

Mira Nair's Kama Sutra, A Tale of Love: A Critical Perspective

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Abstract

Cinema is a form of expression which attracts a good amount of masses as a punter. It is a medium that educates, enlighten, entertain and sometimes act as a watch dog to the society. 'Film is not only a piece of art but also a tool of social reform as it expresses the feelings of humans and their ideas of contemporary society. Films are the mirror that reflects the society' says AatishPalekar in his article "Films: The Reflection of Society". Filmmakers like Mira Nair who has worked upon issues like communal clashes, slum children, interracial marriage, and many other socio political based issues. And in Kama Sutra: The Tale of love (2000) she has interrogated a wide range of issues dealing with human relationship, complicated workings of male-female sexual dynamics and along with it the importance of female bonding in a country like India, where sex is considered to be a taboo to be openly discussed. Mira Nair, an internationally acclaimed film maker who is much known for her serious thematic content, has always tried to portray reality through the subject matter she selects. Born in Orissa, studied in Delhi University has got her ground work of filmmaking learned and practiced after she went to Harvard. This paper will focus on her movie Kama Sutra: The Tale of Love and proposes a critical analysis of it in terms of its screenplay, casting and plot narrative.

Mira Nair

Cinema is one of the most influential medium of communication and it gives great knowledge to the audience about various issues in our society and sometimes helps us realize what we are capable of. Nevertheless there are some negative aspects of it as well but good cinema definitely gives fair knowledge about the ongoing situation of our society and also enlightens one about the basic socio-cultural need of the hour as well. And filmmakers like Mira Nair emphasizes to the fact that, we can make entertainment into infotainment by making good films. 'Nair's films, focuses on the fringe of society: prostitutes, street children, slum dwellers, drug dealers, most often ignored by the glamorous film industry' says Ameena Meer in one of her articles. So, In Nair's methods and attitude, realism may be found as an element in many kinds of writing prior to the century ago. Born in Orissa in 1957, of Punjabi parents, Mira Nair is probably the best known Indian filmmaker overseas and as director- screenplay writer and producer, a graduate of Delhi University, was involved in theatre in India for years. In 1979, she submitted Jama Masjid Street Journal, a sociological film thesis to Harvard University. Making her debut as a filmmaker in the USA, where she normally resides, she has directed short films, English- language documentaries and more than fifteen feature films in English and Hindi. She has won a number of awards, including a National Film Award and various international film festival awards, and was nominated at the Academy Awards, Golden Globes, BAFTA Awards and Filmfare Awards. She was also awarded the India Abroad Person of the Year-2007. In 2012 she was awarded India's third highest civilian award, the Padma Bhushan by the President of India, PratibhaPatil. She has around 17 films in her kitty. Some of her notable works are Salaam Bombay(1988), it won the National Film Award for Best Feature Film in Hindi, the National Board of Review Award for Top Foreign Film, the Golden Camera and Audience Awards at the Cannes Film Festival, and three awards at the Montreal World Film Festival. The film was among the list of "The Best 1,000 Movies Ever Made" by the New York Times. Comparisons were made by renowned film critic Dave Kehr who says, 'That was the case with the Italian neo-realists of the postwar years, when Vittorio De Sica made "Shoeshine" and Roberto Rossellini made "Germany Year Zero" (still the masterpiece of the form), and that was the case with Luis Bunuel, when he made "Los Olvidados" in Mexico in 1950. It's the case now with Mira Nair, a Harvard-educated Indian filmmaker who has made "Salaam Bombay!" as a rebuke to the prosperous and-for the most part-mindlessly commercial cinema of her native country.'

Another acclaimed work of Nair is Monsoon Wedding (2001), the film won the Golden Lion award and received a Golden Globe Award nomination. Vanity Fair(2004), The film was nominated for "Golden Lion"

Award in 2004 Venice Film Festival, Mississippi Masala(1991), The Namesake(2006). Her movies depict her views upon society.

This bold and vibrant filmmaker has a unique style of making films. The themes of her movies touches the ground reality of our society but also reinforces to enquire the ill nature of the blind believes and norms that our society possess in this 21st century. And she conveys a message to the audience to see beyond the boundary. This paper aims to highlight the relevance of making such a bold film titled Kama Sutra, A Tale of Love by Mira Nair. Nair's movie is not for everyone and her movies are mostly in English so it appeals to the educated section of the society. Her point of view is westernized and she also considers scope for the foreign audience when she makes films.

Analysis of the characters

The cast is made up of acclaimed Indian film stars, highly trained theatre actors from Music and Drama school, London and lesser known television actors and first-timers. The principal cast includes Rekha, playing Rasa Devi, who was once the late king's favorite courtesan. And William Sidney Andrews, a British actor, who auditioned for drama school and was accepted at London's Guildhall School of Music and Drama with Ewan McGregor and David Thewlis. Mira Nair, who directed Rekha in Kama Sutra likens her to a "Jamini Roy painting" and says, "Like Marilyn Monroe is shorthand for sex, Rekha is shorthand for charisma". The best casting in the film out of all is Rekha's presence in it, even though it was for a short time. Rekha's role as Rasa Devi who teaches Kama Sutra, the art of making love to young women draws everyone's attention with her grace and charisma. The main protagonist of the film Maya, a servant played by Indira Varma, looked sensuous in a deep cut blouse and low waist long skirt in the film. Her curves were well defined in the costume which ultimately added more credit to the hotness to the film. Kama Sutra, A tale of love was Indira Varma first major film, a member of Musical Youth Theatre Company. A graduate from the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) in London has definitely mesmerized the audience with her refined performance in the film. The role of Princess Tara was played by Sarita Choudhury, half Bengali-Indian and half English descent who studied Economics and film at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada. She is best known for her roles in this film and others of Nair's films like Mississippi Masala and The Perez Family. Her role as an arrogant princess who is abusive towards her childhood friend as well as an over reactive queen of lustful King Raj was justified by her. So Nair's cast played a beautiful role to stage the film with success.

Ramon Pramod Junior Tikaram is a British stage and screen actor of Indo-Fijian and Malaysian descent. He plays the role of Maya's lover, a gifted sculptor Jai Kumar who didn't have much role to play in the film except few scenes highlighting the most important part of the film.

Khalid Tyabji, who played the role of Prince Vikram aka Viki and Tara's brother, he had no fury like a hunchback princeling scorned. This is a cruel depiction of a physical characteristic that a person cannot change. Having witnessed the copulation between the king and the commoner, Prince Bikram had Maya run out of town after she rejected his marriage proposal. Nair symbolized this character as the most pitiful one starting from his appearance to his secretive motives but at the end, he is the only character who has survived through every odd and stood till the end.

The portrayal of friendship, love, betrayal and jealousy in the film

Kama Sutra, A Tale of Love represents the cultural society of the 16th century India. Nair tried her best to make the location look like the socio-cultural ambience of that era but haven't succeeded in doing so. As it was a low budget film, one could see some glitches here and there as the film proceeds. And the costumes were way too revealing to be representing the particular era, but considering the theme of the film, which is sensuous and erotic it is excusable and could be undermined. With an imaginative storyline of friendship, love, betrayal and jealousy which is portrait through the lens of the sensual aspect of Kama Sutra. And the theme is to analyze the supremacy of love and also to emphasize the experience of pleasure from the five senses between men and women. It reinforces the idea of making love into something more than just a routine to help the couple know each other better.

It encourages the partners to manipulate each other in order to win the desired mate. The game of love has

been given importance in various ways. One instance from the film Maya tries to seduce the king in the role of a courtesan; she did all she could to manipulate a man to gain his attention of sexual favor but in a subtle way. In order to serve her purpose she seduces him and makes love to him.

Rasa Devi's role in the film who radiates a glorious screen charisma relates the film with the text Kama Sutra that talks about human sexual behavior, and a Sanskrit literature written by Sage Vatsyayana. Sage Vatsyayana's Kama Sutra, is a guide to a virtuous and gracious living that discusses the nature of love, family life and other aspects pertaining to pleasure oriented faculties of human life. And Nair presented Rasa's character as somebody who teaches Sage Vatsyayana's text to the young courtesan. Rasa's role in the film was critically acclaimed by many critics but on the contrary many others found some gap in the character. Amy Laly, filmmaker and freelance writer says, "How much more vibrant the character of Rasa would have been if she had more of a life other than reciting Kama Sutra proverbs as though they were clichés from fortune cookies. And how much more powerfully the proverbs would have resonated if they had been played out instead of being merely recited? Dialogue is static. Language is not part of the erotic. Nevertheless, the many different sexual positions of the Kama Sutra are effectively portrayed by pairing women in winsome tableaux while images of explicit erotic sculptures from the temples of Khajuraho are superimposed."

Historical records are evident that since thousands of years, India pioneered the use of sexual education through art and literature and it is not a mere coincidence that the first evidence of attitudes towards sex comes from the ancient texts of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. In fact, they are the first cultural texts which are perhaps the oldest surviving literature in the world celebrating this subject matter. Considering the fact that some Indian philosophies follow the "four main goals of life", known as the purusharthas: Dharma: Virtuous living. Artha: Material prosperity. Kama: Aesthetic and erotic pleasure. Moksha: Liberation. The valuable ancient texts, namely, the Vedas, reveals moral perspectives on sexuality, marriage and fertility prayers. One must not be surprised that it was somewhere between the 1st and 6th centuries that the Kama Sutra, originally known as VatsyayanaKamasutram, was written and this philosophical work on the 'science of love', was intended as both an exploration of human desire, including infidelity, and a technical guide to pleasing a sexual partner within a marriage. This is not the only example of such a work in ancient India, but is the most widely known in modern times that represents an ancient form of way to lead a fulfilled life with the need for sexual gratification as one of its core values.

One can bring in here what Brian Welsch states in his article "History of Sex 2- Sex In India And Its Changing Role."

"India with its vast population and ancient history understandably has had changing attitudes towards sex. The history of sex in India has been affected by many things, the caste system, colonization, and latterly globalization. There has been a turnaround in attitudes towards sex recently and a return to attitudes that were common in ancient times"

Mira Nair also highlighted the theme of lesbianism in the film. Through the characters of Tara and Maya she called for justice of those women who need to come out of the stereotypical setting of a woman sacrificing their lives with a man even though she is not about to fulfill her sexual desire. In India, lesbianism is not accepted yet but Indian lesbians are keen to come out of the closet. And films like this as well as others help young lesbians to come out in the open live under pressure. Geeta Kumana, a lesbian and a project coordinator with human rights NGO says "The most common anxiety is the feeling that one must either betray oneself by remaining in the closet or be dishonest to others by leading a double life." So themes like this helps the women folk to stand up for themselves. Another film was Deepa Mehta's Fire, which portrayed an emotional and sexual relationship between two middle-class women. Though the film ignited protests all over India, it also brought the underground lesbian movement to the surface.

The interpretation of the protagonist and antagonist in the film

Nair's protagonist in the film is Maya, the story is based in and around her with the help of antagonist figures like her childhood friend and princess Tara, King Raj, Prince Vikram and sculptor Jai Kumar. Maya the ser-

vant's life changes after her childhood friend Princess Tara, reminds her of the social class differences between them. Resentful Maya seduces Tara's husband Raj just before the night of their marriage with the help of her beauty and sensual techniques. Prince Vikram saw her making love with Prince Raj. After this incident Maya's life becomes uncertain. Prince Vikram proposes Maya, she rejects the proposal after that he brands her as a whore, and she is forced to leave her home. After she leaves home she meets a sculptor, Jai Kumar with whom she develops a romantic relationship, Jai introduces her to Rasa Devi, who teaches Kama Sutra, the ancient art of seduction and love making. With time Jai thinks of Maya as a distraction and so let Maya starts spending more time with Rasa Devi learning the art of Kama Sutra. Meanwhile King Raj gets eager to have Maya and later he manages to find her and make her his concubine. In order to help her husband Jai flee from King Raj's custody, Maya teaches Tara the art of seduction to help her seduce her husband. Tara promises Maya to help her husband Jai flee from Raj's custody. But at the end Maya realizes that Jai would not be able to make his way out of the prison. She finally visits Jai and cuts her hair which symbolizes the end of their marriage and her resolution to lead the life of a widow. Jai is killed, while Maya watches from the crowd and she leaves without responding to the call of prince Vikram. Maya who is played by Indira Varma is beautiful, charming and has a swan like body which helps Nair portray her point more beautifully. She can be naïve in front of her lover and she can be vicious when it comes to fulfilling her revenge. She can be abstemious when it comes to helping her childhood friend. So Indira Varma has given one of her best performances through this film. Mira Nair's filmmaking is something that is thought provoking and inspiring which succeed in keeping the minds of the audience busy. She keeps the audience busy with the kind of theme she selects for the film.

Critical analysis of the theme

When we hear the name Kama Sutra, our first impression directs to Vatsyayana's Kama Sutra, who wrote the book between the 4th century BC and the 1st century AD. Nair shows the importance of learning the art of pleasing a man and attempts that it should be known to every woman in life. She has included characters like Rasa Devi (played by Rekha) who teaches in a school, a school where the young girls are made to learn this art.

Mira Nair doesn't make movies which will make the audience jump from their seats and start dancing and after the film gets over they go to their houses happily and end their day. Instead her movies are for the intellect or mainly for those who will help society grow and try bringing some kinds of change if required. She targets to a specific form of group. Her filmmaking is more like a passion than money making. Something which is close to her heart and that's the reason, be it Salaam Bombay or Mississippi Masala or Kama Sutra, The Tale of Love, we see a close observatory kind of film; something which will need a detailed research before you even think of starting the project.

Through the contrasting characters of Tara and Maya, who shares a childhood friendship and later turns into enemies but nevertheless gets back to their friendship with time, Nair successfully merges the theme of friendship and the way sexual politics affects it, making-remaking it's meaning. The character Tara, a princess, who is self seeking, arrogant, imperious and egoistic, portrays a picture of a group of women during this social milieu that gives importance to everything around her but has less idea about the real key to lure the man of his life. She suffers from a failed married life and later on tries to commit suicide. And it is when Maya, her childhood friend comes to her rescue and teaches her the act of Kama Sutra, the lessons of love. On the other hand Mira Nair portrayed Maya, the servant and the childhood friend of Tara as the symbol of love, passion, compassion and most importantly bold and beautiful. Nair portrays her character as someone who every man would dream of. The way she talks, the way she loves, the way she dances possess all the feminine personality that every man will look for when they desire for the woman of his life. And Nair has made this character as a representation of the art of the various sensual forms included in Kama Sutra. King Raj Singh (played by Naveen Andrews) is the representation of the male psyche of that era. Dominating, chauvinistic, proud and patriarchal who wants to own. And Maya conquers the heart and mind of the king with her art of making love and sleeps with him just to take revenge from her childhood friend Tara just before their marriage night. Tara embodies the powerlessness of women without Kama Sutra skills in this culture, and must take comfort in her queenly stature while Raj Singh smokes opium and chases courtesans during the absence of Maya. So Mira Nair made each and every character in the film plays an important role in order to portray the idea of Kama Sutra. But as it was in the Indian context the erotic scenes highlighting nudity were minimal. When the ro-

mantic scenes between the lovers Jai Kumar (Ramon Tikaram) and Maya were shown, the erotic and gorgeous nature of making love was highlighted in the film.

So in the film, Nair tries to highlight the art of Kama Sutra through one character, with various intentions. Firstly, the use of the art by Maya to quench her thirst of revenge; secondly, the use of this art by Maya for aesthetic and erotic pleasure; thirdly, it is use by Maya to salvage her friend Tara and making her an epitome of an Empowered woman. So through a careful representation of the vibrant character of Tara by Ms. Varma, a talented actress making her film debut, the film has the physical grace that her role demands and makes a lovely delivery of her crucial part and becomes the center of this story This film is really well made— informative, and erotic without being pornographic and the pictures are gorgeous.

Westernized version of Indian culture

Indeed Mira Nair captures a most basic spirits of the Kama Sutra in her movie where “Kama” or the “erotica” becomes something much more spiritual than the usual fashions in which it’s been translated, particularly during our time. This film unquestioningly stresses upon the importance and relevance of this art even today, more so when most social crimes in our society are mainly motivated by suppressed sexual behavioral pattern. In a subtle sense, Nair becomes a social critic who condemns the hypocrisy that forms the core of most of the Indian social mores. The euphoric celebration of conservatism underlined by utmost call for sexual fulfillment is according to Nair, a social psyche that requires transformation. Without pleading for an open-sex system, she nonetheless, emphasizes upon the need for our society to do away with reservations and meaningless prejudices against even basic talks and discussion on and about Sex and sensuality and need for its knowledge for a healthy personal relationships building. The idea of human feelings not obliging to man-made definitions of barriers and boundaries constructed in the name of race, caste, class or creed is also another important highlight of the movie.

With a realistic style coloring the thematic concerns of the film, Nair emphasizes on making a meaningful narration out of simple less-known casts, with more predominance given to good traditional music and along with it, propagating and adhering to moderate feeling; consideration in terms of inter-caste and international relation. All in all, Nair makes Kama Sutra, A Tale of Love and presents it as a modern tale educating many about the importance of its teachings for a healthy social inter and intra personal relationship.

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