



Mira Nair

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What is really important to me is a sense of humor and a mischief about life. Life is just too boring otherwise.

— Mira Nair

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1957
- * Indian film director, lives in the United States
- * Director of *Mississippi Masala* and *Monsoon Wedding*

Biography

Mira Nair was born in 1957, Bhubaneswar, India, a small town 300 miles south of Calcutta. She is the youngest of three children from a middle class family. Her father was a civil servant, and her mother was a social worker. Mira is married to Hehmood Mamdani; an Ugandan national.

She first left her home town at 13 to attend an Irish Catholic missionary school in Simla. She then went to Delhi University to study sociology. There, Nair became involved in political street theater and performed for three years in an amateur drama company in Delhi, working with director Barry John and later Joseph Chaikin of the Open Theater in New York. At 19, she came to the United States on a scholarship to Harvard, where she became disillusioned with its conservative theater program and was soon drawn to filmmaking. Her student work and her first independent films were documentaries exploring the culture and traditions of India and their impact on the lives of ordinary people. Her student thesis film, *Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979), explores her relationship with her country through images of the streets of Old Delhi. Her second film, *So Far From India* (1982), is a double portrait of an Indian news dealer in a New York subway and his pregnant wife in India awaiting his return. The film won Best Documentary prizes at the American Film Festival and New York’s Global Village Film Festival.

This page was researched by Simon Blenski, Adrien Maurice Debreyne, Martha Eugenia Hegewisch and Avani Anant Trivedi for the Freshmen Composition Course taught by Maria Zavialova and submitted on 8/05/05.



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In 1985, Nair directed *India Cabaret*, a study of strippers at a Bombay nightclub, a male customer who is a regular at the club, and his wife who stays at home. Her next film, *Children of a Desired Sex* (1987), was made for a current affairs program for international television, and looked at the dilemma facing women who discover that their fetus is female, while living in a society that favors male offspring.

In 1987, Nair departed from documentary filmmaking. Building on her experience in theater and documentary film, Nair and her scriptwriter, Sooni Taraporevala, a college friend of Nair's and a native of Bombay, conducted a three-month workshop with 30 street children who would perform in the feature film. In *Salaam Bombay!*, Nair set out to "portray the reality of children who are denied a childhood, children who survive on the streets with resilience, humor, flamboyance and dignity." Mira Nair entered the international film scene when this first feature, *Salaam Bombay!*, won the Camera D'or and Prix du Publique at the Cannes Film Festival in 1988. The picture won twenty-three international awards and went on to receive an academy award nomination as best foreign language film in 1989.

After the international success of *Salaam Bombay!*, Nair was invited by a number of independent financiers and Hollywood studio executives to pitch ideas for her next film, *Mississippi Masala*. The setting for the film is rural Greenwood, Mississippi, where local motels are owned by Indians expelled from Uganda. With Taraporevala again building the dramatic framework, Nair created a story about the owner of a carpet-cleaning business, played by Denzel Washington, who develops a relationship with the daughter of one of his Indian clients, played by Sarita Choudhury. Their relationship stirs prejudice in both the African-American and Indian communities.

The film earned a standing ovation at the Sundance Film Festival in 1992, and three major awards at the Venice Film Festival, including best screenplay for Taraporevala and the CIAK award for the Most Popular Film at the festival. Next, Nair made her first foray into Hollywood to direct *The Perez Family* (1993), adapted from a novel by Christine Bell, about Cuban exiles living in Miami's Little Havana. With the Samuel Goldwyn Company backing the production, Marisa Tomei, Anjelica Huston, Alfred Molina and Chazz Palminteri were cast in leading roles.



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Her most recent film, *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1997), is inspired by a Hindu erotic manual. Nair feels the film has relevance to contemporary life in the United States, where sex is “devoid” of a connection to spirituality, and in India, where the historical connection has been lost. The film broke box-office records in Japan and the Far East, and was an art-house hit in America, but was banned in India. Legal battles over censorship of the film went to the Supreme Court. Nair is currently in post-production on *My Own Country*, based on the 1994 autobiography of Dr. Abraham Verghese, an Ethiopian-born Indian doctor who treated HIV and AIDS patients in the Smokey Mountains of eastern Tennessee. Dr. Verghese was trained as a specialist in infectious disease at Boston City Hospital and in 1985 set up his practice in Johnson City, where he began treating the community’s first AIDS patients. The screenplay was adapted for Showtime Networks by executive producer Barbara Title. The film stars Naveen Andrews (as Dr. Verghese), Marisa Tomei, Glenna Headly, Hal Holbrook and Swoosie Kurtz.

Nair returned to the documentary form in August 1999 with *The Laughing Club of India*, which was awarded The Special Jury Prize in the Festival International de Programmes Audiovisuels 2000.

In the summer of 2000, Nair shot *Monsoon Wedding* in 30 days, a story of a Punjabi wedding starring Naseeruddin Shah and an ensemble of Indian actors. Winner of the Golden Lion at the 2001 Venice Film Festival, *Monsoon Wedding* also won a Golden Globe nomination for Best Foreign Language Film and opened worldwide to tremendous critical and commercial acclaim.

Nair’s next feature was an HBO original film, *Hysterical Blindness*. Set in working class New Jersey in 1987, the film stars Uma Thurman, Juliette Lewis, Gena Rowlands. Thurman and Lewis play single women looking for love in all the wrong places, while Rowlands, who plays Thurman’s mother, adds to her daughter’s hysteria when she finds Mr. Right in Ben Gazarra. The film received great critical acclaim and the highest ratings for HBO, garnering an audience of 15 million, a Golden Globe for Uma Thurman, and 3 Emmy Awards.



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Following the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Nair joined a group of 11 renowned film makers, each commissioned to direct a film that was 9 minutes, 11 seconds and one frame long. Nair's film is a retelling of real events in the life of the Hamdani family in Queens, whose eldest son was missing after September 11, and was then accused by the media of being a terrorist. *11.9.01* is the true story of a mother's search for her son who did not return home on that fateful day.

Nair yielded the director's seat in 2003 to produce a documentary directed by Dinaz Stafford that explores the ancient rice farming technique practiced by the Garos of Meghalaya.

In May 2003, Nair helmed the Focus Features production of the William Thackeray classic, *Vanity Fair*, a provocative period tale set in post-colonial England, filmed entirely on location in the UK and India. Reese Witherspoon stars as Becky Sharp, a woman who defies her poverty-stricken background to clamber up the social ladder; Jim Broadbent, Bob Hoskins, Eileen Atkins, Gabriel Byrne, and Rhys Ifans round up the stellar ensemble cast. *Vanity Fair* was released in September 2004.

Nair's upcoming projects include Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* for HBO, and Hari Kunzru's *The Impressionist*; there are also plans to take *Monsoon Wedding* to Broadway. Mirabai Films is establishing an annual filmmaker's laboratory, Maisha, which will be dedicated to the support of visionary screenwriters and directors in East Africa and South Asia. The first lab, which will focus on screenwriting, will be launched in August 2005 in Kampala, Uganda.

Mississippi Masala, stars Denzel Washington, is about the Indian community expelled from its East African homeland (Uganda), and taking more than 15 years to come to terms with this loss. After an Indian family is forced to leave Uganda in the mid-70s, they go to England and then to Mississippi, where they open a motel business. The daughter, Mina, is 24 and still treated as a teenager. In a small traffic accident, she meets Demetrius (Denzel) who has a carpet-cleaning business. They click and begin to go places together. Trouble begins in Biloxi when they are in a motel room together. When mom and dad go back to Uganda, Mina stays in Mississippi with Demetrius. Along the way, the father of the Indian family becomes estranged from his best friend from childhood, a very black African, and finds, when he finally returns to Uganda, that his friend has died.



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This film discusses race from a unique point of view, mixing many cultures together, natives of India, Africans, African-Americans, and white-Americans. Mira Nair talks about race issues between Indians and Blacks, and gives a realistic perspective on this topic commenting on the situation in Africa where Black Africans want to keep Africa Black. It may seem that the focus of this film is the race relations between Asian Indians and Blacks in Southern USA. But it could also be seen as a collection of stories, each running along its own thread while impacting others at the same time. In this film, there is a love story between a Black man and an Asian Indian woman born in Africa. Another story is about a man trying to regain his lost homeland (which many consider a useless endeavor), and other African Indians who are trying to fit into the new South, such as a younger brother, a motel owner, who does not understand the people around him.

This film depicts a tender love story between a man and a woman of different races and cultures that is tested by the social and economic pressures from both American blacks and the South Asian community. Angry and bitter after being expelled from their homeland of Uganda in the early 1970s, Indians have settled in Mississippi coastal towns and flourish as motel owners with their own strict, rigid codes of courtship and marriage among their young men and women, with money and a light complexion being the most desirable qualities in a search for the perfect mate. The movie shows many things, in particular how both the blacks and the Indians are displaced from their ancestral lands. Also, it shows how the blacks are racist towards the Indians and vice versa. As Demetrius reminds Mina's father: "Your skin is just a couple of shades from mine."

Kamasutra: A Tale of Love (1996) was one of Mira Nair's boldest ventures. Says Srini Narayanan in his review in *India Star* "*Kamasutra: A Tale of Love* aims to be a bold new experiment that marries the wisdom of an ancient Indian treatise on sexuality with politics and power relations in a previously unexplored setting (16th century pre-colonial India)". *Kamasutra* is a tale of two friends, Maya and Tara, who are bound together in their destiny. Maya is a servant girl while Tara is a princess who has always been jealous of Maya's beauty. Tired of using Tara's hand me downs for all her life, Maya avenges her low class position by sleeping with Tara's husband, Raj Singh, on their wedding night. As a result, Maya is driven out of the palace. She finds comfort with a sculptor Jai Kumar. After their brief affair, Jai decides that he would rather dedicate his life to art than to be with Maya. Hurt and enraged, Maya seeks solace in the school of Rasa Devi, who teaches the art of love-making. Maya becomes a courtesan. It is in this capacity that she encounters Tara and Rajas well as her old love, the sculptor.



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The movie was received with mixed reactions. The positive critics have called Nair's *Kamasutra* 'luminous, exotic, alluring' and 'sumptuous beyond description.' According to Amanda Richards, *Kamasutra* provides some high potential sexual situations, but it lacks the depth of emotion as well as a decent story line. In her opinion *Kamasutra* comes over as a beautiful art movie, with magnificent scenery, brilliant color, and maximum use of nature, light and texture. However, many critics have taken the negative stance and have almost entirely written the movie off as an 'intolerable bore.' Says Sunil P. Sridhan from California "the experience of watching *Kamasutra* was largely less than satisfying -- a surprisingly poor directorial output from Nair." In our opinion, *Kamasutra* is definitely not one of Mira Nair's best directorial outputs. The entire movie seems to be a mélange of sex, drugs, politics and power with no definite storyline integrating the various issues that Mira Nair is trying to portray. On the upside, the film definitely boasts a strong subject and powerful acting, exploiting *Kamasutra* further could have resulted in a fresh, unpredictable adventure. Instead, all the elements together produce a tired, clichéd melodrama that routinely throws in stereotypical sub plots like class, military, intrigue and exploitation of physical deformity.

In her 2001 film, *Monsoon Wedding*, Mira Nair captures the anticipation, chaos, and beauty of a Punjabi wedding, set in New Delhi. An Indian bride, Aditi (Vasundhra Das), is marrying Indian-American Hemant (Parvin Dabas) in an arranged marriage set up by Aditi's parents, Lalit (Nasserudin Shah) and his wife Pimmi (Lillete Dubey). The film starts a few days before the wedding as preparations are being made and the extended family of the bride and groom arrive.

The interactions of the family members allow for numerous subplots that are both humorous and dramatic. With the help of scriptwriter Shefali Shetty, her teaching assistant in college, Nair maintains control of the complex storylines. Subplots include Aditi's second thoughts about the marriage and her temptation to go back to an ex-lover. Another subplot includes the wedding planner, Dubey, (Vijay Raaz) finding true love in the family's maid.



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Nair contrasts working-class Delhi with the emerging upper middle class. Between the color and glamour of the wedding ceremony, Nair shows images of bustling Delhi during rush hour. Stepping away from traditional Bollywood films, she incorporates the strong western influence present in modern day India. The primary language of the film is Hindi, however English is frequently spoken as due Aditi's father is a businessman and Hemant lives in the United States. Mira Nair described her film as "the ultimate love song to Delhi." Showing the city both in its traditional aspect and one susceptible to western influence runs parallel to the gathering of the families for the wedding. Children participating in traditional ceremonies and grandparents dancing to modern music reflect the changing times.

Monsoon Wedding has been labeled Nair's finest work to date. Critics say that she approaches each scene with great sensitivity and special care. The film won the Golden Lion Award at the Cannes Film Festival. The only part of the film that is often criticized is her controversial approach to the subplot involving molestation by Aditi's Uncle. The abrupt confrontation between Aditi's father and uncle on the day of the wedding creates an uncomfortable atmosphere both on and off the screen. Although a dark time in the plot, it does provide a change to the color and comedy of the rest of the film.

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