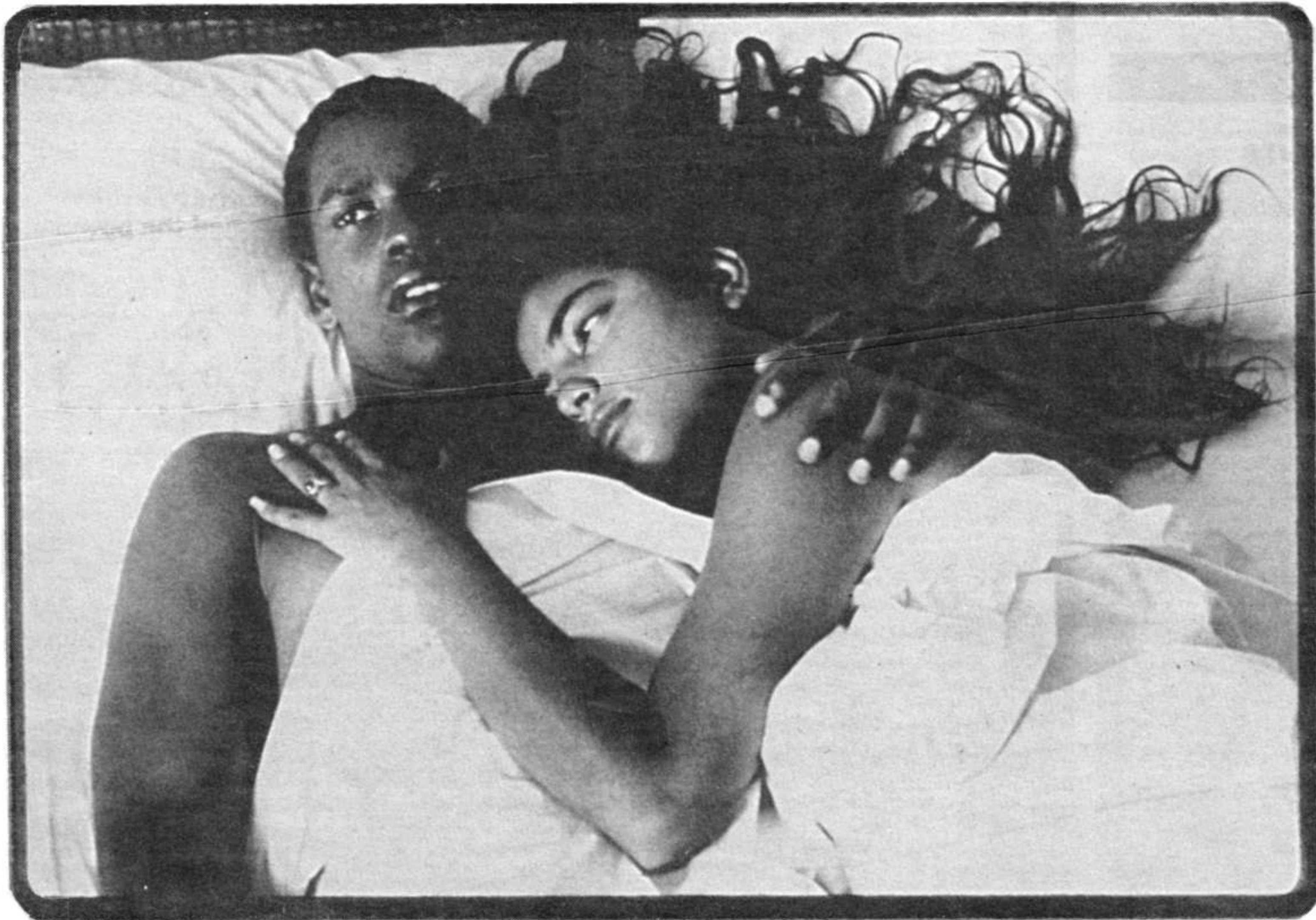


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Mississippi yearning: Denzel Washington and Sarita Choudhury are the Romeo/Juliet hook for Mira Nair's latest.

Family Affair

VV 2/11/92

By J. Hoberman

Mississippi Masala

Directed by Mira Nair
Written by Sooni Taraporevala
Produced by Nair and Michael Nozik
Released by Samuel Goldwyn
At the Angelika

The titles of Mira Nair's movies have a geographical lilt that bespeaks the global village: *So Far From India*, *Salaam Bombay!*, *Mississippi Masala*. Born south of Calcutta in the state of Orissa and educated at Harvard, the 34-year-old filmmaker is herself a member of the Indian diaspora. She addresses Third World themes of deprivation and displacement with an American pop sensibility that's knowing and sentimental, buoyant and glib.

Mississippi Masala is Nair's most structurally complicated feature. A prologue, set in 1972, establishes Ugandan dictator Idi Amin's expulsion of his nation's Asian citizens, introducing a well-off Indian family—the lawyer Jay, his wife, Kinnu, and their young daughter, Mina—who eventually settle, under greatly diminished circumstances, in Greenwood, Mississippi. Their imposed exile is shown as cruel (but not bloody). The film's romantic drama, played out 18 years later in Greenwood and environs, is punc-

tuated with flashbacks to the Ugandan paradise lost.

Jay (Roshan Seth) and Kinnu (Sharmila Tagore) manage a liquor store for the Indian owner of the Monte Cristo, a motel offering hourly rates, where Mina (Sarita Choudhury) works as a housekeeper. The parents are incongruous and resigned, their little girl has blossomed into a full-fledged Americana with a Bob Marley T-shirt and a funky corona of long, frizzed-out hair. Introduced pushing an overloaded shopping cart through a well-stocked supermarket, the adult Mina is so blatant a statue of liberty it's confusing to discover that, between Uganda and Mississippi, her family actually spent a decade and half in London and have only been in the U.S. three years.

Mina's American education advances a few grades after she re-enters a van driven by a self-employed black entrepreneur named Demetrius (Denzel Washington) and then reencounters him later at the Leopard Lounge. Wiry and cool, Washington is a Cooper-Costnerlike heartthrob—his entrances evoked squeals of admiration from the promotional audience with which I saw the film. A glamorous couple, Mina and Demetrius have more than a little in common: Neither has gone to college, choosing instead to remain with their families; both are cleaners, and thus correspondingly low-caste. But *Mississippi Masala* is overtly concerned with difference. The movie's motor is the *Romeo and Juliet* plot that enables Nair to switch back and forth between two high-energy cultures.

In addition to Demetrius's irrepressible partner (Charles S. Dut-

ton) and kid brother (Tico Wells), the film showcases a small galaxy of Indian and Anglo-Indian character actors—the mournful, dapper Roshan Seth, the Maharashtra comic Mohan Gokhale, iconic Sharmila Tagore, the heroine of Satyajit Ray's *Devi*, Ranjit Chowdhry as the crass and self-interested motel owner whose unconsummated marriage provides the film's running gag (“What are you doing? It's paining!” asks his querulous bride). Nair gets as much pleasure from the idea of Indians pining for an African homeland that their African American neighbors have never seen as she does from the film's mischievous absence of a white perspective. (A white guy bugged by the noise of an Indian wedding can only mutter, “send them back to the reservation,” in belated punchline to a joke Nair set up by having a bunch of Indian children dressed up as cowpersons and Native Americans.)

Given the potential for cuteness, *Mississippi Masala* never quite sitscoms out, but it quickly accelerates into earnest melodrama once the various communities discover Mina and Demetrius's romance. (*Mississippi Masala* may be an Indian *Jungle Fever*, but *jungle* is a Hindi word.) What's only barely suggested is that, in falling in love with Demetrius, Mina gets to play out a version of her family's own unresolved African romance—albeit transposed to the second-chance land of America. Feasting on the restaurants, shrines, and motels, cinematographer Ed Lachman gives *Mississippi Masala* a look worthy of its title—the palette is spicy neon, the contrasts are affably lurid. Mina sits by the Monte

Cristo's pool, chlorine reflections dancing across her face.

The shiny colors are appropriate. Resolving conflict with a determination that would make Gary Marshall blush, *Mississippi Masala* is pretty much a present to the viewers—the narrative even ties itself into a neat bow.