

**Shifting Social Awareness:  
From *Monsoon Wedding* to *Made in Heaven*<sup>1</sup>**

**Alejandra Moreno-Álvarez**  
**University of Oviedo**  
**Spain**

**Abstract**

*Monsoon Wedding* (2001), a film directed by Mira Nair, is a comedy of manners which portrays what wedding movies offered to the global, western palate until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Nair's novelty and great success is putting India in the center and not in the margins. If *Monsoon Wedding* acquainted a western audience with the sights and sounds of the new global India (Sharpe 2005), *Made in Heaven*, an Indian drama web television series directed by Zoya Akhtar, Alankrita Shrivastava and Nitya Mehra, premiered on Amazon video on 8 March 2019, attempts, on the other hand, to make a shift in Indian social awareness addressing a global/glocal (Ritzer 2003) audience. This "Big Fat Indian Wedding" blends the old and the new India, showing a postmodern India where modernity coexists with traditional rituals. *Made in Heaven* breaks barriers and represents a progressive and daring show within the Indian market. The voice-over that closes each of the nine chapters acts as a wake-up call for its global/glocal audience. Kabir Basrai (Shashank Arora) – the voice-over – disrupts mainstream conventions and redefines the nature of the margins allowing minorities a resistant space in which to be heard (Moodley 2003).

**Keywords:** *global; glocal; otherness; TV series; social awareness*

---

<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgments: The research for this article was conducted in the framework of the research project "Politics, Aesthetics and Marketing of Literary Formulae in Popular Women's Fiction: History, Exoticism and Romance" (grant reference FFI2016-75130P) (MINECO/AEI/FEDER, UE), funded by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

### 1. Introduction - old issues in new film frames

*Monsoon Wedding*, directed by acclaimed Indian American filmmaker Mira Nair, was released in 2001. It is an Indian style comedy of manners about the romantic entanglements during a traditional Punjabi upper middle-class wedding in India. The film, awarded with the Golden Lion for the best picture at the Venice Film Festival (2001), was a breakthrough in the west. The cast was exclusively Indian, languages were English and Hindi, and the geographical setting was Delhi, where the Verma family lived. Nair, capturing an international, postmodern and postcolonial spirit, played with tradition and modernity offering interconnecting love stories around wedding preparations and the wedding itself amid the monsoon. Encompassed with moments of real drama, this motion picture portrayed what, until then, wedding films had offered to the global, western palate yet have never been about Indian weddings. The storyline is based on an arranged marriage between the characters of Aditi and Hemant, two upper middle-class Punjabis. The former living in India and the latter in United States. Nair addresses the conflict between traditional Punjabi customs and modern western ones, challenging India's traditions and local cultures by introducing western influences. At the same time, she internationally disseminates traditional and local aspects of Indian culture, this being one of the key points of the film. Nair's success was coherently blending Bollywood and Hollywood styles. As an example, we can take the song "Chunari chunari" which once the film was released became a hit song played in many bars around the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as in many other spaces. Although the song was first featured by Indian film director David Dhawan in *Biwi No. 1* (1999), it was not until 2001 that it became a hit. *Chunari* means scarf, which, within the context of both films, represents a symbol of female modesty. Bollywood choreographer Farah Khan played with gender roles in this Bollywood-Hollywood production providing Neha Dubey with a scarf that she would place around the neck of the man of her choice, contrary to the traditional way around. The fact that the setting

of this song is in an empty swimming pool, where a party before the wedding is taking place, is a metaphor for the initiation of a new reality where women have a main role. Everybody at the party – those who live in India and those Indians who live abroad – ends up singing the song which represents the celebration of “prodiasporic Indian nationalism” (Singh 2018), and at the same time western and eastern conviviality (Gilroy 2004) onscreen and offscreen. As Eduardo Viñuela-Suárez highlights, “music is another cultural discourse which not only reflects the reality in which it is subsumed, but which also contributes to its creation through the affirmation or deconstruction of stereotypes” (2013: 99 my translation). Thus, the film soundtrack, particularly the song we are referring to, is a tool Nair employs to deconstruct traditional stereotypes the west has about India, since we must bear in mind that the audience Nair has in mind is not only Indian but also western.

If *Monsoon Wedding* acquainted a western audience with the sights and sounds of the new global India (Sharpe 2005), *Made in Heaven*, an Indian drama web television series, premiered on Amazon video on 8 March 2019, attempts, on the other hand, to make a shift in Indian social awareness, addressing a global/glocal audience. The date chosen for its premier, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March, was intended to celebrate International Women’s day since strong women’s empowerment themes permeate the whole series. *India’s Daughter*, a documentary film directed by Leslee Udwin (2015), based on the 2012 Delhi gang rape and murder of 23-year-old Jyoti Singh, had also been released on the same day four years before. Until 2008 coverage of rape cases in the news media in the country was forbidden (Losh 2014: 11) and gay sex was decriminalized by India’s Supreme Court on 6 September 2018. Both rape and gay sex are part of the topics that *Made in Heaven* openly includes. Nair also tackled both topics in *Monsoon Wedding* but in a more discrete way so as not to be banned in India, as was later the case of *India’s Daughter*.

The nine episodes of *Made in Heaven* are directed by Zoya Akhtar, Alankrita Shrivastava (*Lipstick Under my Burkha*, 2016) and Nitya Mehra (assistant director in films like Mira Nair’s *The Namesake*, 2006, and *The*

*Reluctant Fundamentalist*, 2012). This “Big Fat Indian Wedding” blends the old and the new India, showing a postmodern India where modernity coexists with traditional rituals, and, thematically speaking, it goes a little bit further than *Monsoon Wedding*. The TV series puts patriarchal powers at play making its audience uncomfortable by including topics such as feminism, class, homophobia and sexual harassment. The two main characters, who run a wedding-planning business, Karan (Arjun Mathur) and Tara (Sobhita Dhulipala), are in a liminal space, since they are forced to tread the line between being insiders and outsiders of the drama offered. As Priya Arora underlines, “[t]hrough aware of the need to stand up for the powerless and voiceless, Tara and Karan also end up becoming complicit in their own silencing” (2019). This means that both the audience and its characters feel awkward due to the, until then, muted topics the series openly addresses. *Made in Heaven* breaks barriers and represents a progressive and daring show within the Indian market that was almost silenced until 1991 when “a new economic policy eliminated the bureaucratic red tape restricting imports and foreign investment” (Sharpe 2005). For the first time, the marketplace became flooded with consumer goods that had previously only been available on the black market (Sharpe 2005: 58). Indian television went from the two channels of the state TV to more than sixty channels available on cable and brought with it the discussion about sexual topics that had been unmentionable before. In *Monsoon Wedding* Nair often uses her camera to zoom in on television screens and monitors to highlight the power of this new media at the turn of the century in India, as if she knew what was going to happen nearly two decades later.

This time, the strategy used by Akhtar, Shrivastava and Mehra is not only Kabir Basrai’s (Shashank Arora) camera but also his voice as a voice-over. He becomes the omniscient narrator of the different chapters which form the series. This voice-over that closes each of the nine chapters acts as a wake-up call for its global/glocal audience. The TV series portrays a journey of identity, from women who are obedient and

dutiful to women who step outside of tradition to become empowered. They reclaim their bodies and sexuality since, as the voice-over recalls,

the truth is, you were just operating from the lack of self-worth this world has gifted you ... you scratch any surface and it all comes down to the same thing. Hope. Hope for better, hope for holier, hope for happier: poor, old, rich, young, modern, traditional....

This voice-over disrupts mainstream conventions and redefines the nature of the margins becoming a place of resistance for the characters in the films and a place for the expression of the subalterns' resistance. As Subeshini Moodley underlines when analyzing the works of Nair and Deepa Mehta,

they represent the texts of other Indian women, where the text is the nationalism of India inscribed in the notion of the ideal Indian woman and the consequences that accompany this. They are not speaking of these women but are allowing them a resistant space in which to be heard. (Moodley 2003: 73).

## **2. Big Fat Indian Weddings**

The main difference we encounter between *Monsoon Wedding* and *Made in Heaven* is that one was created mainly for the western/Indian palate by a diasporic filmmaker whereas the other one has an Indian audience in mind directed by Indian film directors. Nevertheless, since the latter was released by Amazon Prime, its scope is appealing across the world despite being rooted in India. Thanks to these streaming platforms geography and languages are no longer barriers. Without a doubt, there is a shift in social awareness caused mainly by the integration of modernism and traditionalism into a glocal world, both nationally and internationally speaking. This social awareness, which was ignited by Nair, mainly affects upper middle-class urban India since they are the ones that have access to these streaming platforms.

*Monsoon Wedding* belongs to the genre known as “wedding pictures” (in Beebe 2002: 75). It acquaints a western/Indian audience with the sights and sounds of the global India of the turn of the century. It belongs to the “accented cinema”, a label given by Naficy in 2001 to films directed by diasporic directors around the world. Nair merges the realism of American independent filmmaking with Bollywood’s narrative style and becomes a great success in Britain, United States and in India, at least among the urban middle class. In 2001 *Monsoon Wedding* destroys any “lingering image of a nation mired in some premodern space as a traditional land with ancient customs and beliefs” (Sharpe 2005: 59). Rather, it reveals a postmodern world in which technological devices coexist with traditional rituals. The heroine, Aditi (Vasundhara Das), represents a new generation of Indian women who live double lives in order to reconcile their desires with the wishes of their parents (Sharpe 2005: 59). We can see, as has been suggested above, that this is how Nair addresses both a western and an Indian audience, when for example discussing arranged marriages. Aditi has agreed to an arranged marriage with a Houston computer engineer, Hemant, and at one point the groom says “What marriage isn’t a risk? Whether our parents introduce us, or we meet in a club, what difference does it make?”. As Jenny Sharpe suggests “These words are directed at a western audience that regards arranged marriages to be a holdover from India’s feudal past” (Sharpe 2005: 71). For an Indian audience, instead, this dialogue is just an arranged love marriage that has been incorporated into the formula of Bollywood “wedding pictures”. *Monsoon Wedding* highlights how the real debate is not, as Sharpe suggests, the battle between tradition and modernity, but the right for women to choose (Sharpe 2005: 71), as already explained when analyzing the song “Chunari chunari”. The monsoon which happens in the last scene of the film functions as a cathartic metaphor for Indian women’s liberation from the dominant structures imposed on them. Aditi becomes an empowered decision-making being within a liminal space between tradition and modernity.

## Shifting Social Awareness ...

---

*Made in Heaven*, on the other hand, becomes a discursive space where (self-)knowledge is produced by and for Third World Women (Mohanty et al 1991: 34). As already mentioned, the nine episodes of *Made in Heaven's* first season are directed by four acclaimed Bollywood directors and screenwriters, who also happen to be women who "become active participants in their self-representation" (Moodley 2003: 70). At first, *Made in Heaven* seems to be Ladki-Cinema<sup>2</sup> (Ladki means "girl" in Hindi), synonym of chick lit, but it is not. It breaks barriers and represents a progressive and daring series. It is centered around Karan (Arjun Mathur) and Tara (Sobhita Dhulipala), two friends who run a wedding-planning business. The former is married to an upper middle-class man who is unfaithful to her with her best friend, while the latter is a gay man searching for love. It is ironic how both characters deal with love in their business yet how both lack it in their personal lives. At the end of the series another love flourishes, that of their true friendship. Setting love aside, although this may seem difficult since we are dealing with a movie where love is bound to be present due to the purpose of their company, the show is a cartography of issues which mainly concern South Asian upper middle-class women. Weddings are presented with all their ornament, but they are tinted with the freedom that a new generation claim. This is the generation that belongs to the #MeToo movement and that has fought to erase colonial-era laws like Section 377, an article under the Indian constitution that outlawed gay sex. As Priya Arora suggests, "[i]t is this paradox that Amazon Prime India has taken on in *Made in Heaven*" (2019).

As it has already been said, the show is fueled by strong and multidimensional storytelling which is encapsulated by a voice-over. In one episode, a couple in their 60s marry against their children's wishes; in another, an Indian man based in America holds a contest to find an Indian wife. He is impotent and he wants a wife to be his companion in America. In the end, the bride-to-be accepts him because she needs to

---

<sup>2</sup> *Ladki* is a 1953 Hindi-language romantic comedy film written by V.S. Venkatasalam and directed by M.V. Raman.

leave India in order to, supposedly, have a better future. It is her choice, or so she thinks. As the voice-over recalls

On the surface, it seems that you made a selfish choice, but the truth is you were just operating from the lack of self-worth this world has gifted you. A world where you have been made to believe that the price for your acceptance and happiness must be paid by you appeasing an entitled man. And sadly... you are not alone.

This voice-over is so straight forward that it makes *Made in Heaven* distance itself from Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*.

The conflicts between tradition and cultural change not only play out in the protagonists' own lives but also in the spectators' lives. There is a palimpsest of different interpretations from the multiple perspectives: the ones the directors create, the one the camera man records, and the one that both Karan and Tara see. All of them are intertwined by the voice-over, forcing the characters and the audience to tread the line between being an insider or outsider. As Priya Arora highlights, "[t]hrough aware of the need to stand up for the powerless and voiceless, Tara and Karan also end up becoming complicit in their own silencing" (2019), particularly when dealing with two of the main topics: class and gender. Tara, for instance, regularly advocates for the rights of her employees, as well as her female clients to give them the weddings they desire, even when it goes against their families' demands. She wants them to fit in; yet at home, Tara who is married to Adil (Jim Sarbh), a wealthy man dismissive of her middle-class roots, wishes to fit in among the elite, where she knows she does not belong. It is in episode eight where instead of a voice-over Tara herself tells a group studying to become angels in the house the following:

Learn as much as you can about grooming, table manners, etiquette, English language, clothes, makeup. But your identity, the one deep inside you, never let go of it.

## Shifting Social Awareness ...

---

Karan, on the other hand, is a cisgender gay man, not effeminately mannered – which breaks with gay stereotypes – who is brought to mainstream India media by the creators of the show. The audience can see Karan’s homophobia which is understood thanks to a flashback where we see how his family, particularly his mother, rejected him when he was caught having an intimate relationship with another boy. Once an adult he is put into prison under Section 377, where he is harassed by the police. Karan belongs to the generation of the #MeToo movement and the one that has fought to erase laws like Section 377, and tired of being ashamed he stands for his rights and files a public lawsuit against the law. He becomes the voice for L.G.B.T. Indians, as Arora suggests (2019), and, at the same time, in episode six, the audience is reminded that “There is nothing wrong being gay. It is natural”.

### Conclusions

*Made in Heaven* is then a journey of identities, from women who are obedient and dutiful to women and gay people who step outside of tradition to become empowered and reclaim their bodies and sexuality. The explicit dialogues and the closeness of the camera at times make the audience feel attached to this journey of identity, supported by a voice-over that recalls “the truth is, you were just operating from the lack of self-worth this world has gifted you.” *Made in Heaven* and its writers draw on India’s social dilemmas and make the audience face them. *Monsoon Wedding* began to push the boundaries and shows like *Made in Heaven* continue to do so even further. The latter is a space of resistance where a glocal audience is welcomed and responsible for its actions. As the voice-over reminds us

Welcome to New Delhi. Insider or outsider, you will find your corner. Because the truth is, you scratch any surface and it all comes down to the same thing. Hope. Hope for the better, hope for the holier, hope for happier, poor, old, rich, young, modern, traditional...

**Bibliography:**

- Arora, P. (2019): "An India TV Show Points the Way for a New Generation, in *The New York Times*, April 9. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/09/arts/television/amazon-india-made-in-heaven.html>. (retrieved June 16, 2020).
- Beebe, J. (2002): *At the Movies. Monsoon Wedding*, directed by Mira Nair, Screenplay by Sabrina Dhawan, in *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal*, vol. 21, no. 1 (May), pp. 75-78.
- Gilroy, P. (2004): *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* London: Routledge.
- Losh, E. (2014): "Hashtag Feminism and Twitter Activism in India", in *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, vol. 3, no. 3, pp. 11-22.
- Mohanty, C. T.; Russo, A. Torres, L. (1991): *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, Indiana: Indiana University Press.
- Moodley, S. (2003): "Postcolonial Feminisms Speaking through an 'Accented' Cinema: The Construction of Indian Women in the Films of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta" in *Agenda. Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 58, African Feminisms Three, pp. 66-75, Taylor & Francis, Ltd. on behalf of Agenda Feminist Media.
- Nair, M. (2001): *Monsoon Wedding*.
- Naficy, H. (2001): *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Ritzer, G. (2003): "Rethinking globalization: Glocalization/Grobalization and Something/Nothing", in *Sociological Theory*, vol. 21, no 3, pp. 193-209.
- Sharpe, J. (2005): "Gender, Nation, and Globalization" in *Monsoon Wedding and Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge. Meridians*, vol. 6, no 1, pp. 58-81, Duke University Press.
- Singh, A. (2018): *The Film of Mira Nair. Diaspora Vérité*. Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.
- Udwin, L. (2015): *India's Daughter*.
- Viñuela-Suárez, E. (2013): "El videoclip del siglo XXI: el consumo musical de la televisión a Internet", in *Musiker: Cuadernos de Música*, 20, pp. 167-185.

**Alejandra Moreno Álvarez**

**affiliation:** University of Oviedo, Spain

**position:** PhD Senior Lecturer

**email:** [morenoalejandra@uniovi.es](mailto:morenoalejandra@uniovi.es)

**research interests:** Literatures in English Language and Feminist and Postcolonial Theory

**Selected publications:**

(2020): *Spiritual and Corporeal Selves in India: Approaches in a Global World* (Escobedo de Tapia, Carmen and Moreno-Álvarez, Alejandra), Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press (Lady Stephenson Library), 2020.

(2020): "India, Heat, Dust and Tea? Alienness and Marketability in Ruth Praver Jhabvala and Nicole C. Vosseler" (Moreno-Álvarez, Alejandra), in *Alien Domiciles: Diasporic Inquiries into South Asian Women's Narratives* (Bhat, Shilpa Daithota ed.), Maryland, US: Lexington Books, Rowman and Littlefield, 39-52.

(2020): "De Kretser's Retelling of a Ghost Love Story" (Moreno-Álvarez, Alejandra), in *Humanities*, 9(3), 87. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h9030087>

