



<CT>**Diasporic Dreams and Shattered Desires: Displacement, Identity and Tradition in *Heaven on Earth* (Deepa Mehta 2008)**

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This chapter addresses the question of travel through the analysis of Deepa Mehta's 2008 film *Heaven on Earth*. Through the narration of the journey of a young Punjabi bride from India to Canada, the film provides a critical analysis of the concept of diaspora which on the one hand emphasises the difference between 'casual travels' and diasporic journeys (Brah 1996: 182), and on the other focuses on the political, economic and cultural conditions within which people move, as well as their positions in terms of gender, race and ethnicity.

'At the heart of the notion of diaspora,' observes Avtar Brah, 'is the image of a journey' (1996: 182). Indeed, as the literal meaning of the term diaspora points to the dispersal from an original homeland (Desai 2004: 18; Tölölyan 2007: 648), it would be impossible to imagine a *static* diaspora. Images of journeys abound in cinematic representations of the Indian diaspora, be they the ones offered by Indian popular films or by Western-based South Asian<sup>1</sup> filmmakers.<sup>2</sup> And yet, if all diasporas entail travelling, not all forms of travelling qualify as diasporas. Embedded in the notion of diaspora is 'a sense of uprootedness, disconnection, loss and estrangement' (Cohen 2008: 174), the problematic of identity and the related instability of questions of home and belonging (Brah 1996: 190–195; Mishra 2007: 2; Tsagarousianou 2004: 56–60; Williams 1999). Moreover, unlike 'casual travels', diasporas are thought of, analysed and narrated as communities<sup>3</sup> characterised by the specificity of the circumstances which prompted their movement away from their homeland.<sup>4</sup> However, even though diasporic communities share some internal characteristics, they are not monolithic, homogeneous social formations. On the contrary, as Brah observes, diasporas are 'contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common "we"' (1996: 184). As a consequence, the scholar argues, in the analysis of diasporas we should remain 'attentive to the nature and type of processes in and through which the collective "we" is constituted. Who is empowered and who is disempowered in the specific construction of the "we"?' (1996: 184; see also Hall 1993: 235). This is a question openly addressed by Deepa Mehta in *Heaven on Earth*.

Inspired by Girish Karnad's 1998 play *Naga Mandala*,<sup>5</sup> *Heaven on Earth* tells the story of Chand, a young middle-class Punjabi woman who happily travels to Canada to marry Rocky,

a man she has never met. Rocky lives with his parents and his sister's family in a two-bedroom house in the suburbs of Toronto and, as a limousine driver, he is the main provider in the family. Overwhelmed by his family's financial difficulties, soon after the marriage Rocky begins to unleash his frustrations on Chand, who becomes the target of his violence. With no one to help her within the family, Chand finds a friend in Rosa, a Jamaican-Canadian woman who works with her and who gives her a magical root to make Rocky fall in love with her – thus putting a stop to his violence. However, unable to go through with the plan, Chand gives it up at the last minute and pours the potion in the backyard, unknowingly hitting a cobra pit. It is the cobra that then falls in love with Chand, and he begins to appear to her at night in the form of a tender and loving Rocky.<sup>6</sup> Unaware of the real nature of her night lover, when Chand casually mentions having spent a day off work with her husband she is accused of cheating and is asked to prove her innocence by undertaking the 'snake ordeal': she will have to put her hand in the snake pit and retrieve the cobra – if she is telling truth the snake won't bite her, but if she is lying, the snake will kill her.

By focusing on Chand's difficult transition from Punjab to Canada, *Heaven on Earth* clearly addresses the dynamics of power (referred to by Brah) that structure Chand's new family in the diasporic space. In the analysis of the film, while addressing these dynamics, I will focus in particular on their intersection with questions of gender, race, class and cultural identity. Moreover, considering that the diaspora theme is a very popular trope in Bombay cinema,<sup>7</sup> I will also discuss *Heaven on Earth* in relation to this film culture. The analysis is divided into four parts: by applying Hamid Naficy's theoretical discussion of accented cinema to the film, I will first locate *Heaven on Earth* in relation to both Hollywood and Bombay cinema; I will then proceed with a discussion of the film's engagement with questions of gender, cultural identity and tradition and will conclude with a reflection on the film's engagement with the question of class in the diaspora.

### **<A>Locating *Heaven on Earth*: Between India and Canada**

While diasporas cannot simply be equated with travelling, the meaning of diaspora, or, to borrow Pnina Werbner's words, the meaning of 'the place which is diaspora' (2002:119) is far from fixed. In films, the meaning of the diasporic journey changes according to the filmmaker's own perspective on diaspora and to the political, economic and cultural context of production: if

representations, as Stuart Hall famously argued, are never neutral (1997) then it follows that 'who represents diaspora matters' (Tölölyan 2007: 654). A case in point is the portrayal of the Indian diaspora offered by Indian popular cinema and by the films directed by Western-based diasporic filmmakers such as Mehta, who is based in Canada. Her work, as Chaudhuri points out, 'attempts to confront aspects of Indian reality left out of the domestic popular cinema' (2009: 8) but, at the same time, she also engages in a dialogue with this film culture by referencing it, borrowing from it<sup>8</sup> (the most notable example being her 2002 film *Bollywood/Hollywood*) and often employing established Bollywood actors, as in the case of Preity Zinta in *Heaven on Earth*. The opening scene of *Heaven on Earth*, which sees the celebration of Chand's sangeet,<sup>9</sup> has been seen endless times in Indian popular films. And yet, starting from what could look like a classic Bollywood wedding scene, the film takes a completely different turn, as viewers are led into the nightmare of poverty and domestic abuse.

As a film which is 'in dialogue with the home and the host society' (Naficy 2001: 6) *Heaven on Earth* can be seen as an example of accented cinema, which, according to Naficy, is also characterised by an interstitial or artisanal mode of production (2001: 46). Films made in an interstitial mode of production, according to Naficy, should not be simply defined as marginal, because 'accented filmmakers are not so much marginal or subaltern as they are interstitial, partial, and multiple – not only in terms of their identity and subjectivity but also in terms of the various roles they play in every aspect of their films' (2001: 47). And so, interstitial films often see the filmmakers themselves financing their own project, often seeking additional financing 'from a range of public and private sources' (2001: 47), which is precisely the case in *Heaven on Earth*, where Mehta is the director, writer and producer (Hamilton Mehta production) and the film is co-produced with the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Another characteristic element of accented cinema is its anti-hegemonic character, a stylistic response to the experience of migration, diaspora and exile that reflects the filmmaker's 'awareness of the vast histories of the prevailing cinematic modes' as well as their 'double consciousness' (2001: 22). Seeing Mehta's personal history of migration and her extensive professional knowledge of Indian, Canadian and Hollywood cinemas (Desai 2004: 49; Khorana 2009), this description serves her well and it also emphasises the fact that her portrayal of Indian migration comes from a point of enunciation very different to that of Bollywood filmmakers.<sup>10</sup>

The anti-hegemonic character of *Heaven on Earth* has to be read in fact in relation to both Hollywood and Bollywood films.

According to Naficy, accented films are anti-hegemonic because they challenge dominant modes of production in terms of both narrative and style. In particular, they challenge the realism of classical Hollywood's 'invisible' style that denies authorship to convey a sense of ideological neutrality (2001: 34). Counter to classical Hollywood films, in *Heaven on Earth*, which was 'shot handheld and in 16mm' (Mehta 2008: 12), the filmmaker uses the grainy look of the film and the movement of the camera to convey a sense of realism (2008: 12–13), thus 'making a virtue' of the 'low-tech, low-velocity, almost homemade quality' of the film (Naficy 2001: 21). In its quest for authenticity, the film is also shot in Punjabi, with occasional insertions in English when the action steps outside the household (mostly the laundry factory or a local shop). This linguistic choice reflects Mehta's desire to tell a story that would resonate with the reality of the setting: the film is located in the suburbs of Brampton, a place with a very high percentage of Punjabi immigrants and where 'signs are often both in Punjabi and English' (Mehta 2008: 7). This is an important element of the film also because the choice to shoot in 'accented languages' is, for Naficy, another way to counter the hegemony of the dominant mode of production: considering that 'characters' accents are often ethnically coded' (Naficy 2001: 24), their idiom is a way to signify their difference and the interstitial position they occupy (2001: 24–5). The film's style thus aims at authenticity by foregrounding the difference that characters embody in the Canadian context.

Mehta's linguistic choice is also interesting *vis à vis* Bollywood cinema, as it represents a challenge to its dominant representation of the Indian (Punjabi) diaspora. Since the mid-1990s, Bombay films have turned their attention to the wealthy Punjabi diaspora, increasingly portrayed as the paradigm of Indian success abroad (Panda and Prasad Mishra 2012: 54). In most Bollywood films set in the diasporic space, the distinctive characteristics of the dislocated Punjabi community are de-regionalised and portrayed as pan- Indian,<sup>11</sup> while characters generally speak Hindi rather than Punjabi. Furthermore, in most Bollywood films characters speak Hindi both at home and at work – as they usually work with other people of Indian origin – and, as a consequence, not only are the differences within the Indian diaspora flattened out, but also the difference of the environment within which people live and work is downplayed. In addition to that, the Indian diaspora represented by Indian popular films usually belongs to the

upper middle class, so that even class differences disappear from the picture (Despande 2005: 193–6). *Heaven on Earth* rewrites this narrative of Indo-Punjabi success and, by focusing on a working-class, Punjabi-speaking family, it foregrounds the element of difference within the Indian diaspora erased by Bollywood, thus providing a counter- as well as a complementary narrative to the ones offered by Hindi films. Moreover, instead of implying a continuity between the homeland and the diaspora, *Heaven on Earth* emphasises the sense of displacement that comes with migration, as evident in the title chosen for the release of the film in India: *Videsh*. If, as Vijay Mishra observes, ‘the homeland in Hindi is the *desh* against which all other lands are foreign, or *videsh*’ (Mishra 2007: 2), the Hindi title given to the film strengthens the sense of dislocation of the characters. This sense of dislocation is highlighted by the coldness of the environment as well as by the isolation within which the family lives and it is rendered in the film by occasional turns to black and white.

*Heaven on Earth* is thus an accented film that challenges the hegemony of both Hollywood and Bollywood, operating ‘both within and astride the cracks of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies, and heterogeneity’ (Naficy 2001: 46). Intervening in the anomalies of Indian popular film narratives, the film also establishes a dialogue with this cinematic mode of production, filling up the gaps left by Bollywood films and providing, as we shall see, alternative perspectives on key Bollywood tropes such as the stability of the traditional family system, the reproduction of gender and sexual norms and the role of tradition in the diaspora.<sup>12</sup>

### <A>Travelling Brides and Displaced Traditions

As an accented film ‘in dialogue with the home and the host society’ (Naficy 2001: 6), *Heaven on Earth*, by translating Girish Karnad’s play to the suburbs of Toronto, merges the question of the married woman and of the roles imposed by society on husband and wife –which are at the heart of the play (Dahiya 2013: 1; Kumar 2003: 141; Shradda 2016: 378) – with the question of migration. This way, the film introduces a reflection on the reconfiguration of gender norms in the diasporic family as the means to reproduce traditional values in a foreign land.

Talking about the task of cultural reproduction in the diasporic context, Arjun Appadurai argues that ‘as families move to new locations [...] debts and obligations are recalibrated, and rumours and fantasies about the new settings are manoeuvred into existing repertoires of

knowledge and practice' (1996: 43–4). This existing repertoire in *Heaven on Earth* is represented in terms of Punjabi clothes and food, but, most importantly, it is the (re)production of sexual and gender norms which is taken as the symbol of cultural authenticity. As soon as Chand arrives in Brampton, it becomes very clear what will be her role within the new family: despite the seemingly nice welcome she receives at the airport, where the whole family meets her, as soon as she steps into the house –but after having given the dowry to her in-laws – she is asked to serve the drinks. It soon turns out that Rocky has already arranged a job for her in a laundry factory, indifferent to the fact that she holds a bachelor degree, and her salary is sent directly to his bank account. When she is not at work, she is expected to cook and do the housework, under the severe gaze of Rocky and of her mother-in-law. She is not supposed to question or challenge her husband, and she is completely subordinated to and, with no money, also dependent on him.

Chand's experience resonates with that of several other 'travelling brides' as reported by Nicola Mooney's research on the Jat Sikh communities of Toronto and Vancouver. As Mooney points out, in the diasporic context the vulnerability of women living in a strict patriarchal system is all the more heightened because, she explains:

<EXT>Cultural practices around Punjabi marriage are what most reflect the inferior social position of women in both Sikh and Hindu communities: dowry, hypergamous marriage and patrilocal residence constitute women as subordinate, disempower them from rights over property and remove them from the comparative security of their natal homes<sup>13</sup> (Mooney 2006: 396) </EXT>

Moreover, according to Mooney, women are seen as the embodiment of tradition and their responsibility for the reproduction of culture is predicated in moral terms, as 'a matter of honour and shame (*izzat* and *sharam*)' (2006: 396). In this context, men's surveillance over women, and their protection, is seen as an 'assurance of family honour' as well as a way to reinforce the masculinist identity of men (2006: 396). Similarly, in *Heaven on Earth*, the reproduction of strict gender norms and the identification of women's conduct with the preservation of cultural identity are very much emphasised.

The link between gender norms, sexuality and identity has been popularised, in India, since the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism, which emphasised the role of women as the

‘repositories and transmitters of Indian culture’ (Das 2012: 60). If woman is the symbol of national identity, the metaphor of the Motherland, then her purity needs to be preserved<sup>14</sup> (Chatterjee 1993: 120–1; Dwyer 2000: 130–1; Gopinath 1997: 467–8), all the more in a foreign environment. As a consequence, Desai argues, ‘diasporas maintain and consolidate connections and imaginings of the homeland by performing national identities through gender and sexual normativities’ (2004: 30). The association of gender and sexual norms with cultural identity is a popular theme in Bombay films, where, for decades, the preservation of cultural identity abroad has been linked to the sexual purity of the Indian woman, so that her chastity (or lack thereof) becomes the ultimate indicator of cultural authenticity (Desai 2004: 133–5; Gangoli 2005; Mankekar 1999: 738–42; Moodley 2003: 68). Instead, in *Heaven on Earth* the reproduction of gender and sexual norms as a way to preserve cultural identity is not accepted at face value but is problematised. As the adaptation of a play that criticises the rigidly gendered roles imposed by society (Dahiya 2013: 2), the film produces in fact a critique of patriarchy which is addressed both at the diaspora and the homeland.

It is especially through the representation of domestic violence that the film reinforces the perception of the inferior social position occupied by women in the Punjabi marriage mentioned by Mooney. Even if Rocky is the one who beats up Chand, the silence of his entire family normalises his actions, as if they were part of his prerogatives as a husband. The only two characters who mention Rocky’s abusive behaviour are his sister and his mother, and they both dismiss it: Aman casually defends Rocky by saying that he, in reality, is a good man, and she also asks Chand to conceal her bruises with some make-up. His mother, on the other hand, is rather satisfied at her son’s brutal treatment of Chand (she constantly winds him up against her) and, when Chand cries, she urges her not to because ‘[hitting spouses] is a common thing’. Strict gender norms also prevent Chand from calling the police: denouncing domestic abuse would mean dishonouring the family, as Aman reminds Chand when she points out to her that in their community they ‘deal with problems in house’.

Exposing the isolation of the victim and the silence surrounding spousal abuse within South Asian immigrant households is a way for Mehta to give voice to the silenced bride. As Desai argues, filmmakers such as Mehta, by depicting ‘these particular embodied experiences of violence rely on the cinematic apparatus and its significant role in the diaspora. The visibility of the film provides a site for intervention according to the filmmakers’ (Desai 2004: 148). Indeed,



the lack of appropriate intervention when it comes to domestic violence is a cause of concern for Mehta, who observed that ‘an Asian woman will never call 911. There is a question of losing one’s dignity. It’s shameful, so the government has no clue how to deal with them’<sup>15</sup> (Khorana 2009). But Mehta breaks the silence around domestic abuse and also, as previously mentioned, questions the role of tradition in the perpetration of this violence. As she observes:

<EXT>The dynamics of immigration really turn the values that felt right at home and were working back home upside down. So the dynamics of the household change, and you want to maintain them but you can’t. The stress trying to maintain something that is non-existent and doesn’t work for you shows on a woman first, but that does not mean that men aren’t victim as well. (Khorana 2009)</EXT>

Mehta’s reflections are of particular importance because they pave the way for a critique of patriarchy which considers its detrimental effects on men as well as women. This is a point that she develops from Karnad’s play, which provides ‘a very sensitive take on men’s circumscriptions by patriarchal codes’ (Mohan 2009: 9; see also Dahiya 2013: 2). The fact that the husband in Karnad’s play is named Appana, which means ‘any man’ (Collie 2006: 3), seems to suggest that his situation is really a metaphor for the condition of men in general. In the film, both Baldev (Rocky’s brother in law) and Rocky, even if for different reasons, feel the pressure of patriarchal norms. Baldev, who, unlike Rocky, is a caring husband and father, is unemployed and, despite the fact that he had been the one who sponsored them to get to Canada, is now dependent on his wife’s family. As he (unwillingly) contravenes the gender norms of patriarchy he feels useless, as he clearly explains when he says that: ‘a man who is dependent on his in-laws is worse than a dog’. Rocky too feels the burden of the expectations held upon him but, unlike Baldev, reacts violently. However, he is not portrayed as a straightforwardly violent character: the first time he meets Chand he shyly greets her, unable to look her in the eyes, and on their honeymoon night he seems on the verge of opening up to her when she asks him about his life. It is nevertheless on that very same night that he first hits Chand, after his mother interrupts their honeymoon. Frustrated at his mother, who interrupted what would have been their first sexual intercourse, but, at the same time, unable to tell her off because of his duties as a son, he lashes out at Chand when she suggests that, instead of going to sleep in the car with

Baldev (and letting her sleep with his mother), they could rent another room. Rocky's mother's comment that that was the first time she had ever seen a hotel room reinforces the perception that Rocky is crushed under the burden of financial difficulties and familial obligations. His anxiety is especially heightened by his overbearing mother, who constantly asks him to earn enough money to sponsor his other brother to Canada and, simultaneously, winds him up against Chand. Just like Apanna, Rocky seems to be the 'slave' of patriarchal culture (Shradda 2016: 382) and his violence against Chand is the expression of his repressed anger. The film thus supports Appadurai's observation that in migratory contexts women 'become the pawns in the heritage politics of the household and are often subjected to the abuse and violence of men who are themselves torn about the relation between heritage and opportunity in shifting spatial and political formations' (Appadurai 1996: 44). It is important to note here that, in portraying Rocky as a victim of patriarchy, Mehta does not try to justify his violence, but to contextualise it.

#### **<A>The Subversive Power of Tradition**

If, as suggested, within the diasporic household the maintenance of tradition is mostly concerned with the reproduction of sexual and gender norms and of men's surveillance over women, it is this practice which eventually liberates Chand. Extremely lonely and convinced that, if only she could make Rocky love her, her situation would improve, Chand accepts Rosa's help and decides to prepare a love potion for her husband. At this point the film unexpectedly shifts to magical realism with the introduction of a cobra living in the snowy Canadian landscape and which, hit by Chand's potion, falls in love with her.

The motif of the 'snake lover' is 'widespread in popular Indian narrative' (Kakar 1990: 52) and Karnad's play, upon which *Heaven on Earth* is based, is in fact inspired by two oral folktales from Karnataka (Mohan 2009: 2). As Kakar observes, snake myths abound in Hindu mythology and religion:

<EXT>In literature, folklore, myth, ritual, and art, the snake, and especially the cobra (*nag*) plays a prominent role in Hindu culture. Born of one of the daughters of Prajapati, the Lord of Creation, snakes are carried by Shiva, the Destroyer, around his neck and arms, while there is no more popular representation of Vishnu, the preserver of Hindu trinity, than of his reposing on the Sesha, the seven-headed cobra. Sculpted into the

reliefs of Buddhist, Jain and Hindu temples, snakes, both single and entwined, are a ubiquitous presence in Indian sacred space. (Kakar 1990: 52) </EXT>

The popularity of snakes resides in the fact that they are ‘regarded as guardians of the life-giving powers of the waters in springs, pools and wells’ (Sullivan 1997: 144) and have therefore been worshipped in India for centuries for ‘fertility, prosperity and the healing of illness’ (1997: 144). In Hindu mythology Lord Shiva, ‘the most powerful Hindu god’, according to Mehta (2008: 5) is traditionally represented with the king cobra Vasuki around his neck and he is known for granting ‘anything to his devotees and worshippers’ (Kumar 2003: 141).

As the film focuses on a Sikh and not a Hindu family, Mehta has made some changes to the narrative so as to maintain the centrality of the snake myth within the story. Not only has she translated Karnad’s play into Punjabi,<sup>16</sup> but she has also adapted it to the new context by adding explicit references to Sikhism in the snake-centred tale that Chand’s mother mentions on the morning of Chand’s departure and that, it appears, she has told her numerous times since Chand was a child. As she associates it with her childhood and with her mother, Chand sees in the snake a reassuring figure and so, as a means to counter her loneliness, she invents a story for herself on her arrival in Canada in which she imagines being rescued by a king cobra. Every scene of violence is followed by a moment in which Chand tells herself a little bit of this story, which progresses until the cobra finally reunites her with her mother.

And the snake does indeed come to Chand’s rescue when he falls in love with her. Assuming Rocky’s form – ‘I am a serpent but not just a serpent’, a voiceover says as the snake enters Chand’s room – the serpent begins to visit Chand at night, and really anytime Rocky is not around, and he grants her all the love she has been craving. As the boundary between reality and fantasy blurs, it is not clear – not to the viewer, nor to Chand – whether her loving husband is a figment of her imagination or whether he really is Rocky. The cobra functions here as Rocky’s double, as he is exactly what Rocky is not, or cannot be, given the ‘rigid system of masculinity’ he seems to be entrapped in (Mohan 2009: 9). If the real Rocky brutalises and imprisons Chand in a life she did not want, it is the cobra that allows Chand to break free. Following an attack from Rocky, one morning Chand is too battered to go to work and calls in sick. Once she is left alone in the house the cobra turns up in her bedroom and tenderly consoles her, but they are not alone in the house: during the day Rocky’s family rents out the house to two (unseen) tenants

and Chand informs them that she will stay in her room for the day and that her husband is looking after her. However, later on Rocky is livid at hearing that she ‘pretended’ to be with him in their bedroom. He thus furiously beats her up and accuses her of cheating. With the whole family against her, Chand is challenged by her mother-in-law to swear on a burning iron, as ‘their traditions prescript’ (she says), to prove her innocence. Tradition, once again, is invoked to police the sexual conduct of women, as this scene is a clear reference to Sita’s trial in the *Ramayana*, when she undergoes the fire trial to prove her purity.<sup>17</sup> But it is precisely the reproduction of tradition which, this time, liberates Chand.

After she unsuccessfully pleads with Rocky that she is innocent, once again Chand is visited by the cobra/Rocky, and it is he who suggests to her that she take the snake ordeal instead. She is then led to the garden where, in front of the whole family, she puts her hand in the anthill to retrieve the cobra. As she successfully holds the cobra in her hands and wraps it around her neck, an aura of light surrounds her head, making her look like a female version of Lord Shiva, and the family watches in awe while she swears on the snake that she ‘has only touched her husband and that cobra with her hands’. Just like Sita, through the trial Chand acquires a new goddess-like status, and it is at this point that, finally empowered, she takes her passport and leaves. Following *Naga Mandala* then, in *Heaven on Earth* tradition is invoked to produce a ‘demystification of dominant beliefs and practices’ (Collellmir 2006: 1), for, instead of subjugating Chand, tradition is the instrument of her empowerment. The irony of Chand’s success lies in the fact that the very ritual that was conjured to ostracise her, leads to her ‘mystic elevation’:

<EXT>As a test of her chastity, the trial defeats the purpose for which it was devised in the first place. The snake ordeal mocks the classic Hindu mythic chastity test, the test of truth. In the *Ramayana*, Sita comes through the ordeal of fire because she *is* truly chaste and faithful. In Karnad’s play, the woman comes through the ordeal of handling a venomous snake only because the snake is her lover (Mohan 2009: 9). </EXT>

The reproduction of the snake ordeal in the film remains true to Girish Karnad’s take on folk theatre, which, he argued in his introduction to *Three Plays*: ‘although it seems to uphold traditional values, it also has the meaning of questioning those values, of making them literally

stand on their head' (Karnad 1999: 14, quoted in Collellmir 2006: 2). Furthermore, the snake myth reference in the story serves the purpose of challenging sexual and gender normativities, because, even if unwittingly, Chand has indeed been unfaithful to Rocky and it is her lover, the cobra, which gives Chand 'the chance to choose and achieve liberation' (Collellmir 2006: 7).

If *Heaven on Earth* faithfully reproduces the subverting character of Karnad's play, it also takes a step further by having Chand leave Rocky. In *Naga Mandala* in fact, Rani, after the trial, remains with Appana. Moreover, if in Mehta's film Chand's infidelity is exposed by their tenants, in Karnad's play it is Rani's pregnancy that makes Appana realise that she must have slept with someone else. These are two important differences because, as Mohan observes, as much as Karnad's play 'makes a mockery of the misogyny and male-centredness of the patriarchal system, as also the exaggerated male claims and ambitions to control female sexuality [...] it is not disruptive of entrenched oppressive structures' (Mohan 2009: 13). The fact that the play closes with the restoration of the heteronormative order and the birth of a son somehow downplays the subversive nature of the story, as it is not only Rani's successful trial, but also her pregnancy, that saves her from the abuses of her husband. As Sudhir Kakar observed, in fact: 'the status of motherhood [...] for an Indian girl consolidates her identity as a woman and can mean a significant improvement in the politics of a joint family' (Kakar 1990: 58).

In Mehta's film instead, the entire status quo is challenged: by the end of the film Chand has developed her own agency and breaks with Rocky and his family, thus breaking with the strict patriarchal norms they uphold. What is most subversive about her story is the fact that it is tradition, in the form of the trial, that is the instrument through which Chand recovers her own agency. Following Naficy, we can say that Chand, by the end of the film, has undergone two kinds of journey: the first one is the diasporic journey to Brampton, while the second is a 'journey of identity', a metaphorical journey that has brought about significant changes within the character of Chand (Naficy 2001: 21), allowing her to grow and develop her own agency. Through the story of Chand thus Mehta questions simultaneously the patriarchal character of the Indian family and its reproduction in the diasporic setting. In the process, she also provides a contribution to the debate over the notion of diaspora and the diasporic journey.

### **<A>Diaspora, Travels and Transnational Mobility: The Working-class Experience**

A final aspect of the film that is worth focusing upon – and which is a key component of

Chand's journey – is the socio-economic context within which her joint family lives. As Mehta explained, one of the aims of the film was to explore 'the reality of dislocation; the effect that immigration has on people who leave their native land to come to Canada in search of monetary security and instead find themselves living in the fringes, trying desperately to simulate elements of their homeland in isolation from the mainstream' (2008: 12). The low socio-economic condition of the family is strongly connected to the politics of the household.

Despite the fact that Rocky and his family have been living in Canada for years, they appear isolated from the broader context within which they live: apart from a few friends of Rocky seen only the night before Chand's arrival, no one seems to have any meaningful relationship outside the family. The film suggests that their isolation is a consequence of their precarious financial conditions as in fact, busy as they are in trying to make ends meet, they do not have time for a social life, nor could they afford it. If, as Brah posits, 'the question of home is intrinsically linked with the way in which processes of inclusion and exclusion operate and are subjectively experienced under given circumstances' (1996: 192), the isolation of the family makes it hard for them to develop a sense of belonging, which explains why they hold on to their homeland by recreating its traditions in the diasporic space. The emphasis on their working-class background is of particular relevance because it not only, as previously mentioned, provides a counter-representation to the ones offered by Bollywood films, it also promotes a reflection on diaspora which foregrounds the need to focus on the material reality of displacement, as mentioned by Mehta. This way, the film explores the tension between the literal and the metaphorical understanding of the notion of diaspora.

Besides indicating the lived experiences of people in motion, the literal experience of displacement, the notion of diaspora is also used metaphorically as a critical tool to challenge the alleged boundedness of culture and identity through its emphasis on processes of adaptation, translation and hybridisation (Hall 1993, Gilroy 1993, Bhabha 1994). With globalisation and the growing mobility of the twenty-first century, the metaphorical understanding of the term has gained prominence especially in discourses on globalisation and mobility, so that, as Tölölyan argues, diasporas have come to be 'celebrated as exemplars or advocates of penetrated and porous borders, heterogeneity, hybridity, and, importantly, mobility' (Tölölyan 2007: 653). Vijay Mishra too observes that diasporas are often celebrated as 'the exemplary condition of late modernity [...] fluid, ideal, social formations happy to live wherever there is an international

airport and stand for a longer, much admired, historical process' (Mishra 2007: 1). Diasporic subjects have thus become 'travellers on the move' (2007: 4), the symbol of transnational mobility. The problematic attachment of assumptions of 'easy mobility for all' with discussion of diasporas (Tölölyan 2007: 654) fully emerges once we focus on the specific social, economic and political conditions of mobility.

*Heaven on Earth* clearly shows how not all diasporic subjects are hyper-mobile and cosmopolitan. Despite its journey across continents to reach Canada, Rocky's family is excluded from the hypermobility of the transnational, postmodern subject, and no pleasure is involved in their diasporic journey. This is a point clearly expressed by Rocky during his two-day honeymoon to Niagara Falls: enchanted by the view, Chand asks him to take a photograph, to which he replies, coldly, that 'photos are for tourists'. If tourism is commonly understood as a celebration of choice (Kaplan 1996: 27) this brief exchange between the couple expresses vividly Rocky's perception that life, for him and Chand, is not a matter of choice. Rocky and Chand's journey has nothing to do with the culture of leisure and consumption usually associated with tourism (1996: 5), nor with the 'safety' of the tourist, who has the chance to immerse himself in a 'strange and bizarre element' aware of the fact that it will only be a temporary experience (Bauman 1996: 29). More, Rocky and Chand's journey has nothing to do with the celebrated fluidity of the border zone they occupy. This is quite an important point because it is connected to Brah's warning that we should always be aware of the social, economic and political conditions of the people who travel (Brah 1996: 182). Against utopian celebrations of diaspora that, in Mark Shackleton's words, too often 'forget the sufferings of the underprivileged and do not pay sufficient attention to the historical, geographical and political contexts' within which the movement of people takes place (2008: ix), *Heaven on Earth* highlights the material realities of displacement and shows how they influence the way in which diasporic subjects structure their lives in the diaspora. In so doing, the film draws attention to the unequal dynamics of power, of inclusion and exclusion that characterise the diasporic space, and emphasises the connection between questions of class, gender and ethnicity.

Excluded from dreams of upward mobility paradigmatic of the transnational postmodern, Rocky's family, rather than embodying hyper-mobile cosmopolitan subjects, resembles the proletarian diaspora, 'the disadvantaged product of modernized polities' mentioned by Armstrong (1976: 393), as it is clear that the low socio-economic status of the family determines

its exclusion from the celebrated ‘liberatory effects of dispersion’ (Parry 2004: 100). Moreover, by addressing the material conditions of the displaced diasporic family the film also emphasises that, as Mishra observes, ‘contrary to idealist formulations about diasporas’, they are also ‘bastions of reactionary thinking’ (2007: 17, see also Werbner 2002: 120), as seen in the way in which the family reproduces tradition in the diasporic space.

## **<A>Conclusions**

To conclude, *Heaven on Earth* offers a representation of the diasporic experience that counters popular celebrations of ‘the massive immigration of the twentieth century as a hybridising phenomenon that eradicates monolithic notions of identity’ (Behdad 2005: 402) emphasising how, as Behdad points out, many ‘underclass migrants’ are caught ‘in the tailspin of a globalization that has taken them away from their hopes for upward mobility into a state of economic and political disenfranchisement’ (2005: 403).

An intersectional approach that jointly considers questions of race, class and gender is imperative here, as the film tackles questions of inclusion and exclusion in the diasporic space which cut across these signifiers. Similarly to the representation of the diasporic family that is common in contemporary European cinema, in *Heaven on Earth* ‘the domestic space’ becomes ‘a symbolic [...] battleground onto which social conflicts are displaced’ (Berghahn 2013: 11), as violence is in fact located in the context of the dislocation, isolation and emotional stress of a life at the margins (Mehta 2008: 13). Chand’s exclusion both from society and her new family is portrayed as the consequence on the one hand of the low socio-economic status of the family, and on the other of the strict patriarchal norms which govern the household, where violence is justified as an expression of tradition. The film explores the problematic notion of tradition as it turns it from a constraining into a liberating force. Chand’s journey to Brampton is, as already mentioned, also a journey towards self-awareness and empowerment, which will lead her to question, and finally challenge, the patriarchal traditions upheld by Rocky and his family.

*In conclusion* *Heaven on Earth* emphasises the complex character of the diasporic journey because it simultaneously addresses the trauma of displacement and it shows how diasporas ‘are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings’ (Brah 1996: 193). The film thus serves as a reminder that diasporas ‘are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure’ (1996: 193).



## <EN>Notes

- 1 The term 'South Asian' is used here to refer to those filmmakers whose families left India prior to Partition, the division of British India into the two independent states of India and Pakistan (as in the case of Gurinder Chadha). See Desai 2004: 6.
- 2 See for example Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *The Namesake* (2006), Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on The Beach* (1993) and *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), Srinivas Krishna's *Masala* (1991) and Aditya Chopra's *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), Karan Johar's *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) and *Happy Ending* (Raj Nidimoru and Krishna D. K., 2014), for Bollywood films.
- 3 Both Tsagarousianou and Naficy insist on the horizontal character of the diasporic consciousness: a collective sense of identity which involves not only the original homeland but also other 'compatriot communities elsewhere' (Naficy 2001: 14; Tsagarousianou 2004: 59–60). For a detailed analysis of the notion of diaspora see Cohen 2008, Brah 1996, Clifford 1992, Gilroy 1993, Hall 1993, Safran 1991.
- 4 In this respect Appadurai talks of 'diasporas of hope, diasporas of terror and diasporas of despair' (1996: 6).
- 5 Girish Karnad is a famous Indian playwright and writer (predominantly in the Kannada language) and also an actor and director in both the Hindi and the Kannada film industry.
- 6 Andrews explains how "in the myths of India and southeast Asia, nagas were serpents who inhabited rivers and pools and the waters believed to exist beneath the earth. The Nagas of Indian myth appeared either as cobras or as half cobras, and they had the ability to change forms at will" (1998: 135). See also Sullivan 1997: 144.
- 7 Bombay cinema and Bollywood are two overlapping but not identical terms. They both reference the Indian popular film industry in Hindi and based in Mumbai (former Bombay), but there are important different nuances to the terms. While Bombay cinema refers to the output of the Indian popular film industry since its early days, the term Bollywood is most commonly used to refer to the films produced since the mid-1990s, when the Bombay film industry began to acquire a quite strong transnational character (in terms of production, distribution, funding and narratives). The term also refers to the transnational culture industry that has emerged, in those very same years, around films (see Prasad 2008: 43–44;

Rajadhyaksha 2003: 30; Punathambekar 2013: 1–2). In this context, Bollywood will be used strictly in reference to films produced since the second half of the 1990s. For a more detailed discussion of the debate over the term Bollywood see also Mishra 2006, Dudrah 2012, Thomas 2013, Vasudevan 2008.

- 8 See Jigna Desai, 'Homo on the Range', in *Beyond Bollywood*, 2004, pp. 159–91.
- 9 The sangeet is a pre-wedding celebration which involves only women. Mehta compares it to a bachelorette party (2008: 2).
- 10 While Mehta fits in with Naficy's profile of the accented filmmaker, she does not only make accented films. If her personal experience locates her in a specific position of enunciation when it comes to diaspora, this position does not 'contain her', to borrow a felicitous expression from Stuart Hall (Hall 1996: 169).
- 11 Mishra for example draws the attention to the popularisation of the Karva Chauth fast (Mishra 2002: 256).
- 12 On the centrality of the Indian diaspora in Bollywood see Prasad 2008, Rajadhyaksha 2003. On the centrality of sexual and gender norms in Bollywood diaspora films see Brosius and Yazgi 2007, Mankekar 1999, Mehta 2005, Sharpe 2005.
- 13 On Indian immigrant women perceived as the repositories of an essential 'Indianness' see also Bhattacharjee 1992.
- 14 See also Rachel Dwyer's genealogy of the most prominent theories on love in the West and in India, where she traces the roots of the idea of the Indian family as based on the control over women in Indian religious and mythological literature (2000, 8–57).
- 15 On the problematic silence which surrounds domestic abuse among diasporic communities and the difficulty of state politics in dealing with it, see also Desai 2004: 147–9.
- 16 In her notes to the making of the film, Mehta explains that the idea to use the play Naga-Mandala to tackle migration and the condition of the woman within marriage came after she saw the Punjabi version of the play, directed by Neelam Mansingh Chowdhry (2008: 8).
- 17 Referenced by Mehta also in *Fire*. See Desai 2004: 239.

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