

The view from the oasis

Monsoon Wedding, directed by Mira Nair

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Monsoon Wedding is a comedy-drama by Indian filmmaker Mira Nair about a Punjabi family wedding in New Delhi. Nair's film took the 2001 Venice film festival's prestigious Golden Lion award, the first time in four decades that an Indian production has won the honor. The filmmaker's previous works include *Mississippi Masala* (1992) and *Kama Sutra* (1997).

An upper-middle class, globally extended family comes together for an arranged marriage between a young New Delhi woman, Aditi Verma (Vasundhara Das), and Hermant Rai (Parvin Dabas), a Houston-based engineer. A buffoonish wedding planner, P.K. Dubey (Vijay Raaz), oversees the lavish and intricate organization of the four-day event at the Verma family's affluent home, always with an eye to extracting more money from his client.

The bride-to-be, Aditi, has only reluctantly agreed to the marriage after a failed relationship with her married lover, a television talk-show host. The negative comments of her closest confidante, her forward-thinking and unmarried cousin Ria (Shefali Shetty), deepen Aditi's doubts about her hasty agreement to commit to life in America with a man she has only just met. The bride's father, Lalit (Naseeruddin Shah) maintains the demeanor of a gracious host, despite struggling with the escalating costs of the wedding, his daughter's imminent departure and a variety of family difficulties. The hot monsoon season and its torrential eruptions seem to parallel and anticipate the dynamics of the emotionally intense, status-conscious Verma family. As relatives from disparate parts of the world converge, Indian traditions get diluted. 'Speak a little English and you become a cultivated family,' declaims a member of the clan, which speaks more English than Hindi.

One of the movie's story lines involves the "downstairs" courtship between the Vermas' servant, Alice, and the upwardly mobile, Dubey. Despite his entrepreneurial successes, Dubey is a lonely man seeking a mate, as much to please his mother as himself. The angelic Alice, largely invisible to the wedding participants, has dreams of her own.

"Upstairs," a sex scandal (a history of pedophilia on the part of one of the family's distinguished friends is uncovered)

disrupts the celebratory mood. "Downstairs," the couple must overcome their reluctance to trust. Both worlds succeed in their respective rites of passage. Now, after a mix of comic moments and attractive dance numbers, all contradictions are resolved in the colorful wedding finale with monsoon rains enhancing the ecstatic mood.

At first glance the film appears to be making a solid argument against Hindu religious fundamentalism, an important political tactic of the Indian ruling elite. With visual succulence, the filmmaker presents the wedding, a core event in Indian tradition, as a confluence of international influences. Pointedly, in one of the film's early sequences, Aditi's married lover moderates a television program, "Delhi dot-com," on which a fundamentalist is advocating censorship in a "Hindu India." Indeed the film does present a multicultural tapestry which exposes the absurd fundamentalist claim that the population must rally to a nonexistent "traditional India." The film's production notes comment: "Set in today's globalized Delhi, *Monsoon Wedding* interweaves the ancient and the modern, the old-fashioned and the irreverent, the innocent and the sexual, to tell a modern Indian story."

Monsoon Wedding also takes a relatively sharp-eyed look at the lifestyle and concerns of the Punjabi middle class layers who now dominate New Delhi. Punjab was divided into Indian and Pakistani provinces at the time of partition in 1947. A large number of those who migrated across the new border to India were resettled in Delhi. Nair, who comes from this milieu, involved family members in the project. This, as well as the filmmaker's artistic approach, which she describes as one that masters "our story and our method completely before we begin shooting ... always returning to the essence of the actor," accounts for many of the film's engaging segments.

However, serious weaknesses in the film surface when Nair ventures outside her milieu. The family conducts its life in an oasis surrounded by extraordinary poverty, which rarely shows up on camera. Containing some 14 million people, Delhi is a megalopolis with sharp class divisions. The film, however, lavishes all its energies on the characters in the oasis. And to the extent that it feels obliged to reach out beyond, myth and fabrication substitute for realistic portrayal.

Alice, the film's only working class character, is irritatingly

sweet, saintly—and one-dimensional. Not much effort has been expended to make her authentic. Dubey is a more rounded character and, as an entrepreneur, holds an intermediary social position. He serves mainly as comic relief, although certain moments in his dealings with his employees reveal glimpses of a society still gripped by the hierarchical caste system. Dubey's home in Old Delhi, where his mother follows the stock market, is pretty miserable, although one must presume, because of his social standing, that he lives much better than the average working person. Nothing much is made of these characters and in the end there is no class tension—only a playing field made level by love.

It must be said that *Monsoon Wedding* stacks the deck in such a manner as to distort reality. Are there arranged marriages in which both parties are attractive and intelligent, so that a potentially satisfying relationship develops? No doubt. Are there Indian upper middle class families that treat their “help” with respect and even affection? Probably. Is a more or less seamless coexistence of elements of tradition and modern life possible? Yes, under certain conditions. However, if all the social “exceptions to the rule” in the film are added up, one confronts a narrative that simply stretches credibility.

Nair elaborates her concept of the relations between rich and poor in an interview given to *IFCRant*: “Their life [the have-nots] is the same as our life [the haves]. It's just that the language of love is different.” In her own notes about the film, she further says that *Monsoon Wedding* “capture[s] a time in Indian society when we are proud of our culture, free from colonial complexes.” The filmmaker does offer an explanation for what she means by the dubious phrase “free from colonial excesses” in the *IFCRant* interview: “We no longer have inferiority complexes about the West.... Bollywood is very chic. The clothes are very chic. It is no longer the cousin from New Jersey who is the hippest. It's actually the reverse.”

Nair's outlook reveals why *Monsoon Wedding* is so skewed in its character development. With such self-serving complacency and indifference towards the lives of the vast majority of people in her country, why even include any representative of the general populace in the film? But, according to the production notes, “it was important to Nair to show the co-existence of ‘upstairs’ and ‘downstairs’ in this society because, in India as in no other place, the haves and have-nots live side by side.” In the *Hindustan Times* Nair speaks more candidly, revealing a truly reprehensible cynicism, when she quips: “I could have done another movie about poverty and derelicts and got rave reviews for it. There is nothing that the western audience loves more than watching the poor in the third world.”

Let us give Nair the benefit of the doubt, so to speak, and suggest that behind this cynicism and complacency, or commingled with them, is probably a sense of the apparently overwhelming dimensions of poverty and misery in India. Despondency, the feeling that nothing *can* be done, will tend to

encourage susceptible petty bourgeois layers to conclude that nothing *should* be done, or even discussed. Still, to dwell, for example, on an unconvincing and contrived scandal involving a pedophile in a country where *100,000 women die each year* simply giving birth, has almost the character of a social provocation.

Monsoon Wedding's espousal of class détente, as well as the filmmaker's indifference to the condition of the poor, forces a closer examination of the movie's attitude to Hindu fundamentalism. The scene at the television station is a dig at the fundamentalists and, at its most interesting, the movie does show how the globalized family phenomenon erodes insularity. But at *Monsoon Wedding*'s core is an uncritical and conformist acceptance of the wretched “arranged marriage.” How does one explain the picking and choosing when it comes to such a reactionary and destructive practice? Only someone concerned with the fate of the masses can be a consistent opponent of all fundamentalist philosophies.

Whether she cares to admit it or not, Nair's film ultimately curries favor with the Hindu fundamentalists, or implies that there can be a compromise between the demands of modern life and those of reactionary, quasi-mythical religious and cultural tradition.

Nair, a Harvard graduate and a film professor at Columbia University, was asked by the *IFCRant* interviewer about how filmmakers should view their social and political responsibilities after the September 11 bombing of the World Trade Center. She replied: “Social responsibility sounds extremely dull. I shrink from that. As I get older, I look for movies to affirm life, to embrace life.” It is a symptom of an intellectually impoverished time that accepting social responsibility and affirming life should be considered opposites. *Monsoon Wedding* would have been a better film had Nair taken her responsibilities as an artist more seriously and had not sunk politically to the level of the social layer she was investigating.



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