

## Past Meets Present: Monsoon Wedding Redux

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Cosmopolitanism, as a conceptual ideal, can refer to educated, well traveled, minority elites from postcolonial nations who may, apparently, be associated with liberal and plural moorings. Presumably, this kind of an understanding does not repudiate either rootedness or openness regarding cultural and local differences. On the one hand, it holds the promise of promoting a sense of universal consciousness expanding spheres of belonging. On the other, it can extol the travels of migrants conflating both contexts of their travels along with communities who travel. In the latter situation of the cosmopolitan ideal, this utopic sense of belonging can espouse an uncritical classlessness. Could those elitist and apparently inclusive enclaves of belonging mean a borderless, or, at least a receptive belonging within a wider community?

Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, recast by Berkeley Repertory Theatre (2017) as a musical, provoke ruminations on the film released in 2001. Marriages are never out of season, and both the film and its musical remake employ this universalizing trope. It is, however, the interactive space or the lack thereof between prominent central characters and non-specific, marginal characters that occasions revisiting the film. While the wedding trope is literally symptomatic of the week-long celebrations associated with South Asian cultures, metaphorically, it symbolizes the wedding of two different spaces that may be envisioned, but can never occur. It is this impossible yet teasing possibility of the metaphorical marriage that I am more interested in exploring. Can the camaraderie in *Monsoon Wedding* transcend economic class and social markers to promise an optimistic duet that thinks of equality with a difference? In interrogating and exploring such a possibility, I take the film as an example offering a critique of cosmopolitan ideals. Within the paradigm of crossover films, and nearly two decades after its US release, Nair's film remains a domestic top grosser in the foreign film category with nearly fourteen million dollars in earnings.<sup>1</sup> Falling under a genre that Priya Joshi calls "Bollylite," that have captured US audiences' attention as it deviates from conventional Bollywood forms of cinema (see Joshi 2010), the musical recasting of the film relives the "lavish spectacle" of the wedding that the original film captures.<sup>2</sup>

My revisiting *Monsoon Wedding* is a critical response to Nair's recent thoughts on its topicality in an age when waves of ethno nationalism and tribalism characterize the political rhetoric of democracies like India and

the US. Both countries feature prominently in the central narrative of the film and the musical. In her words, “[w]hen the film came out, it was almost the first portrait of globalization that people outside India had seen. Now, in the time of Trump, the doors are literally closing between borders” (qtd in Tsering 2017). She clarifies that, in the play, there is a portrait of two things: an “India that is complicatedly becoming a sort of real power, but also a portrait of America, since half our story is about America — an America that may not even let us in” (qtd in Tsering 2017). Nair’s words resonate with the crisis in plural moorings and the way in which laying claim to a porous border has suddenly become politically amplified. But, were these borders not always already a part of the problem of belonging? While the play is beyond the scope of my discussion, the film provokes an inquiry into an understanding of the nature of the fluidity and ease of belonging portrayed in it. Does Nair’s film, made at the time in a ‘newly’ globalized India, then project an uncritical celebration of inclusive belonging?

My interpretation of the film tells otherwise. The final spectacle of the film is especially interesting in my re-examination. It depicts the marginal working-class characters joining in the celebratory final dance within the marriage tent of the Vermas. Amidst torrential Delhi rains, the joyous dance can be the gesture of a utopic embrace uniting all in the soaking rains, while it can also refer to the washing out of any unities after grand celebrations. Ironically, Nair’s film concludes problematically by actually highlighting the flattening of socio-cultural differences in a dance as if it can sustain itself. Metaphorically, the wedding tent of Dubey’s labor (P. K. Dubey is the wedding planner) is not someplace that can shelter him and his family, but a space where he only has a momentary and limited entry. Thus, their final dance in the rain in unison with his clients, the Vermas, is but a symbolic gesture of a celebration around a grand wedding. It is not, exclusively, about extending that circle of belonging. In fact, Nair’s narrative teases out the cosmopolitan and multicultural assembly in *Monsoon Wedding*. While we can be appreciative of such a moment, I want to be critical of the dangers of this universalist notion. For one, cosmopolitanism can be symbolic of dispersal; it can also refer to a point of restriction that marks out the borders and boundaries of that dispersed group. This is maintained despite a momentary happy feeling that all is well in the interaction and dance between the dispersed groups—between communities in the center and those in the margins. As Jenny Sharpe argues in her seminal reading of Nair’s film, it “renders invisible the widening gap between rich and poor, urban and rural areas under India’s economic liberalization policy” (Sharpe 76), so that the all-uniting dancing in the rain at the film’s conclusion is utopic at best and disturbing at least.

I want to read this moment in the film within the wider context of cosmopolitanism—using it as an analytical tool to underscore the problematic universalizing of class-caste experiences within spaces that are plural, urban, and multicultural. This kind of celebratory simplicity, I

argue, is a critical myopia that disinvests ethical responsibilities of fostering belonging, while promoting a more sinister exclusivity leading to nativism. It overlooks ongoing struggles and mediations that structure our empirical experiences and articulations of identity. To my mind, interrogating and applying the concepts of cosmopolitanism can categorically help understand and develop the terrains of an ethical and empathetic community building across class, caste, and other socio-cultural and economic matrices. Within the realities of a growing global sphere, this kind of an interrogation can help support a global civic culture while laying the foundations of a cosmopolitan democracy. As an analytic exploring the possibilities of a multicultural and multi-religious coexistence beyond the limits of secular citizenship, my engagement opens up spaces to think of a just world on a more global scale. Thus, I take *Monsoon Wedding* as a premise marking tensions within group and individual interactions while exploring this potential of community building.

### The Film in Discussion

Nair seems to finely couch the complexities and nuances of social belonging amidst the camaraderie of an upper class/caste Punjabi-Hindu marriage set in Delhi with invitees from Canada, Australia, the United States, the Gulf countries, and the UK. Her cinematography provocatively includes themes, narratives, and characters rejuvenating the merriment of the big, fat Indian wedding, and the brand of Bollywood fantasy surrounding grand weddings. As Nair's "little, big movie" ("Nair commentary on *Monsoon Wedding*") unfolds, we see the quintessential North Indian Punjabi appetite for life reveal itself. At the center is upper-class heroine Aditi's wedding, starting from the four-day fanfare, the floral decorations, the *sangeet* or traditional Punjabi wedding songs, to the *mehndi*, food, shopping, and the arrival of invitees. Aditi, the bride, works in an advertising agency and is embroiled in an affair with her promiscuous boss. Her father, Lalit Verma is in the garment exporting business. Lalit is shown to be conscientious about his family, loving and generous; he is portrayed as the quintessential controlling patriarch with a heart of gold. Aditi's mother Pimmi is the commonplace, upper-class socialite. Their son, Aditi's younger brother, Rohan is an aspiring chef; Lalit thinks he should go to boarding school to develop 'enough' masculinity to forego of his feminine (or queer) sensibilities. Ria is Aditi's cousin from Lalit's side and lives with them. She aspires to be a creative writer and abhors the idea of Aditi's arranged marriage with Hemant. Aditi's groom, Hemant, is a software engineer settled in Houston, Texas. Then there is Tej *bhaisaab*, revealed to be Ria's molester and a member of Lalit's extended family from the USA. The marginal characters include wedding contractor P.K. Dubey, his crew, his mother, and the Vermas'

only domestic help and live-in maid, Alice. The repertory of characters is symptomatic of the familial, 'comforting,' typically patriarchal, and heterosexist set up of the upper middle class/caste Hindu family. Moreover, the film portrays a tension between tradition and modernity, love and sexuality through subplots and characters that nearly serve as alter egos to each other (see Sharpe 2005). The film is a montage of different but distinct relationships and developing identities thrown in the characteristically grand chaos of an urban Punjabi wedding (with undertones of a multicultural North Indian identity; in a mosaic of Hindi, English, and Punjabi that is spoken, sung, and celebrated).

Aditi and Alice's marriages work in contrast to one other. On the one hand, Alice is shown in a socio-economically and ethnically exiled situation from where she longs to claim a decent life and marriage for herself. On the other, Aditi is the chirpy, upper-class girl hopelessly entwined in a lurid affair with her married boss. For Aditi, the idea of marriage is a thing to be 'tried out' as she relishes her rights to a big wedding. Her marriage is in stark contrast with the simple marriage of hearts that Alice gets. Nair comically stitches in a shot showing Alice's groom's proposal with a floral heart of marigolds, and Aditi and her family being weighted down with flowers and floral decorations, also from marigolds. Perhaps, that is where the intersection of the realities of the two couples in the film begins. And ends.

As the two marriages are solemnized amidst pouring monsoon rains, Alice's groom, marriage contractor Dubey, comically chews on a marigold he decorated Aditi's marriage venue with. Although Alice and Dubey are invited inside the privileged circle of the fanfare of Aditi's marriage and join invitees from India, Muscat, Canada, London, New York, and Melbourne, uninhibitedly dancing in the rain, there is no reason to believe that Alice and Aditi transcend their socio-economic and cultural contexts and give in to a postnational euphoria, emulating a classless, borderless cosmopolitan oneness. They are simply a part of a community of different married women captured together, in a special and probably one time moment of conviviality. Once the fanfare of the four-day wedding concludes, things get back to usual. Aditi flies away from Delhi and settles down in Houston, and Alice, hopefully, retains her maid's job at the Vermas. The inclusion of motley characters in the film, from the local migrant laboring class in Alice or the somewhat nomadic crew of Dubey, makes clear that the upper middle-class Hindu Brahmins of the Vermas and the Kapoors never really incorporate their working-class/caste counterparts.

How do the Vermas define and contain the borders of their belonging? As the narrative unfolds, we see this contour defined in very simplistic terms. It is momentarily ruffled but settles down soon. For instance, would Ria—with her feminist sensibilities, her creative, independent self, and her defiance of patriarchal control (exerted by Tej *bhaisaab*), be celebrated for who she is, in the same breath as Aditi, the bride who listened to her parents and agreed to her arranged marriage?

Would the younger son and aspiring chef and dancer in the household be accepted if he came out as queer? We clearly see that this upper-class Delhi family has strict boundaries and family expectations. They expect daughters compliant with arranged marriages (Aditi), sons agreeing to be exiled in elite boarding schools (Varun), and child molesters and predators like Tej *bhaisaab* out of auspicious weddings. Cosmopolitan capitalists, such as Lalit and Pimmi Verma, who are also traditionally rooted, have no place for Tej *bhaisaab*. Their middle-class and heterosexist complacency, however, soon take over and the moral universe settles down with Aditi's 'perfectly' arranged marriage. Tej is included in Aditi's wedding photograph more willingly before Lalit disavows him. In a way, Lalit's kinship values are shown to be greater than Tej *bhaisaab*'s financial power. Lalit confronts him in front of a picture of Ria's father and ascertains his patriarchal hold by metaphorically rescuing Ria's (and her niece, Alia's) honor. By the conclusion of the film, Ria escapes her abuser in the older Tej and finds a savior in Umang, based in London. Aditi meets the honest, liberal, and righteous Hemant, the Non-Resident Indian (NRI) rescuing Aditi—the victim of a manipulative affair, from her boss, Vikram. The Vermas' middle-class ethos valuing higher education, class mobility, wealth, and a sense of moral and familial responsibility make them seem like the torchbearers of egalitarian middle-class personal and national progress. Ironically, they look down upon the underclass they employ as lazy, untrustworthy, and part of the problem. So, there are scenes where Lalit Verma exasperatedly talks to the wedding planner, chides him for his decoration, punctuality, and work ethic. Dubey charily dodges him, reminding him of payments not made, with estimates out of range in the construction of the 'grand' wedding tent.

As a marriage contractor and a working-class man on the rise in urban Delhi, Dubey is in possession of a cell phone. He takes good advantage of the technology at hand. No longer only submissive to the master-slave, rich-poor equation, Dubey uses technology to his advantage. Nair shows Dubey perched high up on a floral decoration trying to talk to his clients and then climbing down to reconnect—blaming the cell phone network for poor customer service! In this case, Dubey uses technology to connect to his rich, upper-class clients or to avoid them when necessary. In another shot, we see Dubey convincing Lalit Verma of his professionalism by drawing out a huge laundry list of items since he admittedly works in "foreign style list" (*Monsoon Wedding*). As Verma remains exasperated with Dubey, the latter starts using his wristwatch calculator to come out with the exact figure that Verma now owes him for his decorations. In these instances, we see Dubey as a person with increasing mobility and access to technology, using them for his own ends and who unscrupulously keeps his upper-class clientele in check. Nair incorporates a moment where Dubey laughingly mentions how a presumably rich guy wants a "Killinton-wala" (Clinton-like) *mandap* without Clinton-like funds! Dubey's double-edged barb—his awareness of who Clinton is and how rich they might be, coupled with his mocking

Clinton analogy for his Indian clientele—insinuates that older and neatly compartmentalized hierarchies are getting destabilized. Dubey unassumingly renegotiates class boundaries and characterizes himself as a legitimate and key player within larger capitalist systems. But, is 'Dubey' (here I am taking his character as a representative of the underclass) a fitting match to infiltrate the protective enclave of opulence and certainty the Vermas possess?

### Cosmopolitan in Theory: Problems Raised in *Monsoon Wedding*

In examining these scenes, I am critical of the ethical and realistic positionality of being cosmopolitan. European in its genealogy and critical episteme, the default mode of cosmopolitanism is still western. Thus, any trajectory to expand the notion must include marginalized figures, such as women or characters minoritized due to class, race, sexuality, or language. Not only helpful in reterritorializing the dominant field of identity politics by adding this heterogeneous matrix, the term cosmopolitanism can refer to translocal characters (in minority positions) that expand the notion of interconnectivity. Furthermore, an engagement with the empirical experiences of minority subjects raise critical awareness as it makes way for disrupted, asymmetric presences that create the possibility of an opened-up space fostering cross-cultural contacts. Within this locus, I am engaging with minority characters within the main narrative of the film and their contact points with the major characters. Through this framework, I can critique the Western notion of cosmopolitanism and the theories advanced about it while being more optimistic about the fluid and complex understanding of the minority characters. Generally speaking, the ambivalence of literary studies on the film along a cosmopolitan analytic have been few. In these interventions, *Monsoon Wedding* became a site to inquire on gender and female sexuality complicating the urban landscape of India and Bollywood films in general. Cultural studies scholar Jigna Desai reveals how in the genre of wedding films, *Monsoon Wedding* deploys a "feminist sexual agency" (Desai 33). Later, Desai connects a significant body of South Asian diasporic films to indicate a further exploration of feminist and queer understandings of transnational cultural studies.

Desai also delves into discussions on the recuperative nature of a feminine sexual agency and its utterance within heteronormative and traditional patterns of Indian womanhood through her analysis of Aditi, her cousins Ayesha and Ria, and a segment on Alice (224-6). For Alice too, as Desai points out, it is Dubey who brings promise and joy, as Alice is seen in the film "almost entirely from the voyeuristic gaze modulated through Dubey" (226). Such a reading risks the question of sexual agency Desai proposes while raising hopes for potential in transnational cultural productions that explore alternative forms of sexual agency outside the

heteronormative pattern. I am also aware of Jenny Sharpe's critique of the film. She underscores the tenets of the global Indian identity that crossover films such as *Monsoon Wedding* depict as she connects them to nationalistic belonging in India (62). With a gendered focus, both scholars examine sites of feminist (and queer) interventions in reading Nair's film. Other scholars, such as Mythili Rajiva (2010) look at the "colonial past's influence on contemporary South Asian identity in both homeland and immigrant contexts" (Rajiva 213) by exploring South Asian father-daughter relationships. While missing out on the absent fathers (here Alice's dad, Dubey's father), Rajiva's study is more conforming of a certain kind of parenting (fathering) that is associated with patriarchs like Lalit Verma. Her study connects middle/upper-class Indians defining their status quo with a colonial baggage, the knowledge of English (Rajiva 216), while glossing over any mention of the distinct dialect of the Dubeyes and Alices and the ways it connects to colonialism and belonging in current India. Starting from Desai's critical premise, I reexamine sites of cosmopolitan and plural belonging; and I take my cue from Sharpe who asks, mentioning the film's closing scene: "[A]re we to understand [it] as a gesture toward a classless society" (Sharpe 74)? In my argument, I also attend to Gita Rajan's essay (2006) on tropes of contesting South Asian masculinity where she observes the strategic power and privilege of the diasporas—those created through laboring classes and those through privileged travel (see Rajan 1118-19).

Within this analytic, I am interested to see how *Monsoon Wedding* engages the cosmopolitan vision. How then is the vision of a minority filmmaker (Nair in Hollywood) for minority characters within a group of transnational and translocal migrants assembled in a cosmopolitan city (Delhi, where the film is set) centered on a wedding? Referring to theories of cosmopolitanism in my analysis, I rely on a comparative mode of knowledge, so I am able to diverge from and engage with the way Western ideals function within an understanding of cosmopolitanism in a global and postcolonial world.

Kwame A. Appiah calls cosmopolitan values paradoxical due to ambiguously trying to be inclusive and exclusive at once. He proposes a cosmopolitan ideal that is "congenial" (*Ethics* 220). Indeed, Appiah assumes that the cosmopolitan project cannot proceed without the willingness to initiate being cosmopolitan (*Ethics* 220). This is to say that the self-will to be plural can make way for developing a cosmopolitan identity. If this were true, are rural migrant laboring classes, also cosmopolitan in the *same* way as Verma—playing golf in Delhi and sharing details of his next consignment to Macy's, USA with his golf buddy? Without acknowledging the politics of location, access, and socio-economic positionality, being cosmopolitan gets decontextualized from capitalist and neocolonial realities. Thus, the same kind of movement in trade, commerce, and socio-economic mobility that works for Verma and their relatives in Muscat, Australia, London, or their relations through marriage in the USA, is not congenial or favorably located for, say, an

Alice or a Dubey—who go around from state to state, rural-suburban-to urban in search of subsistence. For them, the movement is more about survival and sustenance than a privileged access for upward mobility and economic capital. The groups of migrants that Alice or Dubey represent along with the elite group that the Verma family upholds are both actors in the local and global economy. In the interactive space created by the global economy and symbolized in a plush wedding, lies a yoking together of two parallel socio-economic strands united by national origin that hinge on the forces of globalization. It creates objects and identities in flux—unequally related to one another through economics.

This creates a temporary fantasy for the cosmopolitan ideal but, ultimately, it is the product of global capitalism that fosters an unequal hierarchy of production, accumulation, and distribution. When we first meet the migrant laborer from Bihar, flaunting her religious identity prominently around her neck, she who does not have a last name and is called Alice—the Verma's maid, we hear Bollywood songs of yore in the background. Old Mohd. Rafi songs, "aaj mausam bara baiman hain, aaj mausam..." or "ankhon ki ankhon mein ishara ho gaya..." Roughly translated to English, these opening lines of popular Bollywood lyrics mean: "it is a treacherous season of love" and "these eyes hint desiringly" respectively. These snippets complement Alice as she serves as a foil to Aditi through her location, her limited sociocultural, economic positionality, and geocultural mobility, and her limited access to urban media and culture. In numerous scenes related to the marriage elaborations, Alice is always present on the fringes—serving tea, cleaning the room, working in the kitchen, or helping out during a power outage. In a way, Alice embodies the clash of culture and modernity within the Verma household.

Appiah prescribes an ethical and a partial cosmopolitanism that values all lives to include others who are not a part of a majoritarian political and cultural order (*Ethics* 222-223). He supports a moral epistemology—respect for human values, respect for humanity, and a wider consensus about sharing human rights. In the context of finding these common grounds of shared humanity in *Monsoon Wedding*, we are disappointed but not surprised. Dubey does not share interactions with Verma outside details and payments related to arrangements in Aditi's wedding tent and decorations. Alice and Aditi do not share any moments either. We wonder if Ria and Alice may have developed any spaces of conversations. The working-class, local, migrant laborers included as a fringe in Nair's narrative — the characters of Dubey, Tamizuddin, Lottery, Alice, and Yadav — are a group of people who continually challenge and put into question this liberal humanist question related to cosmopolitan belonging.

Initially, Alice and Dubey meet shortly during the time when the stock-market literate, cell phone wielding, self-styled event management guru, Dubey, takes a dinner break with his team of tent haulers and flower decorators. Later they have a formal introduction, where Dubey comments



about Alice's "English name" and shares with her his business card and e-mail. As Dubey introduces himself, "Parbatlal Kanhaiyalal Dubey" short for "P.K. Dubey" or "Dubey-ji," we realize that he too, like Alice, is a migrant from Bihar, although, in Nair's commentary on the film, Dubey represents a "man on the rise" (Nair). Interestingly, the South Eastern state of Bihar is lower down in the Indian national index in earnings, development, and per capita income. Notoriously touted as one of the poorest and most corrupt of the Indian states, Bihar becomes, in Nair's nuanced urban cartography, a space whose mobile laborers seek a better life by transmigrating to urban metropolitan centers like Delhi. Thus, Dubey and Alice embody people from two strata of the same class—both translocal migrants from the same region, both in transition from their social milieu, with Alice having a greater lack of social mobility than Dubey because of her gender and professional context. In Alice, viewers find a perfect blend of the transition from tradition to modernity, with the former more predominantly expressed. She represents the "*sahaj-si, sidhi-si ladki*" or "simple and decent woman" whom the upwardly mobile and aspirant Dubey longs for in a wife. In their union, region, class, and cultural associations play a more crucial factor than religious divide. Notably, Dubey is a Hindu and Brahmin last name, while Alice's "English name" along with the shot of a cross on her necklace defines her as an Indian Christian. As they meet in the interstices of the urban and the rural, the local and the global, the traditional and the modern, Nair dynamically shows how these two out-of-place characters are connected to the pivot point of transnational cinema.

The latter, borne out of an intersection of the local and the global, has a plural approach to understanding the impacts of history on contemporary experiences of immigration, exile, technology, tourism, or belonging. In these two characters, Nair shows the way through which transnational cinema provides a context for questioning and analyzing the play of local identities in a global world that is interconnected with factors of urban belonging. The urban traffic to belong is a two-way street after all, with the homogeneously rich forming a major part followed by the lower class-in-flux segment. Thus, in Nair's matrix of representation in a transnational world, a mobile and confident Aditi from urban Delhi, and a Hemant from Houston are transnational subjects whose socio-cultural positionality enables them to become players who circulate capital. Couples like Alice and Dubey are subjects who are circulated by capital in the global marketplace. In Nair's filmography, these characters work as capitals' byproducts in a postindustrial society. It is hard to ignore them, but easy to exclude them as the Vermas tighten their boundaries of solidarity. As Gita Rajan points out in her study of the film, the "local relations to labor and production hold this couple," Dubey and Alice, "firmly down, reiterating that they are not ready to be circulated for global consumption" (1118). Dubey and Alice are the 'new' working-class couple, partaking in the momentary song and dance of the privileged Hemant and Aditi, although

denied "unlimited access" to socio-cultural and economic opportunity with them (see Rajan 1119).

Literary critic Sangita Gopal reads this crossover diasporic film as a spectacle celebrating "the rites and rituals of Hindu marriage" along with popular Hindi cinema, this time enticing the global mainstream (Gopal 62). Gopal importantly argues that this kind of a film rescues the insecurities of overseas Indian families who fear that globalization can erode traditional Indian family values (Gopal 62, 67). These films, Gopal maintains, link the diaspora to the nation and cement the anxieties of the urban middle class about traditional 'Indian' values and ideas of identity and belonging. While I agree with Gopal's reading of Nair's film, it is important to question the ways in which the diaspora has been able to engage with groups within it. Apparently, the overseas Indian diaspora is as heterogeneous as the group of people we meet on screen in Nair's film, distinguished by caste, class, and belief systems. Ascertaining the homogeneity of the diaspora and its values are as naïve as universalizing the experiences of those who occupy its margins at home or outside. On the question of values that the film evokes, earlier criticisms of Patricia Uberoi (2006) or Sujata Moorti (2003) refer to the quintessential family and communal identities articulated. The default position of the family as an institution upholding Indian culture, according to them, integrates the diversity and superiority of Indian culture in conditions of postmodern anxieties. Taking a cue, Daniela Berghahn's "Romance and Weddings in Diaspora" read the representation of family and family values in *Monsoon Wedding* as a participant "in the project of global Bollywood" while it sutures "the diaspora to the motherland" (175). In this visualizing, there is a liberal celebration of an incredible, egalitarian India. Berghahn notes from the exuberant dancing in the final scene, a cinematic representation of "the extended Verma family as a microcosm of India in which class, caste, and religion have been overcome" (174). Even though family and kinship values organize the central theme of Nair's film, it is not beyond contestation. This is because capitalist consumption with its heterogeneous Janus head of inequality, opulence, and incredulity cannot be glossed over. This is shown in the way Nair constructs the subplot—silencing some characters and their portrayals as others dominate the narrative space.

In the allure of the lavish wedding industry in the film is a conspicuous consumption and display of opulence. Validating the urban middle-class affluence with the Verma family, however, can endorse an extravagance denied to others who work to sustain this spectacle. Alice can only toy and desire Aditi's bridal finery; she can never actually enjoy it. Since Alice's desires transcend barriers of class and socio-cultural-economic positionality, to be an equal to Aditi is deviant and transgressive. Her desires are only to be played in stealth when no one is in the room, while Dubey and his crew gaze at her from outside Aditi's window. They cannot come in, neither can Alice be like Aditi in the open and in front of everyone. Alice's heteronormative longing for life and love through marriage and her womanly desires come to the fore when she puts

on Aditi's jewellery while cleaning her room on the day of her wedding. Long shots of Alice's posing with her *pallu* (the free end of the sari) over her head like a coy bride and her reflections, while wearing Aditi's jewels, in Aditi's mirror, and voyeuristically modulating herself through Dubey's desirous gaze, may also be read as a symbol of her nascent sexuality, and a subversive and transgressive action within the strict domestic hierarchy of the Verma house. When Dubey's team mock her as a "*chor*" (thief) and she runs the risks of her employers knowing of her not-so-secret longings, we see Alice intimidated and uneasy. She has knowingly overstepped boundaries in her employer's household. Although she is a member of the house, her desires and longings to be a part of her employer's class implies that she is silenced, distinct, and excluded from their circle. Furthermore, in any class or gender-based analyses, characters like Alice also need to be studied historically and socially within the context of power relations that create and/or redefine them.

Alice's muted sexuality is particularly relevant for analysis. It is a terrain through which she is defined for the audience. This becomes more relevant in the mirror-scene, where she admires her bejeweled self. Although Sharpe and Desai associate Alice's figure as an antithesis to the modern Aditi, the scene in Aditi's room which involves Dubey's lustful gaze, portrays Alice's sexual potential while underscoring how that is controlled and curbed by her socio-economic status in the Verma household and in the narrative itself. In a Foucauldian sense, Alice's sexuality is disciplined and controlled by the family of her employer since none of her family is mentioned. Coincidentally, Alice is silent in the company of her employers. She only speaks in the presence of Dubey and his community. The boundaries are set and are perennially put in place—never to be dislodged. Ironically, one may think that Alice's situation changes with marriage but it does not quite. For Alice, her social rehabilitation with Dubey does not make her an autonomous part of the socio-cultural economy but becomes a process of repositioning her in a re-constituted patriarchy, this time headed by Dubey. Her marriage with Dubey reinstates her within the heterosexual marital code of female sexuality. Her sexuality would once again be controlled, molded, and contained within parameters that Dubey will determine. Thus, she will have to fulfill the "*sahaj-si, sidhi-si*" role Dubey likes to think of for his wife.

It is the compulsion of their livelihoods that bound them to their spaces and also to each other. While Alice's marriage does not entail much literal (or metaphorical) movement, the Verma wedding does. So, traveling members of the extended Verma family—from Canada, Australia, Muscat — are not in the same position as the local laborers and domestic helps who sustain the functionality of the household and make the wedding possible. The NRI Texan groom in Hemant is a groom as much as the Bihari groom in Dubey. Although each exists in non-confrontational cinematic spaces, they are in empirical spaces of separation and inequality. Their desires to be grooms to brides are the only

indices that unite them in a narrative of inequity. The different travelers in the narrative bring in the concept of peripheral cosmopolitanisms— involving a disparate set of migrants—not privileged through travel but undertaking to migrate in conditions of economic desperation. They are dispersed, and in constant interaction with others like them within that space of movement and transition.

Paul Gilroy's *Postcolonial Melancholia* presents a vociferous engagement with race, racial tensions, and colonialist structures that sustain a rampant imperialism in the garb of ameliorative cosmopolitanism, in the context of Black British urban culture. Gilroy mentions that the ideal involves “the bloodstained workings of racism” (4) and that imperial expansion of the Europeans had tainted the concept by consolidating and managing “resulting imperial orders” (Gilroy 5). Critical of closed enclaves of markers of identity which he sees as a sign of imperial melancholia, Gilroy opens up the redemptive possibilities in thinking of a postcolonial mixture of cosmopolitanism. He envisions an ambivalent, planetary, chaotic, unmoored, and radical space of conviviality. Taking popular cultural productions as representations of this conviviality, Gilroy tacitly argues that without travel, there is no dynamism in culture, and without the latter, there is no conviviality. So, Gilroy pushes for circulating the idea of social ethical processes within cultures that call for empathy, cohabitation, and recognition of the stranger or, of alterity. According to Gilroy, it is the fluid space of conviviality that can emancipate conditions of imperial melancholia bearing the mark of colonial inequality. This open space of easy interaction is not risk-averse. In fact, it can swing from forging alliances to promoting stultifying and alienating systems of hierarchy.

In the scheme of things involving the movement of capital, class, and wealth, disparity is reified when contrasting economic spaces come into contact. For example, Lalit Verma's entrepreneurial abilities are discussed in passing with his golf buddy as they discuss finances for his daughter's wedding. A consignment to Macy's can salvage Lalit's perilous finances. By implication, Lalit's garment business is indicative of nonwestern sweatshops immediately benefitting his family while sustaining global corporates in the long run. A reference to the players of global capital also glosses over those that sustain the system of capital—migrant laborers, workers, and unnamed underpaid producers whose empirical experiences are missing from the wedding but without whom there will be no wedding. The uneven distinction within both groups and classes become markedly conspicuous when we note the lack of easy camaraderie when these communities interact (only when they have to). So, the ease of interaction Aditi has with her cousin Ria or with her fiancé, Hemant is absent in any interaction with Alice or Dubey. While Aditi and Alice are never shown speaking to each other, wedding planner Dubey's interactions with Lalit Verma disrupt and distinguish the socio-economic and cultural boundaries that Alice can neither transcend nor question. From Gilroy's connotation,

these interactions within the space of the film, whether forced or out of necessity, are not symptomatic of the convivial.

In scenes of Aditi's shopping trip with Ria, we see long shots of billboards and insinuating flashbacks of the urban underbelly of Delhi. They encapsulate the diversity of urban life, while working as metaphors helping us to transition from one distinct and interconnected socio-economic system to the other, letting us glimpse into the complex picture created by the meshing of the rich and the poor, the diaspora and the nation, the traditional and the modern, brought together by a monsoon wedding. In Nair's non-linear narrative structure in the film, these long shots also create the simultaneity of spaces. These are moments that open up instances where the minorities and/or working-class people express themselves or are expressed within the majority and/or moneyed class or within their own groups. However, there is no direct and willing interaction outside of the economic dimension.

In referring to economic migrations, we must be careful to note the dynamism that characterizes it. Both translocal migrations (due to necessity especially from those constructed as minority or indigenous) and transnational migrations (more prevalent, in postmodernity, among those who have access) imply a kind of border crossing, both across and between dominant and dominated groups. Dubey and his team members and Alice represent this group of translocal migrants within the greater diaspora that constitutes India. They represent the minority within this structure and their relationship within the matrix of power wielded by communities such as the Vermas. Avtar Brah argues that the concept of diaspora space “centres on the *configurations of power which differentiate diasporas internally as well as situate them in relation to one another*” (617; italics in original). For instance, groups of migrants denoted by the Vermas or those by Dubey are in relational positionality to each other. Power play is indexed here by money, accessibility, and, to a large extent, proficiency in English as a cultural-economic status quo. Power dynamics through wealth and stability emplace the dominant characters within their social relations while inscribing their identities with minor characters. Brah, however, is reserved in her concept of minority inclusion (Brah 621-22). In signaling the unequal power relations involving minority identities located on the periphery of cultures, she is more attentive to relational positioning of diasporas instead of the more crucial and contextual areas that illuminate internal diaspora spaces (see Brah 622). She then argues on engaging with “complex arrays of continuities and contradictions; of changing multilocality across time and space” (Brah 623). Brah does not add the necessary context of the conditions of such migrations that configure minority spaces in the same diaspora or that trigger border-crossings within that diaspora. Neither is there more contextualisation of the violence that involves any migration. Scholars like Gayatri Gopinath (see *Impossible Desires*) and Jigna Desai (*Beyond Bollywood*) have contributed significantly to locating gender and sexuality within diaspora and in cultural studies, Brah's early work runs the risk of depoliticizing

the nature of the diaspora and its internal dynamics by decentralizing both these factors and the question of minority presence in diasporic space. Nonetheless, in applying her critical framework, we see border crossers in the mobile-literate Dubey, in the email-familiar Alice, or the motley crowd of wedding decorators whose existences are reliant on an unequal power dynamics wielded by the Vermas and their ilk.

In another concept of becoming cosmopolitan, Homi Bhabha argues for vernacular cosmopolitanism (1994, 1996), which presupposes universal, liberal notions to the category while conveniently eliding migrant subjectivities in local and global settings coerced into travel and displacement. In romancing the cosmopolitanism of the global migrant (including the one he professes) in his secular liberal individualism, calling for peace, solidarity, and the development of an ethical consciousness, Bhabha excludes a more nuanced study of the processes or events that can bridge the gap between the elite migrant and the laboring class migrant. He notes that the liberal secularism that generates and sustains a situated cosmopolitanism in the interstitial spaces of movement is ultimately a subaltern project: “[W]hat we need is a ‘subaltern’ secularism that emerges from the limitations of ‘liberal’ secularism and ‘keeps faith’ with those communities and individuals who have been denied and excluded from the egalitarian and tolerant values of liberal individualism” (Bhabha 204). The notion of being cosmopolitan from below or a conceptual tool recognizing subaltern cosmopolitanism, however, is not as engaged in this theorizing. How does nativism work within these apparently ameliorative settings? In fact, being cosmopolitan in this utopic (Eurocentric) worldview is sustained by an elitist envisioning and through a cultural relativism blatantly disregarding structures maintaining inequality in this local-global network. In an earlier version of the essay, written in 1994 as a *Preface to the Routledge Classics Edition*, Bhabha presupposes that a vernacular cosmopolitanism is a “political process that works *towards* the shared goals of democratic rule, rather than simply acknowledging already constituted ‘marginal’ political entities or identities” (1994, xviii; italics in original).

Bhabha's call to self-reflexivity, peace and solidarity between communities of cosmopolitans implies a conscious inclusion and engagement between subjectivities in the periphery and those in the center. In Bhabha, it is in these utopic and transformative interactions that the ethics of cosmopolitan subjectivity may be envisioned. So, marginal communities have the responsibility to enable ethical and convivial interactions within cosmopolitan spaces. While such an imposition on minority identities is a liberal oversight, the exoneration of the liberal elite in symbiotically and strategically investing in commingling, constitutes an oversight. For the reference, such attempts, while celebratory and liberating, are precociously attempted but precisely withdrawn in *Monsoon Wedding*.

Thus, in scenes involving the Delhi family engaged in their daughter's marriage, welcoming their globetrotting relatives can imply tenets of

Indian hospitality, middle-class opulence, and consumer capitalism, but they elide instances of real interactions outside of their economic class and community. Scenes of the contractor and his team eating and chitchatting occur in a different space, outside of the Verma home limits. Moreover, Dubey and his team's distinct linguistic flavor, dialect, and speech pattern, Alice's linguistic exclusion from Aditi, Ria, or Pimmi sew the markings of social hierarchy. This tight structure defeats any universal or romantic sense of belonging, and ironically, widens its circle instead of narrowing it.

In Bhabha's theorizing, it should be Dubey, his team, and all minority migrants who should reach out in sustaining cosmopolitan solidarities while the group of the Vermas and the Kapoors can only extend their hand to join them in a celebratory dance. Even if for the sake of debate, had the minorities initiated the process of cosmopolitan belonging, would that then be only limited to their being in the urban space of labor-exchange? If Dubey is a dispensable labor migrant, it is the ebb and flow of consumer capitalist desires that make his labor visible and necessary. Thus, if Alice had found livelihood in her native state, Bihar, would she still move out of her home state? Where then is the catalyst to move and mingle to create cosmopolitan solidarities from below? Any sweeping theory on inclusivity and intermixing needs to acknowledge the real contingencies of the conditions of interactions across socio-economic classes. In Nair's vision, cosmopolitan belonging becomes a mobile tribute to the landscape of urban, neoliberal India where Western cities (here it is Houston, Texas where Hemant lives) and their glamor fade away to the ebullience of the plural/nonwestern moments. This new equation seems to reset class distinctions as a momentary delusion so that a 'big, fat, Indian' wedding can take place.

In fact, animating the idealisms of cosmopolitanism that is performed in a cityscape also lays bare the immobility and stagnation of these spaces for some people. Ideals of moving out, moving up, or moving in are insulated and protected categories only meant for strategically situated communities. This tight structure undermines the security that the notion of a borderless classless cosmopolitanism can provide. Ignoring global structural inequalities with the complacency and privilege of the rich and alienated also symptomizes a vagrant dehistoricization supporting neoliberal corporatization. So, understanding the causes of labor migration, employment patterns, and local infrastructure is as much to be scrutinized before any liberal indulgence in cosmopolitan idealisms. While 'situating cosmopolitanism' (a term I borrow from Bruce Robbins) calls into attention the contexts and conditions of travel and displacement, its structure is more complicated. Robbins's essay "Comparative Cosmopolitanisms" talks about metropolitan intellectuals as transmitters of cosmopolitan ideals who insist on plurality, "dispersed but real forms of membership, a density of overlapping allegiances" (Robbins 173). Robbins indicates the lacuna in studying "situatedness-in-displacement"

(173) that may well lead to a responsible, located, and ethical humanist politics (see Robbins 176).

### Conclusion: Towards a Cosmopolitan Future

In retrospect of the categories of the cosmopolitan, especially, when it comes to understanding the distribution of global economic labor, Robbins throws an important conjecture. He calls it "discrepant cosmopolitanisms" (Robbins 181). It is a premise for developing shared knowledge with diverse cultures and communities that help resist the partiality of western universalism. Privileging the empirical over the conceptual, Robbins talks about the possibility of making cosmopolitanism a real, historical, particular process of "overlapping syncretisms and secularisms" (Robbins 182) with the added possibility of fostering ethical, global civic spheres. Even though Robbins primarily reworks the issue on US multicultural debates along with a resurgent debate on US ethnonationalism, a critical focus on postcolonial states and income inequality seem to have been limited in his theorizing. In other words, Robbins includes cosmopolitan postnationalism by superseding postcolonial realities. This can lead one to a postnational version of the cosmopolitan ideal that supports and advocates for basic welfare and human rights within a wider group. Thinking along these lines, I take my cue from Priya Kumar's *Limiting Secularism*, where she proposes the notion of civic solidarity within disparate groups to foster shared spaces, responsibility, and on building networks based on common civilities. She says that the debate about cosmopolitanism has to look beyond the "national-transnational binary" (Kumar 51). In widening the compass of the cosmopolitan societal network, Kumar also invokes the Derridean concept of hospitality. The latter refers to a structure of unconditional hospitality, demanding that the host shows an absolute "relinquishment of all claims to mastery and ownership" (Kumar 53). This means that our responsibility to the other is inextricably connected to the idea of social justice. While Kumar acknowledges the idealism of this Derridean ethos, on an aesthetic level, she concludes, this is an inspirational model for envisioning a functional context of social justice.

Ultimately, following Kumar's lead, we can think of more just and wider worlds that can home disparate communities under the same tent. So, the Vermas and the Dubeys can coexist. As the wedding host in a just and cosmopolitan space, Verma then needs to initiate the process of engaging and including all and sundry. His mutual respect and hospitality can help sustain a home-space away from the restrictive and limiting arenas that he currently inhabits. In this space of community and solidarity, David Hollinger's concept of solidarity is especially relevant. For him, "solidarity is an experience of willed affiliation" (Hollinger 24), it is "a state of social existence more specific than what 'community' has



come to mean” (Hollinger 24). For Hollinger then, solidarity for a just social order is a broader alliance not restricted through kinship.

In the context of *Monsoon Wedding*, kinship relationships are complicated if we think of the reasons for their socio-economic and cultural positionalities. The household of *Monsoon Wedding* is characterized by the forces of colonial and neocolonial histories (and geographies). The dimensions of characters and callings of Dubey, Verma, Hemant, Pimmi, Aditi, and others are possible due to colonial, feudal, neocolonial structures of inequality, access, and privilege. So, interconnections through kinship relationships are not as deeply entrenched in the envisioning of these characters and their interrelationships as the social, economic, cultural, and historical interconnections that emplace (and privilege or deny) them in relation to each other. As we dwell on the nature of the dimensions of hospitality transcending kinship ties, what then are the dimensions of hospitality in the transnational South Asian context? Are they different and secular in intent? Is there an alternative to the Derridean notion? While it is beyond the scope of this essay to underscore the dimensions of this hypothetical and just global order, it is feasible to see that symbolic, emotional attachments through empathy and humanity create solidarities and promote cosmopolitan democratic alignments.

The significance of cultural representation lies in opening mediatory spaces to analyze interactive areas within multiple social spheres. Interactions that are reciprocated, instead of being passive and closed, make way for this civil and cosmopolitan space, even if these spaces are fragmented and heterogeneously situated. Recognizing the common dignity of everyone can foster such a kind of a plural civic sphere of belonging. Perhaps, Aditi and Alice getting together in a dance while singing different songs of feminine solidarity from their communities can seal the space. One could also see the tent as becoming emblematic of the collaboration enacted across communities and classes created by the Vermas, Kapoors, and the Dubeyes. The Berkeley Repertory’s musical I referred to in the beginning forces us to revisit the film along these lines to critically think about recasting belonging (and nonbelonging) while underscoring that conscious boundaries can often result in a pushback. The happy dance may well become a *tandav* (Shiva’s mythical dance of destruction), unless there is a simultaneous ethical and conscious effort to widen the circle of belonging.

## Notes

1. See *The Guardian*’s ranking here: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/gallery/2013/jan/12/world-cinema-pictures> from 2013.

2. According to Joshi, 'Bollylite' refers to "*specific forms from Bombay that have captured the interest of U.S. audiences*" (Joshi 245; italics in original).

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