

Women on the Other Side

Week 9: *Nina's Heavenly Delights* (UK 2006)

Directed by Pratibha Parmar
Produced by Kali Films and Priority Pictures
Written by Andrea Gibb (Pratibha Parmar – story)
Cinematography by Simon Dennis
Original music by Steve Isles
Film Editing by Mary Finlay
Production design by Andy Harris
Costume design by Louise Allen and Bobby Mc Culla
Sound editing by Vincent Watts
Runtime: 94 minutes

Leading Players

Shelley Conn	<i>Nina Shah</i>
Laura Fraser	<i>Lisa Mackinlay</i>
Ronny Jhutti	<i>Bobbi</i>
Art Malik	<i>Raj Khanna</i>
Raji James	<i>Sanjay Khanna</i>
Veena Sood	<i>Suman Shah</i>
Radd Rawi	<i>Mohan Shah</i>
Atta Yaqub	<i>Kary Shah</i>
Zoe Henretty	<i>Priya Shah</i>
Kathleen McDermott	<i>Janice</i>
Adam Sinclair	<i>Fish</i>
Rita Wolf	<i>Auntie Tumi</i>

Pratibha Parmar brings together many of the themes we have encountered on the course. Her personal biography matches the post-colonial, diaspora experience of others such as Claire Denis, Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair. Born in Nairobi, Kenya she emigrated with her parents as a young child to Britain in 1967. She remembers that her mother had the experience of living on three different continents – India, Africa and then Europe and cites this as a major influence on her work – in determining ideas of “home, identity and belonging.”

Parmar's experience of her new home was coloured – by white racism. She encountered the hostility towards people of Indian origin living and working in the UK, and remembers her early years as a negative experience rather than a positive one. Education was seen as a way out – and Parmar achieved this escape spectacularly well, studying for a BA at Bradford University and post-graduate degree at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies. There, she was studying in the hothouse of cultural debate of the 1970s onwards, with leading lights such as Stuart Hall, Paul Willis and Angela McRobbie, delving into the sociological heart of the British, questioning the accepted identities and relationships of class, gender and race.



Whilst a student at Birmingham, she was part of a group writing and publishing on race and racism issues. She has subsequently written extensively on feminist and gay issues, published within academic essay collections. In the mid 1980s, she worked within the feminist publishing collective, Sheba Feminist Press, where she was responsible for editing and publishing writings by Asian and African-Caribbean women.

However, Parmar's career demonstrates that she is no blue-stocking or ivory-tower type. Her feminism (which she discovered and embraced whilst at Birmingham) is intellectual *and* political -with an impetus towards action and intervention as well as thought and writing. Before she began to make films, she was a community worker with young girls in the British Asian community. In 1975, she travelled to India to work as a volunteer in rural development projects around India, three months of which was spent working in Calcutta under the guidance of Mother Teresa. We could conclude that it's in the blood, given that her mother “fought alongside Gandhi, de-railing the railway lines when the British trains were coming through.”

No wonder, then, that her filmmaking contains the same political engagement. Eschewing film school, Parmar started in documentaries, working as a researcher at Channel 4 and moving to producing and directing her own documentaries. Her themes, in these, were global and activist. Her extensive, early work examines the active roles women have played in society and has been political in its exposing of injustices promoted on women. *Sari Red* (1988) creates a “visual poem of remembrance” for a young Asian woman killed in a racist attack in London. The

Righteous Babes (1998) reclaims the role of women (pre the ersatz-feminism of the Spice Girls) in creating genuinely, committedly subversive and challenging music. *A Place of Rage* (1993) documented African-American women's role in civil rights. With Alice Walker, in 1993, Parmar made *Warrior Marks*, which recorded and confronted ritual female mutilation in Africa. (A topic similarly dealt with by Kim Longinotto's documentary *The Day I will Never Forget* (2002)).

Parmar has maintained a commitment to be in the forefront of speaking out and speaking for oppressed communities. As well as awards for individual films, Parmar was awarded the Visionary Award for her entire body of work at the One in Ten Festival, a festival for diversity and equality for all sexualities at Pennsylvania State University. She describes her own sexuality as an 'open secret' at home, but there is a refusal to over-politicise lesbian issues in her cinema. When asked if she views herself as a "lesbian filmmaker" and to define "What is a lesbian film?" she states "I am a filmmaker first and last. Of course, my experience of the world is informed and shaped by my various identities, passions and commitments and have a direct influence on the films I make . . . I would like to think that I should be able to make any films and about anything that interest me and that shouldn't be constrained by who I am."

***Nina's Heavenly Delights* (2006)**

Nina, of the title, is a young girl who could share some of Parmar's biographical experiences. She returns home, after a long absence, to face and re-engage with her family after her father's death. The film is melodramatic as it centres around Nina's relationships with her mother and her siblings, but not least with her memories of her father. The central focus is Nina's coming of age and responsibility.

With Parmar's heavyweight background, it is interesting how some of the responses to her first feature film have not fallen far short of calling it 'lightweight': it is a "dainty appetizer that "tries but fails to fill you up" or a film that, potentially, falls into a fantasy world. Reviews measure Parmar's film against *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) as its direct antecedent, and to see it as being 'about' sexuality and an Asian family's expectations. (Indeed, Art Malik, who plays Raj Khanna in the film, did refer to it as 'My Beautiful Restaurant').

However, I think it is more useful to bear *East is East* (1999) in mind. Both films have very specific cultural settings (Salford for *East is East*, Glasgow for *Nina's Heavenly Delights*) and both attempt a difficult balancing act between real, serious social/cultural issues and broad comedy, using stereotypical characters.

Parmar's film, however, could risk being marginalized because of her portrayal of a lesbian relationship. The film establishment apparently resisted investing in such a narrative, but Parmar emphasises how the film concentrates on the characters as people, and their relationship is romantically and sensitively portrayed. In her writing and her filmmaking, Parmar wants her ideas to be in the centre of things, not at the edges. As she explicitly states: "since my arrival in England in the mid-sixties, it has been a constant challenge and struggle to defy those institutions and cultural canons which seek repeatedly to make me believe that because of my visible difference as an Asian woman I am an 'other' and therefore 'marginal'."

For me, Parmar relates very strongly to our previous interests, despite the British context and the questions about portrayals of sexuality. Like Ashima in *The Namesake*, Parmar seems to want to have the best of all her personal cultures and to recognize that the experience of both does not privilege one over the other. Her past and her family's past are rich additions to her British identity; they can co-exist in a creative mix. She argues for a British culture that is diverse and diversifying, and seeks to celebrate that diversity rather than question its place and survival. Her political statement is, perhaps, to aim to enjoy difference as multiplicity rather than as opposition.

The questions that might be interesting to ask when viewing *Nina's Heavenly Delights* are:

- Does this film bring to life the experience of a family and dramatise their relationships effectively, as previous films have done?
- Does it dramatise the lives of a diaspora and the experience of being British Asians?
- Comparing Parmar to the work we've seen of the Makhmalbaf family, is this political filmmaking (i.e. in engaging with women/racial/sexuality rights)? Does Parmar's presentation of women as central characters and of the alternative sexualities challenge current thinking?
- Although it is set in Britain would you compare it to the films we have previously watched?
- Does it celebrate women's experience (as *The Namesake* and *The Day I Became a Woman* do)?
- Is it ultimately possible to link these women directors, and their collaborators, together as a diaspora of global women filmmakers?

Filmography

Adapted from: kalifilms.com (Kali Films is a film company founded by Parmar)

More detail about many of the films can be found at: Women Make Movies: www.wmm.com

Features

Nina's Heavenly Delights

2006

Shorts

<i>Playing Dead</i>	2008
<i>Sita Gita</i>	2000
<i>Wavelengths</i>	1997
<i>Memsahib Rita</i>	1994

Documentaries

<i>The Righteous Babes</i>	1998
<i>Jodie: An Icon</i>	1996
<i>The Colour of Britain</i>	1994
<i>Warrior Marks</i>	1993
<i>Brimful of Asia</i>	1992
<i>Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun</i>	1992
<i>A Place of Rage</i>	1991
<i>Khush</i>	1991
<i>Flesh and Paper</i>	1990
<i>Bhangra Jig</i>	1990
<i>Memory Pictures</i>	1989
<i>Sari Red</i>	1988
<i>Reframing Aids</i>	1987
<i>Emergence</i>	1986

Television Drama

<i>Doctors</i> – BBC1 (various episodes)	2002
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Music Videos

Tori Amos, Morcheeba, Ghostlands, Midge Ure

Rona Murray and Roy Stafford 20/11/07