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MISSISSIPPI *Masala*

A FILM BY
MIRA NAIR

The vibrant cultures of India, Uganda, and the American South come together in Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala*, a luminous look at the complexities of love in the modern melting pot. Years after her Indian family was forced to flee their home in Uganda by the dictatorship of Idi Amin, twentysomething Mina (Sarita Choudhury) spends her days cleaning rooms in an Indian-run motel in Mississippi. When she falls for the charming Black carpet cleaner Demetrius (Denzel Washington), their passionate romance challenges the prejudices of both of their families and exposes the rifts between the region's Indian and African American communities. Tackling thorny issues of racism, colorism, culture clash, and displacement with bighearted humor and keen insight, Nair serves up a sweet, sexy, and deeply satisfying celebration of love's power.

New 4K digital restoration undertaken by the Criterion Collection and supervised by director Mira Nair and cinematographer Ed Lachman

United States | 1991 | 117 minutes | Color | 1.85:1 aspect ratio

Booking Inquiries: Janus Films
booking@janusfilms.com • 212-756-8761

Press Contact: Courtney Ott
courtney@cineticmedia.com • 646-230-6847

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1957 in Rourkela, India, Mira Nair was raised in the city of Bhubaneswar, also in the eastern part of the country. She majored in sociology at Delhi University but soon transferred on a full scholarship to Harvard University, where she began a directorial career with her thesis film, *Jama Masjid Street Journal* (1979). Three more documentaries followed, including 1983's *So Far from India*, which won Best Documentary at the American Film Festival and New York's Global Village Film Festival. In 1988, Nair directed her first fiction feature, *Salaam Bombay!*, which won the Caméra d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. Her subsequent films include *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1996), and *Monsoon Wedding* (2001), the last of which won the Venice Film Festival's prestigious Golden Lion. In the 2000s, Nair embarked on a series of acclaimed adaptations and biopics, including film versions of William Makepeace Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (2004) and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2006), and the Lupita Nyong'o-starring *Queen of Katwe* (2016). In 2020, she directed the BBC miniseries *A Suitable Boy*, and she is currently in production on a TV series for Disney+. Nair is also an educator and activist who in 2004 founded the Maisha Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering East African filmmakers to tell their own stories through scholarships, classes, and film labs.



PRODUCTION HISTORY

ORIGINS

Following the critical and box-office success of her 1988 debut feature, *Salaam Bombay!*—at the time one of the highest-grossing exports in Indian film history—director Mira Nair chose for her next project a romance between an Indian American woman and an African American man. The subject emerged from her observations of the unifying and dividing forces among BIPOC communities in the United States. “Growing up in India, it’s so apparent, the consciousness we have of degrees of color,” Nair told *BOMB* magazine in 1991. “So coming from that and witnessing it in an American context—I was intrigued.”

The background for the story began when Nair landed as an Indian student at Harvard. She found herself accessible to both white and Black communities; as she has put it, “a third-world sister to the Black community and kosher to the others—yet there were always these invisible lines. I felt that there was an interesting hierarchy where brown was between Black and white.”

Nair decided to set the film, initially titled *Twice Removed*, in the deep American South. She knew Indians who had settled

CAST

Demetrius	Denzel Washington
Mina	Sarita Choudhury
Jay	Roshan Seth
Kinnu	Sharmila Tagore
Tyrone	Charles S. Dutton

CREDITS

Directed by	Mira Nair
Produced by	Mira Nair
	Michael Nozik
Written by	Sooni Taraporevala
Executive producer	Cherie Rodgers
Coproducer	Mitch Epstein
Associate producer	Lydia Dean Pilcher
Director of photography	Ed Lachman
Production designer	Mitch Epstein
Editor	Roberto Silvi
Music	L. Subramaniam

and owned businesses there, and she was fascinated by their presence in a region with a long, troubled history of racial oppression and tension. The film's two narrative strands—the interracial romance and the Ugandan Indians living in exile in the U.S.—would affect and reflect upon each other.

PREPRODUCTION

Nair's longtime friend Sooni Taraporevala wrote the film's screenplay. The director and screenwriter had collaborated on *Salaam Bombay!*, and the success of that project practically guaranteed that they would work together again. "We share a worldview," Nair has explained of her creative partnership with Taraporevala, who would go on to script such Nair films as *My Own Country* (1998) and *The Namesake*.

Already a rising Hollywood star who had recently won an Academy Award for his work in 1989's *Glory*, Denzel Washington was cast as Demetrius, the romantic lead whom Nair modeled after a real carpet cleaner she had met while conducting preproduction research in Mississippi. Washington's participation was a major coup for Nair, who had been abandoned by her original financial backers after Ben Kingsley dropped out of the role of Ugandan Indian exile Jay. (Other potential financial backers suggested to Nair that she cast Caucasians in lead roles.) Lauded British Indian actor Roshan Seth took on the part of Jay, while fellow British Indian Sarita Choudhury made her acting debut as Mina, Jay's daughter and Demetrius's love interest.

"I was looking for an Indian woman who could understand the Indian ethos . . . as well as having a free-spirited side to her," Nair told the Australian television program *The Movie Show*. "Because she's a 'masala,' after all, and has to represent the hybrid quality of going to prayers in the morning and the disco at night." Seventy-five young Indian women auditioned for the role before Nair chose Choudhury: "From the moment I saw her, I knew this was Mina," the director has said. Many other roles—the film's end credits list over sixty speaking parts—were filled by local actors and nonactors.

PRODUCTION

Nair's directorial career had begun in documentary filmmaking, and so she planned *Mississippi Masala* with an eye for the authentic. This necessitated unconventional production choices, such as shooting on location in Uganda, a country where no major film had been shot since *The African Queen* (1951). Sets and costumes replicated the look of 1970s Uganda, and Nair even enlisted Kenyan actor Joseph Olita to play Ugandan dictator Idi Amin for a few brief moments.

Most of the film's scenes that take place in the American South were shot in Greenwood, Mississippi. Wary of a production that might depict small-town southern culture in an unfavorable light, Greenwood residents questioned Nair as to whether she was

making a film in the style of *Mississippi Burning*, the 1988 policier based on the midsixties murder of civil rights activists. Nair warded off scrutiny by offering reassurance that *Mississippi Masala* was a "love story, trying to make it sound as insipid as possible."

RELEASE

Released in the United States in early 1992, *Mississippi Masala* received nearly universal acclaim from audiences and critics alike, bridging the gap between the art houses that turned Nair's previous film into an indie success and the multiplexes that would soon turn Washington into a superstar. *Entertainment Weekly*, the *Nation*, *People*, *Rolling Stone*, and Gene Siskel and Roger Ebert all hailed *Mississippi Masala* as moving and insightful, and the film won the Golden Osella for Best Original Screenplay at the Venice International Film Festival as well as the Special Critics Award at the São Paulo International Film Festival.

"It was the first Black and brown interracial love story, and I haven't seen anything like that since," said Nair when reflecting on the film and its legacy in 2021, adding that "if we don't tell our own stories, no one will."

TRIVIA

Sarita Choudhury had just graduated from Queen's University in Ontario when she flew to London to audition for the role of Mina. She had no money to return to Canada and suggested to Mira Nair that she work on set as an assistant if she wasn't chosen for the part. *Mississippi Masala* initiated Choudhury's acting career, including a major role in Nair's 1996 film *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love*. "After I saw *Mississippi Masala*, I realized Mira really was great at harnessing something in me and letting it be," Choudhury told *Vulture*. "I'm so grateful for her. And then, after that, I realized I'm not always going to have someone like Mira, so I went back and studied and got confidence. I couldn't wing it anymore."

Nair met her second and current husband, Mahmood Mamdani, during the Uganda shoot of *Mississippi Masala*. Mamdani is the author of *From Citizen to Refugee*, a critical study of Idi Amin's expulsion of Asians from Uganda.

Joseph Olita also played Amin in 1981's *Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*.

Nair used the home she had recently purchased in Kampala near Lake Victoria for Jay's family's residence in the flashback scenes of the film.

Legendary Greenwood, Mississippi, restaurant Lusco's was used for the diner at which Demetrius's father, Williben (Joe Seneca), works. Lusco's closed in 2021 after eighty-eight years of business.

Other Mississippi locations in the film include Biloxi, Grenada, and Ocean Springs.