

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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MONSOON WEDDING 2001

Mira Nair

(Hindi and English)

Contents (Overview – Plot – themes – Characters)

OVERVIEW

This film is a forensic dissection of a wedding, perhaps the cultural form most revered by Indians as traditional. What Mira Nair show us, however, are other enduring aspects of Indian family life: dissension and deception. This is the new millennium and the wedding reflects the international, modern life-style of the two extended families involved. The bridegroom and his father come to the event from Houston, the bride's sister and brother-in-law fly in from Oman and there's a cousin who arrives from Australia. In the hothouse atmosphere of such an event, the film-maker peels away the pretensions, exposing past histories that shape present decisions. There are financial debts, sexual peccadilloes, homophobic parents, child molestation and a second wedding involving the bride's family's employees. Yes, it's a whirlwind of dramatic exposes, but it ends happily, more or less, and feels more like a satirical comedy than a domestic drama.

CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

Weddings are grand affairs in most cultures, but Indian weddings carry extra cultural weight because they celebrate the conjunction not just of two individuals, but of two families, usually two extended families. An extra layer of complexity in this film is the globalisation of marriage among wealthy Indians, with family members arriving in New Delhi from other countries. Indian weddings, like the one shown in the film, are thus fertile ground to flout affluence, build alliances and settle old debts. All of this genealogical and financial complexity stokes up the emotional atmosphere of a wedding, making it a perfect vehicle for exploring Indian culture. The 'monsoon' element of the title is also significant: in many regional literatures of India, the rainy season is viewed as the time for separated lovers to unite.

STORY

Setting The Vermas are an upper middle-class, westernised Punjabi family in Delhi who have arranged a marriage between their daughter Aditi (aged 24) and Hemant. Hemant, a thirty-two-old engineer who lives in Houston, is the son of a family friend. Bride and groom met only a few weeks before. They are not in love.

Troubles The first sight of trouble arrives when Lalit, the father of the bride, gets upset at the lack of preparations for the wedding in the garden of his large house. The wedding is only three days away and the pavilions have not yet been erected or the flowers arranged. Next, we see Aditi, the bride, at work, where she is having an affair with her boss, Vikram. In the next scene, Aditi explains to her cousin Ria that she is getting married only because Vikram's wife will never agree to let him go. 'So you're going to marry someone selected by Mommy and Daddy?' asks the sceptical Ria.

Groom arrives The tension rises when the groom, Hemant, arrives with his family. There are awkward moments as the two families greet each other, the couple exchange rings and a grandmother says that she hopes she will see a great-grandchild before she dies.

Uncle Tej Although he arrives late, on a flight from Texas, Uncle Tej is given a huge welcome since he is the wealthy relative upon whom many in the family depend. There is another awkward moment when he greets Ria with a kiss and she is clearly disturbed.

Dubey This scene of the affluent families is followed by one in which Dubey, the wedding manager, tells his crew about how Lalit doesn't have a cent but wants a 'White House theme' for the wedding.

They all laugh rudely until Alice, the Vermas' maid, comes and offers to get water for Dubey. There is a tender exchange of words, and for once we see that the smart-aleck Dubey can be sincere.

Money Pimmi Verma, the bride's mother proudly boasts that 'no expense will be spared' in celebrating her daughter's wedding, and minutes later we see Lalit, the bride's father, grovelling to ask a business associate for a loan. Uncle Tej is asked to pay for Ria's plan to study creative writing in the US. When he agrees, and also says that he will 'take care of everything, including the wedding,' Lalit is simultaneously happy and humiliated.

Child abuse Uncle Tej acts a little too intimately with the eight-year-old Aliya, causing her distress and alarming Ria. When Tej offers to drive the little girl home, Ria intervenes and reveals that he abused her when she was young. The older women in both families tell her to shut up—it can't be true and they don't want a scandal on the eve of the wedding. Ria then leaves them, taking Aliya with her, and goes to stay in a hotel.

Love Affair More potential scandal ensues when Aditi sneaks out of the house at night to meet Vikram, her lover whom she is leaving. While making love in his car, the police arrive and make fun of a 'bride who couldn't wait.' Disaster is averted only when Aditi drives off in the car and escapes. At home, Aditi talks in secret with Ria about whether or not to tell Hemant, the groom, about her lover. Telling the truth may cause him to cancel the wedding and heap humiliation on her family.

Honesty triumphs Aditi does tell Hemant about Vikram, and he confesses to having had affairs himself, but his male ego is stronger than his liberal thoughts. He is disturbed and on the verge of cancelling the wedding, but eventually accepts Aditi's past and admires her for being honest.

Brave decision It is now time for Lalit to make a decision. A major pre-wedding ritual, is about to place, but it can't go ahead without Ria (who has disappeared after revealing Uncle Tej's paedophilia). Lalit tries to persuade her to return, but she is reluctant. By returning, she will, in effect, condone Uncle Tej's abuse; but if she doesn't return, the wedding will be ruined. She does return, and Lalit makes the courageous decision to denounce Uncle Tej in front of everyone and order him to leave the wedding

Double wedding With the monsoon rains pouring down, Aditi and Hemant (who have grown closer during the film) are married with great pomp and circumstance. In the second wedding, Dubey and Alice exchange a little necklace in the background. With Uncle Tej exposed and driven away, Ria joins in the celebrations.

THEMES

Family *Monsoon Wedding* is a skilful exploration of the 'Indian family,' put under the microscope of a marriage. As the film unfolds, especially in the case of Ria, we see how the physical proximity of families breeds physical intimacy, not all of which is wanted or culturally approved. Through the character of Lalit, the film dramatises the pressures brought by family pride, particularly when the head of the family (like Lalit) does not have the financial wherewithal to match his ambition. Through him and other characters, the story also reveals how families incubate dependency, both financial and emotional. This leads to humiliation (Lalit and Varun) and domination (Uncle Tej). In addition, the film shows that the family can be both a vehicle for personal success (Ria and Ayesha) and a roadblock to personal happiness (Varun, Pimmi and possibly Aditi). The film thus reveals the secrets that enable families to cohere as well as the lies that split them apart. It is a traditional wedding in many respects, although the diaspora of wealthy Indian families, like the Vermas and the Rais, places extra strain on the kinship ties through physical dislocation and cross-cultural differences.

Upstairs-Downstairs The other theme explored in this film is the division between upper and lower classes in Indian society. What we see is that people, whatever their caste, are primarily separated by economic status. This is the new millennium, India has a growing, globalised economy and old caste barriers are breaking down, especially among westernised urban elites, as in the film. But the social gap between the upper middle-class (Vermas and Rais) and the lower middle-class (the workers who set up the wedding and the housemaid) is startlingly sharp. Lalit speaks harshly to Dubey, the man who manages the workers, and Alice (the maid) is marginalised almost to invisibility

within the Verma family. In order to dramatise this division, the film-maker has arranged for a wedding within a wedding: while the main action focuses on the trials and tribulations of the Vermas and Rais, a sub-plot is skilfully developed between Dubey and Alice, who also get married at the end of the film. Juxtaposed to the pretensions and deceptions swirling around the upper-class wedding is a simplicity and sincerity of the lower-class lovers. A momentary cross-over between the two weddings occurs when Alice tries on Aditi's wedding jewellery. It is a tender scene that reveals both the gap and the commonality between the two economic groups. The contrast is also shown in the final sequence, in which the camera shifts away from the gaudy celebrations of the Vermas and Rais, complete with brass band and groom arriving on horseback (as is traditional), to show the other couple, dressed in ordinary clothes. Dubey hands her a simple, single-strand necklace, which Alice slowly puts over her head. In the end, with the rain streaming down and soaking everyone, it is their wedding, carried off without fanfare, that we celebrate.

CHARACTERS

Lalit Lalit Verma is the father of the bride. Lalit is a likable but flawed character. Status-seeking but without the funds to achieve his ambition, he is over-anxious and controlling. Because he is clearly not in control, he is tense and critical of others, particularly his son. He tries hard to be jovial but his jokes fall as flat as his ego. At the centre of the wedding maelstrom, he feels hard done by, though in the end he plays the role of the hero.

Controlling The controlling, almost bullying, element of Lalit's character is revealed in the opening scenes. He is anxiously waiting for his son, Varun, to return from the airport with the groom's family. He is angry that the wedding manager (Dubey) has also not arrived yet, and he fiddles unsuccessfully with a flower display. When his son does arrive, without the expected guests, Lalit's anger goes into overdrive and he berates him. 'Idiot, where have you been?' he asks. When his son explains that the guests did not appear at the airport, Lalit finds other reasons to belittle him, including his poor parking skills and his 'stupid-looking' hat. He even shoves his son in the chest and tells him to 'shape up.' We cringe at the undeserved verbal abuse hurled at the innocent boy, and we realise that this is a classic case of an unhappy man taking out his frustrations on a more vulnerable person, his own son.

Courageous Lalit may seem an unlikely hero to reconcile the irreconcilable divisions within the families, but it is a role he plays convincingly at the end. In one of the many rituals during the three-day wedding, all the family members of the bride pay their respects to their ancestors and then welcome in the family of the groom. In the film, this ritual becomes controversial because Ria has exposed Uncle Tej's sexual abuse. She has agreed to return to the wedding only to prevent humiliation for the bride. Everyone maintains a tense silence. Uncle Tej, smiling and full of satisfaction as the family's benefactor, proudly announces that he will go out and greet the family of the groom. At that moment, Lalit shakes his head and says that he will not allow that. Tej is astounded and all the others look shocked, as Lalit asks Tej to leave the wedding. He is almost in tears as he conveys his difficult decision. 'It was such a small thing,' protests Tej's wife, but Lalit dismisses this and will not relent. Tej, the child abuser, must go, regardless of the financial consequences because family honour comes before everything. It is a hard decision, one that Lalit takes with pain on his face, but we know that it is the correct one. When Tej leaves, the stain seems to be cleansed, and unity restored when Lalit plants an avuncular kiss on Ria's forehead.

Aditi Aditi Verma Aditi is the bride. Aditi is a normal, upper middle-class westernised woman in New Delhi in 2001. She has an affair with her married boss and is then betrothed to someone she hardly knows. She is uncertain why she is going along with the wedding plans, and she has deep discussions about what to tell her husband-to-be about her sexual affairs. She can be sharp-tongued and nasty, but she is also sympathetic because of the dilemma she faces.

Uncertain From the very beginning, we see that Aditi is confused about her plans and her motives. She's not certain why she is getting married ('I want to settle down', she says unconvincingly in the first scene). Her wavering personality is clearly illustrated in later scene, when she has a long conversation with Ria, her cousin. Aditi is caught in a difficult situation, though it is mostly of her own making. She's had an affair, which she has not broken off, and she's about to be married. Should she tell her fiancé about the affair? It she does, he might cancel the wedding, which would humiliate her and her whole family. If she doesn't tell him, she might poison the marriage with her dishonesty. As she goes over these choices with Ria, we see that Aditi is truly 'lost at sea,' unable to find her bearings and make a decision.

Sharp-tongued Although Aditi is generally presented as a likable character, she can be cruel, at least, in speech. A good display of her sharp tongue occurs in an early scene, when she and Ria are travelling together in a car. Ria asks her why she's getting married to someone she has only met three times, and she answers that she 'wants to settle down.' Ria sees through that and says that marrying without love is a mistake. Now, Aditi, who is carrying on a secret love affair with a married man, turns her anger against on her cousin and sneers, 'Oh, I see. And what would my unmarried cousin Ria know about passion?' It is a cruel comment, referring to the spinsterish-character of Ria, who is past the marrying age.

Dubey Dubey is the wedding fixer or planner. In some ways, Dubey is the most interesting figure in the array of characters who appear in this film that both celebrates and satirises families and weddings. He is the 'fixer', the man who is responsible for putting up the pavilions, laying on the massive flower displays, arranging for the catering and supervising the music. In other words, he is as crucial to the wedding as the groom or the father of the bride. Dubey would not be a successful fixer if he did not stretch the truth a little now and then. He appears to be cynical and unsentimental, certainly toward his employer (Lalit), but he later shows his softness in his attraction to Alice, the maid.

The 'fixer' One of the scenes that reveals Dubey's character occurs early on when Lalit calls him and wants to know why he hasn't begun work on the wedding. The conversation that follows, on their mobile phones, is also extremely humorous. 'I'm stuck in a traffic jam,' Dubey explains to the frustrated Lalit, while he walks about with his phone at another job site. When the angry Lalit orders him to come 'right now,' Dubey placates him with his most ingratiating tone of voice. 'Yes, sir. Immediately, ten minutes, approximately.' When told that the flower display is falling apart, Dubey dismisses this by saying, 'What's a few flowers? Listen, sir. For you and your family, I will create a Mughal garden.' It is situational satire at its best: we can see that Dubey is making it up as he goes along, while poor Lalit is kept in the dark and has to be content with empty promises. Dubey is a fixer in every sense of the word.

Tender While he appears cynical in most of the film (mocking his employer and scoffing at the pretensions of the rich), Dubey comes out smelling like roses, literally. He falls in love with the maid Alice and marries her in the end. The most tender moment along this journey occurs when Dubey is regaling his workers with jokes about the hapless Lalit ('bastard doesn't have a cent but wants a grand wedding'). Alice appears in the background and meekly asks if he would like a glass of water. He is at first annoyed that she has interrupted his performance, but then he realises that she is genuinely concerned about him. When she asks if he wants water from the tap or from the fridge, he looks carefully at her. 'Fridge,' he says, with a wistful look in his eye, and when she nods and turns away, he waves a hand and says, 'Thanks.' The transformation from cynic to lover is quick and yet completely convincing.

Pimmi Verma Pimmi is the mother of the bride.
Varun Verma Varun is Aditi's younger brother.
Ria Verma Ria is Aditi's cousin, who wants to study in the US.
Ayesha Verma Ayesha is another one of Aditi's cousins.
Uncle Tej Uncle Tej is Lalit's brother-in-law
Hemant Rai Hemant is the groom.
Mohan Rai Mohan is the father of the groom.
Saroj Rai Saroj is the mother of the groom.
Alice Alice is the Rai family maid.
Vikram Vikram is a TV host and Aditi's lover.



(The family congratulate Aditi during the ceremonies)



(Aditi confronts her married lover)



(Alice, the maid, who also gets married)



(Lalit, anxious during the ceremonies)



(Aditi, the troubled bride)



(Dubey, the fixer, at work on the flower display)