Representations of Indian diasporic female subjectivities in women’s diasporic cinema

Mélanie Le Forestier
(pre-published version)

Summary: This paper discusses the emergence of a women’s diasporic cinema that challenges the representation of Indian women as guardians of Indian values. Through the examination of three films directed by women filmmakers (Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta and Nisha Pahuja), this analysis proposes to delve into the reconfiguration of Indian identity in a context of migration from women’s points of views. Women filmmakers offer a decentering approach of the diasporic displacement in which the relation to Indian values are necessarily modified. Thus, diasporic cinema will be defined as an agent of cultural demythologisation.

Keywords: female subjectivities; diasporic cinema; women filmmakers; transmigrants; cultural demythologisation.

Indian cinema, among other media, has played an important role in shaping the political and cultural identity of India as a modern nation-state, and has also later contributed to ‘the formation of South Asian diasporic cultures’ (Desai 2004). As it portrays the socio-cultural problematics of its time (Catoir 2014), cinema is an interesting object to study the processes at work in contemporary identity constructions in a globalised world. Indian cinema, and more particularly Bollywood¹, has thus often been studied to understand the structural changes taking place in the country² - its relation to the nation (as it became central to the configuration of a national imagined community) and its engagement with the global

¹ Bollywood here refers to the Hindi mainstream cinema that has been produced since the 1990s. This cinema is also considered as the dominant cinema in India.
that has brought about the transformation of the social experience of belonging to the nation. In this sense, the Indian diaspora has been a privileged framework for exploring the complexity and evolution of contemporary identity formations. Drawing on transnational and diaspora studies, I aim to demonstrate the definition and significance of an Indian women’s diasporic cinema. I intend to decenter the interpretive approach usually employed.

Instead of focusing on cultural belonging to the Indian nation, I want to examine how the diasporic experience influences the reconfiguration of women’s identities in three particular films: *Mississippi Masala* (Nair 1991), *Heaven on Earth* (Mehta 2008) and the documentary *The World Before Her* (Pahuja 2012). The paper will discuss the following questions: how do women filmmakers of the Indian diaspora present a decentering approach of the diasporic displacement? What difference does it make when it comes to cultural belonging and national identity? In the first part of this study, I will consider the cultural representations of the Indian diaspora in Bollywood and diasporic films, which is necessary to understand the redefinition of Indian identity in a migration context and how it echoes the experience of (non-migrant) women in India. The second part of this paper will then emphasise the role of diasporic cinema as an ‘agent of cultural de-mythologisation’ (Aksoy and Robins 2003: 95).

1. Cultural representations of the Indian diaspora

In this section, I will seek to outline some of the principal characteristics of the representation of diaspora in Bollywood and diasporic films. I believe it is important to give some consideration to the relationship between diaspora and Indianness in both cinemas to understand the distinctive nature of diasporic imaginations. If female diasporic characters are
mainly represented as the guardians of Indian traditional values in Bollywood, Nair, Mehta and Pahuja’s films, on the contrary, call into question this idealised image of Indian women.

1.1. Representation of the Indian diaspora in Bollywood

The political and economic reforms occurring in the 1990s have led to substantial transformations in India and ‘necessitated changes in the articulation of Indian national identity’ (Ranganathan 2010: 153). The adoption of the Dual Citizenship Act by the Government of India in 2003 for instance was important in the redefinition of national identity as NRIs (Non-Resident Indians) and PIOs (Person of Indian Origin) became citizens of the Indian nation. It had a huge impact on the film industry which was revitalised after a period of crisis in the 1980s. The Hindi film industry became Bollywood, playing an important role in the new national imaginary, and Indian cinema became popular among the diasporic audiences, providing them with ‘a link to their home country’ (Ranganathan 2010: 159). As Purnima Mankekar (1999: 732) pointed out, mass media ‘are among the most crucial channels of socialization among diasporic communities, and they play a crucial role in the creation of imaginary homelands for diasporic subjects’. These new cultural practices have contributed to the growing and expansion of Indian mass media in the global market. Since the Indian diaspora has become ‘one of the largest sites of consumption of Bollywood films’ (Desai 2004: 38; see also Clini 2012), India has strongly capitalised on these transnational flows and the political dimension of images (Dagnaud 2009) to create and expand a pan-Indian identity that would help to unify a disparate nation (Deprez 2010). In this context, Bollywood productions started to include the NRIs in the representation of ‘a new form of transnational nationalism’ (Clini 2012: 125). NRIs, along with the new Indian middle classes, have become the new figure of modern India in the new national imaginary (Dwyer 2010).

---

3 See Dagnaud & Feigelson (2012).
4 Deprez 2010: 121-132.
The main feature of this Bollywood’s representation of the diaspora is the inclusion of the NRIs in the Indian national identity and their role in the configuration of this new national imaginary in which the national identity is a concept that goes beyond territorial roots (Clini: 126).

In these films, the family becomes the symbol of the nation and plays an important role in shaping the image of the diasporic communities. The narratives of these films focus for most of them on ‘characters who live in the UK or the US [but] continue to maintain Indian traditions’ (Mehta 2005: 143), and ‘while being comfortable with the diaspora, [they] remain deeply Indian and are completely identical to their compatriots back in India’ (Clini: 126). But as Clini emphasises, this narrative is not especially representative of the real diasporic experience, but ‘rather reveals the anxiety of India […] towards the loss of its own hegemony towards its citizens’ (Clini: 126). The configuration of the diaspora’s identity in Bollywood films is ‘based not on tangible elements of shared histories but rather on essentialist conceptions’ (Sathian 2010: 26) of national identity. This essentialism ‘projects itself onto gender in a distinct way’ (Sathian: 26): female characters embody this Indianness and become the keepers and bearers of traditional values in a patriarchal system. However, some recent case studies have also revealed the evolution of the representation of diasporic women in Bollywood films, allowing them ‘to exist as a cosmopolitan figure similar to her male NRI counterpart’ (Sathian: 23). Drawing on this new perspective, I will analyse how female characters negotiate their own identity in three diasporic films that were directed by women filmmakers.

---

5 One of the films that represents this particular narrative is Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (Chopra 1995).
6 For more details about these values, see Sathian: 26-28.
1.2. The Indian diasporic cinema

Besides these Indians films, a diasporic cinema has emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. This new category of films is often described as ‘cross-over’ films, ‘referring to their capacity to cross over national boundaries’ (Deprez: 185). Being directed by migrant filmmakers and internationally distributed, these films can be set in the diaspora and ‘portray the lives of Indians living abroad’ (Sathian: 23) or in India, dealing with the ‘constant negotiation [that] takes place between home and the outside’ (Jain: 135) and how contemporary identities are reconfigured in transnational flows. They ‘form a broad category in themselves as they are engaged in an ongoing dialogue with their culture of origin’ (Jain 2008: 134). These films remain diasporic\(^7\) and are sometimes strongly rejected by the Indian audiences who negatively criticise their representation of India that is in contradiction with the national imaginary and the hegemonic representation of Indianness in Bollywood films\(^8\). The Indian audiences seem to call into question the reasons for producing films about India (Jain: 141), as if diasporic filmmakers were filming India from the outside (and not as Indians). This statement can be paradoxical when the diaspora has been incorporated in the national identity imaginary. The diasporic filmmakers, however, deny making films only for a Western audience and they consider doing films about themselves - as NRIs but also as Indians (Jain: 142).

The controversy surrounding some of these films regarding the image presented of India raises a question about the situation of enunciation of these films, which is a common feature for contemporary cinema\(^9\). The intercultural problematics explored by diasporic cinema are intensified with the complex situations of enunciation of these films. In this

\(^7\) These films are usually not described as Indian films in India, but as Canadian (like The World before her or Heaven on Earth), American (Mississippi Masala), British; or the Indian nationality of the films are linked to the nationality of the host country: Indo-Canadian, Indo-British, Indo-American, South-Asian American films, etc.

\(^8\) These films are sometimes considered as anti-patriotic for showing the ‘dark’ side of India.

\(^9\) This question not only concerns diasporic cinema, but also transnational or intercultural films (such as co-produced films).
context, the ‘rule that would say there should be a correspondance between the country of
origin of the author, the place from where the film takes place and the place of its production
and diffusion’ (Rueda 2009: 71) is now substituted by a place of enunciation that goes beyond
the nationality of the filmmakers and national boundaries. *Mississippi Masala* (Nair 1991)
multiplies the situations of enunciation as the film follows an Indian family living in Uganda
who is forced to leave the country and settle in the United States - following the experience of
Mira Nair who was born in India, then moved to the United States, and finally followed her
husband in Nigeria; *Heaven on Earth* (Mehta 2008) shows the exile of an Indian family from
India to Canada (like Deepa Mehta); while *The World Before Her* (Pahuja 2012) reverses the
situation, following Nisha Pahuja returning to India (from Canada). One of the important
specificities of diasporic cinema comes precisely from these multiple mediations that create
an indeterminate situation of enunciation. It calls into question the nationality of
contemporary films (Creton 1994) as this factor becomes less and less pertinent to describe
contemporary film practices that become more and more transnational and intercultural. Thus,
the situation of enunciation is not much defined by national ties but, on the contrary, by the
experience of mobility that characterise the term ‘diasporic’ in the designation ‘diasporic
cinema’. In this context, diasporic filmmakers do not claim their national identity anymore but
present their cinema as universal.

2. Reconfiguration of women’s identities from the diasporic experience

Mira Nair, Deepa Mehta and Nisha Pahuja share some similarities in their personal
diasporic experiences but also in their cinema as all three explore the reconfiguration of
diasporic identities from a woman’s point of view. Moodley (2003) describes diasporic films
as an *accented* cinema (borrowing this notion from Naficy) that emerges from the personal
experiences of ‘displacement of the filmmakers’ who ‘exhibit similarities at various levels’
(Moodley: 66-7). Women are often the main characters of their films and they crystallise the tensions between local (Indian values) and global (non-Indian values) in the representation of Indianness. In their films, ‘female characters are constructed as Indian women with agency and not simply as ideological constructs of nationalism’ (Moodley: 67). Staying away from the hegemonic vision of the ideal Indian woman, these filmmakers ‘represent the texts of other Indian women’ (Moodley: 73) and thus subvert the definition of Indian womanhood which can also be understood as a result of their own position as diasporic women. In doing so, they ‘are not speaking for these other women, but are allowing them a resistant space in which to be heard’ (Moodley: 73).

In this part, I will analyse how this women’s diasporic cinema offers a decentering overview of the contemporary processes of identity constructions and Indianness. For this purpose, I have mainly studied the films from three different perspectives: ‘the presence of the substantive ‘culture’ of the nation in influencing characters’ actions and the values of the film’ (Sathian: 38); the social relationships between characters in a diasporic context; and the relationship with the culture of the host country. This empirical analysis revealed the transformations of identity formations as the diasporic experience allows these women to free themselves from their social obligations of being the guardians of Indianness by becoming ‘the subject of their own lives’ (Moodley: 68).

2.1. Indian women as keepers and bearers of Indianness

The migration experience is represented differently in these three films. In *Heaven on Earth*, the migration of an Indian family is mainly presented from Chand’s experience as she

---

10 These three observable traits are not exhaustive and not exclusive to female characters but I will only focus on them for the purpose of this paper.
11 I only give in this paper an overview of this empirical study that I have conducted on the process of cultural demythologisation in contemporary Indian cinema.
moves to Canada to live with her in-laws (who moved before her), after being married to Rocky in an arranged marriage. The migration is mainly based on economic reasons. In *Mississippi Masala*, the family is forced to leave Uganda when Idi Amin seized power. I have also included the documentary *The World Before Her* in this case study even if the film deals with women living in India, as I consider the conflicting rapport between the two factions - the Miss India pageant on the one hand and the right-wing women’s militant organisation Durga Vahini on the other - similar to the tensions or negotiations that occur in the transnational context. Besides, representations of Indian diasporic women are closely related to the Indian national imaginary and the model of Indian womanhood.

Even in a (real or symbolic) diasporic situation, the nation influences the characters’ thinking and actions as traditional values are extended to a transnational level. The notions of family and community become an important mediation in perpetuating Indian culture as the characters attach importance to their community: Aman, Chand’s sister-in-law, tells to her Jamaican colleague that in their (Indian) ‘community [they] deal with [their] problems in-house’ (Mehta: 2008); the Loha family lives in the Indian community and Mina, the daughter, introduces herself as Indian (even though she has never been to India) while the film addresses the tensions between different ethnic communities (Nair 1991); finally, in Pahuja’s (2012) film, Prachi proudly introduces herself as a Hindu, and explains that she lives to defend the Hindu cause against other communities (namely the Muslim and Christian communities). In this context, where Indian values and social relationships are transposed in the new hybrid cultural environment, women are considered by the Indian community as the keepers and bearers of the traditions. They are still wearing, for most of them, traditional clothes and accomplish religious rites; they perform their duties as wives, mothers, and daughters. The patriarchal system still prevails. Mina’s mother tells her husband ‘You forget
she is a girl. Can girls behave the way she does?’ (Nair 1991) This question is aimed at all the female characters. Becoming a metaphor of Indianness, these women are oppressed and colonised, ‘such that [their bodies] and its representation become subject to the’ (Moodley: 68) control of men.

2.2. Reconfiguration of women’s identities

However, these diasporic films reveal that a simple transposition of the traditional Indian way of life to a new country usually does not work properly. Indeed, the experience of migration also has an impact on migrants’ life as the host country’s culture comes to stand in the way of perpetuating the traditional way of life, and even, sometimes, subverts it. Diasporic characters have to renegotiate their identities within a new cultural space that transforms ‘the dominant hegemony of patriarchal nationalism’ (Moodley: 68). In *Heaven on Earth*, Aman and Chand, as Indian women, are subject to their familial obligations at home, but since only Rocky provides financial support (as Aman’s husband, Baldev, is unemployed), both women have to work in a factory to provide an income. The experience of displacement challenges women’s roles as wife and mother who usually stay at home. It does not mean, however, that they become independent. We can see that Chand does not even receive her salary since it is directly given to her husband. Both women remain financially dependent and even if they stand alongside non-Indian women, they remain obedient and seem to still ‘serve as vessels for the transportation of Indian values’ (Sathian: 28). Their relationship with their husband contributes to understand where the process of replacement fails: while Aman and Baldev seem to have a mutual respect and love for each other, both Rocky and Chand seem to be inhibited by the traditional model (personified by the mother). Their relationship is doomed to fail and after the snake incident at the end of the film, Chand gets ready to go back to India, leaving her husband, which definitely marks a rupture with the Indian model.
In *Mississippi Masala*, Mina, who ‘is an Ugandan-born woman of South Asian descent who has never been to India’ (Desai 2004: 72), works at a motel and lives as a young modern woman. She presents herself as a ‘mixed masala’, and indeed, she is ‘subject to traditional, cultural practices’ (arranged marriage), but she ends up running away ‘from her ‘oppressive’ traditions and family’ (Ballal 1998). When her parents do not allow her being in a relationship with Demetrius, who is African-American, she answers back: ‘This is America, ma!’ Living as a modern woman, she does not let her parents and her community decide for her and she takes charge of her life by eloping with Demetrius. Like other female characters, she seems ‘to be in a state of tension regarding who [she is] expected to be, and who [she] would like to be’ (Moodley: 68). But contrary to Chand or Prachi, Mina can *speak* to defend her point of view. Nair also depicts her as a woman who ‘speak[s] out in resistance through the language of’ (Moodley: 68) her body as she is shown as a sexualised woman, which is contradictory to the traditional image of Indian women as pure and chaste.

In *The World Before Her*, the Miss India candidates are also presented as sexualised women, who accepted to reveal their bodies walking down the catwalk in bikini (even if that makes them uncomfortable as one of them remarks). These women are young modern Indian women who still speak Hindi, follow Indian culture, but who also want to ‘become someone with an identity’ (Pahuja 2012). Taking part in these beauty contests is a way for them to ‘take an active step in rejecting the current inscription of their identities and participate in the creation and construction of their own identities’ (Moodley: 68). These women, like Mina, ‘rebel against their oppression through the exploration of their sexualities and the reclaiming of their bodies’ (Moodley: 68). It gives them an ‘identity in India dominated by men’ (Pahuja

---

12 In reference to Spivak (1988).
13 It is interesting to point out that this round was a closed-door event as showing the contestants in bikini was too controversial for the Indian scene.
2012), even if it is in contradiction with the patriarchal system. If Ruhi’s parents support her\textsuperscript{14}, Ankita’s parents are, on the contrary, opposed to her project. Ankita explains that what is right for her – being an independent Indian woman – is wrong for them and vice versa\textsuperscript{15}. The modern culture that symbolises this Miss India pageant is also strongly rejected by the pro-Hindus like Prachi’s family. For them, traditional values are assaulted by modern culture, and Prachi seems desperate seeing that modern culture will eventually change India. But even though Prachi is a proud Hindu and wants to defend the traditional Hindu values, she is also presented as a conflicted young woman who feels oppressed by the male-dominated society. In a parallel editing, Pahuja shows how Prachi also undergoes the same journey as she also wants ‘to become [an] empowered, decision-making being’. If this change does not come through ‘a reclaiming of body and sexuality’ (Moodley: 69), she stills paradoxically fights against the system she tries to protect: she wants to dedicate her life to the Hindu movement by not getting married and not having any children. This statement comes in contradiction with the traditional image of Indian womanhood, which is what her father reminds her: he is against seeing his daughter working full-time for the camps, and does not listen to what she wants to do with her life (even if she can speak it out loud), he assures that ‘she will get married’, since ‘marriage is a duty’, and a ‘woman is complete only after having a child’.

The transposition of Indianness into a new cultural environment, or being in contact with another culture in India, arouses tensions but allows Indian women to renegotiate their own identities thanks to the expression of their subjectivities. During their personal journeys – trying to protect Indian values or wanting to free themselves from the dominant system –, all female characters try to understand what being a contemporary Indian woman means, at a time when cultures are constantly in contact with each other. Even if Ankita and Prachi

\textsuperscript{14} Ruhi’s mother explains that ‘women should have freedom’ (Pahuja 2012).

\textsuperscript{15} But Ankita explains later that she still has traditional values and she is sometimes conflicted, wondering if she should go to the \textit{new} world (modern and Occidentalised India) or not.
are completely opposed to each other, they still both contribute to the redefinition of women as independent subjects. After being the guardians and symbols of Indianness, they define themselves as women who can decide for themselves (by accepting or rejecting cultural hybridity for example). The tension between the local (Indian values) and the global (non Indian values) is not represented through a symbolic image of Indian women but through their emotional and physical conflicts in the processes of their identity formations as women. In this context, the notion of home is less attached to territorial boundaries.

3. Diasporic cinema as an agent of cultural demythologisation

The analysis of the representation of diasporic women in these three films has put the emphasis on a process of de-essentialisation occurring in the construction of identities, demonstrating the way this specific experience of mobility has influenced the way immigrants construct their own identities in a ‘state of ‘in-betweenness’ (Basch et al. 2005: 8). Two concepts thus become helpful to describe the specificities of this diasporic cinema. The first one is the notion of transmigrants (Basch et al. 2005) to define the specific identity of the migrants; while the second one is the concept of cultural demythologisation (Aksoy & Robins 2003) which is used to describe the capacity of diasporic cinema ‘to undercut the abstract nostalgia of the diasporic imagination’ (Askoy & Robins 2003) represented in Bollywood films.

3.1. Configuration of flexible subjectivities: cultural hybridity

The first argument I want to make is that the diasporic experience transforms the configuration of identities and creates an unbridgeable gap with the dominant Indian patriarchal model. If the notion of diaspora can be complex to delineate (see Mattelart 2007; Stoiciu 2012), in this paper, I apprehend this notion as a concept characterising the
contemporary experiences of cultural mobility that ‘are not easily integrated into the national imaginary and even calls it into question’ (Robins 2001: 22). Instead of describing the diasporic experience in terms of loss and nostalgia regarding the homeland (Aksoy and Robins: 5), I rather consider diaspora in terms of transnational mobility that transforms ‘the nature of migrant experience and thinking’ (Aksoy & Robins: 6) beyond the ‘imagined community’. In this case, the analysis framework conceptualised by Basch et al. (2005) about transnationalism is relevant to understand what changes in the lives of the migrants. These scholars define ‘transnationalism’ as the processes by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement. [They] call these processes transnationalism to emphasize that many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders (Basch et al.: 8).

In this sense, the characters as well as the diasporic filmmakers become transmigrants, as they ‘develop and maintain multiple relationships - familial, economic, social, organizational, religious, and political – than span borders’ and ‘take actions, make decisions, and develop subjectivities and identities embedded in networks of relationships that connect them simultaneously to two or more nation-states’ (Basch et al.: 8).

In this context, the process of construction of identities, social relationships and belongings are de-essentialised (García Canclini 2005). The representation of diasporic women in the three films - portraying how the relation to Indianness necessarily evolves when the characters move into another cultural space - reveals that transnational flows play a significant role in the reconfiguration of contemporary cultures. Thus, cultures need to be thought in a ‘pluralist perspective’ (García Canclini: 264), and not from a natural relation to
geographical and social territories, but more from ‘the tensions between deterritorialization and reterritorialization’ (García Canclini: 228-9). However, it is important to mention that most of these characters do not identify themselves as transnational beings as their identities ‘continue to be rooted in nation-states’ (Basch et al.: 9). Even if some of these characters are aware of their flexible identities (especially the young generation) they all still present themselves as Indians. It is the way they construct their identity that changes (in terms of values). If there is a ‘multiplicity of involvements that transmigrants’ sustain in both home and host societies’ (Basch et al.: 8), they still consider India as their ‘home’ and they still perceive themselves as citizens of India, especially when they are placed ‘on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy’ (Basch et al.: 286) and face racism in their country of settlement.

Conversely, Nair, Mehta and Pahuja’s experiences tend to be different from their characters’. In most of their films, they explore and conceptualise their situation as diasporic women. When they are asked where they belong, they answer that, above all, they are individuals who delve into the issues of the contemporary world. They want to talk about themselves, as Indians and as transmigrants, but through films that may be appealing to a large audience. Their positions as diasporic filmmakers differentiate their cinema from Bollywood films. Contrary to Hindi films in which the Indian diaspora is depicted in an ideal form, diasporic filmmakers operate a critical engagement with Indianness. This is the result of a process of cultural hybridisation which not only reconfigures the construction of their identities but also their film practices. I have already mentioned the indeterminate or diasporic situations of enunciation of their films. Their aesthetic style is also a combination of different elements coming from different cultures: while the formal aesthetic style is similar to American or European films (in terms of narration, acting, or mise-en-scène), several elements from Hindi films are reinvested, like the marriage scenes or the use of Hindi
traditional songs. But all these ‘bollywoodian’ elements are transposed in a transnational cinema\textsuperscript{16} that crystallises the cultural hybrid nature of these films\textsuperscript{17}. The presence of these features from Hindi cinema does not express a form of nostalgia or parody as they are reinvested in the social life and experiences of the characters and not in a Bollywood style.

\textbf{3.2. A critical engagement with India and Indian values}

This case study draws on recent research studies of the diasporic agenda in which different scholars\textsuperscript{18} ‘want to consider new practices that seem to open up alternative, and potentially more productive, dimensions of migrant experience’ (Aksoy & Robins: 92). Taking some distance with some previous enquiries in which migration and diaspora were studied through the ‘theme of separation and distance’, these authors explore how ‘migrants are now routinely able to establish transnational communities that exist across two, or more, cultural spaces’ (Aksoy & Robins: 92). These transnational developments are mainly defined by the fact that ‘a growing number of persons [...] live dual lives’ (Portes et al. 1999: 217). Falling within this particular perspective, I have tried to bring into light the fact that these contemporary transnational reconfigurations of identities are not exclusive to diasporic communities as Indian people also negotiate their identities through different cultural spaces. It is certainly related to the colonial past of India, but also to the specific nature of India as a nation that is fundamentally heterogeneous and multicultural, and in which different ethnic and religious communities coexist. Several scholars have pointed out the fact that there are two Indias (Dwyer 2012), which has been partially depicted in Pahuja’s documentary. Both girl groups (the contestants for the Miss pageant and the Hindu girls from the Durga Vahini camp) negotiate their identities between Indian and non-Indian values. If the context is

\textsuperscript{16} For a conceptualisation of the notion of transnational cinema, see Higbee & Lim (2010).
\textsuperscript{17} In this paper, I did not put the emphasis on this process of cultural hybridisation in the films’ aesthetic as I wanted to focus on the experience of migration from the perspective of women (on the gender dimension of migration).
\textsuperscript{18} See Basch et al. (2005); Aksoy & Robins (2003); Portes et al. (1999); Ong (1999).
definitely different from each group, the new dynamics introduced into the ways diasporic and sedentary Indian populations are configuring their identities are similar.

In accordance with these recent transnational theories, I define this diasporic cinema as an ‘agent of cultural de-mythologisation’ (Aksoy & Robins: 2003). Two main features define this cultural demythologisation. The first one would be the capacity for this cinema to be synchronised with the diasporic experience of the migrants, contrary to Bollywood films that represent an idealised image of Indian diaspora. The second one is related to the critical engagement diasporic populations have with their country of origin. Being in daily contact with other cultures changes the way migrants remain connected to India. While it is true that diasporic media ‘make it possible to transcend the distances that have separated ‘diasporic communities’ around the world from their ‘communities of origin’’, Aksoy and Robins (2003) insist on the fact that transnational experiences do not end here. Two different reactions can be perceived in the Indian (real or symbolic) diasporic experience: on the one hand, Indian characters or people remain deeply attached to Indian values, like Prachi and her family in *The World Before Her*, the parents in *Mississippi Masala* and the family in *Heaven on Earth* who reject or stay away from Western culture; on the other hand, some other characters are more open to other cultures and configure their identities in a more flexible way (and not solely in terms of belonging to a community or a homeland) like the younger generation in *Mississippi Masala* or the Miss pageant contenders in *The World Before Her*.

What I would like to emphasise in conclusion is the way transnational experiences necessarily transform the relation to Indianness from the perspective of women. I have analysed how Indian diasporic women are considered as the guardians of Indian values and how, on the contrary, they tend to construct their own identities as *subjects*. I do not say there
is no form of nostalgia that can occur in the diaspora imagination, but this case study has revealed a process of de-ethnicisation or cultural demythologisation from which diasporic women have ‘liberated themselves from certain outdated and culturally imprisoning notions of’ (Milikowski 2000: 444) Indianness. It shows how a simple transposition of Indian values in another social context finds its limits and cannot work properly, which is symbolised by Mina’s words ‘This is America, ma!’ (Nair 1991) Contrary to Bollywood films that have mostly presented the Indian diaspora as a population longing for India, these diasporic films have shown characters who ‘cannot recover the simple perspective of monocultural (national) vision’ (Aksoy & Robins: 103) of their identity as they live in a different cultural space (outside of India), or in a daily Indian space in which different cultures coexist. Their critical engagement with Indianness comes from this specific situation where ‘they operate in and across two cultural spaces (at least)’ which allows them to compare Indian culture with other cultures. Be it consciously or unconsciously, these women ‘are compelled to think about [Indian] culture in the light of other cultural experiences and possibilities’ (Aksoy & Robins: 123). This analysis has focused on the diasporic experience from women’s points of views. If the conceptual framework is also appropriate for the study of migration from men’s perspective, this paper has enabled to emphasise the fact that the reconfiguration of women’s identities as women subjectivities come to challenge the Indian patriarchal system. It has reflected a changing relationship to Indianness but most of all; it has revealed the plurality of transnational experience.


Dwyer, Rachel (2012) ‘Zara hatke (‘somewhat different’): the new middle classes and


Films

Heaven on Earth (Deepa Mehta, 2008)

Mississippi Masala (Mira Nair, 1991)