

Monsoon Wedding

India, 2001

“What I like most about filmmaking is to make you weep at one moment and completely laugh the next, to mix the tragic and comic. That is life for me...”

--Mira Nair

Major Credits:

Director: Mira Nair

Screenplay: Sabrina Dhawan

Cinematography: Declan Quinn

Original Music: Mychael Danna and Sukwinder Singh

Cast: Naseeruddin Shah (Lalit Verma); Lilete Dubey (Pimmi Verma);

Vasundhara Das (Aditi Verma), Shefali Shetty (Ria Verma), Vijay Raaz (P.K. Dube)

Background:

Mira Nair grew up in India but has spent much of her creative and professional life in America—she is a film professor at Columbia University—since her first international success, *Salaam Bombay!* (1988). *Monsoon Wedding* was conceived as her personal version of a Bollywood movie, featuring bright costumes and vibrant color schemes, exuberant dancing and music, and a fair amount of sheer silliness. But Nair began her filmmaking career as a documentarist, and this film also has its fair share of closely observed cultural details, especially in the street scenes in Delhi and the mixture of languages, which reflect the characters’ conflicting loyalties and aspirations as well as the transitional status of modern India.

In its blending of genres and appeal to both the familiar (the wedding plot, family secrets, romantic complications) and the exotic, *Monsoon Wedding* reflects the globalization of contemporary cinema. It was a critical and financial success, winning the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival and becoming the top grossing international film in America.

Cinematic Qualities:

1. Visual Style: *Monsoon Wedding* deliberately combines expressionistic and documentary filmmaking, thereby synthesizing the two great traditions of the cinema. Realism is represented by the frequent employment of hand-held cameras to create an intimate feel in the confined interior spaces and by the several telephoto sequences capturing the street life of Delhi. The lush romanticism of the film, on the other hand, culminates in the illicit rendezvous in the night rain, the beautiful backlit kiss of the bride and groom, and, most stunningly, in the wedding planner’s Dubey’s irresistible floral courtship.
2. Performance: Among a cast of relative newcomers (Vijay Raaz, for example, in his screen debut, and Indian pop star Vasundhara Das in her first major role) and many non-professionals, Naseeruddin Shah is one of India’s most honored actors,

- and he gives a complex performance here. Note, in particular, his touching private appeals to his wife ("I'm falling, Pimmi. Hold me.") and niece Ria ("If you go, everything will break.") preceding his public break with his brother-in-law and the family benefactor ("These are my children, and I will protect them.").
3. Music: As in the story, traditional and contemporary musical forms collide to create a delightful pastiche. Particularly memorable is the scene in which the older women serenade the bride with traditional songs about marriage. But there's also Indian rap and Ayesha's seductive (and successful) shimmy!

Questions for Discussion:

1. Part of *Monsoon Wedding*'s commercial success in America can be explained by its generic connection to popular television sitcoms and movies like *Father of the Bride*, *The Wedding Planner*, and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. How does this film transcend the limitations and conventions of both Hollywood and Bollywood?
2. This is a film about *modern* India: the plot centers around an arranged marriage and a bride who is having an affair with a married man; computers and cell phones compete with traditional saris and henna markings; wedding guests arrive from America and Australia. What is the cosmopolitan director's attitude towards her native country? How is Nair's vision of contemporary India both promising and problematic? Is the film's ideology best described as conservative or progressive?
3. Related to the previous question, the film generally portrays women as the more active, stronger characters, yet the moral climax of the film depends upon a male character's decisive intervention. Put another way, does the moral center of the film rest with Ria or Lalit? Discuss *Monsoon Wedding* from a feminist perspective.
4. Don't forget to stay for the tail credits. In addition to providing a satisfying musical finale, how does the concluding montage simultaneously serve to conclude the story and open up new meanings?
5. The social history of India has been marked by the caste system. How does the film's "downstairs" sub-plot, Dube's courtship of Alice, contribute to the film's social commentary and enrich our understanding of the main plot?