



Socio-political issues in a limited frame: A study of the select short films of Mira Nair

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Abstract

The short film is a genre that is gaining vogue in current times. It could be compared with the short story with which it shares some features. The short film, like the short story, is a genre that requires astute handling by the director, given the minimalist space and duration in which it occurs. The film maker has to make use of the resources available within the limited frame of the short film to drive home important messages. The paper analyses how Mira Nair, the transnational film maker of Indian origin uses the genre of short film to render visible important socio-political issues of the time. When the features of mainstream and parallel cinema are considered and compared, we find that Mira Nair can be located in the midway between the two varieties of cinema. However a deep sense of social commitment informs even her commercial ventures imparting them with a more serious sense of purpose. The two short movies discussed in the paper deal with issues such as Islamo-phobia, feminism, marriage, motherhood and personal choice and are a continuation of Mira Nair's zeal for social reform and revolution.

Keywords: counter cinema, parallel cinema, short films, Mira Nair, sociopolitical issues, ISLAMO-phobia, feminism

Introduction

Cinema has always had an instant and deep-running impact on people, given its visual nature and wide public appeal. The inevitable link of cinema to capital makes it a commercial medium that caters to the masses and popular taste with the aim of harnessing profit. Mainstream cinema tends to play safe and adhere to norms and value systems accepted by society in terms of themes, techniques and treatment. At the same time, there has always been a parallel stream of cinema that has worked to counter the capitalistic and conformist impulses of mainstream cinema. Designated variously as parallel cinema, counter cinema or alternative cinema, this stream of cinema has very little profit motive, is more serious in content and is concerned with important sociopolitical issues of the time.

Counter cinema can be used as an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of strategies and modes of operation that oppose the mainstream. It is marked by heterogeneity and plurality of perceptions and strategies and includes a plethora of genres, camera angles and shooting and script-writing techniques, cultural, racial and feminist aspects and ideologies. The films that fall under the category of counter cinema or alternative cinema are Third World cinema, women's cinema, documentary, narrative cinema, avant-garde and art cinema ("Counter" n.p). We can also add diasporic cinema, transcultural cinema, transgender cinema and eco-cinema to the list. While the opposition or countering of the mainstream may happen both in terms of form and content in these films, the countering can also be limited to either one of these aspects. Another possibility in parallel cinema is a hybrid form that mixes the aspects of both mainstream cinema and alternative or counter cinema.

The films of Mira Nair, the renowned transnational film maker of Indian origin can be categorized as belonging to the last variety of cinema mentioned, namely hybrid cinema. Nair exemplifies the global and transnational film maker who has tried her hands at both commercial and non-commercial cinema. The range of her themes and the panorama of life she captures on screen make her oeuvre rich and varied. Mira Nair has, over a span of thirty years, made poignant movies on various aspects of human life that touch a universal chord and at once entertain and educate. A deep sense of social commitment and strong humanitarian value form the link in her movies.

The diasporic situation of Mira Nair is largely responsible for making her films what they are. A film maker who has moorings in three different locales – first, in India where she was born and brought up, second, in New York where she currently resides and pursues her teaching job at the University of Columbia and where her film company, Mirabai Films, is located and third in Kampala, Uganda, her husband's native place, to which she is deeply attached. Nair has been influenced by the realities and peculiarities of all these various places and the multiplicity of locations has naturally widened her horizons and made her assume a broader world view. This accounts for the eclectic nature of her films, the elements of which have been drawn from diverse genres and forms including parallel and mainstream, diasporic and transcultural, cinema verite and documentary, narrative and feminist cinema and so on.

Whatever be the form or genre used, Nair's films are marked by a deep concern for the weaker sections of society, for outsiders and the marginalized and a deep sense of social commitment. This is evident in the documentaries she made in

the beginning of her career, including *So Far from Home* (1982) which was about an Indian immigrant who worked as a newspaper dealer in the suburbs of New York and his relationship with his pregnant wife back home, *India Cabaret* (1984) that depicts the life of the strippers in a dance bar in Bombay and *Children of a Desired Sex* (1987), on the evils of amniocentesis and female foeticide. Her first feature film *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) powerfully portrays the lives of the street kids of Bombay in cinema verite style using real-life characters from the streets and authentic situations and backdrops. This film set the tone for her future projects like *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *My Own Country* (1998), *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), *The Namesake* (2006), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2012), which all had an underlying social commitment and purpose despite their use of popular forms and techniques.

An important category of films in her rich oeuvre that we should not lose sight of is the short film, an experimental form in which Nair's social commitment and serious treatment of important issues figure. The short film, which is shorter than a typical feature film, runs for a duration of about forty minutes or lesser. The genre is usually regarded as a launch pad for film makers in the beginning of their careers. Earlier, short films came in the format of cartoons, comedy or animated films and were used as fillers in film festivals. But today the relevance of short films has increased with the suitability of the form on internet and the low cost of production incurred. The short film is related to a full length feature film in the same way as a short story is related to a novel. Depicting human life and the world on a small frame or canvas is a challenge for both writers and film makers or directors. The short film, like the short story, requires the tapping of the acumen and skill of its creator and is marked by economy and intensity in its treatment of the world and human life. Closely related to the short film is the anthology film which comprises a collection of short films, where several reputed directors come together to make short film segments on topics related to the main theme of the anthology. Nair has contributed short films to such anthologies and collections also. In Nair's hands, the short film, despite its inherent limitations, becomes an important medium to communicate important social and political messages. The present paper studies two of Nair's short films to comprehend how the minimalist medium of the short film has been used as a powerful tool by her. The films taken for the study include a segment titled "India" from the 2002 anthology film, *11'09'01, September 11: A Film*, and the segment "How can it be?" that occurs in an anthology titled *8* released in 2008.

11'09'01, September 11 records the response and vision of eleven film makers from eleven different countries to the events surrounding the September 11, 2001 attacks by the Islamist terrorist group, Al-Qaeda on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre in New York and on Pentagon, the headquarters of the United States Department of Defense. Each short film in the anthology is of the duration of eleven minutes, nine seconds and one frame each in correspondence to the date 11-09-01. The attacks killed nearly three thousand people and injured around six thousand, causing massive damage to infrastructure and property. The US government headed by President Bush retaliated quickly by declaring a

war on Islamic terrorism globally and by invading Taliban led Afghanistan where the al-Qaeda leader Osama Bin Laden was in hiding and Saddam Hussain's Iraq. The unwarranted outcome of the declaration of a war on terrorism was the rise of Islamophobia which caused suspicion and victimization of Muslims or anybody who seemed to be Muslim in America.

Mira Nair's segment in the September 11 anthology centers round Mrs. Hamdani, a Pakistani woman living in New York with her family and the disappearance of her son, the twenty three year old Salman Hamdani, in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Salman Hamdani is suspected by American authorities to be involved in the attacks as a terrorist associated with the Al-Qaeda. The Federal Bureau of Investigation is probing into his disappearance and has pasted look out notices all over the place. The suspicion surrounding Salman and his being branded as a terrorist are clearly part of the Islamophobia that elicits prejudice and hatred against "anybody who sounds Muslim, who looks Muslim" ("India" 31: 10).

It is Mrs. Hamdani, Salman's mother who has to bear the brunt of this prejudice and hatred most. She is a proud Muslim woman who had brought up her son to be more than anything, an upright and compassionate human being. Her sorrow at her son's disappearance is accentuated when Americans hold him culpable of a heinous act of violence. The frequent questionings that she and her husband are subjected to by journalists and officials, the hostility of their neighbours and acquaintances, and TV reports and news coverage promoting prejudice against Muslims take their toll on both of them and they have to take sedatives to induce sleep. The television has a central place in the film and in the Hamdani household as it constantly updates the family as well as the audiences about the atmosphere in America in the aftermath of the September 11 incidents through never ending reports and news coverage. In one such TV programme, President George Bush voices the need to "rid the world of evil doers" (32:05-07), the evil doers being anyone from full-blown terrorists to ordinary peace-loving Muslims and their families who are suspected to be terrorists.

The efforts made by Mrs Hamdani to combat the prejudice and Islamophobia become a tale about the assertion of human dignity and uprightness. Both Mrs Hamdani and her son, Salman are examples of hybrid individuals who have assimilated the ways of their foster land even while keeping their native culture intact. Mrs Hamdani has been working as an English teacher in America, and in spite of the visibly Pakistani identity manifest in her attire and life style and her deep religious affiliations; she has no objections to her son's imbibing American culture and ethos. Salman, a research assistant at Rockefeller University was a thoroughly Americanized boy and Mrs Hamdani's attempts to convince the authorities about this is portrayed in a touching way. When the FBI officials come to search their house and Salman's room for clues as to his terrorist connection, she is seen telling them, "He was born in Pakistan, but he is an American citizen....He is a regular American boy" (33:16, 33:23). The authorities are insensitive to the grief of the mother and the pain with which she asserts that her son had a penchant for science fiction, video games, football and star wars like any regular American boy. For the officials, the Hamdanis who are

Muslims, are outsiders and potential threats. While the survivors of those who were killed in the September Eleven attacks got enough support and sympathy from all sides, there was nobody to sympathize with or console a Muslim woman like Mrs Hamdani whose missing son was wrongly suspected as a perpetrator of the violence. We listen to a TV report that speaks of two slender beams of light rising up to the sky projected in the void where the demolished towers had once stood. These slender beams, according to the report were called “the tribute of light” and “filled the void in many hearts” (37: 11-14), but there was nothing to fill the void created in the hearts of the Hamdanis.

The ironic twist to the story comes when it is discovered that Salman Hamdani is not a terrorist, but a rescue worker who lost his life as he volunteered to help those wounded in the attacks. After this discovery, he is elevated from the position of terrorist to that of a hero. The commemoration ceremony held to honour the young martyr and hero is attended by the officials who had suspected him earlier and the white neighbours who had shunned his family. The words from Mrs Hamdani’s commemoration speech which are filled with irony prods the conscience of the viewers. All the while she had been convinced of her son’s innocence and her conviction has proved to be true. She emerges as a strong woman who had transcended racial, cultural and religious barriers herself and had brought up her son according to broader human values. She questions all the stereotyping and branding that goes on in the name of religion and points out the cruelty a mother has to endure and the price she has to pay “for raising a compassionate human being” (39: 35-39). If her son had not been the compassionate boy he was, he would not have gone to save the life of fellow human beings and Mrs Hamdani would not have lost him. Her ending remark tears down the mask of American complacency. “You have honoured America by choosing her as your final resting place” (39:43-49), she declares. It is commendable that Mira Nair could etch out the story of this woman’s uprightness, trauma and dignity in the face of the prejudice and hatred towards Muslims in the small frame of a short film.

The second short movie that is discussed here, “How Can it Be?” is from an anthology titled 8, comprising a collection of movies made by eight film directors in accordance with the Millennium Development Goals envisaged by the United Nations in 2015 which among other things, included the eradication of poverty, hunger, disease, illiteracy and discrimination against women (“MDG” n.p). The segment contributed by Nair to the film tells an intensely personal story of gender equality and emphasizes the importance of a woman’s choice. Starring Konkona Sen Sharma and Ranvir Shorey as husband and wife, the movie is said to be based on a true story and consists of only three characters, a husband, a wife and their son caught up in a moment of crisis in their lives. The husband’s name, Arif is mentioned, but the name of the wife is not mentioned anywhere in the film. It is as though the intensity of the crisis in her life and the political questions it elicits are more important than the personal details like names. The crisis evolves from the decision of the woman to step out of the house leaving behind her husband and young son to join her lover who is a married man.

The film, that is approximately nine minutes long, opens at the

crucial moment when the wife makes the decision to quit her current marriage. The couple is Muslim and the agency shown by the wife in deciding to leave her husband is a deconstruction of the patriarchal Muslim practice of Talaq, whereby a man can divorce his wife by uttering the word talaq thrice. The practice of talaq puts a Muslim woman in a very disadvantageous position as the husband can forsake her easily at his whim and fancy. In the film, the practice of talaq is subverted when the wife demands divorce from the husband instead. The husband, in a fit of exasperation at his wife’s unwillingness to reciprocate and cater to his need for physical intimacy, states that he is divorcing her, a statement he makes without really meaning it – “I divorce you. That’s what you wanted, isn’t it? And you have it” (00:54 –01:06). A short while later, as the wife pours out their cup of morning tea, she asks the devastated man to formalize the divorce. Such a demand by the wife is unheard of in a faith where, “women beg not to be divorced, not the other way round” (“How” 03:33-36). There is a reversal of situation in the movie with the man begging not to be divorced and the woman eager to proceed with the divorce.

The woman’s choice and decision become subversive due to several reasons. The first reason for the subversion is the married status of her lover and the fact that he has a child. Arif taunts her by saying that she will have to be satisfied with being a “bloody whore” (04:10), sharing a man with his legal wife. He persuades her to stay with her family; there is a stress in the word ‘family’ when he says, “You have a family here. Munna and I are all yours” (04:25-28). She has no qualms about leaving the family, a shocking fact considering the attachment women are supposed to have with their families in all cultures. Apparently, she takes such a drastic decision solely for the sake of love – “I’m in love with him, Arif” (04:41), she tells her husband. This is a pointer to the fact that the film upholds love instead of marriage and family as reason for a man and woman’s living together. The opening shot of the film shows a packed suitcase on the staircase landing and the next shot shows two tea cups in the kitchen, symbolizing domesticity and companionship of a married couple. As the film comes to a close, the wife takes the packed suitcase with her when she embarks on her journey, leaving behind a life of companionship, sharing and domesticity with her husband. The packed suitcase usually associated with the man of the house is transferred to the hands of the woman of the house thereby subverting the notion of the family and hearth as the woman’s rightful place. This is an interesting instance of how such minute details and seemingly insignificant objects lend depth and meaning to a Mira Nair film.

Effective use of dialogue to capture the intense human drama and the workings of the human mind is an important strategy used by Nair in her short film. The confrontation between the couple on the morning when the wife makes known her decision, the persuasion of the husband and the wife’s counter arguments -- have all been well executed. Even in sparse strokes and dialogues Nair gives us a good sketch of her characters and their emotional turmoil. It becomes clear that Arif is not the brutal husband who would repel his wife by torturing her and driving her to forsake him. He has in him nothing of the tyrannical patriarch who would use force and his superior powers to retain his wife within the household.

On the other hand, he appears to be a man deeply perturbed by his wife's move and is seen appealing, pleading and imploring: "Stay with me! Sleep with him, but stay with me" (04:54-05:00). The woman, who has the upper hand, dismisses the prospect of a woman's entertaining a husband and lover at the same time as adultery (05:02). The man next tries to appeal to her motherly instincts and religious impulses: "You have a child here. Choose him...If you leave, you don't just go without your son, you go without God" (05:10-11, 05:56-06:02). The wife has considered the pros and cons of her choice and is aware of the risks involved. She muses: "Is it going to be so terrible? It may be a mistake, but I've got to do it (04: 30-38). The CD she hands over to her son partly explains and justifies her choice as one based more on integrity, courage, adventure and convictions (07:48 - 08:01) rather than on any social or moral compulsions or codes.

Two factors could have caused an impediment to her decision – her motherly love and her religious feelings, for she is both a devoted mother and a deeply religious person. It is heart-wrenching for her to part with her son, who is around ten years old. She is seen hugging him and weeping when she makes known to him her decision. The son is deeply perturbed like his father and the disturbance is conveyed through his question, "Why? Why? Why?"(01:29-31). But the young boy is able to come to terms with the situation more easily than his father. As Arif watches his wife close the door behind her to step out into the street and the waiting car, he gasps in pain and disbelief, "She's gone! ... How can it be?" (06:46-53). The son, who has resigned himself to the situation after watching his mother's CD, tries to console his father with the words, "But it is!" (06:54). He accepts and respects his mother's choice, despite the loss and pain he has to suffer. An important detail included in the film, the woman's wearing of the hijab or the head dress of Muslim women before she makes her final exit indicates that she is a person strongly steeped in her religious faith. Though the hijab is usually associated with the subordination and seclusion of Muslim women, it has recently gained significance as a means of the assertion of the religious identity of Muslim women in the face of western censure. The ambiguous significance of the hijab and the strong feminist consciousness of the woman combine to create a powerful tale of a woman's search for identity and the true purpose of her life. The story of the woman who honours her personal choice over her motherly instincts and her religiosity becomes an example of the empowerment of women.

The movies discussed in this paper are largely conventional as far as their form and structure are concerned. They are linear narratives with coherent plots and realistic elements. The short movies are part of anthologies produced with sufficient budgets unlike movies that usually belonged to parallel or alternative cinema. Much of the unconventionality of these short films comes from their theme and the revolutionary content -- the deconstruction of the Islamophobia that existed in America post September 11 in the first movie and the subversion of the patriarchal constructions of womanhood, family, marriage and motherhood in the second. The films are a proof of Mira Nair's concern with and commitment to the pressing issues of the time and her ability to use the limited capacity of a medium like short film to examine sociopolitical

issues and capture the angst of human beings and the depth of the human psyche.

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