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In- Between This and That: The Anxiety and Burden of Culture in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*

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Abstract:

Migrant or diasporic communities are often seen wrestling with the question of identity, a sense of home and belonging. The distress such communities have to face is a sense of *this* or *that*, a sense of anxiety between assimilation of the host country's culture and traditions or an urge to stay in touch with their own cultural roots, traditions and practices. Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) offers to its viewers the dilemma faced by a diasporic (Gujarati) community in Mississippi, who are lost in-between different identities. The diasporic anguish is reflected through the movie, showing a loss of culture, loss of home and above all a loss of sense of belonging somewhere. The paper will examine the ways in which culture becomes a burden along with an attempt to understand the role of space and place in the formation of one's identity.

Keywords: Diaspora, In-betweenness, culture, Post- colonial

Mississippi Masala (1991) a passionate drama film directed by Mira Nair brings to its viewers an interracial romance set in the Deep South. The story is set against a backdrop when Asians were forced to leave Uganda in 1972 under the rule of General Idi Amin who made it mandatory that, "Africa is for Africans, Black Africans." The story revolves around a Gujarati family Jay, Kinnu and their young daughter Meena who are forced to leave Uganda and move from Kampala to Greenwood, Mississippi, U.S.A. The family struggles to establish themselves in their new ambience and try reacquainting themselves with their kith and kin Jammubhai, Kusum, and Chanda. The paper attempts to analyse how Jay and his family are stuck in-between Indian roots and American culture. It will further look into culture becoming a burden along with location, space, time becoming important categories leading to multiple discourses.

Memory is both process and raw material; process as it covers many journeys back and forth as a new subjectivity is defined, as relationships are reviewed and very often cleansed of bitterness and regret and the raw material as it is the only reality which has been experienced either by them or their ancestors, that has created them, made them what they are (Jain 11).

The act of remembrance becomes important as it gets highlighted through such cultural nuances. This also gives rise to self- analysis, rediscovering and relocating the self. Memory as a raw material is then seen as a primary baggage. In the movie *Mississippi Masala*, there is constant struggle between roots and routes. The family despite being settled in Uganda and later in Mississippi are seen to struggle between their roots which is they being Indian versus routes i.e. they being displaced and trying to find their roots in an un- Indian land. The act of remembrance in the movie can be traced when the families are seen singing the Hindu religious chant *Om Jai Jagdish* trying to rediscover and relocate themselves in a foreign nation and sticking to their culture.

According to Jasbir Jain in *The Diaspora Writes Home- Sub continental Narratives*, “Culture is what defines us, a burden we carry wherever we go. It can be positive as well as negative- a cross to be borne as well as the mainstay, the recurring refrain of our existence.” In the movie, Jay and his family are defined as Indian’s by sticking to the roots of their culture. The family is seen adhering to singing ritualistic religious chants, wearing Indian *ghagara* and *sarees*, playing Indian *ghazals* and popular Indian music and staying with people of their origin, tradition, culture and nation in a foreign land. The family is seen relocating themselves in new surroundings by finding someone who belongs to them. The culture is seen to travel with the family despite a loss of home. Steven Bowman says that the concept of Diaspora, “denotes a community that has emigrated from ancestral community yet maintains linguistic and cultural (i.e. religious), if not political connections to the mother city” (192). Jay, Kinnu and their daughter Meena try relocating themselves in Mississippi in a Gujarati community by maintaining their linguistic roots and cultural identities.

It is seen that diasporic people and communities in a land not of their origin and at times not of their birth, with the umbilical cord buried in some far off place, work out different strategies of defining the self and their cultural co- existence. While Jay and Kinnu define themselves as Indians by adhering to certain Hindu/ Gujrati rituals, staying in a Gujrati community and sticking to their roots, their daughter Kinnu is seen oscillating in between her so called home culture and host culture. She adheres to wearing Indian clothes but at the same time is seen following the pub culture and a change of dress adhering to the host culture.

Even though distinction has to be made between forced and willing movement of people, the phenomenon of diaspora necessarily involves a “structure of location followed by dislocation and relocation” (Paranjape 59). When one moves away from their native soil elsewhere for a long-term, it brings in them a feeling of getting dislocated resulting in a sense of nostalgia, loss and remembrance of the roots. This is further accompanied by a proposition of getting relocated in an extraterrestrial milieu through conciliation and alteration. All Indians who have been living outside India compose the Indian diaspora.

The living ‘in-between’ condition, a sense of being nowhere, can be very excruciating and marginalizing for the diasporas. In the movie Jay has a longing to go back to Uganda which for him was his home, while for his daughter Meena, Mississippi becomes her home and she has little memories of Uganda . In an article *Diasporic Crisis of Dual Identities*, it talks about the anxiety faced by diasporic communities and the sense of in-between.

The identities of diaspora individuals and communities can neither be placed only in relation to some homeland to which they all long to return nor to that country alone where they settle down in. They, by all means, face the crisis of hybrid or dual identity, which makes their existence all the more difficult. This is an experience universal to all Indian diaspora, irrespective of their caste, region and religion (Karunesh 39).

In an instance from the movie, when Meena is asked about her origin she calls herself a “Mixed Masala.” Meena says, “Three years in Mississippi, but before that in London and before that in Africa. I have never been to India. I am a mixed *masala*.” Meena knows that she is an Indian who has never visited India, she spends her initial days in Uganda and then is displaced to U.K and then finally to Mississippi. The title of the movie *Mississippi Masala* in itself brings out a lot of hidden connotations and probably the anxiety of a diasporic existence.

My territories. Places I have lived, loved, absorbed, traversed. I negotiated myself in them, wrote myself in them, write about them. I have called them home... Home is a hyphen. Hyphen is my home (Bruno 402).

The use of hyphen in textual practice is a punctuation sign that unites and disconnects two dissimilar identities. The hyphen used ‘In- between’ performs the migrant condition between this and that, it shows us a liminal space of betweenness and conversion, where domestic and peripheral worlds, this and that, here and there, past and present are seen intersecting each other.

A hyphen then begins to evoke an interesting spatial- temporal paradigm for transnational’s, who are placed between two or more divided geographies, sociographies and cultural identities (dyk 8).

According to Loretta Baldassar, the term ‘transnational’ is for migrants who “live their lives across borders and develop and maintain their ties to two (or more) homes, even when their countries origin and settlement are geographically distant” (70). For Jay and Kinnu their ties are to India and majorly to Uganda and then to Mississippi. On the other hand Meena maintains her ties to Uganda and then to Mississippi, her notion of being Indian are from the way her parents have described about India, the Gujarati community of which she is a part and some other Indian rituals.

The sense of in- between and the anxiety of belonging to a culture hence become prominent throughout the movie. Meena’s mother Kinnu wants her daughter to get married to Harry Patel, in order for her to stay in an Indian community, instead she falls in love with Demetrius who is a Black and owns a carpet cleaning business. While her parents struggle to keep their Indian-ness alive, Meena on the other hand though respecting traditions and her culture moves away from its shackles and lives an independent life of her own. The burden of her culture is finally set free when she decides to leave her parents and live her life with Demetrius.

Migration also becomes important to understand an anxious state of mind and an anxiety of search for an identity are seen. In *Home and Away*, Baldassar defines,

Migration is not simply about departure and establishing one’s home in a new country. It is also about ties to the old homeland and the influence of this attachment on the development of ethnic identity in the new homeland (Baldassar 70).

There is search for an identity for both Meena and Jay. While searching and fixing an identity, the characters are in a state of a perpetual flux between this and that. Meena doesn't restrict herself to one particular identity and hence the masala identity that she owns is clearly visible. There is a sense of layered identity in her character rather than identity that has been accumulated. Jay on the other hand has a longing and urge to go back to Uganda where he was born and brought up; his sense of 'home' is Uganda. Towards the end of the movie he clearly states, "Home is where the heart is." A state of belonging and displacement hence becomes integral to diasporic communities along with a sense of in-betweenness, migration and burden of culture.

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