

MISSISSIPPI



Masala

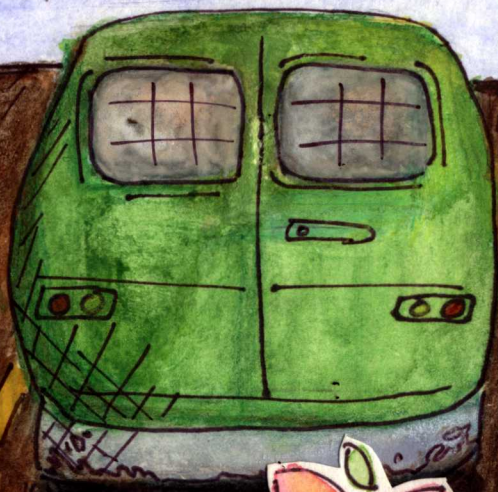


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Who Is Mira Nair?



Image of Mira Nair
(Black Star)

Mira Nair is an actress, filmmaker, and activist. After her breakout feature, *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), was released and nominated for an Academy Award for Best Feature Film, she went on to direct *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and numerous other films (Britannica).

Nair was born in Rourkela, India, on October 15, 1957. She attended the University of Dehli in 1975, then left to study at Harvard University.

In *Mississippi Masala*, Nair portrays a beautiful romance and tackles the issue of colorism between the Indian and African-American communities in the South.



What Is Mississippi Masala?



This film is a romance indie film that was released in 1991 and stars Denzel Washington,

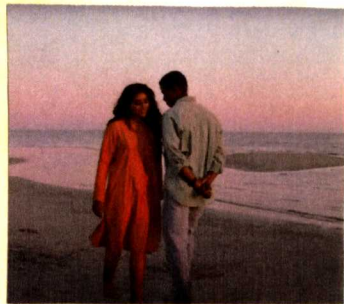


Mina and Demetrius share an intimate moment (YouTube, 59:09)

Sarita Choudhury, and Roshan Seth. It was written by Sooni Taraporevala and directed by Mira Nair. It is set in 1989 Mississippi, seventeen years after anyone of Indian descent was kicked out of Uganda.



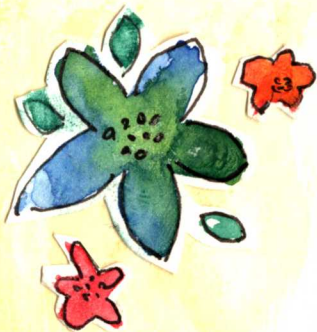
This story follows one family in particular, focusing on the father, Jay, and the daughter, Mina. After they are driven from Uganda, they move to England for a short time, then they move to Mississippi. There they settle and work in an Indian-run hotel. After a car accident, Mina falls for Demetrius, an African-American carpet cleaner, which sparks controversy with her father. Jay dislikes anyone of African descent, since they drove him from his home in Uganda, and has been continuously suing the Ugandan government for his land back for years.



Mina and Demetrius take a stroll on the beach (YouTube, 1:08:52)

Demetrius's and Mina's newfound relationship challenges and exposes the prejudices of each of their families in many different ways. Colorism is shown explicitly throughout this film in many ways. The

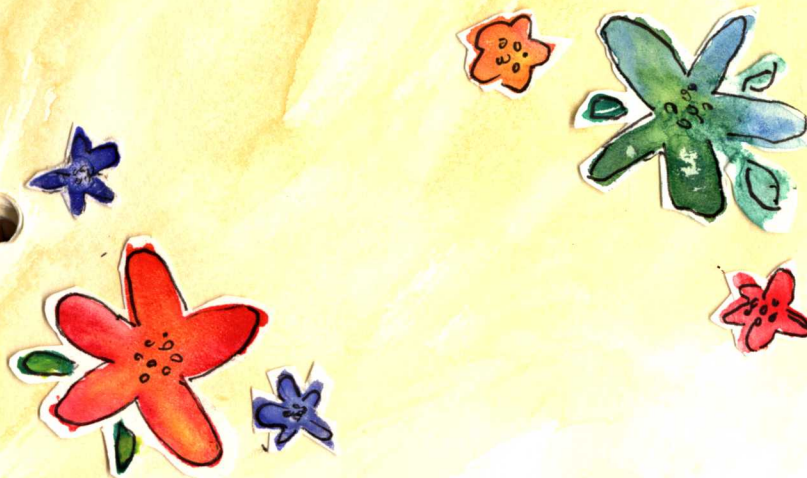
Indian and African American communities tended to only tolerate each other at best, and actively hate each other at worst.



What Is Colorism?

Colorism is "The privileging of light skin over dark" (Tharps). Some may say this is the same concept as racism, but it is entirely different. The Australian Human Rights Commission states, "Racism is the process by which systems and policies, actions and attitudes create inequitable opportunities and outcomes for people based on race."

While colorism simply means that anyone can be prejudiced against people with a darker skin tone, racism means that systems and institutions create unequal opportunities against people based on their race.



6 The Gossiping Aunties



The aunties gossiping at the wedding. (YouTube, 28:18)

Early in the film, there is a wedding that the local Indian community all comes to.

During this scene, the

audience sees two aunties gossiping about Mina and her family. They mention that Mina's mother is trying to marry Mina off to Harry Patel, a richer single man, and one auntie retorts, "You think this one has a chance? You can be dark and have money, or you can be fair and have no money, but you cannot be dark and have no money and expect to get Harry Patel" (28:36 – 28:50).

This scene demonstrates colorism clearly. This shows that even within the Indian community itself, they still were prejudiced against each other because of their skin color. Anyone in this community who is poor and has a darker skin tone is immediately looked down upon. Because of colorism, Mina is discriminated against and looked down upon, even in her own community. This shows that colorism is not just an abstract idea, it affects people in their everyday lives.



Colorism also negatively influences beauty standards. These aunties are basically saying that by having a darker skin tone, Mina is undesirable and ugly. This is also an issue across the world today.

Globally, people tend to favor lighter skin over darker skin. Studies have shown that people with darker skin tones are more often passed over for job opportunities, are punished more in schools, and are offered worse services than those with lighter skin (Tharps).



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Demetrius and Jay's Argument



Demetrius confronts Jay.
(YouTube, 1:27:07)

Later in the film, Demetrius goes to talk to Mira, but her father will not allow it and talks to Demetrius himself. During

this conversation, Jay says that Mira is free to date anyone she wants, but he does not want her to date Demetrius since he does not want her to struggle.

Demetrius retorts, "I know you and your folks can come down here from God knows where and be about as black as the Ace of Spades, and as soon as you get here you start acting white and treating us like we your doormats. I know that you and your daughter ain't but a few shades from this right here, that I know." (1:28:42-1:29:00). Demetrius is saying here that even though they are very similar, Jay still treats African Americans like dirt.



Demetrius points out that Jay is acting just like any other racist white person, looking down on African Americans, treating them terribly, and destroying his business, just because Jay does not date her. He points out Jay's colorism against him and shows the audience another way colorism affects the world. Colorism impacts relationships and can destroy them, whether it is romantic, familial, or friendship.



Negotiations and Racial Solidarity



Demetrius and his co-worker.
(YouTube, 43:32)

Demetrius will not sue them. To get on their good side and butter them up, he says, "Black, brown, yellow, Mexican, Puerto Rican, all the same! As long as you're not white, it means you're colored. Isn't that so?"(43:54-44:04)



Mina and Jay's family friend. (YouTube, 43:54)

Right after he says this, he brings up the issue of the previous car accident and asks if Demetrius has gotten hurt. He uses this idea of how all non-white people should stick together to his friend get out of the risk of being sued. Even though he has a strong prejudice against African Americans, he only tolerates them out of necessity. It is ironic since he promotes racial solidarity between them, yet only intends to keep it if Demetrius agrees to his terms.

Later in the film, after Mina and Demetrius have stayed the night together, Mina's uncles and family friends barge into their hotel room and start to fight Demetrius. The racial solidarity that the family friend has convinced Demetrius of has quickly dissipated and the idea of "We suffer together so we should work together" has disappeared. Instead, they have turned on each other in an instant. Their fragile alliance has shattered.



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Why Is This Film Important?

This film was mainly created for those of Indian and African descent. Nair wanted to create this movie to cross racial boundaries and portray interracial relationships in film. She also wanted to feature people of color on the screen rather than white people, since they do not get nearly as much representation in media as white people do.

When asked why she mainly features people of color in her films, Nair responded, "I've always been drawn to stories of those who are considered marginalized. If you're not in the mainstream or if you're not in the stream at all, you're virtually invisible... If we don't tell our own stories, no one else will" (Ford Foundation).

Colorism is a huge factor in this film. Usually, in mass media, racism is portrayed in film with white versus black people. Exhibiting the prejudice between Indian and African American people shows that this problem extends further than most people realize. This problem is still prevalent across our world today.



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Further Readings

The full movie is available on YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jHQrw_s28qA

This interview with Mira Nair, thirty years after the film's release, shows the director's thoughts and reflections on the creation of the film.

<https://www.vulture.com/2022/04/mira-nair-on-making-mississippi-masala.html>

This article from Time magazine explains the history and effect of colorism and how it differs from racism.

<https://time.com/4512430/colorism-in-america/>

This podcast episode features an in-depth interview with Mira Nair, where they talk about her past, projects, and films.

<https://www.blackstarfest.org/manylumens/season-2/mira-nair/>



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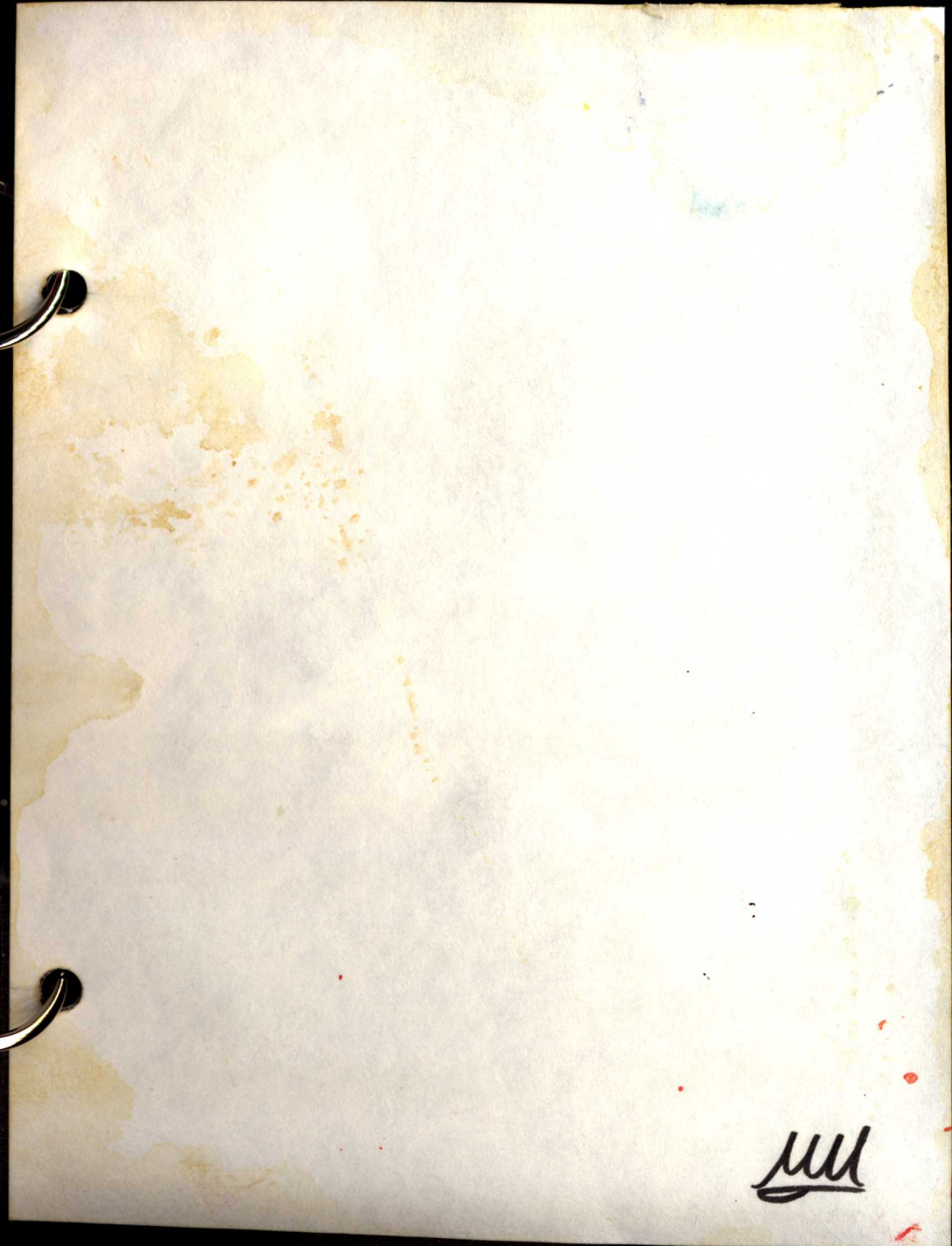


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