his own country:

When Satyajit Ray made *Pather Panchali (Song of the Little Road)* in 1955, depicting life in a rural Bengali village, a famous Bollywood actress criticized him for glorifying India's poverty...It seemed to me that India under the BJP was in the midst of a similar purification campaign. Pavan K. Varma, writer and member of the Indian Foreign Service, said "all nations indulge in a bit of myth-making to bind their people together". *Water* was one of the casualties of maintaining that myth (2005: 85).

It is noteworthy that Saltzman uses the term “myth” to describe the mainstream (and uncritical) representations of India because Heifetz, referring to Ray as a meditative lyricist rather than a realist, points out that his films move toward myth, albeit of a special kind (‘Mixed Music’). He adds that these are ‘myths of the supreme value of individual and limited moral choice, of women as charged poles of influence on weaker or tradition-bound men, of sexual desire outside marriage as emblematic of corruption, of the exaltation of childhood, all of these conditioned by the fact that he remained till the end an “aristocrat” but not in the usual sense of the term’ (Heifetz, ‘Mixed Music’). At the same time, Rex Roberts, a film reviewer, notes of Mehta’s *Water* that its ‘social realism works against its romanticism, the movie unable to decide whether it wants to be a historical epic or a Hallmark tearjerker’ (‘Water’). Even if the moral compass of Ray’s world was not as wide as Mehta’s is now, it appears that both filmmakers, while dealing with confronting content, use a film grammar that is poetic and are often rebuked for doing so. There are, however, others like Salman Rushdie who commend such a combination of austerity and aesthetics as he observes of *Water* that, ‘The fluid lyricism of the camera provides an unsettling contrast to the arid difficulties of the characters’ lives’ (cited in Mongrel Media, ‘Water’).

While the glorification of poverty in Ray’s cinema is debatable, a number of critics in India and overseas have applauded him for the humanitarianism and accessibility of his stories and characters, a quality that arguably won him an Academy Award for Lifetime Achievement at the fag end of his career. According to Sengoopta, the crossover quality of his films derives from their particularity, adding that Ray maintained that, ‘a truthful portrait of any human group would ultimately demonstrate the fundamental humanity of the subjects, a humanity that would bear some meaning for all human beings, across national and cultural boundaries’ (‘Satyajit Ray’). As mentioned above in Mehta’s comparison to Ozu, her own films attempt to showcase cross-cultural themes through local tales. Mehta often lists Ray as a key influence on her work and is particularly moved by the deceptive simplicity of his cinema as she comments, ‘He’s the greatest humanist filmmaker that I’ve ever known. His work is simple, very complex yet uncomplicated. That is the beauty of it. I do not wish to emulate it, but I wish at some point I could reach his vision on some level’ (cited in McGowan, 2003: 284). Besides the similarities in the stylistic elements of their films, Mehta seems to be concerned, in her elements trilogy, with the same socio-cultural issues as Ray. During the course of his filmmaking spanning four decades, he covered

themes like ‘conflicts between tradition and modernity, the position of women, the nature of religious superstition’ (Sengoopta, ‘Satyajit Ray’).

Ray’s cinema had a worldwide reach not just due to its humanitarian themes and accessible content, but also because he told his stories in a way that might be considered “western” in that it appropriated Italian neo-realism and American melodrama rather than following the conventions of mainstream Indian (Bollywood) cinema. Sengoopta attributes this to the fusion of eastern and western traditions in Ray’s own education and upbringing:

Much of the appeal of Ray’s work for Westerners stems from his deep familiarity with Western artistic conventions...Ray was as familiar with Shakespeare as with Tagore, had as much admiration for Tintin and Buster Keaton as for nonsense characters created by his father, was as conversant with Beethoven as with Indian classical music, and as fond of Piero della Francesca as of the murals of Ajanta (‘Satyajit Ray’).

While Mehta belongs to a generation which came after the Bengali Renaissance that influenced Ray, she was also a hybrid product of the east and the west, and not just due to her stint in Canada. Justifying the use of English rather than Hindi dialogues in *Fire*, she comments, ‘I come from a generation of Indians who went to British schools, had British headmistresses, grew up speaking English and listening to the Rolling Stones’ (Mehta cited in Randoja, ‘Deepa Mehta’). Naseeruddin Shah notes the use of eastern and western “formulas” in Mehta’s *Earth*, but is critical of the same: ‘*Earth* is melodrama. It is the use of the Indian formula film genre to tell the story of Partition. What I like is that *Earth* kept within that formula. *Earth* is also Hollywood formula. The sex scene was more important than the scenes of partition violence’ (cited in Ansari, ‘Interviews with Deepa Mehta and Naseeruddin Shah’). Even though Shah dismisses Mehta’s films as formulaic, it appears that he recognizes the inherent hybridity of diasporic practice.

### **3.6 Conclusion: Towards a Crossover Location**

Given Mehta’s various allegiances with and alienation from Bollywood, Hollywood, Canadian cinema, diasporic/exilic cinema, the question remains as to how to best locate her in contemporary discourse on cinema. Levitin comes closest to providing an answer when she refers to Mehta as a transnational, feminist and independent filmmaker:

The ability to manipulate content, aesthetics, and perhaps, controversy defines Mehta’s special talent as an independent filmmaker competing in the global market. A more precise description of Mehta, then, might be as a transnational filmmaker attuned to the

cinematic traditions of two very dissimilar societies, a feminist with a distaste for rigid nationalisms and oppressive power relations, and an independent filmmaker with an early-honed instinct for the art of film exhibition (2003: 274).

I argue that keeping in mind Mehta's allegiances with the cinema categories examined in this chapter, as well as those suggested by Levitin, it appears the safest to locate her work in the broad category of world cinema. However, given the association of this kind of filmmaking with the arthouse genre, even this label seems inadequate. Therefore, I suggest the use of "crossover cinema" to best describe Mehta's personal-political-poetic filmmaking location. The following chapter will elaborate on this amalgamation of varying genres, as well as their transcendence in Mehta's elements trilogy and similar situated Indian diasporic productions.

## **4. CHAPTER THREE**

### **ELEMENTS: THE TRANSCENDENCE OF GENRES IN INDIAN DIASPORIC FILM**

In this chapter, Mehta's film trilogy (and those of comparable Indian diasporic directors like Gurinder Chadha and Mira Nair) will be subject to textual analysis using the lens of genre. The methodology used here appropriates a traditional film studies analysis of film content and form. I will not only pay attention to certain elements of production design, but also examine the use of dialectics to establish the poetics of an evolving, yet situated transnational genre. Therefore, the theoretical approach employed in this chapter is itself a crossover of genre studies and heuristics in that it involves both the consumption and production of theory (Ulmer, 1994: xiii). While postcolonial and feminist concepts that highlight the personal and the political will be used as aids informing the genre analysis, the gaps in these theories will also be highlighted. These gaps pertain to the victim-bound take on subaltern narratives, often depriving characters of agency. They will be addressed through a theoretical practice that crosses borders within, and transcends both critical theory and film genre, and thereby produces a new theory for reading film. Thus, what will be established is both a need for a crossover reading practice for diasporic productions, as well as a demonstration of this practice by highlighting the intertwining of the personal, the political and the poetic in my own situated reading.

In a collated historiography on Indian cinema's global reach, Rada Sestic, a Sarajevo-born filmmaker, film curator and academic comments:

The old Indian scripture *Natya Veda*, a treatise on drama, tells us that the main goal in making and exhibiting art is to establish a *Rasa*, a specific mood that makes the audience merge with the piece, make them breathe with it and take this feeling home (cited in Iordanova, 2006: 129).

I thus focus on producing a reading of the moods and genres invoked by the often-dialectical interplay of colour, space and other design elements in the creative practice that is Deepa Mehta's cinema. Further, I demonstrate the ways in which Indian diasporic cinema not only combines several film genres, but transcends them.

On interviewing Deepa Mehta's partner and producer of the elements trilogy, David Hamilton, at a film set in Toronto in December 2007, I was told that Mehta's scripts are very descriptive and specific about the use of certain colours:

She chooses her colour palette very early, and she is very strict about it. If blue is not in her colour palette, nothing blue can be on the set. You'll see that if you see the films. If you go back and just look at that one factor, you will never see anything in the films that is outside of that range. It's not just an affectation on her part, it's an attempt

to create a particular mood and feeling because our films are about feeling (Hamilton, 2007: transcript).

Thus, an attempt will be made to view Mehta's films, as well as those of comparable Indian diasporic directors like US-based Mira Nair and UK-based Gurinder Chadha through the lens of their situated canvas, that is, an amalgamation of the film's colour palette, costumes, and settings, as well as relevant aspects of the background score and music. A revised understanding of the postcolonial terminology traditionally used to examine diasporic creative practice precedes such a reading. This also lays the groundwork for a personal-political-poetic approach to content analysis, which enables the use of theoretical as well as experiential approaches to film criticism. An account of the macro and micro details of production design, followed by an analysis of the dialectics of particular images is undertaken from my own situated yet crossover perspective, which is that of a diasporic academic-practitioner. Finally, the combination of genres in the film trilogy is shown to transcend the aesthetic and thematic vision of the source cultures.

#### **4.1 Reading Diasporic Practice: The Appropriation of Postcolonial Discourse**

As explained in the preface, diasporic discourse in the academy has tended towards an amalgamation of the theoretical and the experiential. This chapter is based on the premise that a reading of diasporic creative practice requires a similar approach that is simultaneously formal and dynamic. Postcolonial literary theorists (and of late cultural studies theorists) have coined and long-used terms such as "hybridity" and "subaltern" to read the literature, films and miscellaneous creative productions of former colonial subjects (including those now in the diaspora). However, it is my contention that these terms have been simply stretched to apply to the contemporary diasporic state and are in need of revision.

In the context of postcolonial studies, the term "subaltern" was first used by Ranajit Guha in his essay, 'On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India', laying the foundations for its widespread use in theory and the emergence of the predominantly South Asian "Subaltern Studies Group". Guha defined it as 'the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those we have described as elite' (1982: 8). The elite was composed of 'dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous – the foreign including



British officials of the colonial state and foreign industrialists, merchants, financiers, planters, landlords and missionaries, and the indigenous divided into those who operated at the “all-India level”...and those who operated at “the regional and local levels” (1982: 8). According to another postcolonial theorist, Ania Loomba, ‘such a definition asks us to review colonial dichotomies; it shifts the crucial social divide from that between colonial and anti-colonial to that between “elite” and “subaltern”’ (1998: 199). Given that we live in a world largely free of explicitly colonial dynamics of power and rife with new forces of social and economic domination at play, the usage of the term “subaltern” needs to be qualified if not dismissed altogether.

Scholars like Arif Dirlik have begun to enquire critically into the usage of the term “subaltern” in the age of global capitalism. He argues, ‘Postcolonial critics have engaged in valid criticism of past forms of ideological hegemony but have had little to say about its contemporary figurations’ (1996: 315). This raises the question as to whether the onset of economic and socio-cultural globalisation in the former colonies has rendered the notion of subaltern agency redundant as an appropriate descriptive for those in the native country as well as those in the growing diaspora.

Arguably, this age of global capitalism has led to transnational flows of people, commodities, capital and culture at unprecedented levels, causing dilemmas regarding the identity of native as well as diasporic subjects, the representation of their agency, and their own creative practices. In light of this ambivalence, I propose a recognition of the fluid and encompassing nature of diasporic identity, as outlined in the rubric of performing the personal, negotiating the political, and inventing the poetic. It is being reiterated here because subalternity is an aspect of such an identity, but is certainly not definitive of it. Although a review of subaltern history is not the subject of this section, I want to emphasise that a problematisation of the traditional use of the term “subaltern” in postcolonial studies is essential in the post-globalisation age, especially for reading diasporic creative practice. Therefore, as Lata Mani suggests, Gayatri Spivak’s well-known question “Can the subaltern speak?”,

is perhaps better posed as a series of questions: Which group constitute the subalterns in any text? What is their relationship to each other? How can they be heard to be speaking or not speaking in any given set of materials? With what effects? (1992: 403).

Thus, what Mani recommends is both a revised methodology for identifying subaltern figures, and also alludes to the possibility that they may already be speaking. In other words, a different hearing/reading approach is in order to recognise and analyse the presence and resistance of formerly or currently marginalized groups in diasporic texts.

Similarly, a problematisation of the notion of “hybridity” (in its postcolonial sense) is essential when using it to understand diasporic creative practice. In their review of the term, Ashcroft et al conclude that it ‘commonly refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonisation’ (1998: 118). Further, they point out the association of the term with the work of eminent post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha, who ‘contends that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in a space that he calls the “Third Space of enunciation”’ (1998: 118).

I propose that describing the identities of postcolonial native subjects and postcolonial diasporic subjects as “hybrid” in the same way is problematic as it amounts to a conflation of the two similar yet distinct sets of identity and practice. While the diasporic subject, if hailing from a formerly colonised nation, may be or may have been influenced by the colonial power in the same manner as the postcolonial native, his/her circumstances are altered due to the new spatio-temporal location. In this new location, the postcolonial diasporic subject’s socio-political and economic relations with the host nation become more significant than the relations with the erstwhile imperial nation. There is no denying that if the host nation is the same as the imperial nation (as in the case of the UK), or has a similar ethnic composition and language as the imperial nation, then relations with the host nation are bound to be directly influenced by colonial history. However, a distinction needs to be made between applying the term “hybrid” to the native postcolonial context and using it for the postcolonial diaspora.

Another reason for the problematisation of “hybridity” when used in the postcolonial diasporic context is with regards to Bhabha’s concept of the “Third Space”, also known as the ‘in-between space’ (Ashcroft et al, 1998: 119). While diasporic cultures are often characterized as being bicultural, thereby justifying the “hyphenation” of their identity and the in-between space accorded to them in theory and in the public sphere, this gives the impression of such cultures being primarily derivative. In other words, a term like “Third Space” both potentially implies that the “First” and the “Second” spaces are primary and

authentic in themselves, and also that the culture produced by mixing the two is marginal. Hence, when using the concept of “hybridity” to read diasporic practice in this chapter, an attempt will be made to emphasise that such practice is innovative not only in its “mixing” of apparently disparate cultural elements, but also in that it is able to transcend the hyphenated space and become an elemental product in itself.

Uma Parameswaran, an Indo-Canadian artist like Mehta, and a commentator on Mehta’s films argues for a new reading strategy to understand diasporic practice:

To critics I would say, we must recognise that we have a whole new stream of writers whose creative sensibility and critical parameters are shaped by forces and environments that occupy a liminal space. We have to shape a reading strategy and critical theory that take into account that the Indian Diaspora has an identity of its own, which is not homogeneous by any means but is different from the identity and sensibility of those who have always stayed in their native land (2001: 291).

It is my contention here that diasporic cultural products exhibit a non-homogeneous, albeit similar tendency towards an enmeshing of apparently dissimilar cultural references and audio-visual codes. This ongoing enmeshing forms the basis of the reading methodology that is a situated yet crossover content analysis.

#### **4.2 Towards a Situated yet Crossover Reading of Diasporic Practice**

Reading Deepa Mehta’s cinema in a holistic manner requires a new approach to critical film theory that does not adhere strictly to descriptions of national film conventions and genre. Hence, what is called for here is a situated yet crossover approach to film criticism that both recognises her hyphenated filmmaking locations and is able to transcend them through its own reading location. This approach is critical in its observation and analysis of the cultural and literary symbolism present in Mehta’s films (and especially the elements trilogy), as well as creative in its ability to be engaged by the affect invoked by her personal-political-poetic choices.

Before beginning the content analysis, it is worth considering why the diasporic films examined here are not simply being theorised using current film studies terminology such as “transnational cinema”, “transcultural cinema”, “world cinema”, and “third cinema”. Existing literature on the above kinds of cinema is being used throughout to read the

trilogy. This includes Hamid Naficy's scholarly contributions on reading the mise-en-scene of exilic and transnational films. However, while the above categories contribute to the discussion on a holistic reading of diasporic cinema, they are mostly relegated to the margins of mainstream film studies (as explicated in Chapter Two).

Calling this methodology a situated yet crossover approach is not a mere renaming, but in effect a refashioning of the film studies canon. This enables diasporic cinema to be recognised as a category that potentially crosses over genres and audiences. Such a crossover also necessitates a theoretical confluence, that is, a consideration of both relevant postcolonial and feminist concerns in the films' content and form. Examining the films in light of their postcolonial and feminist themes is part of the textual analysis characteristic of traditional film studies. My theoretical intervention in the following section is the use of the above theories as tools that are not mutually exclusive but together enable the generation of an analysis that is holistic, situated in specific milieus, and able to cross over to application in wider contemporary global contexts.

Considering race and gender concerns in the films also mirrors the postcolonial and feminist aspects of my own diasporic journey. In other words, my need to seek a feminist theory relevant to my peers (see "The Germaine Greer Tan" in the appendix), as well as comprehend my first-generation migrant experience as different from my postcolonial condition while in India provided an experiential basis to the revision, re-contextualisation, and re-combination of these theoretical tools when conducting textual analysis.

### **4.3 Diasporic Confluence of Postcolonial and Feminist Concerns**

Given the postcolonial legacy of diasporic studies and the media spotlight on female diasporic directors of South Asian origin like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha, we need to examine the co-existence of race and gender issues in their work, albeit in a manner that does not pit one struggle against the other. In other words, the history of postcolonial and feminist appraisal of diasporic production calls for a situated yet crossover reading practice which incorporates contemporary postcolonial and feminist concerns in a manner that expands, rather than engulfs the scope of postcolonial feminism and feminist postcolonialism. It would therefore be important to begin with a consideration of how

postcolonial and feminist readings of commercial cinema have been undertaken in film studies.

Several film studies scholars have observed that mainstream cinema is constructed for the male gaze. Speaking of Hollywood cinema, Graeme Turner notes, ‘the dominant viewpoint to which the narratives address themselves is masculine, and film’s visual pleasures (including the spectacle of the female body) are primarily for men as well’ (1999: 136). In a similar vein, Laura Mulvey uses psychoanalysis to establish ‘the way film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle’ (1975: 6). In such a context, films by women filmmakers, and especially transnational women filmmakers, seem to be overturning conventional film grammar by presenting a new way of looking at ethnic women’s bodies.

Foster, in her book on women filmmakers of the Asian and African diaspora, notes that Indo-American director Mira Nair’s film *Salaam Bombay!* is rendered through a postcolonial feminist gaze. She adds that it is a critique of the gaze of the First World, and attacks “white privilege and its looking relations”, as described by Jane Gaines. According to Foster, Nair’s film puts Gaines’ theory into practice by criticising, even disallowing, the cultural denial of the black female body in terms of dominant white feminism, which theorizes ‘the female image in terms of objectification, fetishization, and symbolic absence [while] their Black counterparts describe the body as a site of symbolic resistance and “the paradox of nonbeing”’ (1997: 118). In this way, films such as Nair’s combine race and gender struggles, often through the figure of the non-white woman. This is not to suggest that black and white feminism are always distinct ideological categories, but rather propose that postcolonial feminism is better positioned to represent situated confluences of race and gender-based negotiations. Therefore, it is evident that the films of transnational ethnic women filmmakers like Mehta and Nair are aptly positioned to render the presence and resistance of the home nation and its marginalised peoples, especially women.

Despite dominant white feminism’s denial of the black female body discussed above, transnationalism and its representative practices are making it imperative for not just postcolonial feminism, but all strands of feminism to examine racial difference as a means

of political solidarity, as well as understanding the nature and antecedents of discrimination in general. In order to understand the continuing legacies of racial and gender discrimination as well as their new disguises, Vron Ware argues for a feminism that does not overlook the history of racial domination:

In order to understand these multi-layered images of femininity and to understand their relationship to the past, feminism needs to reconstruct histories of ideas about women with a perspective that takes in not just the shifting parameters of gender itself but also the interrelated concepts of ethnic, cultural and class difference. The danger that arises from overlooking the “often silent and hidden operations” of racial domination throughout women’s histories poses a threat to the survival of feminism as a political movement. For it is partly through returning to the past that we are able to understand how these categories of difference between women and men, white and non-white, have emerged and how, why and where they continue to retain significance today (1996: 154).

Diasporic film practice by ethnic women can then be seen as a confluence of the personal-political-poetic aspects of feminist methodology and postcolonial theory. This is best manifested in Minh-Ha’s notion of “making films politically”, rather than making political films, as a politically-made film widens the definition of what is considered political, and makes any representation political by shaking the system of cinematic values (1991: 147-148). Can making (and reading) films politically, however, be accomplished within the mainstream ambit of nation or genre-bound practices of filmmaking and criticism? Can politically-made and personally and poetically-framed creative practice, like diasporic cinema, be conceptualised as constituting a “visual ecology” of sorts, a space where cross-cultural textures attempt to co-exist? The next section will unpack this visual ecology by highlighting the significance of space, and its interplay with elements like colour in the diasporic films under consideration.

#### **4.4 Reading the Spaces Within/Out the Diasporic Frame**

Due to the location of diasporic creative practice in more than one cultural setting, the representation of space in the works of diasporic filmmakers becomes a crucial motif for performing a situated yet crossover reading. All that is contained within the frame as well as that which is left out are important signifiers of the film’s possible range of meanings in any piece of content analysis. What makes an examination of the frame in diasporic film different is the use of this space to show temporal and physical dislocation. In her book on

the evolution of film studies, Janet Harbord uses Marc Auge's theory of non-places and invokes the films of Wong Kar-wai to argue that space in his films becomes associated with memory:

Space is interrelated, stretched, extended and collapsed. What we are suffering here is not a loss of spatial specificity, but an overabundance of space, an excess of the types of space we are exposed to. Spatial referents are produced through various channels: transport and travel, in the movement of the individual and of objects, and through electronic image and sound devices that bring and refract space to us. In this elaboration of the qualities and types of space we are exposed to, proximity and distance have no coordinates to distinguish them, nor is it possible to discern between events of varying scales. The foothold that Auge does offer is the distinction between two types of space, place and non-place (2007: 105).

Given that of the three films of Mehta's trilogy, only one, *Fire*, is filmed in the city in which it is set (New Delhi), we are forced to consider whether the spaces of the other two films are in fact spaces of memory, or non-places. While the story of *Earth* is based in Lahore (undivided India, now Pakistan), due to inability to get the required permits to shoot the film in modern-day Lahore, a film set was constructed in New Delhi (Zeitgeist Films, '*Earth: The Production*'). *Water* was initially planned to be filmed in the same city (Varanasi) in which the story is based, but this could not go through either despite obtaining permission from the Central Government in India. Due to protests by right-wing Hindu forces, production was halted after only one day of filming. After five years, the film was shot under a pseudonym in Sri Lanka. The production designers went to great lengths to construct the banks of the Ganges, a widow house and, a temple and other crucial locations.

Deepa Mehta's difficulties with shooting and screening her films in India have been well documented by Indian and international media and these narratives will be discussed in detail in Chapter Four. For the purpose of the discussion here, it is worth noting that the films have nonetheless been located, or production sets constructed within the Indian subcontinent. After *Water* was shut down in Varanasi, Mehta did not create an alternative set in North America (even though the film is part financed by Telefilm Canada). Clearly, the lushness of the Indian/Sri Lankan setting is key to creating a realistic background. Many contemporary Bollywood films are shot in a number of western locations (with Switzerland, Toronto, New York, and now Australia being popular choices). In the case of these productions, the absence of a credible Indian setting does not lead to the authenticity of their "Indianness" being questioned. However, where diasporic

productions are concerned, there appears to be a greater effort to shoot native stories on native soil. It could be argued that this is a generic convention as diasporic films like Mehta's are closer to the arthouse aesthetic of realistic cinema. Even so, the outsider status of the diasporic filmmaker in the homeland possibly makes it imperative to set the cultural productions in native settings (or close imitations of the same). This helps reinforce a sense of their continuing contact with the cultural spatiality of the nation, as well as grounding the production in a temporality that is one of a native's lived history rather than a diasporan's memory.

Also worth considering is *Fire's* setting in contemporary India compared to *Water*, which is set in pre-independent India and *Earth*, which relates the story of India and Pakistan during the time of their independence from colonial rule. In other words, the latter films invoke historical periods and can be more readily associated with memory. In the case of *Fire*, most of the action takes place within the four walls of a contemporary middle class Hindu joint family house in New Delhi. This house is ostensibly realistic. However, despite being located on a busy street, it does not interact with its socio-cultural milieu. The absence of neighbours/friends/extended family, as well as the video store and take-away shop attached to the family home suggest that it may be closer to the abode of Indian diasporic folks rather than a traditional and thriving household in a busy Delhi suburb. As Ratna Kapur puts it, 'This is the context as it exists in the imagination of a first generation immigrant to Canada' (1999: 379). Therefore, not only are the spaces of diasporic films imbued with the memory of the homeland, but also memories of diasporic existence in the host society filter through when returning to the homeland.

NOTE:

This figure is included on page 72 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

The domestic kitchen and the balcony in *Fire*



The spaces of *Fire* and their interaction with light and colour signal claustrophobia, which, according to Hamid Naficy, is characteristic of the liminal panics of the independent transnational film genre:

A variety of strategies are used to create such spaces, including the following: closed shot compositions, tight physical spaces within the diegesis, barriers within the mise-en-scene and the shot that impede vision and access, and a lighting scheme that created a mood of constriction and blocked vision. Often many of these strategies are condensed in the site in which the film unfolds. Such locations are self-referential, but since at the same time they refer to other places, they are also symbolic (1996: 131).

The lack of light in the house and the central position of the living room with its silent matriarch create a phobic space, perhaps suggestive of tradition gone stale. There are however, two places in the house where the transgressive relationship between the sisters-in-law flourishes, and both these interior locales have been carefully chosen to exhibit more character and light. The first of these is the domestic kitchen, as well as the kitchen of the family's take-away shop. This becomes the setting for several playful conversations between the two central female characters, and also the subversive site where they turn a space traditionally associated with the subordinate female in patriarchy to one where a homoerotic conversation thrives. The second site is the balcony of the house where another practice sanctioned by patriarchy (and its accompanying compulsory heterosexuality) that is, looking at the full moon after a day of fasting for one's husband, is subverted by Radha (Shabana Azmi) and Sita (Nandita Das).

In addition to the presence/absence of light, the interaction of outdoor and indoor spaces in the film trilogy is indicative of diasporic themes and aesthetics. According to Naficy, transnational cinema is often characterised by phobic spaces that are played off against spaces of immensity, and thereby space mediates between order and disorder (1996: 129). This is especially evident in the case of *Earth* where most of the partition violence takes place on the streets or at the railway station, while the home of the Parsi family exists as a sheltered abode for religious tolerance and harmony. As Avinash Jodha notes,

Out of some sixty-five scenes, forty-two scenes take place within the four walls of the Sethna house; another truncated world with its heavy curtains, high walls, garden, servants' quarters, and its own banyan tree. A house, where each of the major communities is represented through the servants – a miniature replica of the good old tolerant India in a colonial setting (2007: 45-46).

It is the Sethna house, which is the mediating boundary between the tolerant old India and the intolerant divided nation that is crossed in the penultimate scene where Shanta (Nandita Das) is taken away from the house by the Muslim mob.

Finally, while indoor and outdoor spaces are gendered and nationalised in film theory and criticism, these traditional binarisms are significantly destabilised in diasporic film. Naficy notes these destabilisations, and also points out the recurring eruption of memory:

Western critics have associated the domestic, enclosed spaces with women and heralded the disappearance of nature. However, many non-Western and preindustrialised civilizations still live in nature and although they often confine women to inner quarters, they associate the external, particularly the wilderness and the sea, with the female and the maternal. Transnational filmmakers bring to their films these different styles of spatial inscription. In addition, they further destabilise the traditional gendered binarism of space since in transnationality the boundaries between self and other, female and male, inside and outside, homeland and hostland are blurred and must continually be negotiated. Moreover, spatial configuration in their films is driven not only by structures of identification and alienation but also by eruptions of memory and nostalgia and the tensions of acculturation. The inside and outside spaces are thus not only, as it were, transnationalised but also nationalised and ethnicised (1996: 128-129).

Mehta's *Water* presents a case of indoor-outdoor space interaction where boundaries are definitive of social status, yet constantly negotiated or transgressed. The city's gentry and its colonial rulers live across the river to set themselves spatially apart from the masses and the widow houses. However, the young widow Kalyani (Lisa Ray) is led to the other side at night to earn money for the house in lieu of sexual favours for rich Brahmin clients. Married women and priests on the riverbank who consider the widows as bad fortune openly look down upon them. However, a positive transgression of these boundaries occurs towards the end of the film when Gandhi's visiting procession allows the widow Shakuntala (Seema Biswas) and the child-widow Chuyia (Sarala) to enmesh with the crowd at the railway station.

Therefore, it is evident that the spatial location of the shoot as well as the use of light and indoor/outdoor spaces within the frame of the diasporic film tends towards a transnational film aesthetic. My situated reading has shown that this aesthetic is an amalgamation of personal-political-poetic diasporic choices. The transgression of spaces within the frame is symbolic of a transcendence of themes and film genres, which will be examined next.

#### **4.5 Towards a Crossover Genre of Diasporic Cinema: Beyond Ethnic and Women's Themes**

Given the transgression of spaces in the diasporic film frame, the question arises as to whether it is possible to assign them to a singular genre. According to Naficy, this is undesirable as it may lead to overdetermination of meanings and ideological structuration for films made in diaspora (1996: 120). He adds:

By classifying these films into one of the established categories, the very cultural and political foundations which constitute them are limited, negated, or effaced altogether. Such traditional schemas also tend to lock the filmmakers themselves into “discursive ghettos” which fail to adequately reflect or account for the filmmakers’ personal evolution and stylistic transformations over time. Once labelled “ethnic” or “ethnographic”, transnational filmmakers remain so even long after they have moved on (1996:120).

Despite Naficy’s note of caution, I propose that a crossover film genre that recognises the dialectics evident in diasporic creative practice can prevent a discursive ghettoisation of independent transnational filmmakers. Therefore, I will now illustrate the ongoing appropriation of traditional film genres and national cinematic film conventions in Indian diasporic film. This demonstrates a stylistic and thematic evolution that opens up the critical reading discourse instead of confining such practice to the ethnic margins.

In addition to a discursive refiguration that does not simply cast diasporic films as ethnic, it is also possible to read the ones made by female filmmakers as subverting rather than reinforcing traditional notions of women’s social roles and romance. Moreover, these films often combine women’s themes with other genres and thereby call for a palimpsestic reading. Commonly used for reading multi-layered postcolonial texts, ‘the concept of the palimpsest is a useful way of understanding the developing complexity of a culture, as previous “inscriptions” are erased and overwritten, yet remain as traces within present consciousness’ (Ashcroft et al, 1998: 176). For instance, in relation to Gurinder Chadha’s *Bhaji on the Beach*, Gokulsing and Dissanayake comment that ‘Marketed as a seaside comedy, the film combines a number of genres, mixing irony with comedy, as it follows the women from Birmingham on their day-trip to Blackpool’ (1998: 115). They add that while women’s experiences remain the central theme of the film, it is a kind of ‘road

movie' within the broad category of women's films (1998: 115). Arguably, the Indian diasporic setting (within the specificities of the locations that are Birmingham and Blackpool) is the wider framework within which the themes of race and gender, and the conventions of comedy and drama are played out.

In a similar vein, Mehta's films invoke women's themes, but these are often a subversion of commercial Bollywood representations of romance, or aligned with struggles over ethnic and religious identity. Some critics, like Jodha are of the opinion that *Earth* and *Water* mimic the romantic conventions of popular Indian cinema:

Narayan and Kalyani's romance, much like the depiction of romance in *Earth*, has all the ingredients of Hindi cinema – "love at first sight", breathtaking landscapes, captivating music, smuggled letters, social restrictions, meetings in dusk but in spite of every prop the intensity of love is somehow missing (2007: 50-51).

It is important to note that Mehta's films may have a romantic plot or sub-plot, but often give agency to the central female characters. This is unlike most Bollywood cinema, which, even in its contemporary guise, limits the aspirations of women to the private sphere (Malhotra and Alagh, 2004: 30). While characters like Radha in *Fire*, Shanta in *Earth* and Kalyani in *Water* come across as subaltern in the sense of being victimised by dominant patriarchal ideology, they are depicted in alliance with younger and more resistant characters like Sita, Lenny and Chuyia, respectively who act as catalysts for change.

#### **4.6 Towards a Syncretic Visual Ecology of Indian Diasporic Film**

The crossing over of genres and themes in diasporic film discussed in the previous section will now be considered holistically so as to establish a visual ecology of sorts. This is essential to demonstrate that what is being produced through a personal-political-poetic combination of film conventions is not a piecemeal or patchwork effort, but rather a palimpsest with multiple layers of meaning that nonetheless mostly holds together. Commenting on the transcultural properties of visual images, David MacDougall notes that they 'may have a particular capacity to represent continuities across apparently dissimilar global settings – what Appadurai describes as "ethnoscapes" and likens to landscapes in visual art' (1998: 261). The cinematic landscape of Indian diasporic films, then, is multifariously yet holistically framed in that it attempts to present dissimilar visual and

music cues as both dialectical and continuous, thereby demonstrating the situated yet crossover approach to the reading of diasporic film outlined in this chapter thus far.

MacDougall further highlights the importance of seeing the image as a whole in his book on the corporeal nature of film by suggesting a visual, and not merely a textual anthropology:

Do visual systems require certain forms of visual analysis and communication? Do they suggest distinctive patterns of understanding? A greater awareness of visual systems directs our attention towards a range of cultural domains that have long remained at the margins of anthropology, not least because they are linked to visual sign systems more familiar to other disciplines, such as art history. Visual anthropology may offer different ways of understanding, but also different things to understand (2006: 220).

While diasporic films undoubtedly give us different things to understand, it is crucial to work on the different ways of understanding so that we do not judge these films or their makers in accordance with traditional genre-bound methodologies of analysing film texts. While film studies' concepts like *mise en scene* still play a role in a holistic analysis, the elements contained within any single frame will now be considered in relation to other frames, and not in isolation. It also becomes crucial to look at the films as a cacophony of voices (in terms of both visual and audio), or a personal-political-poetic voice in development rather than merely as an already-established voice characteristic of classical cinema's auteur filmmakers. Parameswaran, in her examination of Deepa Mehta's films, falls into the trap of searching for a distinctive voice as she comments, 'The choice of setting and of language problematise, to an extent, the choices faced by the Diaspora in the search for voice. Mehta repeats certain patterns in all three movies but with different degrees of success' (2007a: 278). What follows, therefore, is an experiential reading of the ecology of Mehta's trilogy and other Indian diasporic films that examines the harmony of their visual landscape.

In the opening scenes of *Water*, we see fresh lotus leaves, followed by a shot of Chuyia on the *tonga* (bullock cart) with her gravely ill husband, father, and mother-in-law. Wearing a colourful *lehanga* (Indian skirt) and nonchalantly chewing on her sugarcane stick, she seems to parallel the lotus itself – surrounded by murky waters, yet in full bloom. The lotus analogy becomes a motif in the film as it is also used in reference to Kalyani (Lisa Ray), the angelic-looking widow who is prostituted to upper-class Indian men in

order to keep the widow house running.

In a similar instance of the natural environment framing and/or signifying the corresponding cultural setting, Patiraji (Vidula Javalgekar) vividly recalls her wedding after eating the laddoo bought for her by Chuyia. The bride, groom, their kith and kin, and miscellaneous wedding paraphernalia like bright decorations and colourful food items are framed within overarching palm trees. It seems as if the wedding was supposed to be an oasis in the widowed Patiraji's desert-like existence, but life disappointed her.

NOTE:

This figure is included on page 78 of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

The festival of Vasant Panchami and the multi-religious gathering in the park in *Earth*

Similarly, in *Earth*, the browns and greens of the earth in the opening shots foreshadow the map of undivided India that Lenny (Maia Sethna) is subsequently shown to be colouring. It appears as though the socio-political entity that is an undivided Indian sub-continent is the natural state of affairs, like the brown earth, and that the foreboding violence (indicated by Lenny breaking a plate) is likely to disrupt this cultural ecology. Later in the film, Shanta (Nandita Das) is shown holding a yellow sunflower as she sits amongst her suitors at a park in Lahore. This is followed by a song celebrating Vasant Panchami, a Hindu festival that earmarks the beginning of spring, with the colour yellow dominating in people's costumes and in the new harvest. As the relationship between Shanta and the masseur (Rahul Khanna) develops, we see her (in a blue sari, with a red rose in her hair) and Lenny go to meet him near an old fort and pass a peacock, a creature likely mirroring Shanta's costume and state of mind.

The visual ecology of *Fire* is also apparent as the film opens with the shot of young Radha in a green field with yellow flowers, and a voice-over narration describing her desire to "see" the ocean. This visually manifested desire is repeated at several other points in the

narrative, and has been read by Jigna Desai as an evocation of the memory of desire and possibility (2004: 168), almost as if it were a dream of both the past and the future. Significantly, it is Sita and not Radha who expresses the desire to see the ocean when the two sisters-in-law are bonding on the terrace. The second instance of the dream sequence occurs just after Sita kisses Radha, who turns away. In this instance, Radha's mother tells her to not try so hard, but instead close her eyes to see. The third and final instance of the dream sequence in the film occurs at the end when the two lovers are re-united at the Nizamuddin shrine in New Delhi. This time, young Radha is in the fields, remarking that she can see the ocean. This immediately follows the shot of Sita feeling the rain on her face. It appears then, that the ecological symbol of the ocean is latent with Radha's desire for liberation from her tradition-bound roles, and "seeing" it is only enabled through the figure of Sita who awakens her sexually and sensually.

In addition to the suggestiveness of the dream sequence in *Fire*, the "real" settings of the film have been noted as being credible and situated. Parameswaran reviews the film in an essay titled 'Disjunction of Sensibility', and commends Deepa Mehta for the setting that is 'so realistic that anyone who has lived in India can add to the visualization of such scenes as the bazaar bustle, the wedding procession at night, the mother in law's bed being in a location where she can see and oversee everything that is going on in the apartment' (2007a: 262). Although the inward nature of the family home has been read as reflecting a diasporic phobic space, it can nonetheless be viewed as a dramatic or colour-saturated take on realism in cinema. Dorothy Barenscott, in her comparison of *Earth* with Holocaust films, notes a similar aesthetic in the latter films where she observes that the psychic energies that arise from incompatibility with dominant patriarchal ideology are channeled through other forms of expression like 'conspicuously over saturated colours, sumptuous furnishing, lighting, overdetermined props etc' (2006: 9). Therefore, I propose that the setting of Mehta's films can be interpreted as realistic in their setting that they are specific to the social milieu they represent. At the same time, they employ an aesthetic of representing realism on screen that is associated with specific cinematic forms.

Although appreciative of the realism of *Fire*, Parameswaran looks down upon the song and dance interludes in the film as 'the bane of Indian cinema' (2007a: 263). It is worth noting, however, that the musical sequences in Indian commercial cinema, unlike the musical genre in Hollywood, are expressive performances rather than narrative aids. In

their work on Indian popular cinema, Gokulsing and Dissanyake elaborate on this difference:

While drawing heavily on Hollywood musicals, the Indian popular cinema adopted a different strategy: the plot was not used to heal the split between narrative and spectacle. Instead, song and dance sequences were and are used as natural expressions of emotions and situations emerging from everyday life. The Hollywood musical maintained the façade of reality by legitimating the spectacle, for example *Singing in the Rain* (1952) not only deployed singing and dancing but was actually about singing and dancing (1998: 21).

The song and dance sequences in *Fire* appear to serve the Hollywood musical goal of advancing the narrative, as well as adhering to the Bollywood style of expressing emotion. The first instance of such a song and dance interlude is contextual as it occurs as the newly wed Sita arrives in her marital home and turns on the radio. The song playing is in Hindi, but has western undertones, and Sita dances to it in her husband's gear until Radha interrupts her. This is an important first indication of Sita's disavowal of traditional Indian (and heterosexual) norms and preempts the second musical sequence where she is in masculine clothes again, but is dancing in tandem with the feminine Radha. The second sequence is a significant manifestation of their developing romantic relationship, and its performance in the presence of Mundu and the mute mother-in-law invites familial scorn.

In light of the above discussion on the use of song and dance sequences in *Fire*, it appears that a genre characteristic of both the Hollywood and Bollywood strands of cinema has been adapted, albeit with a hint of social realism. Thus, what emerges is a hybrid version of a popular cinematic technique that is rendered distinctive and meaningful by virtue of its narrative and social context. Similarly, the diasporic cinema of another filmmaker of Indian origin, Gurinder Chadha is noted for its hybridisation of British cinema:

When Gurinder Chadha's films "desify" [Indianise] British cinema, the themes, music and language of British film is transformed through the introduction of South Asian elements, so that the result is a specifically British South Asian form of cultural hybridisation. Chadha's feature films thus have a distinctive mise-en-scene characterised by their expression of cultural hybridity (Hussain, 2005: 71).

Such a hybridisation is not merely postcolonial, but reflective of a contemporary trend in the age of global capitalism, a trend whereby hitherto exotic cinemas and locales like Bollywood and India are gaining wider cultural and economic currency. The visual ecology of Indian diasporic film is thereby situated yet crossover in that it is rooted in colonial and



postcolonial histories, but also a manifestation of current personal-political-poetic concerns. What results is a practice that transcends and transgresses even as it amalgamates, and hence emerges as an elemental genre in its own right.

#### **4.7 Towards a Transgression of Colours in Indian Diasporic Film**

In her essay about the impact of globalisation on the socio-political construction of gender and the nation-state in India, Leela Fernandes ruminates on the increasing cultural and intellectual currency accrued to the concept of diaspora (2001: 147). She observes, ‘One of the central theoretical foundations, in this endeavour, has been the notion that such global flows fundamentally center on the crossing of boundaries and borders’ (2001: 147). Such crossings are often represented in Indian diasporic film through literal (and multiple) crossings of the geographic borders of nation-states, but also, and more importantly, through the crossings implied in the transgression of cultural codes and cinematic conventions. It is for this reason that MacDougall, a filmmaker and scholar himself, describes “transcultural cinema” as transcultural in that films falling under this category both cross and defy cultural boundaries (1998: 245). Therefore, I will now elucidate the experiential, thematic and cultural “transgressions” in the Indian diasporic films under examination.

In a bid to explicate and locate diasporic creative space, Parameswaran cites the tale of Trishanku, a king from Hindu spiritual lore who desired heaven in his mortal state:

He enlisted the aid of sage Vishwamitra, who propelled him upwards with his yogic power. But the Hindu counterpart to St. Peter said, Sorry, we don’t admit people until they are dead. Trishanku was plummeted down but Earth said, Sorry, we don’t take back those who have left us as long as they are in the same body. So, after being shuttled back and forth, as a face-saving device, Trishanku was given his own constellation in the sky (2001: 292-293).

Although the above analogy serves as a useful metaphor for describing diasporic space, it is crucial to comprehend that this space is more than an amalgamation of two other locales. In other words, the visual ecology of this diasporic location combines elements of the home and host societies, but its radical potential ultimately lies in the structural and thematic transcendence of the static boundaries of both cultures. The diasporic constellation then, unlike Trishanku’s face-saving device, or the liminal space articulated in postcolonial

theory, is its own element in space in that it embodies the personal-political-poetic possibilities of a world that is increasingly crossover, yet situated.

NOTE:  
This figure is included on page 82  
of the print copy of the thesis held in  
the University of Adelaide Library.

The festival of Holi in *Water*

Keeping in mind the transformative potential of articulating or creating from a diasporic space, I will now look at Mehta's elemental films, Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* as transgressions of a fixed notion of cultural and cinematic colours. Clad in white and deprived of luxury, the widows in *Water* only interact with colour during the Hindu festival of Holi. Significantly, the scene of the widows' dancing and playing with Holi colours and water occurs directly after Narayan's wedding proposal to Kalyani. Thus, it seems that the flouting of widow remarriage rules, signified by Kalyani and Narayan's potential relationship, is a transgression of colours with the possibility of a new future for all widows.

While the colours in *Earth* are primarily yellow and green, we see Shanta wearing a red sari for the first time after her relationship with the masseur has been consummated. Significantly, red is the colour that brides wear in Indian wedding ceremonies, thereby indicating that the inter-religious association has been sanctified with the promise of marriage. However, their transgression is later punished as the masseur's body is discovered by Lenny and the cook Himmat Ali/Hari in a sack by the roadside, and Shanta is forcibly taken away from the Sethna family home by the Muslim mob.

While the homosexual relationship between Radha and Sita is an obvious transgression of patriarchal ideology in *Fire*, the degree of its defiance is magnified by the fact that this

takes place within the domestic space that is traditionally thought of as the (almost sacred) place of the heterosexual family unit. This view is echoed in Jigna Desai's analysis of the film's transgressions which she describes as a "queering" of postcoloniality and globalisation in a family-as-nation context (2004). Noting the parallels between Mehta's displacement from the homeland and the displaced nature of queerness itself, she comments, 'One can argue that a diasporic relationship with the homeland can be a queer one, and conversely queerness can be a form of displacement, both of which can call into question the very foundations of home, nation, and citizenship' (2004: 191). Other characters like Mundu (Ranjit Chowdhary) the masturbating servant, Ashok (Kulbhushan Kharbanda) the celibate, and Jatin (Javed Jaffery) the adulterer transgress in their own ways. However, the transgressions of the men are forgivable, whereas those of the women, in the words of Mundu, 'will bring shame to the family name'.

Bhachu argues that migrant women of South Asian origin who have migrated twice or thrice are far more adept in negotiating their various cultural influences than their direct migrant counterparts:

Their communities migrated from rural India in the late nineteenth century to East Africa, where they urbanised and established defined East African Asian identities. From Africa, they migrated to metropolitan Britain in the late 1960s, after their jobs were Africanised in postindependence East Africa. Many of them further migrated to the United States, Australia, and other European countries in the 1980s and 1990s. As relatively prosperous twice migrants in Britain with great command of mainstream skills (in comparison to the less experienced direct migrants who are not as skilled in the "game of migration"), they also occupy separate class as well as caste positions and maintain exclusive marriage and community circuits (1995: 223-224).

While the above mapping of thrice migrants aptly describes the historical and geographical movements of Mina's family in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, the African pining of the father, and the American leaning of the daughter create ambiguity regarding their "migration expertise". As Mina elopes from her parents' abode in an exclusively South Asian owned and operated motel, her mother reasons with her father to let her go because she is his prodigy and has a mind of her own. By choosing an African-American partner, she transgresses the implicit rules of her transnationally located (yet racially biased) community as well as the expectations of her parents.

Significantly, Mina's transgressions are pre-empted in her decision to clean toilets for a living rather than succumb to South Asian class prejudice by going to college and

pursuing a profession. By admitting to her mother that she is darker-skinned than most desirable Indian women in the arranged marriage market, she marks herself out as “coloured”, also dissociating herself from the social hierarchy that mirrors white colonialism. However, the question arises whether colours/races are mixed in a celebration of hybridity, or if they liminally co-exist in the final sequence of the film which Seshagiri describes thus: ‘Jay holds a Ugandan baby in his arms while watching a Ugandan woman dance in a Kampala street; Mina, clad in mirror-worked Indian-print cotton, embraces Demetrius, whose cotton cap and long tunic look equally Indian and African; and the background music morphs seamlessly from an Indian melody to a mournful blues riff played on a harmonica to an upbeat Swahili song performed by a fusion band’ (2003: 194). She adds that the narrative belies the hybrid image, indicating that the rules of empire have yet to be re-written (2003: 194-195).

Considering that *Mississippi Masala* came out in the early 1990s, it is likely that a more recent cross-cultural representation, like Gurinder Chadha’s *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), adequately mixes and transcends the liminal spaces ascribed to “coloured” peoples and places. Hussain compares the attitudes of the Indian and the English family depicted in *Bend it Like Beckham* towards community, gender and sport, and examines the hybrid form (in terms of music, dialogue and dress) of Chadha’s own practice to conclude that, ‘the film is not about football, but is about bending rules, bending cultures and transforming identities’ (2005: 89).

Although Mehta’s elements films are not about the Indian diaspora in a strict sense, they display a diasporic sensibility in their synthesis of different audio-visual elements, as well as their transgression of traditional cinematic form and cultural content. Perhaps they succeed in creating a “diaspora space” which, in the view of postcolonial theorist Avtar Brah

...is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition (2003: 631).

Viewing the elements trilogy and other Indian diasporic films through a situated yet crossover approach then requires an appropriation of classical film theory as much as a

transcendence of nation and genre-bound rules and boundaries. Such a reading practice can be conceptualised as a viewer's response to the trilogy – a sequel that is at once situated in fire, earth and water, and crosses over to be its own element. The discourse of audience and journalistic reception of the trilogy in both India and the west, however, does not subscribe to such a practice. It will be examined in the following chapter on the potential for enhancing the crossover appeal of Indian diasporic cinema.

## **5. CHAPTER FOUR**

### **AUDIENCES: DIASPORIC FILM RECEPTION FROM THE *WATER* CONTROVERSY TO THE *SLUMDOG* PUBLICITY**

The reading of Indian diasporic film through a situated yet crossover approach in the previous chapter signals that the potential audiences for such creative practices are not nation or genre-bound, but combine and cross over these distinctions. This chapter examines the reviews of the elements trilogy to establish that according to popular culture discourse, two kinds of audience groups are clearly demarcated for diasporic texts. These are the audience of the home country, and that of the host and similar nations. This appears to be a simplistic classification as the population within any single nation is by no means culturally homogeneous, and is often further divided along the lines of class, caste, region, religion, and gender. Yet it appears that in the discourse of mainstream reviews of the diasporic films considered here, the western and the home audiences are largely represented as subscribing to distinct and often opposing rhetorics. In other words, it is evident that in the case of audiences, national boundaries may not be redundant and responses are still aligned as along ethnic, racial or religious lines.

The opposing rhetorics are manifested in the popular appraisals of Deepa Mehta's elements trilogy in India and in the west, and a comparative analysis of these reviews in this chapter will explicate the difference. The reviews have been selected to represent a cross-section of views from web editions of popular Indian media sources such as *Times of India*, and western media sources such as *The Washington Post*, as well as audience blogs like Sawnet. Following this analysis, Indian academic Jasbir Jain's edited volume of essays on the trilogy will be reviewed for comprehensiveness, and the ability to synthesise the divergent commentary on the films. This is essential as the volume reiterates the partial rhetoric of the reviews, often viewing the films politically, rather than examining the crossovers inherent in the personal-political-poetic. The publicity material of Mehta's Oscar-nominated *Water* will then be examined alongside Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film that has caused the crossover audience debate to resurface. This will help highlight the role of appropriated commercial devices in maximising crossover audience reception. Finally, the economics of transnational distribution of Indian diasporic films will be noted as being closely related to those of commercial Bollywood cinema. These observations will aid in making conclusions regarding enhancing the crossover access and appeal of Indian diasporic film.

Continuing with the examination of a particular manifestation of diasporic creative practice, that is, Indian diasporic cinema, this chapter argues that while these texts are

applauded in western liberal circles, they seldom receive the attention of mass audiences in the subcontinent. Moreover, while liberal critics in the west look favourably at Indian diasporic cinema, mainstream critics conflate it with native Indian cinema that has so far been meted out the orientalisng treatment in western popular culture. This leads one to question if Indian diasporic cinema reinforces the perceived exotic attributes of India and Indian cinema in the mind of a western moviegoer, albeit in an accessible cinematic language. A further query that arises is whether diasporic cinema is no more than an instrument of neo-colonialism (in both cultural and economic terms). In other words, films like Mehta's elements trilogy may be confirming the western stereotype of India as a socially backward society that represses its women and is steeped in tradition. Therefore, it might appear that such diasporic films, given their cultural capital and economic base in the west, repeat colonial patterns of representing the east. An overview of the discourse of mainstream western reviews of Mehta's films will reveal that the films either reach a niche arthouse audience, which is liberal in its reception, or cross over to the mainstream and often garner responses that reinforce orientalist prejudices.

The discourse found in reviews of Indian diasporic cinema in India itself is similarly divided between indifference, hostility and critical applause. What is common amongst these reactions is the recognition, in the language of the reviewers, of a separation between native cinema and the productions of the diaspora. Due to the western base of the filmmaker, and the use of non-native aesthetics and finances to tell native stories, these films are often accused of pandering to western notions of India's supposed cultural parochialism. While some reviewers do not consider diasporic filmmakers authentic representatives of the modern Indian nation, others hold them culpable for abdicating representative responsibility.

Foremost among the latter reviewers is Gita Rajan who, in her analysis of Deepa Mehta's *Fire* and Mira Nair's *Kama Sutra*, compares them with English paintings of Indian women and views the postcolonial films as colonial (2002). She concludes, 'Nair and Mehta are especially accountable because they know they owed a "debt" to the damaged image of the woman's body wrought by colonialism, but fail to resolve it' (2002: 55). Notwithstanding the criticism, a smaller group of Indian reviewers like Priya Verma exhibit a more sympathetic stance. Including Mehta's and Nair's films with those made by India-based female filmmakers, Verma notes, 'Movies made by these talented female directors



are often branded as art movies or movies of the parallel cinema; these filmmakers, therefore, never enjoy the access to funds and publicity that makers of mainstream cinema take for granted' (2005: 53). Despite this inclusive view of diasporic films that is not dismissive of their claim to Indianness, these texts are still consigned by sympathetic and hostile critics alike to the fringes of Indian mainstream cinema. This is noteworthy given the discussion of a re-positioning of diasporic cinema like Mehta's as crossover in Chapter Two. Moreover, this project is based on the contention that recognising diasporic creative practice as an alternative, yet not marginal representation is critical to realising its crossover potential. However, it appears that there are differences in the reception of native and diasporic alternative representations in the home country. In other words, the diasporic films are rendered more marginal.

Although Verma places Indian diasporic films in the same category as Indian parallel cinema due to similarities in subject matter and publicity, the former category of films is often released in India at a later date than in the west. For instance, *Water* was released in India in March 2007 even though it premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September 2005 ('Release Dates for Water'). Moreover, India-based parallel cinema appeals to the educated elite and fares well in the multiplexes of India's modern metropolitan cities or at critics' awards. On the other hand, as diasporic films are slow to reach Indian cinemas, and are seldom released in smaller towns and regional areas, they are known to circulate on pirated discs. Because of the nature of this circulation, their success with mainstream viewers is difficult to measure, but it is likely that the response is not overwhelming.

This chapter, then, answers the question of whether Indian diasporic films that tell native stories can be made relevant to Indian audiences, and also have increased accessibility amongst mass audiences in the west by arguing that diasporic filmmakers do not necessarily pander to the exotic (the personal), but they often capitalise on the distribution circuits of the home and host nations (the political), and use creative means to appropriate commercial devices in publicity material (the poetic). In other words, I now examine the crossover potential of diasporic cinema such as Mehta's, which has already been explored from the auteur/location and genre approaches in previous chapters, through the lens of distribution discourse such as film posters and reviewer reception.

## 5.1 Mehta's Elements Trilogy: Western Reviews

Due to the overwhelming success of Mehta's elements trilogy in the international film festival circuit, her films have largely been received positively by film critics based in the liberal niches of the west's popular media. While liberal-leaning segments of the western press celebrate her films in a discourse of universalism, those in the western media who have criticised the elements trilogy have done so precisely because of its arthouse-leaning cinematic conventions.

What follows is an analysis of these reviews which shows that they are primarily concerned with the politics of reception in the following ways: a) the films as texts are seen as appealing to a niche audience that appreciates "world cinema"; and b) the turbulent Indian context in which the films were made and received is intertwined with the universalist discourse of the seemingly non-conservative reviewers.

Reviewers have noted that the violence in *Earth* (based on the partition of India and Pakistan) is reminiscent of the Holocaust. Writing for *The Washington Post*, Pamela Constable comments, 'To European audiences, the ominous scenes of trains chugging into dark stations and refugees herded like cattle, accompanied by heavy and haunting music, will instantly evoke images of Nazism and the Holocaust' ('Letter from India'). On the website of the Canadian television channel CBC, Andre Mayer compares certain repressive rituals depicted in *Water* to those practiced in Nazi concentration camps. Referring to the hacking off of the young widow Kalyani's hair by the matriarch of the widow-house, he writes:

With one vicious deed, Madhumati at once defiles Kalyani's beauty – thus lessening her appeal to a suitor – and utterly debases her. Reminiscent of images of Jews being shorn in Nazi concentration camps, the act is appalling as a dismemberment – which in a way, it is (Mayer, 'Digging Deepa').

A review of *Water* by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat similarly notes that the inhumane treatment of widows in India parallels the subjugation of women by certain sects of Christians, Jews and Muslims in other parts of the world ('*Water*: Film Review'). James Berardinelli observes that the trilogy thematically invokes films made about oppressed women elsewhere, like the Iranian-Afghan-Canadian *Kandahar* and the Senegal-based *Moolade* ('*Water*: A Film Review by James Berardinelli'). Therefore, it appears from the

above reviews that Mehta's elements trilogy invokes locally specific yet universally understood concerns (and films based on those concerns) for audiences throughout the world.

In addition to invoking "world" themes, Mehta's cinema is often associated with the poetic realism of renowned Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray in liberal-leaning western reviews. As Chapter Two has already used primary material to compare Ray's "Apu trilogy" to Mehta's elements trilogy, the purpose of this section is to examine what western reviewers make of Mehta's invocation of Ray's themes and techniques. For instance, Laura Blum notes that cinema buffs will see Ray's *Pather Panchali* reincarnated in Mehta's *Water* ('Water'). Those not familiar with the work of Ray observe and comment on the poetic elements of Mehta's films nonetheless. Foremost among such reviewers is Jeannette Catsoulis who says, 'Shifting between romantic melodrama and spiritual inquiry, *Water* flows with the simplicity of a fairy tale' ('Water'). In a more critical vein, Learned Foote of *Stylus* magazine appreciates the picturesqueness of *Water* and concedes that the film makes intelligent criticism of time-honoured traditions, but adds that it challenges 'the sympathies of the art-house crowd' ('Water').

It is worth noting that the reviewers situated in western media institutions compare the trilogy with other films in the "world cinema" tradition, and assume an arthouse audience. Another reviewer, Jeffrey M. Anderson notes with regards to *Water* that Mehta 'includes shots of pretty trees and water lilies so that the art-house crowd can leave feeling they've seen something lovely' ('Water'). Phil Boatwright, previewing the film for a gospel website also implicitly comments on its niche arthouse conventions as he writes, 'this amazing, if somewhat depressing, foreign film (with subtitles) is like National Geographic come to life' ('Water'). The use of the terms "foreign film" and "National Geographic" is telling in that it assumes an exclusive viewership. As the reviewer mentions that the foreign film is with subtitles, he suggests that its exotic fare has been made palatable for western audiences, yet the "foreign" tag remains definitive. Richard Phillips' review of *Earth* on the *World Socialist Website* notes that a British critic described the film as a 'Bollywood influenced confection' ('One of this century's human tragedies, as witnessed by a child'). Therefore, it appears that western reviewers, both sympathetic to and critical of the trilogy presume an arthouse audience, and this is reflected in the discourse of their reviews.

Only a small section of reviewers entertain the possibility that the controversy over the screening of *Fire* in India, and the halting of the filming of *Water* in the same country may have influenced (if not determined) the trilogy's reception amongst liberal circles in the west. Anderson, for instance, is of the opinion that the 'honourable message' of *Water* has been confused with a good movie ('Water'). This is amply reflected in a review of the film on Canada's Amazon website, where reviewer Daniel Jolley refers to *Water* as 'too powerful and moving to be called a mere film; this is a brave cinematic triumph' ('Water: Customer Reviews'). Additionally, the *World Socialist Website*, which has been an avid supporter of Mehta's cause (and by default, of her work), published a series of letters and statements from artists and intellectuals around the world. These were 'sent to the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh protesting the decision to block the production of Deepa Mehta's latest film *Water*' ('More protests'). In other words, it appears that the overwhelming applause for the films, like George Lucas' full-page petitions in *Variety* magazine (cited in Yuen-Carrucan, 'The Politics of Deepa Mehta's Water'), may have been a political show of support for artistic freedom of expression rather than a personal-political-poetic endorsement of the texts themselves.

From the above conclusion, it is apparent that Mehta's India-based films are supported by artists and critics in the liberal west by virtue of their perceived sharing of a common, universal artistic discourse. The question then arises as to whether audiences in the west, liberal or otherwise, engage with these texts in a manner similar to the engagement of homeland reviewers and audiences. Uma Parameswaran, who has taught Mehta's texts at Canadian universities, compares the responses of her Anglo-Saxon students to *Earth* with those of correspondents in India and the diaspora, and notes some differences. She writes:

My students noticed the class differences in the plot and the colonial presence in the first scene, and got a glimpse of the violence of partition, but they did not pick up on the religious and cultural nuances. My correspondents in India and Diaspora members in North America, on the other hand, questioned the details of realism in the choice of social and religious cultural specifics (Parameswaran, 2007a: 279).

Although the above sample of responses may not be representative, it is certainly indicative of a difference in response based on the kind of engagement with cultural nuances.

However, themes like class divides and colonial motifs are noticed by most members of Parameswaran's circle of correspondents, and are arguably crossover concerns. In other words, it is not possible to discount western responses to Mehta's and other diasporic texts on the grounds that they appear less culturally engaged, or not as much in the know as

Indian audience members. At the same time, it is important to be cautious of a celebratory universalism to the often-difficult diasporic production contexts, or the politics of these texts at the cost of a critical approach to the personal and poetic aspects.

Despite recent shifts in greater visibility of Bollywood and diasporic texts in alternative and mainstream public spheres in the west, concerns regarding the Eurocentrism of this oriental interest remain. Jigna Desai is of the opinion that the success of diasporic films like Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* suggests that 'Western viewers may well be interested in films that confirm their own nostalgia for close-knit and extended families and that support an anthropological gaze of cultural "traditions" linked to their own ideas of cosmopolitanism' (Desai, 2006: 121). At the same time, Gokulsing and Dissanayake trace the history of Asian filmmakers in Britain, and conclude that there is a recent trend towards making films that do not cater to the colonial notion of the exotic. They elucidate:

There have been quite a number of Asian film-makers working in Britain (e.g. Waris Hussain, Jamil Dehlavi, Ismail Merchant) who did not present the Asian experience. It could even be argued that they confirmed the West's fascination with the Orient, the exotic, in films such as *Gandhi*, *A Passage to India*, *Heat and Dust*, *Jewel in the Crown*, in which nostalgia of the "Raj" is reworked... Since the 1980s, however, there have been some Asian screenwriters and directors who have made an impact on the big and small screens... Nair's *Mississippi Masala* created a stir among the Asians because of its love affair between the Asian, Sarita Choudhury and the "black" American, Denzel Washington. However, it was *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) which caught the imagination of Asians in Britain (1998: 68-69).

Significantly, the mainland Indian audience is not mentioned as a possible target market for the cinema of the new Asian filmmakers. This is possibly because films like *Mississippi Masala* and *Bhaji on the Beach* are based on the experiences on the Indian diaspora living in the west. However, considering that academics in India have responded to these films, why has the mainstream Indian audience been excluded from popular and scholarly accounts of their reception? It appears that western liberal espousal of freedom in relation to Mehta's trilogy, and academic appraisal of other diasporic texts have assumed critical superiority over the non-archived and presumed nationalistic reviews of the Indian "masses".

Therefore, the following section will attempt to piece together the Indian side of the review narrative by looking at the Indian mainstream media's and popular review blogs' take on the elements trilogy and the surrounding sagas.

## **5.2 Mehta's Elements Trilogy: Indian Reviews**

The response of the Hindu fundamentalist political parties and social institutions in India to the elements trilogy has been widely reported in the media. The discourse of the media itself largely assumes a position of libertarian superiority and will be analysed in detail in this section. Similar to the western liberal reviews, many segments of the Indian media support Mehta's democratic and artistic right to freely express and represent her views of the home country. Unlike their counterparts in the west, however, most reviewers in the sample of Indian media examined here also disown the texts. In other words, the films are construed as made for a non-Indian audience (not necessarily an arthouse audience), and it is often alleged that Mehta exploited the violent and shocking content of the trilogy for commercial gain. Other allegations are to do with her insufficient engagement with the contemporary Indian context, absence of cultural nuances, and the use of clichés and hackneyed symbolism. While a small segment of reviewers comment on and applaud the poetic yet political nature of her work, most appear critical of her authenticity as well as suspicious of the intended audience. In other words, the politics of reception is again given primary importance, while the personal and poetic is relatively discounted.

All three films of the trilogy are viewed as non-Indian, or at least as made for a non-Indian audience by individual reviewers as well as media institutions in India. For instance, reviewer Kavita Chetty, commenting on *Earth* on Sawnet says, 'I felt disappointed, felt it was a movie made for a non-Indian audience, too "Hollywood"' ('Earth'). Another reviewer on the same website, Sujata Pal opines, 'since it was made for an audience outside India, I personally would have preferred a more complicated approach' ('Earth'). It appears that the latter reviewer is not only assuming that Mehta's film on partition was intended for a non-Indian audience, but also that films made for overseas audiences are more complex in their treatment of socio-political issues. In a similar vein, Ashwini Sukthankar notes that 'Fire, a tale of two women married to two brothers, developing a relationship with each other in the congested streets of middle-class New Delhi, was not a film made for Indian

audiences' ('For people like us'). While reporting on the Oscar nomination accorded to Mehta for *Water* at the 2006 Academy Awards, a Times of India story refers to the work as a 'Canadian film with an Indian flavour' ('Why Water finally went down the Oscar drain').

Other examinations of the content and form of the films by individual and institution-affiliated reviewers reveal that the discourse of disownership or flawed authenticity is reiterated. For instance, Sonya Pelia, even though appreciative of the major themes of *Fire*, suggests, 'The only discordant note in an otherwise perfect film is the characters speaking in English. It would be more authentic to have the characters speak in Hindi and provide subtitles' ('Fire'). Writing for Economic and Political Weekly, Ratna Kapur is more critical of *Fire*, suggesting that the familial location of the film is a context that 'exists in the imagination of a first generation Indian immigrant to Canada' (1999: 379). In other words, Kapur is holding Mehta's spatial and temporal distance from the country of her origin responsible for the film's inability to do justice to its cultural specificity. Parameswaran also appears to blame Mehta's diasporic state for what she alleges is the offensive use of the Hindu epic Ramayana in *Fire*:

Mehta's purposeful iconoclasm is stated in her use of the Ramayana, as is her one-sidedness in order to achieve the desired effect. She highlights only the summary of the episode, and compacts it to show Rama rudely dismissing Sita...While all this is in line with the film's raison-d'etre to show that "the sense of duty is overrated", it is offensive to Hindu sensibility, and I can understand the hue and cry behind the protests...Mehta's use of the names [Radha and Sita] in the political context arises from her desire to shock people into reaction, and is parallel to Rushdie's naming of prostitutes after Muhammad's wives, in *The Satanic Verses* (2007a: 268).

While the above comments suggest that Mehta's film is provocative, another reviewer reads the same text as 'revolutionary, a whole new way to look at choices' (Nousheen, 'Fire'). Therefore, it can be concluded that regardless of the filmmaker's intention, the text has been interpreted widely in the Indian setting. Also, in both affirmative and negative responses to the trilogy, concerns regarding the diasporic artist's lack of personal engagement with the homeland seem to percolate through and affect readings of the text.

While the above reviews are as valid in their readings of the trilogy as those of western audiences, it appears that the western residential and financial base of the filmmaker, and not the text itself, is often the subject of examination. The espousal of the freedom of expression dominates the west's reviews, in contrast to the questions over authenticity and postcolonial responsibility which illustrate responses in India. How can the political context

of the films be seen as more important than their personal performativity or poetic composition? This is not to say that the texts can or ought to stand apart from the context when an individual audience member is considering them, but to note that responses are often influenced by material conditions such as publicity, and hence the economics of distribution will be considered later in the chapter.

In a comprehensive article on Third World-based films that invite the ire of their home countries, Brian Hu, Senior Editor at UCLA's Asia Pacific Arts lists ten films that are considered "poverty porn" in Asian Cinema ('APA Top 10: "Poverty Porn" in Asian Cinema). Ray's Apu trilogy, Mehta's elements trilogy and *Slumdog Millionaire* are some of the inclusions in the list, possibly suggesting that the concerns over native audience nonchalance versus western critical acclaim remains unchanged. Hu points out the prevalence of the trend of making "outsider" films about the problems of the developing world, and reminds readers that 'we need to find a more productive way out of this critical stalemate' ('APA Top 10: "Poverty Porn" in Asian Cinema).

The aim of the subsequent sections is to suggest that the critical stalemate is already being dissolved as mainland audiences engage with diasporic texts, and also as these texts cross over from the arthouse to the mainstream establishments in the west. In his examination of the globalisation of Indian cinema, Harish Trivedi concludes that the diasporic artistic product is 'hardly visible in India and does not reflect or impinge on the Indian cultural landscape' (2008: 206). This does not appear to be the case in the case of Mehta's trilogy as India-based Rawat Publications is the first to produce a volume of essays on the films, edited by Indian scholar Jasbir Jain. The volume was published in 2007, only a year after the conclusion of the trilogy with the release of *Water*, thereby suggesting that the Indian academy, the cultural landscape and the market are all interested in diasporic creative practice.

A review of the edited volume below explains its consideration of the audience debate and examines whether it plays the role of mediating and/or synthesising the geographically, socially and thematically dispersed popular readings of the trilogy.



### 5.3 Jasbir Jain's Edited Volume: An Inadequate Attempt to Collate Responses to the Trilogy

In 2007, India-based Rawat Publications published a book titled, *Films, Literature and Culture: Deepa Mehta's Elements Trilogy*. Edited by renowned postcolonial theorist and independent critic Jasbir Jain, it appears to be an attempt to collate a series of responses to Mehta's trilogy (much like the comparative analysis sections of this chapter). Although a commendable scholarly compilation, the edited volume makes no attempt at a holistic or comparative reading of Mehta's elements trilogy. Most of the essays have been written by Indian female academics, and are similar to the reviews of the films by mainstream Indian film critics who often take aim at Mehta's lack of cultural engagement. Uma Parameswaran is the only diasporic voice, while Jennifer Heath is the token western voice (ironically, part of her childhood was spent in Afghanistan, hence she claims not be representative of the "west"). Jain's own essay addresses difficult questions pertaining to the location of and audience for diasporic creative practice, and she also defends the trilogy against Parameswaran's critique of its lack of Indian or Canadian authenticity.

Also significant is Rama Rani Lall's essay titled 'Meaning Through Contrast: Colour and Image in Water'. Instead of rebuking Mehta for her choice of a historical period to set the film, Lall points out that this could have been a considered decision due to the fact that the late 1930s were 'a particular time in the nation's history when idealism had a role in public life' (2007: 235). Unlike other contributors, she expresses disappointment that on its release in India, the film eluded the masses, and notes the orchestrated publicity as a possible factor confining it to elite audiences (2007: 234).

As a text, the edited volume does not seem to draw any conclusions either synthesising the various ways in which the trilogy has been read, or addressing how it is derived from (and impacts on) the wider contexts of South Asian diasporic, Indian commercial and arthouse filmmaking. The essays have been organised chronologically in the order in which the films were released, but a thematic classification would have made for a more considered collection. It is a collection of fragmentary thoughts on the trilogy rather than an in-depth analysis of every aspect of production and ongoing meaning-making practices from the personal, political and poetic perspectives.

The introductory essay appears to be a general discussion on the nature of representation and film, and also introduces the forthcoming essays, albeit it ends with a series of questions. The contributors address these questions about representation, responsibility and aesthetics, but the strings are not tied together by the editor, or in a concluding essay.

Jain's most significant contribution to the debate on the reception of the trilogy is her observation that these films have not necessarily been made for a particular kind of audience, whether western or Indian. She concludes, 'No easy division into "them" and "us" is possible. What saves the trilogy from the purely market showcasing is the anger and the love that work in unison with an artistic purpose' (Jain, 2007: 71). It seems as though Jain is gesturing towards a reading that considers the personal and the poetic in addition to the ubiquitous political responses to the trilogy, but such a reading is not explicitly demonstrated. On the issue of reception too, more could be said on the distribution discourses that give rise to audiences for diasporic films such as Mehta's. As will be explored in the final section on economics, it is indeed the need to recoup costs through independent transnational distribution that causes producers and agents to market Mehta's films (and other diasporic cinema) as arthouse, commercial, or potential crossovers. And sometimes, as witnessed in the recent case of Danny Boyle's India-based *Slumdog Millionaire*, an ostensibly niche film can cross over to the mainstream through word-of-mouth, festival publicity and award nominations. The successful garnering of crossover audiences will therefore be considered next in the case of the above film to ascertain whether there are devices that can be applied to other diasporic films.

#### **5.4 Crossover Audiences in the Aftermath of *Slumdog Millionaire***

If Deepa Mehta's *Water* set a precedent in terms of the crossing of geographic and cinematic boundaries by diasporic creative practice, Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (released in 2008) seems to have taken the notion of the "crossover film" a step further by winning critical and popular acclaim throughout the world. It is for this reason that I will now compare the critical and box office performance, as well as the publicity of the two films to better understand the crossover potential of diasporic practice. This does not mean that *Slumdog Millionaire* is an instance of diasporic practice. Rather, it is being considered

here as a successful crossover model model that shares certain attributes (such as independent distribution, arthouse categorisation, and auteur filmmaking) with diasporic films such as Mehta's

Unlike *Water*, *Slumdog Millionaire* was able to get past the "foreign language film" category (both in the Academy Awards and in terms of crossing over to the commercial audience). It could be argued that this is because only one-third of *Slumdog* is in Hindi, whereas *Water* is largely subtitled. More importantly, the former film seems to have been released in mainstream cinema complexes in the US, thereby deeming it acceptable for a non-foreign Academy Award nomination. Fox Searchlight distributed both films (although *Slumdog* also had the contribution of the independent arm of Warner brothers), yet *Slumdog* has won greater popular appeal. Many critics have noted its resemblance to Bollywood cinema of the 1970s, and others have remarked that it is possibly the first globalised film ('Slumdog Millionaire'). The use of the term "globalised film" is significant in that it implies not just transnational distribution, but also a combination of distinct cinematic traditions, talent and publicity discourses. I propose that the above term from mainstream film review discourse is the closest in meaning to the definition of "crossover film" being employed throughout this thesis.

This leads to the question of whether *Slumdog Millionaire* is a globalised film because of a) the cross-cultural creative collaboration that led to the genesis and development of the film; b) its hybrid film grammar that enmeshes the storytelling techniques of commercial Bollywood and Hollywood as well as arthouse cinema; or c) the international distribution and publicity that made the film materially available as well as seemingly accessible to cosmopolitan audiences the world over.

I begin with a consideration of the cross-cultural nexus that led to the text that is now *Slumdog Millionaire*. Commenting on the press notes, Australian film critic David Stratton notes that the script for the film has been adapted from Indian author Vikas Swarup's work of fiction titled *Q & A* ('Dickensian slice of Mumbai'). He adds that Kate Sinclair, the book scout for British Channel 4's feature film production arm discovered Swarup's novel. Screenwriter Simon Beaufoy of *The Full Monty* fame was then brought in to adapt the material, and finally Danny Boyle came onboard ('Dickensian slice of Mumbai'). Boyle, on

his part, has this to say about his initial hesitation and eventual decision to get involved with the film:

I thought, I absolutely don't want to do this – it comes over as a soundbite but it's the god's honest truth. Then I saw Simon Beaufoy's name on the script and I thought, I'd better read some of this so I can do that thing where you say, 'I enjoyed it but it's not for me'. But after 10 or 15 pages I knew I was going to do it – I didn't even care how it ended... Apart from the narrative, I was drawn by the idea of India – I've always worked so I never did the whole backpacking thing (cited in Jivani, 'Mumbai rising').

It is worth noting that although this is not the first time a western filmmaker has tackled an Indian story, as Stratton notes, 'not until now, with *Slumdog Millionaire*, has a Western filmmaker so completely embraced an Indian subject' ('Dickensian slice of Mumbai'). Boyle mentions bringing in new age Indian composer A R Rahman because 'not only does he draw on Indian classical music, but he's got R&B and hip hop coming in from America, house music coming from Europe and this incredible fusion is created' (Boyle cited in Jivani, 'Mumbai rising'). Loveleen Tandon, a veteran casting director who has worked on diasporic films like *Monsoon Wedding*, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* (Pais, 'Making Slumdog Millionaire truly Indian'), met producer Christian Colson and also joined the film ('Loveleen Tandon on Slumdog Millionaire'). According to Boyle, Tandon's role constantly expanded as she became his guide on the 'finer cultural complexities of life on the street' (Pais, 'Making Slumdog Millionaire truly Indian'), and was eventually credited as co-director.

It is the cross-cultural creative talent of the film that set up its hybrid cinematic grammar, one that borrows from conventions of commercial Hollywood and Bollywood, as well as the arthouse tradition. For reference points, Boyle mentions watching all of Mira Nair's films, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, as well sampling contemporary Bollywood directors like Ram Gopal Varma, Anurag Kashyap and Aamir Khan on Tandon's recommendation (Jivani, 'Mumbai rising'). Based on these influences, renowned film theorist David Bordwell notes that Ram Gopal Varma film '*Company's* thrusting wide angles, overhead shots, and pugilistic jump cuts would be right at home in *Slumdog*' ('Slumdooged by the past'). Tandon mentions that when she read the script, it reminded her 'of the fantastic Salim-Javed characters from the 70s' ('Loveleen Tandon on Slumdog Millionaire'). This is in reference to the scriptwriting duo comprising Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar whose films were popular in the 1970s and 80s, and often characterised by tropes like trains and coming of age stories.

While Boyle acknowledges his tribute to Bollywood in some instances, in others he attributes it to the Indian cultural context. When queried on the inclusion of a Bollywood-style song-and-dance routine at the end of the film, he says, ‘The dance isn’t a nod to Bollywood, it’s there because you can’t go to India and not dance’ (cited in Jivani, ‘Mumbai rising’).

In addition to the Bollywood tropes mentioned, the film uses a number of techniques associated with mainstream Hollywood cinema. According to Bordwell, these include adaptation, the double plotline, flashbacks, flashforwards, empathy, parallel editing and others (‘Slumdogged by the past’). He concludes, ‘the film is anchored in film history in ways that are likely to promote its appeal to a broad audience’ (‘Slumdogged by the past’). At the same time, Smitha Radhakrishnan of *Asia Pacific Arts* notes: ‘It’s a fundamentally American story – the individual triumphs, good people win in the end, hard work, savvy, and luck are richly rewarded’ (‘Slumdog Sincerity’). However, despite using popular conventions to appeal to a wide range of audiences, *Slumdog* is often considered a festival or arthouse film because of its child-centred plot (Bordwell, ‘Slumdogged by the past’). In other words, it appears that the film is being categorised as both cross-cultural and cross-genre. As has been demonstrated, in the case of diasporic films like Mehta’s that may cross cultures as well as genres, this presents a challenge in terms of the international publicity of the film as well as its discursive categorisation in media reviews. *Slumdog* has turned the tide by transforming the publicity challenge into a situated yet crossover marketing advantage.

There have been reports of Danny Boyle referring to *Slumdog* as a British film as it was financed in London (Pais, ‘Making Slumdog Millionaire truly Indian’), while its Indian co-director Loveleen Tandon has called it ‘fully and totally Indian’ (‘Loveleen Tandon on Slumdog Millionaire’). However, this difference of opinion regarding the “nationality” of the film between its western director and its Indian co-director does not necessarily imply a conflict of auteurship or belonging.

In other words, although the film as text is a discrete entity, its multiple creative and financial locations, coupled with the wide-ranging sites where it is read makes every aspect of its production and consumption a non-discrete, fluid space of personal-political-poetic

becoming. This fluidity is reflected in the very change in the film’s publicity poster that transformed from a black background with a close-up of the male lead in the early days of its release, to a white background with a colourful long shot of the happy couple after the film’s Golden Globe success.

The next section of my argument gives more detailed comparative analysis of publicity images used to promote the film. What follows is a semiotic analysis of both posters that reveals how certain tropes were used to win even more audience support. This is followed by an analysis of two sets of theatrical release posters of *Water* that demonstrate an increasing emphasis on the political context/controversy rather than the crossover content for better marketing.



The first poster for the film uses a number of superimposed images and text in bold fluorescent colours against a black background. It is the female lead of the film, captured in a running pose, who is at the centre and who in turn draws our attention to the male lead whose facial close up is more muted. Significantly, the male and the female characters are looking in opposite directions. Their gaze, which is also turned away from the viewers, signifies a search for something elusive. Immediately facing the viewer is the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*-style question and four options in purple and white that gives us a clue as to the nature of this search. Audiences worldwide are familiar with this question-answer

format and recognise it immediately as it was developed in the UK and subsequently licensed in over a hundred territories over the past decade (Stelter, ‘Slumdog Revives Interest in TV Show’). The text itself connotes that the film is a story of lost love that may be found with one of the four listed options. However, neither the text nor the images suggest whether this tale of love is a happy one. The title of the film is in a reddish yellow font with occasional black lines breaking its symmetry. This signals a possibly buoyant tale, albeit one marked with setbacks. Also in red and yellow is the text at the top of the poster that declares the film has been a popular choice at the Toronto Film Festival, besides being considered life affirming by *Time* magazine. This poster may bear some resemblance to those of an earlier Danny Boyle film, namely, *Trainspotting* (1996) in terms of the dark colour palette and the individual character-based design.



The second poster of *Slumdog Millionaire*, used for its release in the UK after the film’s Golden Globe success, is both distinct from the first and builds on the its message of buoyancy. Set against a white background with eye-catching text and colours, this one draws our attention to the bright orange lettering declaring *Slumdog* is “the feel-good film of the decade”. The yellow and orange hues of this text lead us to the similarly coloured

outfit of the female lead who is now standing with the male lead. In a significant difference from the first poster, both characters in this one are looking in the same direction that is just above the eye-level of the viewer. This connotes both a love story that ends on a hopeful note with the lovers glimpsing their future together, as well as an upward/uplifting vision to inspire the audience. Also noticeable is the colourful confetti ensconcing the happy couple, again signalling a celebratory mood. The pinks of the confetti lead us towards the much-bolder, pink-hued title of the film, with a diminished version of the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*-style question regarding lost love just underneath it. This question is now in yellow, and the correct option, that is, “Destiny”, has been highlighted for us in the same pink as the title. *Slumdog Millionaire* thus becomes synonymous with destiny, an optimistic one in this case, and leaves behind the “search with an unknown outcome” connotations of the previous poster.



The two original theatrical release posters of Deepa Mehta’s *Water*, juxtaposed above, appear to use similar colour palettes, composition and fonts. Both do not use water imagery directly, but allude to it through the blue sky that constitutes the background along with tall architectural structures that seem enmeshed with the surrounding natural scenery. This could be in reference to the significance of a natural element, that is, water to the cultural themes of the film suggested by the tradition-symbolising architecture. While the sky appears paler in the first poster, the architecture is diminished in the second. The other major difference between the two is the absence of the male lead (Narayan played by John



Abraham) in the first. Therefore, the absence of the rescuing/complementing male figure results in the female lead (Kalyani played by Lisa Ray) being consigned the foreground, albeit with downcast eyes. It may be concluded that his presence in the second poster implies a possibly brighter future for the female (as seen in a bluer, more prominent sky), and a smaller role for tradition (as seen in the diminished architecture). However, like the first poster of *Slumdog Millionaire*, the second poster of *Water* has the male and female lead characters gazing in opposite directions, and away from the viewer. This casts doubt on the outcome of their love story. A stylistically simple font is used to declare the film's title, followed by cast and crew details. Such devices position the film as distinct from the colour and extravagance of Bollywood and also insert it in the global arthouse category often synonymous with understated detail.



The initial posters of *Water* were followed by at least two more versions after the film's Best Foreign Film nomination from Canada at the 2006 Academy Awards. Not only are the subsequent posters of a brighter hue compared to the first two, but they also use direct water imagery and are marked by the absence of the male and female leads. In the first, we are first drawn to the distinctly royal blue waves, followed by the bold white capitalised font declaring that *Time* has pronounced the film as a triumph. It is not clear how this victorious state is achieved in the content of the film, hence the possible link to

Mehta's own triumph in getting the film made after its production was halted by Hindu fundamentalist elements in India. A narrow yellow strip in the middle declares the title of the film in the same royal blue as the water above. This yellow is also mirrored in the costume of the child lead (Chuyia played by Sarala) who displays upbeat body language even as the austere widows surrounding her seem to blur. The next poster puts a red tint on the background consisting of a riverbank and surrounding old structures. The child, dressed in white, forms the centre of this image and is shown squatting and holding a leaf. The white of her robe is the same as that of the font declaring the film's title on the bottom half, and the accolades from the media and the Academy on the top half. It appears as though the second set of posters attempt to literally put a bright tint on the film by capitalising on the viewer's ability to recall Mehta's production triumph, as well as highlighting the child lead who has a more hopeful outcome in the film than the male and female leads. However, the question remains whether this is a deliberate effort that pays dividends at the box office or fails because it has excluded or blurred the austerity of the widows' lives.

From the above analysis of the two posters of *Slumdog Millionaire* and the two sets of posters of *Water*, it is clear that the arthouse-inclining open-ended connotations of the first set have been turned into a more commercial slant in the second. While this seems to succeed with *Slumdog*, it does not appear to be the case in *Water*. It is no surprise then, that according to movie review website Rotten Tomatoes, *Slumdog* has grossed almost \$140 million at the US box office ('*Slumdog Millionaire* 2008'), whereas *Water* only earned just over \$3 million ('*Water* 2006'). Another widely used online resource, Box Office Mojo, puts *Slumdog Millionaire's* worldwide earnings so far at almost \$300 million ('*Slumdog Millionaire: Movies*'), while *Water* only fetched about \$10 million ('*Water*'). Regardless of which of the two films has more critical merit, *Slumdog* seems to have successfully turned its cross-cultural and cross-genre origins into a crossover marketing campaign, thereby earning more critical and popular acclaim.

Using this analysis as a springboard, the following section will explicate how the success of Indian diasporic cinema often hinges on the popularity of commercial Bollywood in the west. Does this suggest that arthouse-inclining diasporic directors like Mehta and Nair should follow the lead of those like Boyle, or even the UK's Gurinder Chadha by altering the publicity discourse?

I argue that broadening their audience demographic in the west, as well as reaching out to mainstream viewers in the home country may absolve these creative practitioners from the personal accusation of pandering to the western liberal niche. The political strategy of capitalising on the distribution circuits of the home and host nations, and the use of poetic means to appropriate commercial devices in publicity material also has the potential to render diasporic cinema more accessible to crossover audiences.

### **5.5 The Economics of Independent Transnational Distribution**

In her influential study of Bollywood cinema beyond the Indian mainland, Jigna Desai observes that the success of Indian diasporic films is dependent on the widespread visibility of commercial Indian cinema in the West (2006). Referring to audience potential for diasporic cinema, she adds:

These hopes of crossover and diasporic appeal result partially from the increasing commercial success of Indian films recently in Britain and North America. A significant minority presence in England, British Asians have propelled Bollywood films into dominant public culture and multiplexes in complicated ways, thus luring not only multiple generations of British Asians, but also white British to the theatres (Desai, 2006:118).

As she cites Bollywood film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (which was the top grossing foreign language film in 1998), the 2002 British Film Institute focus program on South Asian and diasporic films entitled *ImagineAsia*, and Gurinder Chadha's British and international box-office hit *Bend it Like Beckham* as instances of the increasing presence of Indian cinema in Britain and other western societies, Desai's argument appears valid (2006: 119). However, the question arises whether such an accidental economic alliance between Bollywood films and those made in the diaspora is productive for both parties concerned. This question is especially relevant considering that several diasporic directors like Deepa Mehta distance themselves from the political-poetic conventions of commercial Indian cinema. For instance, during my interview with her on the film set of *Heaven on Earth*, Mehta was reluctant to engage with contemporary Bollywood culture when asked why mainland Indian directors did not deal with historical subject matter (Khorana, 'Maps and Movies').

In addition, Adrian Athique maps the terrain of the crossover audience for Indian cinema, and like Desai, comments on the success of Bollywood and diasporic films being

interdependent (2001: 301). With regards to the difference in content and form between the two categories, he notes that diasporic cinema is nonetheless conflated with Bollywood in the western media, and that both benefit from this fallacy:

Mainstream Indian films have been associated, for example, with the success of Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), whilst the "colour as culture" connotations of Bollywood branding have been used to market the films of non-resident Indian (or NRI) directors, such as Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004)" (Athique, 2008: 301).

While *Monsoon Wedding* and *Bride and Prejudice* can be categorised as having a major romantic plot, and hence may be loosely associated with Bollywood, this may not be the case with a serious dramatic feature like Mehta's *Fire*. However, after casting actresses like Shabana Azmi and Nandita Das, often synonymous with the "parallel" strand of Indian cinema in the first film of her elements trilogy, Mehta seems to have bent the rules somewhat. *Earth* starred Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan in a leading role, while *Water* was re-cast with Bollywood heartthrob John Abraham. Mehta's latest film, *Heaven on Earth* is being released in India in March 2009 with the title *Videsh* (Hindi for foreign land). Sanjay Bhutian, the CEO of BR films (the Indian distributor of the film) explains the change of title on the grounds that it would connect well with Indian audiences (cited in 'Preity's HEAVEN ON EARTH is now VIDESH'). It therefore appears that filmmakers like Mehta are moving towards embracing certain elements of commercial cinema, especially pertaining to casting and publicity to appeal to wider audiences.

Besides casting and publicity, Indian diasporic directors seem to be capitalising on their cosmopolitan location in two or more countries, as well as using the increasing public presence of the Indian diaspora in the west. For instance, Desai points out that although Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Bride and Prejudice* are British films, they savvily include references to the United States in the narrative, thereby giving US audiences a point of identification (2006: 122). Citing an interview with Chadha where the director acknowledges her intention to introduce Bollywood cinema with a British twist to people across America, Desai adds: 'It is this kind of prudence and calculation that has encouraged Miramax Films to prepurchase the North American and Latin American distribution rights to the film and to release it as a major, rather than as an art house film' (2006: 122). It is worth noting that such a market savvy attitude runs parallel with, and may even have been influenced by an increasing trend towards product placement and

campaigns to attract crossover audiences in contemporary Bollywood. Rao documents this trend when he notes,

Product placement (with lamentably laughable results in *Yaadein*) and merchandising à la Hollywood, are in the ascendance. Coffee table tomes on the making of hyped films – *Asoka*, *K3G*, *Lagaan* – fuel a whole new industry. Aamir Khan may not have won the Oscar but the campaign to woo a crossover audience has been launched. Market savvy has come to stay (Rao, ‘Globalisation and Bollywood’).

In their study of transnational Bollywood, Inden and Kaur come to a similar conclusion as they comment that product placements are attuned to global consumer fashions and multinational sponsors, thereby making Bollywood the ‘export lager’ of Indian cinema (cited in Athique, 2008: 301). It is worth noting that if Bollywood, synonymous with the Indian national psyche has itself taken a crossover turn, can the authenticity of Indian diasporic cinema be questioned? In other words, contemporary trends towards transnational production and distribution of cinema, together with the greater cultural capital associated with crossover audience appeal render the authenticity argument obsolete.

Recent academic and journalistic studies of Bollywood cast it in the mould of a “global mass culture” rather than a “national cinema”, and this is further indicative of why a diasporic cinema-Bollywood alliance could be symbiotic rather than competitive. In a book titled *Brand Bollywood: A New Global Entertainment Order*, journalist and film jurist Derek Bose argues that it has become the dream of every Bollywood filmmaker to produce a film that is a success on the international stage (2006: 56). He cites the example of ‘Bollywood dream merchants’ like Aditya Chopra, Karan Johar, Ashutosh Gowariker, Nikhil Advani and Yash Chopra, as well as diasporic directors such as Shekhar Kapur and Mira Nair as instances who have come close to crossing over (2006: 56-57).

In his study of the global mobility of contemporary Bollywood, Nitin Govil theorises it as a form of indigenous global mass culture, and attributes its popularity to the modern repackaging of the vernacular as the mass (2008: 203). Similarly, in the introduction to his examination of Bollywood consumption in Nigeria, Brian Larkin comments, ‘For some societies Hindi cinema represents tradition, a space outside of, and alter to, the cultural spread of Western modernity; for others, the cultural address of Indian film is future-oriented, modern, and cosmopolitan’ (2008: 216).

The tradition-modernity dialectic for the reception discourse of commercial Bollywood is not unlike the themes of diasporic cinema itself, which have been explored in Chapters Two and Three. Therefore, if diasporic film can parody Bollywood (in films like Mehta's *Bollywood Hollywood* and Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice*), as well as use Bollywood stars and song and dance sequences, there is room for a distribution alliance. This alliance can enable diasporic filmmakers to capitalise on Bollywood's established commercial mass market in the homeland and the Indian diaspora, as well as enable Bollywood directors to have better access to infrastructure and talent in the west and minimise illegal global distribution networks. Both strands of cinema can thereby facilitate a mutual crossover and be recognised as the transnational media entities that they have already become in terms of content, form and unaccounted for global appeal. Such an alliance will be situated in the roots of the home and host societies, as well as cross over by virtue of the routes of the diaspora. This will enable wider reception, and in turn lead to new kinds of diasporic creative practice that enmesh the personal, the political and the poetic in new ways that are not rendered marginal by popular or scholarly discourse.

The following chapter is a narrative of my own diasporic creative production, that is, the visual essay *I Journey Like a Paisley*, that is a situated yet crossover document of my personal-political-poetic becomings in Adelaide (Australia). Both the visual essay and the blog interface listed in the appendix are not intended for commercial purposes and are situated within an academic framework, yet I attempt multiple crossovers in terms of genre and creative discourse.

## **6. CHAPTER FIVE**

# **REMIXES: PRACTISING THE PERSONAL- POLITICAL-POETIC IN A CROSSOVER VISUAL ESSAY**

## 6.1 Theorising the Crossover Visual Essay

The critical component of this project has so far demonstrated a convergence of the postmodern, postcolonial and heuritic approaches to simultaneously consider the personal-political-poetic in diasporic creative practice that is situated yet crossover. What results is an academic-reflexive dissertation and a diasporic essay in visual form (titled *I Journey Like a Paisley*) that is part autobiography, part documentary and part cultural text. The latter is a visual essay of the kind that Peter Thompson defines as incorporating the documentary, fiction and experimental genres where appropriate ('The Cinematic Essay').

The form of the creative piece can also be theorised using Elizabeth McIntyre's self-reflexive account of the methods used to produce a script. In this account, she adapts Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity to conclude that 'the researcher is placed within the complex system of interaction between the individual, field and domain in the creative process' (McIntyre, 'Facilitating the Script'). Therefore, as a genre and a creative form, the visual component of this project is a remix in that it uses, mixes and transcends postmodern performativity, postcolonial hybridity, and inventive poetics. It is demonstrative of the personal-political-poetic in diasporic practice that is the starting point of the reflexive critical component in the preface. At the same time, the project as a whole manifests researcher-artist-teacher Robyn Stewart's notion of a "neonarrative" in that it uses a bricolage of qualitative research methods, and is both located between, and is a crossover that links theory and practice (2007: 130).

In addition to the dissertation and the cinematic essay, a literary digital counterpart reflecting many of the features of an informal essay has been maintained for most of the development of this project. The blog (<<http://over-exposed-image.blogspot.com>>) begun in May 2007, four months into my PhD, was an attempt to digest the numerous personal changes, intellectual stimulants and creative insights I was receiving at the time. It became a journal for the development of the self, intertwined with a record of the progression of the thesis and the genesis of the visual essay. This is the most detailed application of heuristics in the project in that it is concerned not just with analysis, but also with how theory and practice are "made" (Ulmer, 1994: 4). As a collection of text, photos, video links, film and book reviews, treatments and fragmented ideas, it manifests the shifting content and form



of diasporic cultural theory and production itself. As mentioned in the preface, the blog has been a laboratory for turning my own shifting relationships with diasporic existence into a creative trajectory. The notion of turning a personal-political condition into a poetics is crucial for this chapter as it is a crossover narrative of my own journey of diasporic production. I will now map this journey in order to identify the broader personal and political contexts that led to the emergence of a poetics in, and through, the thesis, the blog, and the visual essay.

## **6.2 Pre-production**

It is necessary to map the evolution of the project as a whole as its changing personal-political emphases created a different poetics, and it is this becoming that comprises a significant part of the pre-production phase of the visual essay. At the beginning of my PhD, I prepared a research proposal with slightly different aims than appears to be the case now. My research questions were more concerned with understanding the dichotomy between western and Indian responses to Deepa Mehta's elements trilogy than with examining crossover cinema through a holistic yet situated lens incorporating diaspora theory, genre studies and creative practice. The other approaches emerged as a result of both watching more "world cinema" and picking up on similarities in form and content, as well as reading extensive literature on diasporic cultural texts.

Another significant difference in my take on the project occurred after meeting with Mehta in Toronto in December 2007. What I discovered while interviewing her was that while I admired her for her verve, I did not think so highly any longer of an auteur-only approach to making and viewing. What I remembered was hybrid academic-filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha's tomes declaring that independent filmmakers are involved in every stage of a film's journey. More importantly, she argues for an enmeshing of filmmaking and filmviewing as opposed to the tenets of high culture which is 'conveniently mystified as the exclusive realm of the creators, while popular culture remains equally mystified as that of the passively demanding consumers who, more often than not, are presented by their very advocates as being fixed and unchanging in their ideology of consumption, unwilling or unable to think for themselves' (Minh-ha, 1991: 197). Hence, I decided to use Mehta's trilogy as a springboard for examining the South Asian brand of diasporic cinema, but was

by no means treating it as exemplary or celebrating it uncritically. Perhaps this was also the answer to the western-Indian audience dichotomy – what was needed was a viewing position that occupied a space somewhere between the extremes of celebratory liberalism and ethnic fundamentalism.

The next difficult phase in the critiquing-making process came just before I was due to present a paper at the Australian Women's and Gender Studies Conference at the University of Western Australia. When I submitted an abstract for the conference that was subsequently accepted, I was glad just to be going to a new city and was looking forward to the networking opportunities. However, a few months later, in July 2008, I was having a crisis of faith vis-à-vis feminism, as well as doubts about the usefulness of postcolonial theory for the content analysis chapter (now Chapter Three). In my paper, I tried to describe the diasporic cultural space as one where postcolonial and feminist concerns could intersect (and transcend their niche concerns), but wasn't entirely convinced with my argument. The problem lay not with the argument itself, as both postcolonial feminism and feminist postcolonialism have a long scholarly history (two influential examples from the 1990s are McRobbie 1996, and Ware 1996).

Rather, I was unsure about letting pre-existing theories determine the diasporic agenda for diasporic scholars, creative practitioners, and their audiences. They could undoubtedly be useful, but only as aids. Moreover, just as many postcolonial concepts need an update when applied to the globalised diasporic context, it occurred to me that radical feminism's lack of appeal amongst my generation made it difficult to examine Mehta's films solely through a feminist lens. I had realised both that the "subaltern" could speak, and that many diasporic films showed both men and women as victim-protagonists.

Hence, while I was initially concerned with the reception end of diasporic cultural products (thereby treating them as "products" as opposed to "processes"), I subsequently became interested in the border-crossing cultural trends that shed new light on diasporans and their creative practices. In addition to the crisis of faith vis-à-vis postcolonial and feminist theories, I was also beginning to notice a distinct subaltern voice emerging in non-elite sections of society on my trips back to India, as well as amongst Indians living in Australia.

One such issue emerged on my visit to India to see family in late 2007, soon after my interview with Mehta in Canada. This was the controversy surrounding Indian cricketer Harbhajan Singh's allegedly racist remarks addressed to Australian Andrew Symonds during India's tour of Australia. As I was getting ready to leave India, this issue erupted with a vengeance in the Indian media, and many pointed out that it was time to equal the scores (this seemed to be a reference to both colonial domination, and the notorious practice of sledging in international cricket). I was wary of facing questions on my return to Adelaide but, in the event, did not receive many. The media here seemed largely concerned with the "gentlemanly" game of cricket being taken over by India and its burgeoning economic might (see Conn, 'Harbhajan Singh walks free after spitting controversy'). The subaltern was beginning to be heard, and I wanted to capture a glimpse of this in my visual essay.

As I write this narrative of my project, another Indian-Australia issue is making waves in both the Indian and Australian media (with anecdotal evidence suggesting that it is even receiving headline coverage overseas). I heard from my parents in India in late May 2009 that a few Indian students had been attacked in Melbourne, and that the news channels in the country would not stop talking about it (see Colebatch, 'Indian TV's unsound fury' and Das, 'It's simple: India doesn't want its citizens harmed'). On a scan of the major online news sources in Australia, I discovered that this event (or series of events) was not receiving any significant coverage here, although there had been a brief story on SBS News. The hysteria in India continued, and the media here gradually began to pick it up. When there was a protest rally of thousands of Indian students held at Federation Square in Melbourne, the Australian Federal Government, Victoria Police, tertiary institutions, and newspaper columnists began to take notice. Most responses seemed concerned with maintaining the global image of a multicultural Australia, and not letting the profitable overseas student market be adversely affected. The welfare of these transnational residents, however, did not and does not appear to be receiving direct redress even as their clamouring voices continue to create a stir. Therefore, issues with subaltern representation remain, and I believed a crossover medium like my own diasporic visual essay could attempt to undo ethnic stereotypes.

What is significant in the above two issues is not the debate over the continuing legacy of racism in Australia, and the same affecting Australia-Asia or Australia-India political,

economic and cultural relations. This debate is an ongoing one in Australia, despite the official abandonment of the White Australia Policy in the 1970s (Jupp, 2002: 10). Rather, the vocal protest from Indians (both at home and abroad) is crucial in signifying a shift from a postcolonial era marked by the muteness of the subaltern to a glocal age where many former subalterns are not merely audible, but often very voluble in the public sphere (although this may not be adequately reflected in the popular media). This leaves us with a new dilemma when considering diasporic identity and creativity – is it still marginal, or is it getting much room at the centre not on the basis of merit, but on account of its erstwhile marginalisation?

The above question is also being raised in literary circles with many “coloured” writers winning the top prizes. For instance, Anuradha Marwah questions the “Indianness” of diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie and Jhumpa Lahiri, as well as Indian writers such as Kiran Desai who do not spend as much time in India as an engaged westerner like William Dalrymple (‘Who is an Indian Writer?’). In other words, I wanted to examine whether diasporic creativity is immersed in the various localities it represents, and does not superficially traverse their borders in the name of cosmopolitan chic. This was bound to be a difficult task given my own location in the diaspora, but considering the political contexts is essential, both for this narrative and the visual essay.

Another contextual occurrence that is directly related to diasporic creativity, and which highlighted the importance of considering genre was the worldwide release and subsequent critical and popular success accrued to Danny Boyle’s India-based film, *Slumdog Millionaire*. While Chapter Four discusses the genre-based reception and distribution of this film in detail, there is a significant reason it was included late into my doctoral research. This reason is not a desire to cash in on the *Slumdog* popularity, but in fact to use this very border and genre-crossing success to illustrate the significance and potential of diasporic cultural texts in the contemporary era of glocal collaborations (at the personal, political, and poetic levels).

The inclusion of the film is not an uncritical celebration of a cross-cultural cinematic venture that utilises a number of well established national and generic film conventions, and also crosses over to reach a mainstream audience. Rather, the feasibility of such a production, and the geographic and trans-genre reach of its distribution highlight the non-

marginal potential of diasporic texts, especially if they are to reach audiences beyond arthouse cinemas and liberal elites. Reaching these audiences may not be an end in itself for filmmakers or distributors, but it is certainly crucial to elicit balanced responses (not just celebratory or fundamentalist) and in turn encourage relevant, engaged diasporic films. This question of crossover audiences is also addressed in the visual essay in that it uses popular tropes such as Bollywood cinema as well as more difficult questions regarding ethnic stereotyping to stimulate responses from Indian diasporic interviewees.

The narrative of the final chapter, the blog, and the cinematic essay is Indian-Australian, remixed in terms of theoretical discourse, and in line with the model of “situated knowledge” set out in the preface. Additionally, while India may appear to be the first link between these seemingly disparate diasporic narratives, Canada (Deepa Mehta’s diasporic location) and Australia are also undoubtedly linked by virtue of their Commonwealth ties. Moreover, given the migrant-friendly multicultural discourse of these OECD nations and their growing Indian diaspora, they have become important sites for envisaging the overseas Indian outside of the UK and the USA. The latter countries are still associated with the zenith of aspirational prosperity in the popular imagination, but the relatively lower living costs and easier migration processes of Canada and Australia are turning them into Indian diasporic hubs. Cities like Toronto and Sydney are now popular locations for commercial Indian film production, and also offer mass audiences for Bollywood shows, screenings, and DVD sales.

In Adelaide, a relatively regional state capital compared to larger Australian metropolises like Sydney and Melbourne, the Indian-born population has grown steadily since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. When I first arrived here, as an undergraduate student in 2003, there were hardly any subcontinental faces amongst the crowd on Rundle Mall, the central shopping precinct. I did have family friends living in the eastern suburbs, and visited a Sikh temple with them soon after my arrival, but the devotees there largely consisted of long-settled Malaysian Sikhs who could switch from authentic Punjabi to Ocker English with effortless ease. There were a few Indian restaurants dotting the CBD and inner city, but they catered mostly to the Australian palate. As for the Indian grocery store and video shop situation, the most well known was situated near Chinatown, included in the multicultural hub that is Grote Street as an afterthought. There was also the odd Indian taxi driver, but not nearly as many as I saw in Melbourne later that year while

visiting a friend at La Trobe University. The cohorts in my Bachelor of Media course at the University of Adelaide more or less consisted of local students, and I often found it easiest to make friends with other “internationals” in the politics and literature electives that I undertook.

Almost seven years later, in 2010, as I step off the bus on King William Street and walk to the University’s North Terrace campus, I see a different Adelaide (at least on the surface). There are women in brightly-hued *salwaar kameez* (traditional north Indian attire), young couples carting prams, proud parents visiting their progeny, groups of turbaned men in food courts, plaited girls serving customers in phone shops and other sights which were unimaginable when I first arrived. This increase can be attributed to sociological factors like India’s spiralling population which coerces its youth to seek higher education and employment opportunities elsewhere, as well as political-economic decisions such as the Australian Federal Government’s Permanent Residency program that rewards applicants with skills, and those willing to live and work in regional centres like Adelaide. According to statistics from the Department of Immigration, the number of offshore and onshore student visas granted to Indian passport holders has grown exponentially from just over 7,000 in 2002-2003 to nearly 35,000 in 2006-2007 (‘Combined Onshore and Offshore Grants for 2002-2003’; ‘Offshore and Onshore Grants for 2006-07 PY’). In his work on Indian cinema audiences in Australia, Adrian Athique refers to these students as a “temporary” diaspora, and notes that ‘they boost the clientele for South Asian cultural and commercial activities in the major Australian cities’ (2005: 119).

The growing number of Indian students, skilled migrants and people of Indian origin (including both second-generation Indians in Australia, and Indians who have migrated twice from countries like Fiji and Mauritius) have particular implications for the trajectory of Indian cultural products entering the mainstream in Australia. While the first Bollywood film I watched in a cinema complex in Adelaide in 2004 was a rare treat, the situation is radically different now with commercial chains like Hoyts joining the worldwide Hindi cinema bandwagon. My foremost public Indian movie experience in Australia was at the Mercury Cinemas, a small avant-garde institution run by the Media Resource Centre in South Australia. We were served hot Indian tea, steaming samosas, and sweetmeats during the intermission, and the aroma of these foods seems to have made a stronger impression on my sensory memory than the actual film being screened.

The point of this recollection is not to berate the escapist and forgettable fare that is a certain section of Bollywood cinema, but to highlight the socio-cultural nature of the film-viewing experience, especially as it pertains to commercial Indian films in non-Indian geographical contexts. My next few films were seen in commercial chains like Wallis and Hoyts with friends and family, but have lately been overtaken by the pirated DVDs that are now widely available to buy or rent in Indian grocery stores that are rapidly setting up in Australian suburbia (Athique, 2005: 122).

In addition to the above material manifestations, in Australia, Indian culture has also begun to colour the nation's popular media. From a Bollywood-themed task on Channel Ten's *Big Brother*, an Indian musical special on Channel Seven's *Dancing With the Stars*, documentary series like *India Reborn* on SBS and *A Story of India* on ABC to the growing undocumented popularity of Bollywood dance schools and theme parties, mainstream Australia appears to be appropriating elements of the imported Indian cultural aesthetic. I find myself in slight discomfort on being quizzed by strangers about *Slumdog Millionaire*, but also rejoice when Indian composer A.R. Rahman and the Pussycat Dolls' version of "Jai Ho" is played on the radio.

Does this mean India has crossed over into Australia successfully and not much has been lost in translation? In response to the above question, it is difficult to ascertain whether the Indian-Australian exchange is egalitarian, although a Euro-American tilt giving the balance of power to largely Anglo-Saxon Australia is inevitable. However, on the basis of academic and anecdotal evidence during my time as an Indian student-researcher-practitioner in inner city Adelaide, as well as an Australian-resident-Indian in the country of my birth, I am inclined to conclude that the cultural tropes of global Indian cinema are giving us a shared context, a lingua franca, however stilted. Athique refers to this shared discourse as one man's imagined community, and someone else's night out (2005: 130). I can only add that it is not only a night out, but also a conversation starter. The rest of the conversation may or may not flow, but the cross-cultural dialogue has begun in earnest and diasporic creative practice has the potential to enable a better translation.

In order to enable a better translation in *I Journey Like a Paisley*, I was keen to select a visual motif with cross-cultural as well as personal resonance. While the selection occurred

after much deliberation in the second year of my candidature, the nuances were developed over the following months. My mother is a trained textile designer, and as a child, I often saw her paint and print the paisley pattern on the numerous fabrics that she exhibited, and later sold in her boutique. I once had ambitions of being a designer myself, but more literary inclinations soon took hold. Nonetheless, I was beginning to realise that my fascination with the paisley pattern had accompanied me to Australia. In my undergraduate years, I often found myself walking into the Oxfam Community Trade store across the road from the university to just browse and look at “ethnic” patterns and hues. As a graduate student, I began to don this very fusion garb more confidently, not fearing labels and perhaps defying assimilationist tendencies amongst some migrants. I wanted this comfort with Indian-inspired clothing, the inner-as-outer idea to be reflected in the visual essay. However, I was also keen to research the history of these textiles, and re-visit my mother’s designs and possessions so as not to be seen as merely appropriating the exotic.

It was therefore opportune that I visited India at a time when I was in need of renewing my ties with family and friends, as well as in search of the resilient thread that makes Indian textiles and patterns historical yet contemporary, situated yet crossover. I was not merely going back, but also had the privilege of looking at the personal, political and poetic histories of textiles (and my family’s entanglement in it) with a diasporic perspective. One of the first stops during my trip was the town of McLeodganj, nestling in the Himalayas in northern India, and sheltering thousands of Tibetan refugees. As the official residence of the Dalai Lama, it is a major hub for domestic and overseas tourists. What attracts me to McLeodganj is its curious mix of the spiritual and the material, with the Buddhist monastery overlooking two street markets that boast silver jewellery and textiles from most corners of India. Then there is the amalgamation of international cuisines that is rare for a small-sized Indian town. It also has many bookshops where my hunt for a book on the history of the paisley pattern first began.

The next leg of my journey was to the newly created Indian state of Uttarakhand which is also flanked by the Himalayas in the north. After visiting friends in the capital Dehradun, I took off for the holy city of Haridwar with my sister. Located on the banks of the Ganges, Haridwar is known for its Hindu pilgrims that flock to the river for communal baths and an evening prayer ceremony, as well as countless homes for celibate retirees. On reaching the riverbank, I was overcome by the spectacle of the mass of humanity that felt so strongly



about taking a dip in obviously polluted waters. A priest who recited a few mantras while we put the ceremonial flowers in the water wasn't too happy that I refused to ritually sip the water. My fascination triumphed over piety, but I welcomed the photographic opportunity. There were neither paisleys there, nor the sombre prayer bells and cosmopolitan elements of McLeodganj. This was the Indian heartland - a version of India that I hadn't seen during my growing years in the multi-cultural state of Jammu and Kashmir. I woke up to the possibility that the interviewees for my visual essay may not associate with the paisley and its border-crossing connotations. At the same time, I realised that the paisley was merely my filter for viewing their stories, not an imposition.

With the heterogeneous nature of Indian lives and fabrics in mind, I visited the National Calico Textile Museum in the city of Ahmedabad, which is renowned for its cotton industry. It is also the site of Mahatma Gandhi's Sabarmati Ashram where he first began to spin cloth to encourage widespread rejection of British goods. The museum itself was enlightening in its breadth of states and corresponding patterns or styles of embroidery covered, but also steeped in tradition and not very encouraging of photography or further scholarly work. I then had the opportunity to visit the fabric industry owned by a maternal uncle, and therefore gained an understanding of the industrial process of weaving and manufacturing cloth. Gandhi's ashram was once again a step back in time, but subsequent trips to the various shopping malls that have sprung up in Ahmedabad city brought me back to the present. I was also finally able to locate a book, not specifically on the paisley, but on India's textile exports at one of the city's numerous Crossword bookstores.

On returning to my hometown of Jammu, I began to examine my mother's scrapbooks and various other designs she sketched during her textile training. I took photos of them, especially her paisleys and leaf motifs, but was not yet sure how I would use these in the visual essay. The book I purchased in Ahmedabad seemed to indicate that cashmere and pashmina shawls originating in Kashmir constituted a large proportion of India's historical textile exports to the west. I recalled my mother's pashmina collection and its vivid colours and paisley borders. She kindly took them out from storage and narrated the story that lay behind many an inheritance or purchase. I was impressed with their luxurious texture which was light yet warm. The paisleys on them were more intricate than any I had seen before, and I knew I had stumbled upon something visually and metaphorically precious. It was the photos of these pashminas that were used during post-production to punctuate and

accentuate the visual essay. It is crucial that I mention that this was not a mere affectation, but an important thread in both my story and the stories of those I was attempting to tell. The pattern on these shawls may not be a literal setting, but it was to frame both the roots and the routes of the journey. It is worth noting that this personal diasporic journey is different from the original colonial journey that led to the export of the Kashmir shawl to Europe, and the naming of the re-naming as well as re-shaping of the paisley pattern to suit English tastes (Sharrad, 2004: 64).

On my return to Adelaide after a two-month sojourn in India, I was more determined than ever to begin the production stage of the film. I posted recruitment posters calling for interviewees of Indian origin interested in speaking about their experiences at the three universities campuses in the city (see Appendix for recruitment poster). After a minor security incident and a decision to cap the interviewee numbers and age range, I ended up recruiting most of the participants through friends in the Indian community in Adelaide. A snowballing conversation was taking place through my project, and I was ready to capture it on film.

### **6.3 Production**

I found it necessary to broach a wide range of conversation subjects, ranging from the expected ties with Bollywood cinema and Indian food, to the more difficult questions pertaining to living in the diaspora and dealing with religious and marital choices. Note that I use the term “conversation” rather than the conventional “interview” to describe these encounters. This is because I believed a conversational exchange was more in line with the crossover discourse of the critical and creative components of the project.

To materialise the above concerns, it was crucial to choose interviewees with a range of experiences in India and Australia. At the same time, selecting individuals on the basis of variety in age, class, religion, language and other factors for the mere sake of representativeness would not have been true to the poetic essence of the proposed visual essay. Therefore, given that my own story trajectory was to act as a springboard for the interviews, I decided to select interviewees based in Adelaide, and from my own generation (varying in age from 20 to 35 years). As mentioned in the section on pre-production,

another significant filter (partly defined by the method of recruitment) was the education and socio-economic status of the participants. The majority was tertiary educated or currently studying, and employed as professionals or with white-collar aspirations.

It may be argued that a visual essay that included a more visible section of the Indian diasporic community, such as the growing number of taxi drivers of South Asian origin in Adelaide, would have made for a more realistic video document. However, the intended genre was not that of a documentary, but that of a documentary-autobiography-cultural text remix as described at the beginning of this chapter. Such a crossover genre was also an opportunity to attempt to undo mainstream and hackneyed representations of diasporic Indians, a function of diasporic creative practice which has been discussed in relation to Mehta's elements trilogy.

The visual composition of the trilogy (analysed in detail in Chapter Three) inspired me to use specific interview settings that reflected the daily poetics of the interviewees' lives. This usually happened to be the living areas of the participants' houses, and further justified the use of personal contacts for recruitment. Although the homes were not always as vibrantly decorated as I had expected, still photos of ornamental objects and attire helped intersperse the narrative during the post-production stage. A couple of interviewees were not comfortable being interviewed in their homes, and hence I filmed our conversations at cafes around the Adelaide metropolitan area. The outdoor setting was not planned in the treatment for the visual essay, but it contributed to the Indian-Australian hybridity of the production.

Many of the interviewees were gracious enough to suggest friends who might be interested in talking on camera. Ashok informed me that his parents would be hosting a *Hari Katha* (the story of Hari) with a celebrated academic-composer from interstate, and I was invited to drop by and film. This was another unplanned, but precious opportunity to get a glimpse into the lives of diasporic Indians in Australia, and specifically their continued patronage of India's folkloric culture. Although the verses were recited in *Kannada* (the official language of the southern Indian state of Karnataka), the accompanying English translations both helped me understand the recital and established the Australian setting.

Another participant, Preeti, told me of a Bollywood-themed float which would be part of Adelaide's iconic Credit Union Christmas Pageant for the first time. She was one of the dancers in the float which was being organised by her friend Francesca, owner of a famous local Bollywood dance school. I contacted Francesca and was able to get details of the float, as well as permission to film it on the day of the pageant. My friend Mike, an experienced photographer kindly agreed to accompany me so we could get footage from more than one angle. As we waited for the parade to begin that November morning, he turned the camera on me and asked me what the visual essay was about. I mentioned that the inclusion of a Bollywood float was a token, yet significant step in the annals of Australian multiculturalism. As the float finally approached our North Terrace position, I was surprised to find myself and dozens of others in the crowd entertained and in swing with its Punjabi beats. The backdrop of the float set consisted of the ubiquitous Taj Mahal, but the music was contemporary, and the dancers from various ethnic backgrounds. When the float disbanded, I interviewed Preeti and Francesca and included this footage in the visual essay. At both public screenings of the visual essay, which will be explicated later, several viewers told me that the two young women dressed in Indian garb, but speaking "Australian" fascinated them. I hoped ethnic stereotypes were beginning to come apart.

In addition to the interviews and the above footage, I also decided to use personal photos and footage at a later stage during the production of the visual essay. This inclusion of the self was a contested issue, and one I shied away from initially as I did not want the essay to veer into self-indulgent territory. However, as the interviews progressed, I gave the last two interviewees who are good friends the opportunity to interview me in turn. I was reminded of sociologist Laurel Richardson's struggle with a researcher-focussed narrative voice and her eventual adoption of "experimental writing". She says, 'Separating the researcher's story from the people's story implies that the researcher's voice is the authoritative one, a voice that stands *above* the rest' (Richardson, 1997: 18). Therefore, my inclusion of the self in relation to other interviewees articulates the CAP methodology explained in the preface in that it 'points to the continual cocreation of the self and social science; they are known through each other' (Richardson, 2005: 962). I came to realise that the inclusion of my own responses and relevant life segments was crucial to understanding the genesis and evolution of this particular crossover diasporic text. It appeared as though an awareness of audiences, one that many independent creative practitioners deny or describe as limiting, was in fact enriching my narrative

## 6.4 Post-production

The post-production stage comprised technical know-how and assistance as well as conceptual elements and decision-making. The visual essay went through about six cuts before the rough cut was ready, and this process took place from January to July 2009. Would it have been more efficient if I was a Final Cut Express (editing software) expert, or if I had hired an external editor? The answer to the above question is a possible yes, but again, I needed to go through the journey of editing, with all its perils and long hours, to take responsibility for the final production. After learning to sit in the postgraduate office through the summer break, through the logging and capture of tapes, through the marking of in and out points, through the dragging of the player head up and down the timeline, through countless adjustments of video and audio settings, I grew to like the program and the story it was helping me tell.

To improve the overall quality and accessibility of the production, I wanted to get professional help to record the voiceovers that top and tail the narrative, as well as original music for the opening and closing credits. Poppi, a friend who is an electronic music student, came to my rescue and agreed to compose credits music that was ambient, yet with a hint of Indian instruments. Listening to my own voice during the voiceover recording was a daunting process, but one that was also a part of the journey of accepting and including the self so I could share it with others. The situatedness of my story would help is cross over.

Through a prize that I had earned after winning the university's inaugural Festival of Short Film in 2007, I was able to get the assistance of Adelaide-based Kojo Pictures for online editing and mastering. Richard Coburn, an editing expert at Oasis Post (the post-production arm of Kojo), set aside a day in his rather busy schedule for us to us his online editing suite and prepare the final copy for screening. Sitting and working with the best in the industry was both intimidating and affirming. I collected a Quick Time version of the visual essay from the Kojo office the following day, and was ready to burn several DVD copies.

The conceptual elements of the post-production stage involved countless decisions regarding not only what to include in the frame, but also how to justify that which is left out. As I listened to the interviews, a story of sorts began to emerge, and I decided to structure it with chapter markers like “Journeying on a Bollywood Float”, “Journeying Past Tradition”, “Journeying to a Better Place”, and others to help structure the narrative. This also provided light and shade, as comments on candid topics such as discrimination and religion were followed by humorous anecdotes. My supervisors and friends watched early edits of the film and recognised the structure, but also suggested the tempo could be faster and more varied. I learned to make the cut finer, and edit comments with rhythm while providing enough cutaways and stills of paisleys to reduce the “talking heads” aspect. Jerry Brown, an American screenwriter now based in Adelaide, also graciously agreed to view the film and suggested it could do with a conclusion. On discussion with my supervisor, I decided to conduct Skype interview-conversations with my sisters and parents on film. Segments of these were included in the last section of the visual essay, and helped end the circle that began with discussion of family, homes and choices.

### **6.5 Screenings: New Crossover Conversations**

The foremost public screening of *I Journey Like a Paisley* took place on the University of Adelaide’s Open Day in August 2009 at an on-campus lecture theatre. I invited friends, colleagues in the Discipline, as well as all the interviewees and their families. My principal supervisor introduced the project and explained its contemporary relevance in a speech that drew much applause. The screening itself was marred by a technical error in the guise of low sound. The varying accents and my decision to not include subtitles added to the sound confusion, but also possibly made the audience listen harder.

I was reassured when I heard a few laughs on Hetal’s comment that it is better to marry an Australian rather than an Indian man. There were clearly noticeable gender-based differences in the responses of the participants, particularly on the issue of dating and marriage. While the female interlocutors appeared to have a generally more liberal approach to the above and were more open to cross-cultural relationships, this was not the case with the male interviewees. This seems to support migration scholarship that suggests gendered differences in the experience of dislocation.

As the screening concluded, I took centre stage and conducted a question and answer session. There were a number of questions about the creative impetus of the project - such as how the visual component evolved from an audiences studies response to Mehta's elements trilogy to its current, more poetic manifestation; and also about my interest in the paisley pattern and how it intersperses the visual essay. Another viewer remarked on footage from my trip to Canada to interview Mehta, and asked whether Indian diasporic life had similar patterns in different parts of the globe. The most difficult response to deal with, by far, was criticism of the technical quality of the visual document, followed by a query about my filmmaking history. I did not apologise for my creation, but rather pointed out that it was the first time I had made a 20-minute solo production as opposed to a collaborative short film. The screening ended on a positive personal and professional note and I felt surer of the appeal of my imperfect yet experimental critical-creative crossover.

The next public screening was only a month later at a weekly seminar series organised by the Discipline of Asian Studies at the University of Adelaide. I was impressed that the chair had chosen to wear a paisley wrap, and later told me she had researched the history of the pattern. The venue was a smaller seminar room, and the audience was composed of students and staff who were unfamiliar with my project. I looked forward to their "first reader" response, as well as a technical error-free screening.

I began with an introduction to the project and the nature of the visual essay, as described in the first section of this chapter. This was followed by the screening itself, which seemed more intimate and immediate, possibly due to the size of the room. I then proceeded to detail the pre-production, production and post-production phases with the aid of web-log entries written during each stage (see Appendix for individual entries). The ensuing question and answer session took longer to gain momentum, but the responses were valuable and hovering on the academic-mainstream border. I was again asked to explain the historical significance of the paisley, as well as its contemporary relevance. One of the viewers made a comment about the increasing number of Indian students and corresponding rise in interest in Bollywood culture at her niece's school. This particular response was telling in that it showed identification with the material, not a mere sympathetic but distanced review that often greets diasporic work in the west.

An academic from the university's Graduate Centre pointed out that in revealing the poetic, I may have glossed over the sections of Indian diasporic life that are much more mired in conflict. I replied that I had chosen an interviewee group that was close to my own demographic and socio-economic attributes, and that interviews with taxi drivers or Indian students in Melbourne would perhaps constitute a different project. I also added that I was now ready for this other project, embedded as it would be in a politics that is failing to be personal and poetic. She suggested a postdoctoral fellowship. I thanked her and concluded the workshop.

A new conversation had begun, and hoped to cross many more discursive and cultural borders before settling down and inspiring new questions.



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# **APPENDIX**

## **PRODUCTION NOTES: BLOG ENTRIES FROM 2007-2009**

**March 2007**

**Locating the Maker**

My head was hurting and my body felt trapped in the closed-windowed confines of Knapman House, an old but functional building donated to the Royal Society for the Blind in the heart of Adelaide city. Needless to say, I was the only “young person” amongst the fifteen or so volunteers gathered to undergo a full Saturday of training to work with visually-impaired clients. Can I add I was also the only Indian, or should I be accustomed to that qualification by now, and only relegate it to the status of a footnote in my mind? After all, I was the only Indian in my Bachelor of Media graduating class, the only Indian working at the local supermarket and also possibly the only Indian queuing for one of the screenings at the Adelaide Film Festival. Although the ethnic composition of the population has changed dramatically since my arrival in Adelaide in 2003, one is still more likely to find people of South Asian descent congregating in the comforting vicinity of medical/engineering schools, Indian restaurants and Bhangra clubs. Aware of these stereotypes and exhausted with four years of attempting to dispel them, I made no conversational endeavours during the lunch break at the training session. Until a woman who appeared to be in her late 50s or early 60s approached me and began chatting about her work as a former school counsellor. I was fascinated by her transition to volunteering and she seemed curious about my interest in social work “at such a prime age”. Citing the busy work and study routine during my undergraduate days as the reason for my inability to do something of this nature before, I then commenced talking about my current project, what I generically refer to as a “PhD in Film” as soon as I step outside the University gates. A surprisingly sophisticated discussion of contemporary Hollywood, Australian and international film ensued. And yes, she had seen *Water*, even enjoyed it. Perhaps I had my own stereotypes to dispel.

I had similar reservations about what I could gain from a book on the making of *Water* by Devyani Saltzman, Deepa Mehta’s twenty-six year old daughter who was by her mother’s side when the original set was burned down and drowned in the Ganges in Benares in 1999, and then again when the film was finally shot and completed in Sri Lanka in 2004. The cynic in me couldn’t help but wonder whether this was yet another marketing gimmick to further exploit the *Water* controversy for better box-office results, or a bid to enhance the film’s chances at the Oscars and other film festivals, or perhaps a strategic

celebrity-mother move to help launch a daughter's writing career. However, a glimpse at the cover and my cynicism had already softened.

*Lisa Ray/Kalyani's face, tinged by an inky-blue underwater light occupies the top left corner, while its soft curve is mirrored in the perforated film-reel edge on the bottom left. Her countenance reminds me of the penultimate scene in The Piano, where Ada has jumped overboard and imagines herself floating in a bluish-green sea-space. And then I remember that Ray's character commits suicide in the film by losing herself in the depths of the Ganges. Is she the absent-present ghost-goddess of the film then – the old Benares widow who inspired Mehta to create the trilogy, or the self-sacrificing Indian wife whose lot continues to be a vantage point for feminists in the country, or the dotting modern-day mother who juggles work and family? Perhaps she is all of these, for it is from her that there emanate snapshots of a ponderous Giles Nuttgens before a movie camera, of Mehta lovingly gazing at infant Devyani and of two Sri Lankan women posing as widow extras in the film. While these shots lie within the film reel, what lies just outside it is a still of Seema Biswas/Shakuntala slightly leaning over Sarala/Chuia. Their mother-daughter relationship, like that between Mehta and her daughter and India and Mehta, embodies hope for the future beyond the film. I can feel the blue goddess overseeing them, and me. I am connected to the characters, the makers, the seers. I step into their world.*

**February 2008**

### **Beyond Extremism**

Today, *The Age* has a story titled 'Extremists drive out India's rising tennis star'. This reminds me of what was happening with Mehta in Varanasi several years ago, and has often been the fate that has befallen westernised/privileged/elite Indians like Rushdie and others. Perhaps Mirza's story is complicated by the fact that she is a "Muslim woman". But should it be? Why has she chosen not to play in her own country? Surely, that would be every sportsperson's dream.

Would it be a leap to suggest that screening/shooting in India would be Mehta's dream (and perhaps mine too)? Then why the fear(s)? While it is all too easy to brand India as a land of religious extremism, it is harder to remember that it is the same country that has



produced people like Mehta and Mirza. Theoretically speaking, the post-colonial reality of contemporary India lies somewhere between the “indigenous” and the “western” models, and perhaps is complex enough to encompass these apparent anomalies. With such seemingly contradictory realities co-existing, it would be naïve to brand the nation as either a land of rising fundamentalism, or a rising economic superpower. Perhaps the heterogeneity of the country is a call for intellectuals to re-think post-colonial theory in a way that it considers power relations that operate within a nation, between natives and diasporic citizens, between the diaspora and host societies, as well as taking into account changing global dynamics where the dominance of the erstwhile powerful nations is being threatened by the new cultural and economic might of China, India and other “emerging” societies. With all these radical inclusions, should post-colonial theory even be called that? Maybe all it needs is a transnational dimension (while remaining specific to contexts). Can transnational post-colonial theory be exemplified by a Deepa Mehta film?

**March 2008**

**The Germaine Greer Tan**

I went to see her at the 2008 Adelaide Writer's Week on a hot March afternoon. As I sat on the bus to go to the Pioneer Women's Memorial Gardens in the city, the venue for Greer and other writerly speakers, I pondered over the coincidental occurrence of my menstrual cramps with a speech that was very likely to have strong feminist overtones. I realised that I have recently become uncomfortable with the “feminist” tag, and hold Barack Obama, Hanif Kureishi and Sam de Brito (a blogger for *The Age*) responsible for my growing modern-male empathy. Why was I, then, going to pay my “homage” to Greer when it would have been more feasible (and relaxing) to have a Sunday siesta? Who was I interested in listening to and learning from - Greer, the Steve-Irwin hater and synonym of controversy; or Greer, the author of the bestselling women's movement tome, *The Female Eunuch*; or Greer, the academic and polemicist? Perhaps I was/am interested in all of these facets of the well-known woman, but aware that she is not the sum of these parts; rather she is probably an icon of feminism (for better or worse) for a significant cross-section of people living in the western world. I was/am fascinated by what she represents - a legacy of struggle that women of my generation often fail to understand and appreciate.

Germaine's little speech on her new book about Shakespeare's wife, Anne Hathaway, was a hit despite the heat. I filmed the first fifteen minutes and the Q&A, holding my camera steady while battling the sun and my abdominal pains. When her opinion on the use of gender-negatives by the Church was sought by a member of the audience, she unequivocally announced, 'If God exists, I'm against him'. And that one-liner, somehow, clinched the deal, justified the cramps. I was now sporting the Germaine Greer Tan.

**March 2008**

***Bollywood Hollywood* (Dir. Deepa Mehta)**

When I first saw this Deepa Mehta "comedy" as an Indian native, I found it kitschy and far-removed from my largely urban and privileged understanding of Indian culture. I couldn't imagine why NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) would worship at the altar of commercial Bollywood cinema, considered uncool amongst us pseudo-Oxbridge types with colonial hangovers. However, watching it now as a diasporic Indian entity, and as a Deepa Mehta researcher, I see the film as a parody of both Hollywood and Bollywood conventions (of both content and form), and as a mediated, albeit gripping representation of transnational Indianness. Some of the characters, notably all first-generation migrants, like the sobbing widow mother, the nostalgic Punjabi mechanic, and the Shakespearean grandmother seem to be lifted from Bollywood formula musicals, but on closer examination, they are simply exaggerations that entertain. At the same time, the second-generation characters, like the girl next door turned prostitute, the dutiful son in love with a white woman, and the rich ethnic boy who is bullied at school are bound to strike a more emotional chord with viewers in the vast South Asian diaspora.

**April 2008**

**Paisley is the new Black**



**April 2008**

**The Motif Moment**

Was it an agnostically-divine, timely-timeless, monochromatically-colourful fraction of a second - the moment I met my motif?

Before I go on to a description of this motif itself, I must spend some wordy time on the long and uninspiring search for it. The (re)search has spanned and scanned continents, city streets, women's magazines, old family photos, bohemian retailers, dreadlocked musicians, fringy plays, art cinema, dismal philosophy, avant garde installations, and a great deal of self-centred thought. Even though I eventually discovered it sitting right below my nose (literally), I believe the journeying and meandering was necessary. These wanderings established a motif of their own - a pattern where my cultural/political leanings largely determined my aesthetic tastes. One could argue that this is the case for the a majority of homo sapiens, and that argument leaves me unfazed and convinces me of the 'normality' of my formative processes. The novelty in this normality, however, is the

particular criss-crossings, the detailed design, the indelible imprint of this motif on my personal and political self (as opposed to selves).

It is the paisley - the same pattern that I saw my mother paint, sketch, block and screen-print, fill up with colour, and adorn with leaves in her textile-designing and my crayon-fiddling days. I have since admired its graceful shape(s) on cashmere shawls, South Indian brocade silk saris, Gandhi's khadi-inspired cotton prints, chic scarves and sarongs, silver beads and jewellery, Persian-style carpets and rugs, cushions and quilt cover sets, wrapping paper, handbags, and a range of other objects I am yet to lay my eyes on. It doesn't even need a Google search to realise that these patterns are here, there and everywhere; perhaps multicultural in a way modern people and nations can only aspire to be. While it may have had its hey-day during the hippie era in the 1960s, the paisley has certainly passed the test of time in terms of both its pop cultural and sub-cultural relevance. Growing up, I knew it as the “ambi”, which is a Hindi term for a mango seed, and now recognise it as the “paisley”, after a town of the same name in Scotland. Good old (or new) Wikipedia tells me it has resemblance with/refers to a teardrop, a Persian vegetal design, half of the Chinese Yin Yang symbol, the Indian bodhi/mango tree, the Indian/European medicinal leech, a Turkish calligraphic seal, the Zoroastrian symbol of life, the French rendition of the palm leaf, and the modern fractal image. Perhaps I sound idealistic here, but I want to unapologetically and unequivocally adopt and adapt the paisley as the visual motif for my aesthetically-political documentary as a film-viewing maker on the subject of “homed-migrants”.

**May 2008**

### **My Filmmaking Anti-Manifesto Manifesto**

According to Wikipedia, a manifesto is a medium that is intended for communication with the whole world. Such a definition of “manifesto” is in line with its political origins, but what purpose can it serve for artists?

When I met filmmaker Deepa Mehta on a film set in Toronto, she was reluctant to talk about her intended and/or real audiences, and insisted that if you didn't write/make for yourself, there was no point in writing/making. This response conjured up for me the image

of the isolated (and probably distraught) Modernist artist in his/her ivory tower. And then a cynical voice arose – somebody built the ivory tower, just as someone constructed Mehta's set, operated her cameras, microphones and lights, acted in her films, and distributed them. Perhaps that is the moment I began to distance myself from the artistic ideal, from Mehta, from the imaginary documentary in my head, and took the first steps to being my own (albeit collaboratively forming) filmmaker.

Despite taking these steps last December, I have been struggling with decisions relating to the content and form of "my" film. I recently presented a number of options for conducting filmed interviews at a postgraduate forum, and was bewildered at the multiplication of these choices by the time I was done. With the encouragement of my supervisor and close friends, I soldiered on and sent out a Facebook message to members of my self-created group, "Cinema Connoisseurs", and other film aficionados, asking them a series of questions about what appealed to them about the documentary genre. I have received a few noteworthy responses, and maintain my stance on the need for "effective" filmmaking to be a collaborative effort. However, what has been slightly more productive is thinking about these questions myself and reflecting on personal aesthetic and political choices. This necessitates the question – is it more useful to head back into the academic/artistic ivory tower?

After careful deliberation, my answer to the aforementioned question is an emphatic and unequivocal no. I have realized that the act of communicating my ideas, however unformed, was crucial to their evolution into something that both resonated with me, the aspiring filmmaker, and had some meaning for my potential audiences. Putting the beginnings of my thoughts into words, and transforming these words into queries that I could confidently project onto the known world became a kind of "creative research" – difficult to quantify or classify, but undoubtedly contributing to the process of creation of the film.

This processual nature of creation parallels the evolution of my project and my relation to it since its commencement over a year ago. I am no longer caught up in attempting to pay a tribute to Mehta and her work through my film. Subsequent to meeting her in Canada and broadening the breadth of my research to include reviews in India, I have decided that the documentary will not merely be a response to the filmmaker herself, but a "poetic

document” of my own emerging filmmaking practice and the specific Indian-Australian diasporic context in which it is currently situated.

Why have I chosen to present my life and those of other Indian migrants in Adelaide when it would have been easier (in terms of academic justification) to record individual or focus group responses to Mehta’s trilogy and edit these together to create some semblance of a film in the documentary genre? Within my doctoral project, an account of a specific site of the Indian diasporic experience may not be the most obvious choice for a creative component, but it certainly resonates with the personal-political stories that artists/intellectuals in the diaspora (like Mehta) are beginning to tell to a steadily growing global audience. The question now arises – if such work is being done by Indians and non-Indians occupying the “displaced” sphere, what specificity do I bring to this global narrative?

I have chosen the well-known paisley pattern as a motif for my documentary, perhaps to both signify my specificity and broadly apply its fluid curves as a trajectory of the contemporary migrant experience. What I bring to the global narrative then, is my geographical positioning in Australia (a relatively recent site for Indian student/professional migration, and my personal “route” to the west), my imaginative positioning in India (in that it continues to be the primary concern of my academic work, and is the place of familial “roots”), and other experiences that do not neatly fit in the first-generation migrant mould. The people I interview will also highlight the similar-yet-different stories of the often-stereotyped migrant worker/student/business owner and how their identity-construction is impacted by (and in turn impacts upon) representations of them in the media of the host country, the native country, and the diaspora.

The documentary, then, will be another representation of them, albeit through the lens of someone who is in a similarly displaced position. Is this unlike Mehta’s representation of India in her elemental trilogy? Even though *Fire*, *Earth* and *Water* are not films about the diaspora, they are of the diaspora by virtue of the site of their conception and the dispersed nature of their consumption. Would it be a leap to suggest that they are also, in a way, representative of the diaspora? Does this mean filmmakers like Mehta and myself will always be considered “diasporic filmmakers”, regardless of our subject matter? Perhaps the diasporic location is ideally situated for exploiting the “crossover” potential of cultural

products in general, and cinematic representations in particular.

Yes, I want to cross over as a filmmaker. I want to make back and forth trips among rather than between these points – the university, the film industry; commercial cinema, art cinema; feminism, postcolonialism; politics, poetics; India, Australia; as well as what lies beyond.

**June 2008**

### **Bollywood and Kitsch**

After more than a year of researching Indian Cinema (including commercial, art-house, diasporic, independent, and the unnameable kind), I have come to the conclusion that most mainstream and some academic writing about this “exotic” industry still embraces an orientalist discourse. In other words, more often than not, the richly-coloured visuals and the dramatic chords that make up this cinema are often equated with “kitsch”, or low art, as opposed to the production techniques and content of Hollywood films that are naturally assumed to be superior. A case in point is this section on the website of the British Film Institute that lists a selection of works on South Asian Cinema, most of which use the graphic exoticism of commercial Bollywood on the book covers, probably for sales purposes. But who are these books being sold to? Certainly not “native” Indians. The likely audience for such elaborations on South Asian cinematic techniques and aesthetics is those of us living in the west who may be fascinated by these films, drawn to them or to the originating culture for a wide variety of reasons.

I am reminded of an animated conversation I had with a South African tourist during my last visit to India in December 2007. Although the flight from New Delhi to my hometown of Jammu was only an hour or so, we managed to discuss the intricacies of Indian cinema and why it appealed to a certain kind of western soul. This financial advisor, proceeding to Srinagar for a ski trip, reckoned that Bollywood was special in his eyes because it was “spiritual”. He added that he rarely felt a similar soulful connection with the psychological thrillers churned out by Hollywood. I would like to think this well-travelled man had no need to be patronising towards India and Indians when talking to me, a self-confessed Bollywood researcher who is not a Bollywood devotee. Did he embrace a point

of view that is simultaneously western and non-orientalist? Can Indian Cinema, then, be a beacon of spirituality as well as a symbol of kitsch? Perhaps it depends on where you are and how you feel.

**June 2008**

***I Journey Like a Paisley (Participant Recruitment Poster)***

***Are you an Indian Student, or an Indian-born Migrant?***

Do you enjoy **talking about India** with your family, friends and strangers?

Would you like to **share your story** on film with the rest of the world?



If your answer to the above questions is “yes”, then Sukhmani Khorana, a PhD student and emerging filmmaker at the University of Adelaide would like to hear from you.

**Email – [sukhmani.khorana@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:sukhmani.khorana@adelaide.edu.au)**

**Mobile – 0439 681 293**



**June 2008**

**Punjabi women in vogue**

Trinh T Minh-ha writes in *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*: ‘ “Wo-“ appended to “man” in sexist contexts is not unlike “Third World”, “Third”, “minority”, or “color” affixed to *woman* in pseudo-feminist contexts. Yearning for universality, the generic “woman”, like its counterpart, the generic “man” tends to efface difference within itself...All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave is the title given to an anthology edited by Gloria T Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith...Third World, therefore, belongs to a category apart, a “special” one that is meant to be both complimentary and complementary, for First and Second went out of fashion, leaving a serious Lack behind to be filled’.

Does the “special” status currently bestowed upon “Third World” sufficiently explain why formerly rustic and primitive traditions (in the Eurocentric mind that is) like those of Indian writing and film are now considered chic, and not merely exotic? Does it also justify the growing popularity of Bollywood amongst mainstream and arthouse audiences in the west? And finally, what is with the trio of fiery Punjabi women - Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha, residing in the diaspora and effortlessly embracing the cosmopolitanism accrued from making “crossover” films?

I wonder if diasporic Indian men or non-Punjabi women would make the same kind of films, or would make films in the first place. I would like to think that the “Mehta-Nair-Chadha phenomenon” is a mere coincidence. But it doesn't help that I am Punjabi too. And female. I'm trying to make a film. And negotiate my diasporic identity.

**October 2008**

**We Journey Like a Paisley (Intro)**

This film is a snippet in time. It is an attempt to capture the lives of young people of Indian origin or ethnicity living in Adelaide in the spring of 2008.

What does this spring being forth? What do these lives bring forth? How do I, as a fellow Indian living in Adelaide, as an interviewer cum director cum country cousin cum peer function in such a situation?

I am exploring where I belong through their belongings, as well discovering their multiple affiliations through our shared location. They have journeyed. I have journeyed. The film is a testament to our past journeys, as well as a beacon for the journeys yet to come. This film is a paisley - fluid yet shapely, rooted yet cross-cultural. This journey is a paisley. We journey like a paisley.

**December 2008**

### **Diaspora and Dispersal**

I have nearly finished interviewing people for my documentary titled, *I Journey Like a Paisley*, and am now well on my way to editing it into a coherent piece of cinema that articulates the Indian-Australian experience through my individualised artistic lens. What have I learned from these interviews that is different from my academic research into diaspora theory and cultural practice? Is there a single, unequivocal message? Who is my audience? Why am I passionate about this story?

Perhaps what I have to acknowledge first and foremost is that it is indeed my own experience of living away from the land of my birth (an experience that is gradually acquiring diasporic undertones) which has fuelled my interest in diasporic narrative(s). But an old feeling tells me I was curious about diasporic writers, filmmakers and members of my extended family living abroad even when I was “wholly Indian”. Why did the Deepa Mehtas and Mira Nairs always haunt my dreams and linger on the horizons of my imagination? A worshipper of Arundhati Roy's brand of writerly-activism in my teenage years, I was still more puzzled by the likes of Salman Rushdie, and continue to be fascinated by his amalgamation of recklessness and wisdom. Reading his book of essays called *Imaginary Homelands* while undertaking a third-year university course on world literature, I figured I was always drawn to the idea of home(s) away from home(s), probably destined to wander.

Wandering reminds me of a story my grandmother told me on my last trip to India. Always keeping me up-to-date on Sikh folklore, she said that once Guru Nanak went with one of his disciples to a village where the locals treated him indifferently. On his way out, he wished the villagers well, saying may they stay here and prosper. In the next village he visited, he was showered with respect and gratitude. This time, he wished the villagers left their abode and dispersed. The perplexed disciple was told that the latter set of villagers were good-at-heart, and hence it was better for the world if they wandered around and shared their spirit. The former village folk, on the contrary, were better off staying put and not polluting others' with their negativity.

And thus, I believe wandering spirits have a higher purpose. Sometimes, however, evidence of extremism or frozen cultural practices amongst those living in the diaspora (Indian and others) questions my faith in the liberalism of transnational populations. Aren't there bad apples everywhere though? While academia tell me that diasporic citizens are merely “complex”, one of my interviewees proclaims himself a “confused desi”. What do I think/feel? The path becomes less muddled as time passes - choices are made both consciously and sub-consciously, accents are shed and acquired in context, clothes and jewellery learn to make adjustments. Hence, I have come to view the diasporic experience as an ongoing negotiation rather than a confusion of values or a complexity of heritage. It is a process of self-discovery, creative-expression and knowledge-sharing that is as enriching as enlightenment itself, provided you do not succumb to the pitfalls of nostalgia for the motherland, contempt for anything ostensibly foreign, or an uncritical attitude towards the economic and social advantages of the new society. This is my message of hope from the diaspora, but it is for everyone. The message is not new, but I/we have travelled far and wide to disperse it. The stories of our diasporic lives are a testament to this dispersal of humanity, of universal values, of cross-cultural sharing (not just understanding or co-existence).

**December 2008**

**Re-imagining, Re-imagining**



I have been wondering of late if I was “meant” to be a writer, and if my recent foray into the world of filmmaking and cinema theory is a broadening of my creative interests, or if I'm simply losing focus. Then I began reading Julia Cameron's *The Artist's Way*, and after only about twenty-five pages, have a new found appreciation of writing for all kinds of artists, and of the image for all sorts of writers.

What I am doing these days is a lot of blogging, writing for my personal journal and thesis, but also creating a scrapbook of memories to include as the opening sequence in my documentary. I have so far shied away from images of myself in the film, but now realise that this is crucial to tell a story that is both honest and poetic. Such a re-imagining of the past in the present, then, is a re-imagining of the journey that me and others like me interviewed in the documentary have undertaken. Why do we need to re-image and re-imagine our private and collective stories? Perhaps the desired effect is a refraction of my/our experiences, a re-contextualisation rather than a de-territorialisation. The originary place of

our socio-cultural milieu may be geographically removed, but it continues to be reinvented in the new spaces that our bodies and minds now inhabit.

**January 2009**

**What's in a Voice?**

I have to have one for my film as well as my dissertation, preferably the same for both. But, what is a “voice”, leave alone “my voice”? Also, why is it important?

Maybe it is something akin to a personal style (both aesthetic and political). Perhaps, instead of thinking about all my influences separately, what I need is to think of them holistically. It is how I combine these threads and produce a pattern that transcends the individual colours and textures that will determine the nature of my voice.

Theoretically speaking, I need to stop swimming in the theory. Do I know enough to last once I'm out of the water? Probably, but the water is not going to disappear. It is always there to be used as an aid.

As to the importance of the voice, I know intuitively that it can make or break a movie or a book. This is not to say that texts should be read as per the intentions of the auteur, but more so that the voice will come through more strongly if it is a subtle yet all-encompassing presence.

**January 2009**

**Audience(s)**

The Golden Globe glory of *Slumdog Millionaire* seems to be raising questions regarding audiences (divided along national, religious, geographic, gender, class and countless other lines) all over again. I have been grappling with these questions regarding the Mehta trilogy, but the recent critical acclaim accrued to the Danny Boyle film, as well as Aravind Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel *The White Tiger* is literally pushing the Indian sublatern into the global spotlight.

A review from *The Australian* refers to the gory yet life-affirming movie as “poverty porn” and blames shallow western audiences rather than filmmakers for their tastes. It also raises the point that the Mumbai-based film has not even been released in India yet, which reminds me of the time Mehta's *Water* was nominated for an Oscar without having officially being screened in the country of origin. Perhaps critics who write such reviews need to consider the perfectly valid proposition that such films are specifically tailored for the western liberal (and occasionally mainstream) viewers. Maybe I'll revise that statement and say that such films are more likely to appeal to the cosmopolitan viewer, whether in India or overseas. While city-dwellers in India may be aware of the existence of slums, it is largely peripheral to their privileged lives. In other words, the film might be as shocking to a section of Indian viewers as it is to the western viewer. The purpose, then, may not be to reach the slum-dwellers themselves, but shake the rest of us out of our consumerist oblivion. Will the so-called slumdogs object to their onscreen portrayal? David Stratton called it Dickensian, and I think he might be right. The poor are not without agency in this film, so why cast them as victims?

**February 2009**

**Textiles that Talk Back**



Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare stretches the skewed notions of cultural authenticity and class hegemony to the limit in his theory-as-performance art. Indonesian batik textiles, passed off as traditional African gear adorn headless Victorian figures. The patterns, the colours and the entire setting of the installation talk back to empire, as much as they comment on contemporary notions of race and ethnicity (that are in turn intersected, intertwined with class and gender). The visual presence of the figures is omnipotent, but their headlessness usurps them and lets the viewer stare and imagine without fear of rebuke. I am tempted to touch the fabrics, tactile things that they are. But I remain on the border - between the spaces of the maker and the tourist. The hyphen can be a thriving home for creativity and tenacity.

**February 2009**

**Editing = Stripping Down = Confronting Loss = Rebirth**

I am not going to include an image with this post because I believe, for once, the writing can stand on its own feet (does writing have two feet, or more?).

The last two weeks have been led at an unprecedented pace, perhaps the rhythm of editing itself has been pacing my life. I have nearly completed a fine edit of my documentary, a process which has taught me a great deal about writing, not just film editing. I now know (not in the way one knows what one has once read, but in a more internalised way) that a holistic text is as much about what is left out as it is a composition of what is included. The frame reigns supreme.

Then there has been the Bigpond Adelaide Film Festival 2009, free access to which (courtesy a media pass) has enabled me to not just watch the best and latest in Australian and overseas cinema, but also inhale an environment where I can sense a future. Or some semblance of a future. Yesterday, attending the Screenwriters' Fringe, I felt for the first time in a long time, that I am lucky to be in Adelaide. Premier Mike Rann, in his consummate cinema-speech, seemed to suggest that it is a hub of film activity in Australia. While the question of native audience indifference looms large over the fate of local films

as well as the diasporic films that I'm examining for my PhD, I'm confident that conceptual scripts and lyrical editing can turn the tide.

**March 2009**

### **Incubating in the Warm Light of the Academy**

I didn't think I would write so soon after the most recent appraisal of a draft of the introductory chapter of my thesis. I wanted my writing to return to its quasi-authoritative academic tone, one more appropriate for a successful PhD completion and greater publishing potential. I began to wonder if writing this blog for nearly two years now has spoiled me vis-a-vis a career in academia. Why can't a text remain provisional? I understand that my thesis, my film, even my blog have to be "about something". But, and herein lies my most demonstrable attempt at writerly assertiveness - I think these "abouts" are multi- and contextual. Yes, the Academy is progressive enough to encompass the lengths and depths of a particular set of texts or even an entire genre, but it remains uncomfortable with anything that is, by nature, transient. Why this resistance to the ephemeral?

It is "certainly" my migrant-state that attracts me to transitory form(s). However, temporary residents the world over cannot wait to be "permanent". And those in a somewhat settled situation long to get out, to travel. I'm not condoning a gypsy-esque existence for all and sundry, or an experimental discourse for all kinds of writing. It would be mighty nice if the Hegemonic social and academic powers that be began to recognise transience as a healthy expression of thought and emotion rather than consider it a sign of weakness, or dismiss it as just another juvenile phase.

Although I'm still incubating, I will "probably" continue writing. The cost of not writing is higher than the cost of writing provisionally. Whether (and when) this or any other text will see the light of day that is critical approval is difficult to gauge. But the light here is warm and ideal for a timely emergence from the apprenticeship, a tentative fluttering of slow-growing wings.



**April 2009**

**Freewheeling Free Will**

I haven't written on my blog in a while because of a combination of reasons - I have had no time to write, and no will to create this time. The last couple of weeks have been emotionally and physically exhausting, but also rewarding in a curious way that I can't quite articulate yet. It has been a time when decisions were made and altered from one moment to the next. I would like to think that I exercised my own free will in arriving at and living through these decisions, albeit my free will decided it wanted to freewheel.

The wheel is still rolling, but I'm ready to reflect on its movement. There may be a pattern of sorts and even a particular colour at certain times. However, I wonder if it is the norm for this wheel to roll, for my will to waver, for my decisions to appear indecisive. Thankfully, women around the world, as Jennifer Fox's brilliant documentary *Flying* explores, are riddled with choices that are not necessarily freeing. Fox herself flees from her mother and grandmother, only to find her life is revolving around the poles that are a series of men. She chooses one in the end, and also makes peace with the matriarchal figures. But is she a free woman?

Am I a free woman? The choice I'm making now is, on the surface, more confining than freeing. Scratching the surface, however, I feel it will eventually enable me to freewheel, fly and flout with greater aplomb. I also want to capture this newfound freedom in my documentary. Perhaps film a Skype conversation with my parents, or other moments of difficulty. There is poetry in difficulty. The paisley cannot be contained any longer. It will double over. Its shadow will end the film. This shadow will journey too.

**April 2009**

**Interiority and the Elements**

While catching up with a friend, I stumbled upon a potential solution for the content-analysis chapter of my thesis. The trouble so far has been that I want to stay away from traditional film or textual theory, while still talking about narrative through a particular lens. I have done three drafts of the chapter, with the first trying to amalgamate postcolonial

and feminist concerns and project them onto a diasporic space, and the second and third spending a lot of word space on the genealogy of diaspora and why reading diasporic work calls for an organic approach. When I coined the “organic” way of looking at film, I had just returned from a two-month sojourn in monsoon-flooded India, and was quite obsessed with the ideas of a life-like pace and fluidity in the context of representation (which is probably also why the first cut of my doco was unconventionally lingering). Looking back, it was a reaction to an overload of theory and I am now ready to give new life to this chapter.

What is this new life? I will not repress it under new age nomenclature and call it “organic”, but there is a particular kind of spatial and temporal composition in all three films of Mehta's trilogy that plays on binary oppositions like interior and exterior, light and shade, colour and austerity, poverty and wealth etc. There is an engagement with the interiority of the domestic space that is a motif for the interior lives of the characters themselves (and perhaps also a reflection on the diasporic artist's insulation from the present of the homeland, a space/place of memory and re-creation).

When thinking about the films from the point of view of a practitioner, I realised that I was most interested in the choices made by the writer-director. These choices not only pertain to detail and colour, both being aspects that Mehta is admittedly pedantic about. They are also macro choices - Why is the set constructed in a particular city? How is the set put together? What is the vision of the production designer? How does the cinematographer translate this vision? I realised that my documentary is also set in a range of domestic spaces, and I made this decision as I wanted the home of the interviewee to be entwined with the content of our conversation. These choices are crucial to the fabric of the films in question, and an analysis of the same fits in with the essence of my thesis argument. What is this essence? That diasporic creativity is not deterritorialised, but reterritorialised. In other words, a diasporic artistic practice like film is made and re-made at every stage of its conception and production, and viewed and re-viewed in each new socio-economic context. A consideration of both the global and local spaces of meaning-making is significant to a holistic understanding of diasporic creative impulses and practices. And a consideration of diasporic creativity in turn is integral to comprehending a world whose cultural and economic capital no longer adhere to east-west distinctions.

**May 2009**

**On speaking English**

I'm reading renowned hybrid cultural theorist Ien Ang's *On not speaking Chinese*, and wondering about my own ambivalent relationship with the English language, especially in its accented and translated mutations. In her book, Ang justifies the use of autobiographical discourse as a means of both asserting the authority of authenticity, and undermining the grandeur of hegemonic narratives. Being a person of Chinese descent who was born in Indonesia, schooled in the Netherlands and is currently working in the Australian academy, her hyphenations are multiple and complex. She apologises for not being able to speak Chinese while also arguing that the shifting identity politics of the Chinese diaspora need not be anchored in a fixed linguistic identity associated with the homeland.

In my own case, I vividly recall being asked as to where I learned “such good English” in formal and informal settings during my early days in Australia. This was a compliment at times, but largely a source of petulance because I didn't think an Australian (or any “native” English speaker, other than those with the appropriate literary acumen) was in a position to pronounce judgement on my English-speaking skills. Once during an English Literature class where the tutor handed us a sheet on “Zero Tolerance Errors in Formal Written English” accompanied by red marks on our assignments, I was surprised to see the sheer number of grammatical and syntactical corrections in the papers of my Australian-schooled peers. Now, as a tutor in the Humanities myself, I have to admit that overseas students with a shorter history of studying English struggle more with the language than their local counterparts. However, indifference to the rules of grammar and punctuation is often rampant in the writing and speech of many university goers, irrespective of nationality. In other words, who can judge whom?

I realise that as someone who attended English-medium schools in India where the Queen's English still prevailed, I am more privileged than most. I wouldn't admit to thinking in the language all the time, but its spoken version has become more relaxed and colloquial during my time in Australia. It is still the instrument of my intellect, of my creative impulses, and hence my work self values it above the other Indian language I have learned - Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu. Why did I not conduct the documentary interviews in one of these languages? Salman Rushdie and others in the diaspora have often commented

on English being a link language in the linguistically-diverse Indian sub-continent. Therefore, the choice of English was strategic so as to access a wider range of people of Indian origin, as well as to render the doco semi-autobiographical.

Privileged I may be in some ways, but my experience of being a translator and interpreter for the Indian languages I am conversant in has brought me into contact with Indians and Pakistanis who are new migrants or on the struggling end of the socio-economic scale. Their stories have often been difficult to translate, but the role of mediator has taught me that transferring from one cultural idiom to another is not necessarily a loss. What is gained is an understanding, however stilted, of the seemingly inaccessible other. There are no doubt miles to go for improving this communication and making it more than a literal exchange of words. In the meantime, being aware of the relativity of linguistic and cultural norms is a crucial starting point.

**May 2009**

**Voice-over to end *I Journey Like a Paisley***

I journeyed to Canada to interview filmmaker Deepa Mehta. I stayed with my cousin sister, her husband, and their four-year old son. I also spent time with my Mum's cousin and her partner in Toronto. It struck me that I was unlikely to meet this tree of the family, this curve of the paisley in India.

Yet I was considered an Australian researcher by Toronto Airport baggage officials and the crew on Mehta's film set. It was the accent they said, which sounded like it had journeyed and picked up its lyric on distant shores.

Will this journey end? Discussions about “settling down” have become rife amongst family. The paisley might be reaching the border of the pashmina shawl. It may be time to wrap it around my shoulders, but I will not do it the traditional way. I will morph this Indianness and turn it into a scarf, a skirt, a throw, a photograph, a living memory. I will settle only if my future remembers this detail, this evidence of a journey.

**June 2009**

**Displacement for the Always Already Displaced**

Eight more days of transit, and I can't wait to arrive. The importance of journeying notwithstanding, a combination of stability and uncertainty might be better than having your goods in two or more places. So many split selves.

This is the longest relationship I've had with a house outside of my parental home. Just over four years is not a long time, but encompassing my transition from a shaken twenty-one year old girl to a more realistic and self-assured person has been a significant shift. It may not be the rosier period of my life, or the most memorable space, but it has been meaningful in its own right. Its space has allowed me to experiment, to fail, to stand up again and to celebrate with good friends. It has given me room to manoeuvre around my own developing self, which I'm sure will continue to grow and learn.

The comfort zone established by this house and its radius has also generated a spatial inertia over the past couple of years that I have been craving to move beyond. I only have to shop in a new supermarket or buy coffee from a different cafe or drive down an unknown street to feel alive and adventurous. The hassle of un-cluttering and financial-physical-psychological stress aside, I am looking forward to this change. It is a small step towards tangibly letting go of a past that once felt like a giant leap. Lest I forget, changing countries/continents is a bigger ask. How could I have come to fear displacement? It is not the absence of roots, but an excess. A potentially constructive, creative excess at that. The Always Already Displaced need not be detached entities floating amoebically in deterritorialised discourse, we should feel at home everywhere.

It annoyed initially that this change beckons just as I am approaching a full draft of my doctoral thesis, and a not too distant submission date. However, my time management skills were probably in need of a force beyond control of this magnitude. And my intellectual-emotional energies, narrativising the project in the final chapter, were also possibly clamouring for a more recent, more embodied experience of displacement. This is not to say that the previous displacements have been forgotten, only that they have become souvenirs. A notebook here, a t-shirt there, and some furniture to deal with. Also, there are the episodes that have been consciously erased. Tears and troubled waters are now being

mingled with hopes and dreams. A changed external configuration, an altered path of everyday existence may or may not make a difference to old habits that have turned into hindrances. But this time I'm looking out for light, not for ample space. If I can open my bedroom blinds in the new house, I will have let the outside in, the inside out.