

Women on the Other Side

Week 10: Parmar: Politics and Aesthetics

In reviewing *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, we have to encounter issues of politics and aesthetics. What are the difficulties of making a feature, on a low budget, with a 'non-commercial' cast and allegedly controversial subject matter? How do we manage the competing demands of the aesthetics of making a film (i.e. narrative, character, visual style) with the politics of its content (i.e. themes and messages).

More widely the film brings together many of the issues we have engaged with during the course, namely:

- Women's ability to bring together multiple perspectives in filmmaking
- Women directors' use of their cultural backgrounds
- The aesthetics of filmmaking, and the use of conventional, as opposed to non-conventional storytelling
- Women's choice of available places within the film industry

In thinking about the film, perhaps we can address the following questions:

- What is the impact of Parmar's (and Gibb's) choices in narrative and character?
- What is the film's significance within the British film industry landscape?
- What are the problems and issues of making entertainment drawn from material that has strong political overtones or messages?
- Can the film, overall, be considered to be 'successful' and by which criteria?

Entertainment and Politics

What is interesting about this perspective on militant Islam is that a resurgence of Bangladeshi national identity has become a complex business. As Chanu points out, Bangladesh is an Islamic state that was born out of a war which set Muslim against Muslim. And an Islamic revival would appear to place Nazneen in even more of a subordinate position than she is now. Gavron's movie finds an unfashionably gentle, human optimism in the face of all this, and a sympathetic performance from Chatterjee makes it plausible. (1)

As the recent release, *Brick Lane*, indicates, politics and entertainment can be difficult bedfellows. The protests against filming in the real Brick Lane, by some members of the Bangladeshi community



Nina and Bobbie in *Nina's Heavenly Delights*

there, suggests the importance given to representations of politically sensitive, cultural identities. Gavron (and her production team) have had to engage with the real politics of that community, in filming a representation of characters and their stories from within it.

Parmar, despite the 'feel-good' style of her film, is also still determinedly political. Her politics mean that she wants to look as "the other within", being both part of the Asian Diasporan community and the British. She states: "I do not speak from a position of marginalization but more crucially from the resistance to that marginalisation."⁽²⁾ Whilst recognizing her differences, she does not believe or accept that these should make her inhabit a marginal place. Instead, her conception of a fragmented identity is not within the person himself or herself, as they try to come to terms with their disparate experiences. Instead, she contends it is the culture itself that is fragmented; it is a British national culture that is "heterogeneous and ethnically differentiated" a fact that "still need hammering home to those who are persistent in their view that to be black and British is an anachronism".⁽³⁾

Parmar wants to reach towards a utopian vision and to realise these within her filmmaking, to make the film that she wants to see and to make visible the cultural and sexual diversity that she believes really sits at the heart of Britishness. Parmar is committed to bringing her ideas to the widest audience possible, to realise her feminist vision but in language that can be understood and enjoyed by everybody. Her first film *Sari Red* (1988) was bought by the Pompidou Centre in Paris as an art installation, but Parmar has consciously moved towards mainstream filmmaking. This choice of aesthetic style is a political choice, as it coheres with her determination not to see her values and cultural heritage as marginal.



Parmar's stated refusal to "pathologise lesbians" and to take the attitude: "Well look, this is who we are, this is what we think" (4) is another political statement, locating 'alternative' sexuality into the mainstream. She knowingly occupies the centre ground and uses mainstream techniques to tell her story. In doing this, her aim is to avoid naïvety in her work but to celebrate without a sense of the struggle.

The feminist cry is always that "the personal is political"; that there are not areas of our lives and relationships, in respect of gender, that can be treated as being neutral and apolitical. Parmar's filmmaking is arguably political, in its determination to bring a lesbian relationship into the centre of a mainstream film, and without overtly engaging with the politics i.e. to site a narrative that has homosexual lead characters, within the diasporic Indian community living in Britain, but not necessarily to make that the content of the story.

I am returned to my question about the validity of categorising directors – Parmar as a feminist activist, lesbian filmmaker or British Asian. Parmar's boldest political statement may be the refusal to be defined by these labels. As with feminism, she shows herself uninterested in fighting the battles that have already been won; that the film does not overtly and protractedly deal with the personal and political issues of coming out, is potentially a reflection of the more assured status of young, lesbian Asians. As she explains, "I wanted to tell a story with a happy ending, one that would make people leave the cinema wanting to celebrate life, get a curry and go dancing"(5)

This can be placed against the contexts of older women who speak of having to make a choice between their racial culture and gay culture. Parmar, herself, has grown up through these eras of radical action and soul-searching. We have seen how Parmar's status as Asian and a lesbian might qualify her to speak from the margins to problematise the status of Britishness with an ability to create an 'outsider's' viewpoint. However, she does not choose this role. I am reminded of the protagonists in Claire Denis, who look from the outside, on a culture that ignores or rejects them – somehow reflecting her

biography of fractured, cultural identity and placement. I am encouraged by Parmar's desire not to do this, but not convinced that she hasn't been failed in trying to separate the political out of the personal.

The Politics of Film Distribution

It would be interesting to compare Parmar's fictional treatment of these themes with her political documentaries. You'll have to take my word as to their engagement with global feminist issues – as I have had to take the world of the various websites I have studied to gather this information. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is available on DVD in Britain and was released in cinemas here; it was recently released in the US having done the rounds at various film festivals.

Her films are available for institutional rental (at the women make movies website: www.wmm.com) but distribution, via internet or DVD, remains elusive.

Notes

1. Peter Bradshaw, *Guardian, Brick Lane* review, 16th November 2007.
2. <www.filmguardian.co.uk>: This isn't just a fantasy World: 18/09/06.
3. *ibid.*
4. E. Ann Kaplan (1997) *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, London: Routledge
5. <www.filmguardian.co.uk>: This isn't just a fantasy World: 18/09/06.

Reviewing the course

Two contrasting examples of women directors whose work might help us think back over the course.

Safi Faye (b 1943)

There are relatively few women who have managed to sustain a career making films in Africa. The Senegalese ethnologist Safi Faye developed her interest in films when she met the French anthropologist Jean Rouch in Dakar in 1966 (Rouch was a pioneer of 'cinéma vérité' as used in his 1961 film *Chronique d'un été* and he worked extensively in Africa.) She subsequently gained a doctorate in Paris in 1979 and at the same time trained in film and video production in Paris and Berlin. Returning to Senegal she has sustained a 'part time' film career, mainly concerned with documentary shorts and features. Several of her films have focused on life in her home village of Fad'jal, some have dealt with the lives of African migrants to Europe. In the extract from *Ouaga* (UK 1988) (a documentary about African Cinema made at the time of the FESPACO Festival) Safi Faye discusses what being a filmmaker in Africa means. Much of what she says echoes this statement from the 'Sisters on Screen' website (<http://spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/sistersprogram.htm>)

In our post-film discussions—and particularly when we had Safi Faye here as our guest, we have often talked about the triple-challenges faced by African women filmmakers: (a) the many production/distribution difficulties faced by all directors working in Africa, (b)

the obstacles they face because of their gender, and (c) the problems inherent in trying to reconcile the various roles in their lives. We have talked about ability that women filmmakers have, particularly in North Africa, of penetrating and bringing us into feminine worlds that are off-limit to men. We have talked about the way that women filmmakers can expose us to the intimacies and frustrations of women's experience.

Niki Caro (b 1967)

New Zealander Niki Caro came to prominence with her second feature, *Whale Rider* (New Zealand/Germany 2002). This film was widely seen internationally and gained an Oscar nomination for its young star Keisha Castle-Hughes. The film brings us almost full circle as Caro directed a Maori story and like her fellow New Zealander, Jane Campion, was criticised from within the Maori community despite working closely with that community. In 2005, Caro followed up with an American film, *North Country*, starring Charlize Theron, who was also Oscar-nominated for her role as a real-life character at the centre of a sex harassment case in the mining industry.

North Country was not a financial success for the distributor Warner Bros. and Caro's next film *The Vintner's Luck* will see her re-united with Keisha Castle-Hughes on a French literary adaptation made independently (in English) in France as a New Zealand/French co-production.

Niki Caro offers us an example of the greater facility with which some English language producers can move from one project to another, working with established stars and choosing between projects that gain the support of either Hollywood or independent studios wherever they happen— as long as they are mainstream enough as social issues likely to interest a Western audience. Caro seems to have chosen films that to some extent focus on 'women's issues/stories' and we might consider her alongside Mira Nair and Jane Campion. Certainly she appears to have a different approach to both Claire Denis (conscious of the colonial relationship, determinedly intellectual in approach) and the Makhmalbafs and Safi Faye (determined to represent the everyday stories of the worlds they live in).

Niki Caro discusses her position in an interview on the web magazine *Slate*:

Slate: Both *Whale Rider* and *North Country* are stories about female empowerment. Do you worry about being marginalised as a woman director of films for women?

Caro: Yeah, I do, because that's not what I do. I don't see myself as a crusading feminist filmmaker. Not at all. I have the luxury of coming from New Zealand and I've had moments in my life where being female is considered to be a tremendous advantage – emotionally, career-wise. Personally,



Keisha Castle-Hughes in *Whale Rider*

I have nothing to prove. But I'm tremendously curious about human nature. Female life is so incredibly underexplored in cinema, so these stories feel very exotic.

Review questions

1. What have you made of the course overall?
2. Have you been surprised or disappointed by the range of films that we have discussed?

Three of the questions we addressed in Week 1 – do we think differently now?

3. Do we think women can make different films?
4. Do we detect a different gaze, even where the material presented is similar to male creators?
5. Can women's perspectives actually be linked to their institutional or cultural context? Is there more in common with the idea of 'otherness' of being outside of the system – either due to cultural or social marginalisation.

Websites for Safi Faye and Niki Caro

<http://www.bookrags.com/biography/safi-faye/>
<http://www.filmreference.com/Directors-Du-Fr/Faye-Safi.html>
<http://spot.pcc.edu/~mdembrow/sistersprogram.htm>
<http://www.slate.com/id/2128415>

Rona Murray and Roy Stafford 4/12/07