

MISSISSIPPI MASALA

Technical File

O.T.: Mississippi Masala
USA (1992)
Director: Mira Nair
Script: Sooni Taraporevala
Music: L. Subramaniam
Photography: Ed Lachman
Edition: Roberto Silvi
Camera: Ed Lachman
Time: 118 minutes

Artistic File

Denzel Washington: Demetrius
Sarita Chouduryh: Mina
Roshan Seth: Jay
Sharmila Tagore: Kinnu
Joe Seneca: Williben
Ranjit Chowdry: Anil
Mohan Gokhale. Pontiac

Awards

Golden Bear award at the Venice Festival (best director and scriptwriter) (1991)
Critics Special Award at the Sao Paulo International Festival (1991)

Synopsis

A story of exile, uprooting and racism. An Indian family, expelled from Uganda, settles in Mississippi. For some, the past represents a longing; for others, the present will be a source of conflict. A love story gives way to a display of ironies in which racism takes unusual faces. Yesterday's victims reproduce the intolerant behaviours in the present.

The Director

Mira Nair is an experienced director in the field of documentaries. Educated in the USA- Harvard University- born in India in 1957 where she would return to film *Salaam Bombay* (1988) her first film, for which she was nominated to the Oscar to the best non-English-speaking film. *Salaam Bombay* tells the adventures of a 10 year-old boy in the streets of Bombay in a neorealistic tone and it is also the result of the collaboration with Sooni Taraporevala. *Salaam Bombay* is the most internationally successful Indian film of the last years.

In 1991 she films *Mississippi Masala in USA*. In 1995 *Cuando salí de Cuba*, about the Cuban exiles in Miami. She returns to India to start a co-production USA-UK-India-France, with the title *Kama Sutra: a Love Story* (1996), set in the India of the 16th century, it tells the story of the relationship between two women, who born to different castes, end up being the queen and the courtesan of the same King.

THE RACIST MONSTER

Mississippi Masala (Masala is the name given in India to a combination of hot and colourful spices) is a film with a simple language and certain documentary tone which introduces us some of the keys to intolerance. It all begins in 1972, when the dictator Idi Amin takes the power in Uganda. One of the first decisions of the new regime is to expel the foreigners, in particular Asian professionals and traders.

These had settled in Africa since the end of the 19th century when millions of **coolies** were brought from India by the English to work as construction workers on the railroad joining Mombassa and Nairobi: the famous "lunatic train". With miserable salaries and subjected to extremely hard working conditions, their epic struggle is one of the many pages of the history of the colonialism of the last century, capable of assuming the most amazing works without taking in consideration the human costs they implied. Eventually, the descendants of those first immigrants would become the commercial and intellectual cornerstone of Uganda, a fact which did not avoid the expulsion of nearly seventy thousands of them when Idi Amin took power.

To remember this particular story makes sense in this case, when we consider that the vicissitudes of those coolies resemble, in a way, those of the African population enslaved in America. Despite their similar disgrace, racial prejudice will antagonise their descendants.

The main characters of this story are part of a family of Indian origin. The father Jay (Roshan Seth), his wife Kinnu (Sharmila Tagore) and the daughter Mina (Sahira Nair and later, Choudhury) after a life of work and social relations in Uganda, betrayed by their most intimate friends, are forced to abandon Kampala. With their Independence, Africa belongs to the black Africans. The last day of their stay and the trip to the airport where they will take a plane to the USA, show how little human life is worth in moments of patriotic exaltation.

Through an ellipsis, the family is presented to us 18 years later settled in Mississippi. Among an Indian community, the father sustains the longing for his youth in Africa and he tries to recover his possessions while he runs a motel. The situation of longing and multicultural life presented to us is set against a love relationship between Mina and Demetrius (Denzel Washington), a young black American that earns his living with a truck in which he carries the cleaning tools to clean motel rooms.

The parents oppose the relationship and both youngsters ran away together, giving way to a series of situations from comical to melodramatic that illustrate the depth of intolerance accumulated by, curiously, people who don't seem to have learned from their own vital experience. Once more, a film deals with the conflict of love denied by the differences in family, social, cultural or racial origins. As in the case of the Veronese lovers, love will dissolve the prohibition and bring down the barriers that constrain it, without, in this case, the dramatic ending of Romeo and Juliet.

Mira Nair's regard, behind a simple script, illustrates a conflict often lived by second generation immigrants: the keeping of the group's identity signs or the adapting of new patterns, derived from the new context they are living in. In this case, new relationships break the patterns their parents expect. This conflict is crisscrossed by the fact that both characters belong to different social classes. Racism and classism which show one of the problems afflicting multicultural societies nowadays.

The happy ending seems to enclose, as in fables, a simple moral learning: if life has made the old people racist, the young ones are expected to put an end to this madness. Love seems to be a powerful tool to achieve it. In conclusion, a view in favour of mestization.

Discrimination is the distinction, the rejection or even the exclusion of an individual or a group by a majority group or society as a whole. It is manifested with indifference or with intolerant attitudes.

Racism is a way of discriminating people based on differences in skin colour or other physical characteristics of people, in such a way that some consider themselves superior to others. Racism seeks intentionally or as a result, to diminish or revoke the human rights of the people discriminated.

Racism is often closely related and sometimes confused with **xenophobia**, that is, “hate, repulsion or hostility towards foreigners”. As with racism, xenophobia is an ideology of rejection and exclusion of all cultural identities which differ from one’s own. It is different from racism in that it does not imply the feeling of racial or cultural superiority and, although it proclaims cultural segregation, it only accepts foreigners through their assimilation.

Aporophobia is the expression of rejection, contempt or hate towards the poor.

Aporophobia is often confused also with xenophobia or racism, but it’s not the same.

Both might feed on the other (“all foreigners are beggars who parasite our country”) and their common ground is intolerance, but xenophobia is not necessarily characteristic of an aporophobic. We might even find the situation in which the foreigner is rejected for the only reason of being wealthy, while a fellow citizen might be rejected for being poor. Nevertheless, in most cases, aporophobia is expressed in relation to the immigrants.

GENERALIZATION DISCRIMINATION	STEREOTYPES	PREJUDICE	
Applied to a whole behaviours against	injustified ideas	negative feelings	
group of people interests of	or beliefs which	or emotions	the
over which we group	generate...	which cause...	this
form.....			

ANALYZE IN GROUPS AFTER WATCHING THE FILM

1. Judge the film in a scale of 1 to 10 and explain what you liked most about it and what you liked least.
2. Do you think the rejection of the families to the love between the couple is a consequence of racism, xenophobia or aporophobia?
3. Try to match the items in the first column (discriminatory attitudes) to the second (possible victims of discrimination). Read the information above before doing it.

Xenophobia	a homosexual
singer	
Sexism	a black footballer
Alterophobia	a Chilean writer
Racism	a Jewish actor
Homophobia	a handicapped
scientist	
Anti-semitism	an gypsy artist
Aporophobia	a homeless
person	

4. What victims of discrimination are usually the object of more than one type of discriminatory attitudes?

CRUELTY HAS NO COLOUR

5. Do you think it is fair to pre-judge a person we don't know applying to them a stereotype of the group they belong to? What would you think if they applied that stereotype to you?
6. Do you think that you could be victim of some of the types of discrimination mentioned? What makes you think it?
7. Of the following identity features, say which you think are innate and which acquired through your life. Justify your choices:

Nationality	ideology	social class
Gender	religious belief	sexual orientation

8. If you had to define yourself with one of the items above, which would you choose? Why?
9. Comment the following statements that are said at some point in the film and choose the one you think is more appropriate:

Tradition is like food, you must know what to eat and what to leave on the plate

If you are not white, you are coloured

We coloured people must stay together

Cruelty has no color

They can take everything away from you, but not your education

As one of the characters in the film (Jay) says: “They can take everything away from you, but not your education” (culture). Complete this chart with the ways of keeping a culture that appear in the film

Scenes in the film	Description of cultural features (details, etc)
Wedding celebration	
Religious celebrations,prayers	
Food	
Drink	

Music	
Other customs and different attitudes	
Clothes	
Others	

Imagine you move with your family to Uganda where there also other Spanish people, what customs and ceremonies would you maintain? Would you rather lose them as soon as possible in order to integrate better? In the case that you are an immigrant, what customs have you had to modify to adapt to the new situation? Give reasons for your answers

For each of the following situations, in your country, could you say how extended discrimination is in your opinion?

	Very extended	Quite	Exceptional	Very exceptional
Ethnical origin	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual orientation (being gay or lesbian)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being handicapped	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religion or belief	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Gender

In the last 12 months, have you felt personally discriminated or bullied for one or more of the following reasons?

	YES	NO
Ethnical origin	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Sexual orientation (being gay or lesbian)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Being handicapped	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Age	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Religion or belief	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Gender	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

In each of the following different situations, mark from 1 to 10 (1 means very uncomfortable and 10 completely comfortable) how you would feel:

Having as a neighbour a person of a different ethnic origin to yours	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Having as a neighbour a homosexual person (gay or lesbian)	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Having as a neighbour a disabled person	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
Having as a neighbour a person of different religion or belief	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Do you have friends or acquaintances that are.....?

	Yes	No
Of different ethnical origin		
Homosexual		
Handicapped		

Of different religion or belief		
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