

Pospíšil, Tomáš

Sam and Me, Masala and Double happiness : multicultural experience in Canadian film of the early 1990s

Brno studies in English. 2007, vol. 33, iss. 1, pp. [185]-198

ISBN 978-80-210-4559-0

ISSN 1211-1791

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/104447>

Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

Terms of use: Digital Library of the Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University provides access to digitized documents strictly for personal use, unless otherwise specified.

TOMÁŠ POSPÍŠIL

***SAM AND ME, MASALA AND DOUBLE HAPPINESS:*
MULTICULTURAL EXPERIENCE IN CANADIAN FILM
OF THE EARLY 1990S**

The article examines the representation of multicultural experience in Canadian film of the early 1990s. Using three case studies of feature films made by Asian-Canadian filmmakers – *Sam and Me* (Deepa Mehta, 1991), *Masala* (Shrinivas Krishna, 1991), and *Double Happiness* (Mina Shum, 1994) – the text focuses on how up and coming minority filmmakers cinematically addressed various aspects of diasporic identity and identity formation.

Introduction

The Canadian multiculturalist films of the early 1990s – of which *Sam & Me*, *Masala*, and *Double Happiness* are the most well-known examples – offered important reformulations of the earlier cinematic depictions of the various ethnic and racial entities. They articulated a position of resistance to the earlier attempts at an easy categorization along the traditional lines of racial and ethnic stereotyping. In contrast to the prejudicial treatment of minority experience in earlier Canadian films such as *Secrets of Chinatown* (1935) or the propaganda documentary *Of Japanese Descent: An Interim Report* (1945) (Gittings 2001: 54–75), these films offered crucial alterations to the earlier dominant discourse. The marked change consisted particularly in the fact that the portrayed characters and their communities were no longer subject to a kind of ethnographic study, neither were they viewed from without as an indistinguishable, anonymous mass. Their experience was narrated from a position within the community and their world was populated by a range of diverse, nuanced and for the most part believable human characters.

The appearance of this group of films (along with Clément Virgo's *Rude* [1995], which deals with the African Canadian experience) can be related to the Canadian policies of multiculturalism, particularly following the passing of the Multicultural Act of 1988. Without public subsidy from institutions such as

the Ontario Film Development Corporation, Telefilm Canada, and Ontario Arts Council none of the films would have been made. This obvious connection has led to complaints that these institutions were “increasingly politicized, funding so-called ‘hyphenated Canadians’ and novices to boot”. Yet, as Eugene Walz put it, this can just as easily be regarded as a Canadian version of what Hollywood calls ‘niche-marketing’. Moreover, one can also argue that it is the very achievements of Mehta, Krishna and Shum that render such charges unfounded. Even a casual viewer of their films will notice that the filmmakers developed mature and complex narratives transcending the narrow definitional confines of an “ethnic feature” made by a striving hyphenated dilettante. For instance their multifaceted treatment of the theme of individual and group identity goes beyond the mere depiction of problems of ethnic subjects who struggle against the usual odds of economic hardship, prejudice and racism. Furthermore, their ingenious combining of elements from diverse film traditions (the Canadian realist tradition, Hollywood, and Bollywood etc.) indicates a deep cross-cultural awareness. Public support was indeed vital for the making of the films. However, in the service of what might be regarded as a politically correct cause their creators did not feel obliged to produce uncritical pieces of sycophantic propaganda. All three films suggest some quite uncomplimentary things about the life options of members of visible minority groups in Canada as well as about the general nature of Canadian commitment to multiculturalist principles.

A discussion of identity and identity formation in film obviously requires a definition of its central term. A person’s identity is understood as shaped by the intersecting aspects of one’s class, education, gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and religion, as well as by one’s relationship to the place where one is located. By its very nature subjective, never entirely fixed, identity is constantly in the making, predicated on a complex process of struggle over meaning within the larger social fields of interpersonal and institutional relationships – such as those between oneself and the other, oneself and one’s family and community, and oneself and one’s company or country. A discussion of the nature of identity is impossible without due attention to the wider question of its discursive formation by means of language and representation.

In the article, the following questions will be asked: What identity problems are highlighted as important for these hyphenated Canadians and what are their suggested solutions? How do the filmmakers describe their characters’ relationships to their respective families and communities as well as their interaction with mainstream society? What are the principal tensions between their personal and collective identities? And furthermore, what particular bearing do the films have on our general understanding of the Canadian nation?

Synopses

Sam and Me

“Premised on a *Driving Miss Daisy Tale* with no back seat” (Banning 1999: 294) this slice-of-life narrative captures the experience of a variety of Toronto ethnicities and contrasts the modest lives of recent immigrants from India with the experience of the more traditional and well-to-do Jewish family. At the center of the narrative we find the relationship of the twenty-five-year-old **Nikhil** (Ranjit Chowdhry) with the aged and mentally unstable Jewish entrepreneur **Sam Cohen** (Peter Boretski). Fresh from the plane, Nick is hired by Sam’s son **Maurice Cohen** to look after his father, who has the dangerous tendency to wander aimlessly through the night, let unlimited quantities of water run across the floor or dance naked in the rain on the suburban lawn outside the house. In the course of the film Sam and Nick’s mutual distrust morphs into affectionate friendship. Sam discovers in his “schwarze” companion a surrogate (grand)son, someone who is capable of taking up the vacated emotional place previously occupied by his estranged son; meanwhile, the gentle and sensitive Indian is capable of discerning that under Sam’s antics lies a tender soul. Sam, paradoxically, becomes the closest person he has in the new Promised Land. If Nick initially resents being a nurse – and accepts the job only upon the insistence of his sponsoring uncle – in the course of the narrative he develops a fond attachment to the unhappy senior. Being left to themselves for a night, Nick takes Sam to a lively party in the house where he stays. The white-haired guest has a wonderful time, but consequently faints and nearly dies. Nick is immediately fired and told to stay away; however, he deeply regrets the separation. Several days later Sam dies in a traffic accident (incidentally looking for Nick in the streets of his neighborhood). Mourning over the loss of his elderly friend, Nick comes once again to the Cohens’ house to express his condolences but is confronted only with Maurice’s prejudice and hostility. In the final sequence of the film we see him defying his **uncle Chetan** (Om Puri), who had originally sponsored his flight to Canada. Nick decides to pursue happiness in the new context on his own terms, free from Chetan’s narrow-minded and somewhat selfish guidance.

Masala

As can be inferred from the title, Shrinivas Krishna’s film *Masala* focuses likewise on the life of Canada’s Indian community in Toronto. The fast-paced, ironic, and at times eccentric satire involves the experience of an extended three-branch family that encompasses a variety of class affiliations. The savvy sari merchant **Lallu Bhai Solaski** (Saeed Jaffrey) is politically well-connected and very prosperous, while his brother-in-law **Hariprasad Tikkoo** (likewise Saeed Jaffrey) represents the less successful side of a potential Canadian career. Working at a post office, caring only for his stamp collection Mr. Tikkoo is drawing dangerously close toward eviction.

The third branch of the family is represented by **Krishna** (Shrinivas Krishna), the only surviving member, for his immediate kin lost their lives in the 1985 mid-air explosion of an Air India plane. Krishna is a hip young anti-establishment figure with an identity problem. Unlike the other members of the family who lead, for the most part, purposeful lives, Krishna is a mere drifter, not well adjusted to his environment. It is only through his emotional attachment to Mr. Tikoo's attractive daughter **Rita** (Sakina Jaffrey) that he appears to overcome his survivor's guilt and finds a way out of his restlessness. However, it is impossible to tell whether this was meant to represent a permanent turning point in his life for toward the end of the film he is killed in the street by a teenage racist.

In the multitude of colorful characters populating the world of *Masala* three more characters deserve to be mentioned: **grandma Tikkoo** (Zohra Sehgal), mother of the passive postman Hariprasad; **Lord Krishna** (likewise Saeed Jaffrey), blue-skinned comic book version of the most venerated Hindoo deity; and the **Minister of Multiculturalism Gerald** (Les Porter), a pragmatic white politician. When grandma asks Krishna to help the Tikkoo's out of their financial difficulties, the good-natured god arranges for the Tikkoo's to receive a dead letter with an ancient Canadian beaver stamp worth five million dollars. Initially, Mr. Tikkoo resists the authorities and refuses to relinquish the stamp for the benefit of the national heritage collection. Later, however, he consents to its permanent display at the newly erected museum of multiculturalism, a building designed – as the Minister of Multiculturalism puts it – “to truly celebrate Canadian diversity”.

Double Happiness

This coming of age story differs somewhat from the preceding films as it deals with the life of the local Chinese community. Set in Vancouver on the opposite coast, *Double Happiness* is a heartwarming tale populated by life-like characters. At the center of the narrative we find a family of four where typical conflicts between first and second generation immigrants are played out. The main protagonist is the twenty-one-year-old **Jade Li**, whose problems and life choices share numerous features with the actual experience of the director Shum. Jade – in an excellent Genie-winning performance by Sandra Oh – dreams of becoming a famous actress, while her parents would like her to marry a prosperous Chinese suitor from a good family. Jade and her younger **sister, Pearl**, speak without an accent and outside of their family world embrace the attitudes and values of mainstream society. At home, however, they play by the traditional rules and obey their autocratic father – **Dad Li**. Thus a conflict is in the making and erupts openly when Jade starts having an affair with **Mark**, a white university student. Unable to act according to her parents' traditional values, the likeable protagonist leaves her family. The final shots of the film present her in her newly rented empty studio, unsponsored but free, facing an uncertain future.

A related and highly relevant theme is the question of the mental images of one's original country and its values that one takes and cherishes while in the Diaspora.

For many expatriates time in their country of origin stops at the moment of their departure, only to be further worked upon by the distortions of memory. Jade's father thus maintains quite outdated notions about proper family arrangements based on his idealized version of the working of Chinese patriarchy, but his beliefs are revealed as obsolete not only by the next generation in the host country, but also by his brother – **uncle Ah Hong** – who visits from China. The fact that his brother is married for the second time and has a child with his much younger wife shows that family structures are no longer what Dad Li believes them to be.

The insiders, the outsiders, and the struggling

Characters, like people, are created to ask themselves the same set of age-old questions: Who am I? What do I want? Where have I been? Where am I going? How should I live?

The prosperous, upper middle class characters are portrayed as overcoming any possible racial or ethnic stigmatization of belonging to a visible minority. Krishna's uncle Lallu Bhai Solaski runs an upscale sari shop and maintains warm political ties with the new multicultural establishment. Being on first name terms with the Minister of Multiculturalism, Lallu Bhai in fact uses his minority status to further his own prosperity and to secure a successful future for his family – in the final sequences of the film we see him planning his son **Anil's** career, in which he wants Anil to become the next minister of multiculturalism. Jade's well-to-do arranged dates also seem to suffer more from the conservative expectations of their parents than from any negative feelings from majority society. (The problem of one of them, for instance, is his homosexuality, which his traditionally-minded parents find difficult to accept.) Paradoxically, the now "whitened" ethnic character of Maurice Cohen, who runs a successful medical supplies business, suffers from the anxiety of not fitting in, no matter how comfortable his present economic arrangement is. He is a little paranoid toward what he perceives as the white policemen's anti-Semitism, when in fact one of them only asks – in a more or less neutral voice – whether the song his father is singing is Jewish.

If the wealthy characters can acquire all the attributes of success in their new country and thus, for the most part, overcome any possible stigmatization (Lallu Bhai: "I know the world is unfair, but what's the point of vengeance? Look what you have in this country." (Krishna, script 41), the outsiders are denied such a possibility. Incidentally, their list is much longer. Typically presented as working class, their life options are circumscribed by their minority status, class affiliation and education. Father Li works as a porter or a security guard, Mr. Tikkoo is a postal worker – respectable jobs to be sure, but a far cry from the ambitions and prosperity of the promised land of yesteryear (Father Li's dream was to become an architect but the typical first generation problems interfered: language difficulties, the necessity of providing for the family, etc.). Nick, fresh after arrival, starts working at the bottom of the social scale as a nurse and servant. One might

hope that his standing will improve in time, but a casual look at Nick's lodging community tells a different story. Although these characters have been in Canada for years, the community consists largely of social outsiders and economic losers: an Indian cabdriver, a struggling would-be actor, who works as waiter, a Chinese takeout owner. None of these characters seems to be ascending along the mythical trajectory of success but merely moves in circles, waiting for a miraculous twist of fate. Nick's uncle Chetan gives voice to the disenchantment that the level of their material well-being provokes: they dream of making it, but look at them. As far as their future is concerned, he remains skeptical. Reacting to Nick's plan to work hard and make enough money for the air ticket for his mother, he asks angrily why Nick would be so foolish to do so: What for? "To clean the airport toilet? To become a servant to people who do not know you and do not want to know you?" According to Uncle Chetan's Canadian experience, the immigrants from Asia have to accept the meanest menial jobs, regardless of their education or skills. Therefore he plans to work hard for five years and with the earned money return home. Upon arrival – so his dream goes – he would be greeted with admiration.

Deepa Mehta does not succumb to the temptation to single out Nick from his immigrant community as an obvious candidate for success. In the final shots of the film we see him having defied his uncle, mourning the loss of Sam, contemplating the significance of this experience, and perhaps thinking about the future. If there is hope – he is young, sensitive, honest, hardworking, so there may be some, after all – it is uncertain at best.

An important figure among the outsiders is Krishna. His social position has not been forced upon him by his minority status, or by his lacking talent. His character suffers from a very bad karma (Krishna, notes). This manifests itself in various ways: by his restless nature that makes him singularly incapable of working at a regular job, by the feeling of guilt for having escaped certain death with the rest of his family, by the ineptitude he shows in failing to compromise and accept the well-meant options offered to him by his well-meaning relatives. It is wholly in tune with his youth rebel nature that he dies, stabbed in the back by a "Paki-hating" racist.

Located between the extreme poles of prosperity and failure are the characters of Rita, and Jade Li. Rita works as a clerk in a travel bureau, but talking calmly to capricious customers is hardly her idea of a permanent occupational pursuit. Likewise Jade only temporarily complies with her father's wishes, but as her ambition radically departs from his plans for her: she does not want to take a business course at the community center, nor does she want to get married to a husband from a good family. Rather, she dreams of succeeding on her own. Being able to determine her own life-choices (both professional and sexual) is her most important desire.

Ambitions, Desires, Dreams

Although Rita's and Jade's ideals have been severely tested at times, they have not given up trying and their ambitions soar high. Rita cherishes the dream of taking up flying lessons; Jade wants nothing less than an academy award. If the former challenges the gender stereotype, i.e. the false assumption – even on the part of her family – about female incapacity of becoming a pilot, the latter confronts racism in the media, i.e. the stereotypical media requirement of a particular look for a film star (not so distinctly Asian, preferably white, someone like Marilyn Monroe). Both girls face uncertain futures but success, no matter how distant, still remains a possibility. Viewed through the prism of these characters, however, Canada is a country without any guarantees. Alongside quite mundane and predictable wishes – such as Lallu Bhai's desire to become even more prosperous, the minister's desire to get re-elected, grandma Tikkoo's desire to equip her household with every thinkable electric gadget – , these are wishes that I would venture to call symbolic: Rita's desire to fly can obviously be interpreted metaphorically, just as Jade's dream of becoming a respected star. One character expresses a related wish quite literally. Having magically acquired the rare historic stamp, Hariprasad Tikkoo is not interested in the money it can bring; rather, he wants respect: "A planeload of people blow up and nobody in this country seems to care. I am beaten up on the street and nobody cares. But when I hold this stamp in my hands, people care" (Krishna, script 67).

The characters' dreams, desires and ambitions not only depend on their class or ethnic affiliations, they also depend on their ages. In *Sam and Me* a contradictory trajectory of desires between the two principal characters regarding the concept of the Promised Land can be discerned. For the newly arrived Nick it is Canada (the idea of "freedom, security, prosperity, the usual..."); for the well-established, ageing Sam it is Israel (the idea of the "full circle"). While one character wants to settle permanently in the country the other regards as prison, in other aspects they are quite complementary: if Nick lacks a father, Sam lacks a son. Sam's estranged son Maurice, unfortunately, no longer counts: the connection between them was lost somewhere in the past, under the strains of economic struggle in the new land. To make matters worse, Maurice cannot come to terms with the idea that in the world of Sam's heart he has been replaced by the "schwarze" boy.

Sam is not the only character to cherish an idealized picture of his country of origin. Similarly, Jade's father, looking back at the time of his youth, embraces an idealized mental image of the land of his ancestors. To be sure, he is not fond of the Chinese revolution, when his family's farm was confiscated. His admiration belongs to his father, who ran the farm well and supposedly understood everything; whatever he did was right. Father Li falls back on this idealized image because in his own family such strict patriarchal dominance is continually contested as his children embrace a different set of attitudes toward gender roles and the distribution of power within the family. Their values – shaped by their new host country – are much more democratic and egalitarian.

Whereas in the older characters – who in a sense have failed (Sam sold out to his estranged son Maurice and is quite dependent on him; Father Li lost two children and failed to become an architect) – the idea of the country of origin attains larger than life proportions, the younger characters do not subscribe to such illusions: although his Canadian experience may have fallen short of his expectations, Nick does not intend to return home. On the contrary, he attempts to pay for his mother's trip to Canada. For all the problems with dislocation, alienation, and adaptation, India is simply no longer attractive enough.

The Conflict of Cultures: Defying the Father Figures

Like *DH*, the other two films also portray hyphenated Canadian families as thoroughly patriarchal, the negotiation of one's relationship to the dominant father figure functioning as the source of the films' principle narrative tension. It is another important piece in the construction of one's identity. Nick arrives in Canada deeply indebted to uncle Chetan, who works for the Cohen's Medical Supplies Company. Chetan becomes Nick's chief advisor, employment agent and virtual boss. However, not sharing Chetan's rather egocentric world view Nick repudiates him in the final sequence of the film. Similarly, Jade defies her father, for which she has to leave her family: both characters pay for their resistance with initial loneliness as they are portrayed alone in their rooms. However, their isolation is not likely to last. The rebellious Krishna, too, defies his prosperous uncle Lallu Bhai. He intentionally embarrasses him in his social circles, neither heeding his advice, nor taking advantage of his social or political connections. Resistance on the part of the second generation to the first generation – represented solely by father figures – seems to be the crucial thematic element these features share.

At the heart of the conflict of traditions (and the resistance to patriarchy in the new cultural setting) we find the institution of marriage and the process of marriage formation. Both *Masala* and – in a somewhat more subdued form – *DH* present struggles over the practice of arranged marriages. The parents in both films favor it as they are convinced that only their superior judgment can secure their offspring's stable economic, social, and (to a lesser degree) sexual future. Krishna in *Masala* debunks the practice by portraying the two families as engaged in a straight-faced bargaining that reminds us less of a meeting of concerned parents over the emotional well-being and mutual future of their children, than of a company merger – or even a more dignified version of a cattle market; *DH* ridicules it subtly in two highly stylized scenes which present Jade entering – in slow motion – her prearranged dates' SUV and Mercedes Benz, respectively. With Jade disappearing into the sunset while the family is politely waving goodbye, one cannot miss the irony: an ordinary girl being taken away by a prosperous prince charming with a law degree and a potentially substantial checking account. However, having been brought up in a wider context where the pursuit of individual happiness is as legitimate a goal as the pursuit of financial

security, the children do not acquiesce: the superb bride in *Masala* refuses to get married to the intellectually feeble Anil and *DH*'s Jade falls in love with the white – and obviously not so prosperous – student, Mark.

More often than not, questions of marriage and questions of sex are related. Jade's one night stand with Mark is an act of resistance par excellence; also Krishna and Rita go after their mutually shared carnal pleasures regardless of the wishes (or concerns) of their family. Both films suggest that the right to have sex with a partner of one's choice is a fundamental bone of contention in the struggle between first and second generation minority Canadians.

And how does sexuality function in the world of *Sam & Me*? In certain respects Mehta ventures one step further for she hints at homoerotic practices in Nick's all male community, yet, in her film sex does not stand for individual liberation. On the contrary, it signals moral corruption. The film opens with a daring scene of passionate lovemaking between uncle Chetan and his younger Indian lover. Nick, on the other hand, remains remarkably chaste throughout the whole narrative. His startling lack of interest in the opposite (or same) gender is explained in the final showdown with Chetan: it is precisely Nick's chastity that provides him with the high moral ground from which to belabor his uncle: it is then that we discover that Chetan is married and is in fact being unfaithful to his wife, who remained home in India. He does not even bother to read her letters. Thus the realism Mehta opted for in her approach to her secondary characters was not matched by her approach to the protagonist. Considering the fact that Nick is a healthy young man aged twenty five – his asexuality makes him, in this particular respect, cinematically pleasing but somewhat lacking in authenticity.

The films further demonstrate that the dominance of parental authority figures only results in massive doses of hypocrisy and repression. This is most visible in *DH*. The girls are forced to deceive Father Li with Pearl's counterfeited school records; they have to lie about their activities outside the house. Whoever fails to participate in the game of make believe is banished and erased from the family and its memory (first Brother Winston, then Jade herself). The amount of pretense in the Li family is striking. One in fact is forced to pretend that the disavowed son has never existed. Then, upon the arrival of his uncle, one invents a fake story about him being a successful businessman in the United States. The same amount of pretense is noticeable in the character of uncle Ah Hong: seeing this perfect family, he claims to have quit smoking – which in fact he has not – and he never confides to his brother about his actual marital condition.

Canada: The Land of the Future

The films contain a critique of patriarchy within the traditional ethnic family but the filmmakers also target the more traditional (read: 'white') Canadian mainstream. The attitudes of white Canadians range from the rather exceptional openness, through indifference to open hostility. All three films address the painful

experience of racial stereotyping. Shum, Mehta and particularly Krishna stress that underneath the polished discourse of multiculturalism – with its high sounding and predictable rhetoric, sympathetic smiles, temple opening ceremonies and support for colorful street festivals – the same prejudiced attitudes still exist. They articulate that members of visible minorities face not only stereotyping but sometimes even downright racism:

– Waiting for a bus Jade is approached by an elderly white passer-by who tries to practice his sparse knowledge of Cantonese. “Airplane, Airplane” he babbles aggressively. “Airplane to you sir” replies Jade and catches a taxi to avoid further entanglement in this meaningless conversation.

– When Jade attempts to enter a discotheque, she is not admitted by the guards while other people can walk in freely under the pretext they are on the guest list. The probable reason is her visible minority status.

– The Indian taxi driver in *S&M* complains about being tired of the same set of questions: “Have you seen the Ghandhi picture? Great, eh? Indian food, hot, eh?” (*S&M*) An entertaining twist in this tale is that when the taxi driver attempts to demonstrate the repetitive monotonousness of a predictable conversation based on his Indian origin, the experiment fails: the white passenger remains silent.

– Sam is initially mistrustful of his “schwarze” nurse and it takes several important scenes for him to discover Nick’s selflessness and sense of humor and to develop a liking for his companion.

– The narrative of *S&M* also suggests another important point: there is no such thing as interracial solidarity among the various visible minority groups. Nick’s housing community plays cricket in the yard, unconcerned about the Black Canadian living in the attic. Later in the film we find out he is also a cricket fan. Yet his neighbors have shunned him, never inviting him to play along, on the grounds that he is not one of them. While being victims of racial stereotyping, the Indians are guilty of the same offence.

– Of all the three films *Masala* is the most radical one: Krishna’s nephew and uncle are openly shouted at and harassed in the streets by white racists. It is at the hand of one of them that the hero finally dies.

The future opportunities of the main characters are minimal in *S&M*, uncertain in *DH* and undesirable in *Masala*. Here, in a mock happy ending, we see the great satisfaction of everyone concerned when a new multicultural museum is opened – the only exception being Rita who still misses Krishna. The irony of the happy ending consists in the renewed alliance between the multicultural establishment represented by the minister on the one hand and the social-climbing Lallu Bhai on the other. This alliance has proved flexible enough to contain Mr. Tikkoo’s principled challenge by incorporating its concerns into its agenda. Thus the stamp gets where it belongs, Mr. Tikkoo is satisfied for now he has gained respect, and Canadian diversity can be celebrated again. Although the filmmaker Krishna ridicules the shallow pragmatic nature of such a compromise, it might still be viewed as a strength rather than a weakness of the Canadian system. Significantly, the more anarchic resistance – represented by the character of Krishna – cannot be

(and is not) contained in such a manner. It is thus ignored, abandoned, left to its own destruction.

Liminal Spaces

Speaking about *DH*, Mina Shum said: “Not only was I hoping to describe [the characters’] new lives in a new language and culture, but I was trying to offer a meaningful and compassionate portrait of what it means to live “in between” and to move within the liminal spaces between Canadian and Chinese cultures”. This wish can be shown in a number of ways: Father Li adheres to traditional Chinese ways while at the same time following the daily stock market reports on television; the Chinese spiritualist examines the household and suggests the proper alignment of furniture, but unable to change their unsatisfactory emotional lives, decides to give them “a twenty percent discount”. In the same vein *Masala’s* grandma Tikkoo insists on acquiring all state-of-the-art kitchen utensils so she can grind a perfect mix of spices, and when she starts communicating with Lord Krishna via her VCR, she demands dollars, cash on the nail.

Perhaps the most painful liminal experience is inscribed into the character of Jade, who tries to conform to her parents’ plans and play by the rules of the house at home, while her desires in fact reveal her embracing a different set of values. Mina Shum’s script – and particularly Sandra Oh’s performance – provided a powerful demonstration of how complex, uncertain and at times agonizing life can be in this region “in between”. In Jade’s character Shum inscribes a profound identity dilemma, so typical for displaced immigrants growing up in a new cultural context. At a crucial point in the film we find out she cannot read Chinese characters. Born in Hong Kong, raised in Vancouver in a Chinese family, not being able to read the script: can she still plausibly hang on to the status of being Chinese?

Language – in this particular instance ability to read Chinese script – is coded as an important piece in the edifice of one’s identity construction. While the older generation, whose identity is more traditionally Chinese, speaks with an accent and their body language is also Chinese, Jade and her younger sister Pearl have no accent and their body language and spatial practices correspond to the North American “mainstream”. This, paradoxically, makes them more uncertain about who they are and where they belong, as their “cultural software” (language, cultural know-how,) operates in hardware (i.e. the body) that is marked by the adherence to a visible minority.

When Mum Li discovers that their estranged son, Winston, is living with a woman who does not even speak Chinese, she is devastated. The fact that in reality this woman is an Asian-Canadian does not help: having lost her language, in Mum Li’s eyes she now counts as white. Shum also supplies a fine illustration of how misleading language (or in this particular instance lack thereof) can be in assessing somebody else’s identity. The first encounter between Jade and Mark takes place in a line outside a night bar. Mark assumes Jade does not speak

English well and Jade plays along, pretending to be a shy, insecure and functionally mute Asian girl. Then she switches register and in perfect Canadian English challenges the surprised suitor to have sex with her this very evening. Mark's expectation of Jade's lacking language skills and appropriate gender role is a telling case in point about how difficult it is to shed one's preconceived notions of the other. He is not a racist, yet he can't escape the numerous stereotypes his culture has equipped him with. In Appiah's terminology he is a "racialist".

The frequently strained transition between one's original culture and the host culture manifests itself quite notably in the change of religious practices. *Masala's* Lord Krishna complains: "What happens when Indians go to foreign lands, baba? They lose their grace and composure. They pester me for explanations. They should spend more time worshipping." It is symptomatic for Shrinivas Krishna's all-out sarcasm that he constructs the traditional maternal authority figure – Grandma Tikkoo – as the most graphic illustration of Lord Krishna's complaint. She is not the usual reservoir of ancient maternal wisdom; she is the most materialistic member of the Tikkoo household. When talking to the deity she seeks neither spiritual uplifting, nor revelation: instead she bargains hard with his TV image, demanding immediate assistance in the form of fast cash. The practical aspects of religious worship in the "new world" are also articulated in *DH*. When mother Li retires to her niche to pray, she asks for her banished son's well-being – and for advice whether to put fertilizer on the garden. Diasporic religion at its most traditional can thus be discerned in the all-male community of *S&M*: with religious posters on the wall, burning incense and Indian music in the air, the poorly equipped, cramped house becomes a little Indian island in the sea of Canadian otherness.

One of the cross-cultural highlights of the playful narrative of *Masala* is the manner Lord Krishna chooses to aid the Tikkoo family. Clad in the Toronto Maple Leaf uniform the blue, comic-book deity shoots the puck in the direction of the oncoming postal van. The driver, horrified by the extraordinary apparition, crashes the car. Letters are scattered all over and one of them magically driven by the wind reaches the house of the Tikkoo's. It is the letter with the rare beaver stamp.

A focus on questions of cultural hybridity can also be discerned at the level of genre. Both Indian Canadian features make use of the Bollywood tradition of dance numbers. While in *Masala* this happens twice in the classical Bollywood fashion – the narrative development stops and the characters are taken into the magic colorful dream world of music and dance – in *S&M* this happens intradiegetically at the party in Nick's community. Here one of the characters cross-dresses and performs a seductive dance to the sound of a Mumbai hit. Mehta's decision not to interrupt the flow of the narrative with an artificial break – which most western viewers would regard as unnatural or culturally alien – was informed by her obvious intention, in this case, to make a serious, true-to-life statement about the immigrant experience. The artificial mixing of genres or borrowing from other cinematic styles such as Bollywood would have highlighted the

viewers' awareness of the film's constructed nature and thus would have subverted the film's realistic ambition. In the post-modernist world of *Masala*, on the other hand, it is precisely the mode of realism that is discarded with the purpose of creating a vibrant narrative of multiple ironies: the Bollywood dance numbers represent but a fraction in an unstable, idiosyncratic genre mix that further includes social satire, crazy comedy, youth culture cult movie and family drama. The Chinese-Canadian *DH* has its entertaining song number, as well. This scene also highlights the theme of cultural hybridity, while refraining from calling into question the film's genre characteristics (a realistic coming of age story). It is the moment when uncle Ah Hong organizes a family karaoke party and makes his brother sing – in a remarkably stiff manner – an American 1950s song.

Summary & Conclusion

As the films suggest, the characters face a whole array of problems ranging from the necessity to define one's identity and choose one's course of life according to one's values and preferences to the banal question of how one is going to earn one's living in the context of Canadian capitalism. The films present the relationships within one's family and community as in no way unproblematic for they highlight a great number of fissures and fracture lines within those entities, lines that are informed by the characters' age, gender, class, religion, sexual orientation, and life experience, etc. The source of the principal tension within the family in these films, however, is the generational struggle, in which a younger protagonist endeavors to live his or her life on his or her own terms, defying the wishes of a dominant father figure. Likewise problematic for ethnic Canadians, the filmmakers tell us, is the interaction with the society outside of one's community. In spite of the fact that Canada has officially embraced the principles of multiculturalism – for which the very existence of the films provides ample evidence – the films emphasize countless examples of racial and ethnic stereotyping, prejudice, harassment and even violence.

A discussion of the "liminal spaces" these characters occupy indicates how elusive and internally painful the definition of one's identity can be in today's multiethnic Canadian context marked by a mixing of cultures, values and traditions. In various ways and on various levels the films visualize the at times extreme degree of cultural hybridity among the hyphenated-Canadians. Their focus on individuals located on the margins of society allows the viewer to cast a sideways look at the nature of the Canadian mainstream and possibly reassess its nature. The diasporic experience articulated in the above films thus calls into question the traditional homogenizing and assimilationist view of the Canadian nation as predominantly white and draws attention to the plurality of cultures and traditions within this context.

References

- Banning, Kass (1999) 'Playing in the Light, Canadianizing Race and Nation'. In Armatage, Kay; Banning, Kass; Longfellow, Brenda; Marchessault, Janine (eds) *Gendering the Nation, Canadian Women's Cinema*. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press.
- Gittings, C. E. (2001) *Canadian National Cinema, Ideology, Difference and Representation*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Krishna, Shrinivas (1991) *Masala*. Unpublished production notes. Toronto.
- Krishna, Shrinivas (1991) *Masala*. Unpublished script. Toronto.
- Levitin, J. (2002) 'Deepa Mehta as Transnational Filmmakers, or You Can't Go Home Again'. In Beard, William and White, Jerry (eds) *North of Everything – English-Canadian Cinema Since 1980*. Edmonton, Alberta: University of Alberta Press.
- Shum, M. (1994) *Double Happiness*. Unpublished production notes. Toronto.
- Waltz, Eugene P. (2002) 'Introduction: What Is Canadian Cinema?'. In Waltz, Eugene P. (ed.) *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.
- Waugh, T. (2002) 'Home is not the place one has left or *Masala* as 'a multicultural culinary treat'?. In Waltz, Eugene P. (ed.) *Canada's Best Features: Critical Essays on 15 Canadian Films*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi.

Films

- Double Happiness* (1994) Dir. Mina Shum.
- Masala* (1991) Dir. Shrinivas Krishna.
- Sam and Me* (1991) Dir. Deepa Mehta.

PhDr. Tomáš Pospíšil, Dr.
 Department of English and American Studies
 Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University
 Arna Nováka 1
 602 00 Brno
 tomas.pospisil@phil.muni.cz