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Re-Imagining Multiculturalism:
How Newness Enters the World

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Media Studies

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in Media Studies
at Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

August 1999

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0-612-43615-2

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ABSTRACT

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Tina Verma

This thesis addresses the possibility of affecting change in official multiculturalism in Canada. It starts from the premise that the current policy and discourse of multiculturalism need to be re-evaluated in our evolving multi-racial and multi-ethnic landscape. Masala, the 1992 Canadian feature-fiction film, is used as an example of how cultural representations reflect a different type of engagement with multiculturalism. It is a hybrid film – a concept that helps articulate this alternative perspective. Cultural critics also contribute to the broader discourse of multiculturalism by translating films like **Masala** for the general public. An overview of this criticism reveals how **Masala's** hybridity is interpreted, and if this body of discourse might serve to liberate new meanings of multiculturalism.

Dedicated to my parents

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INTRODUCTION:
Living in Multiculturalism's Shadow

> In certain civilizations there come epochs in which
> syntax stiffens, in which the available resources of live
> perception and restatement wither. Words seems to
> go dead under the weight of sanctified usage; the
> frequence and sclerotic force of clichés, of
> unexamined similes, of worn tropes increases. Instead
> of acting as a living membrane, grammar and
> vocabulary become a barrier to new feeling.[1]

George Steiner is referring here to the death and birth of language, and

implies that inert language impedes not only creativity, but also intellectual

progress. Steiner's words also act as a metaphor – they articulate the way I

perceive the "language" of multiculturalism in Canada – as an obstacle to

cultural understanding and social advancement. This thesis is about the dead

"language" of multiculturalism in Canada, and the possibility of breathing new

life into it.

Multiculturalism must be re-thought if it is to have any impact on the

contemporary social, cultural and political milieu in Canada. The term has

become prosaic and ambiguous; no-one really seems to know what it intends or

how it obtains. Multiculturalism has become a catch-all term somewhat like

"information"; it is opaque, weighty and dull. As an official government policy,

it is not recognized as an agent of change for the racially diverse communities of

Canada and, its goals remain largely misunderstood by mainstream Canada.

However a second component, the discourse surrounding multiculturalism,

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[1] George Steiner, _After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation_, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976, pg. 22.

continues to have significant implications. While it has been argued that multicultural policy is just one in a nexus of policies that affect the lives of immigrants and ethnic minorities, and therefore should not be given excessive attention,[2] it is the pervasiveness of its *discourse* that gives it a cultural authority that allows it to surpass other policy. All of these criticisms point to a single issue: multicultural policy in its current form does not adequately represent the people and communities that it was originally intended to address.

Multiculturalism as an official policy originated with Pierre Trudeau's Liberal government in 1971, following the welcomed large-scale immigration of non-white immigrants during the '60s. It provided an institutional means by which the federal government could claim to accomodate new populations that were making Canada their home. The creation of the multicultural policy fit into a larger framework of new social policy formation in the Canada and the world during the '60s and '70s. Internationally, *The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* was established in 1965, and was soon followed by *The International Convenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* in 1966. In Canada, the *Official Languages Act*, which recognized the bilingual origins of the country, was introduced in 1969. The *Canadian Human Rights Act* was passed in 1977.

Multicultural policy came at a time that was particularly turbulent in the history of Canadian politics. The *Official Languages Act* proved to be unpopular in the West, primarily because of the small number of French-speaking Canadians in that part of Canada. With Multiculturalism, the Liberal government tried to create a policy that would win them political favour outside of Québec – in the words of Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, it was to be for *all* Canadians. The

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[2] Pearson-Shoyama Institute. "Immigrants, Multiculturalism and Canadian Citizenship." http://www.pearson-shoyama.com/Hot%20Button/immigran.htm (October 15, 1998).

policy also assured the Liberals increased political support in urban Ontario, where many immigrants were establishing themselves. Most importantly, it was seen to be a useful policy in reclaiming a national identity, one that was under threat from encroaching U.S. culture and faced increasing pressure from Québec separatist politics.[3]

Official multiculturalism has gone through a series of reviews and incarnations since its inception. A Ministry of Multiculturalism was created in 1973 to monitor the implementation of the government's multicultural inititiatives. In 1985 multiculturalism was enshrined in the *Canadian Charter for Rights and Freedoms*, further ensuring the rights of immigrants and providing them with the ability to seek out recourse in the courts of Canada. The most significant change came in 1988 when the Multicultural policy was joined by the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*, making Canada the first country to have a multicultural law.[4]

Two passages from the *Act for the Preservation and Enhancement of Multiculturalism*, or the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* define its purpose. Section 3.1(a) of the Act emphasizes the philosophical principles suporting the government's goals for multiculturalism, section 3.1(c) addresses the people and communities affected by this philosophy and concretizes measures to ensure their involvement in Canada's social fabric. Both statements give some indication of the government's committment to supporting, both rhetorically and financially, the cultural communities of Canada:

> 3.(1) It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Government of Canada (a) to recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism reflects the cultural and racial diversity of Canadian society and

[3] Augie Fleras and Jean Leonard Elliot, Multiculturalism in Canada. Scarborough: Nelson Canada, 1992, p. 72.
[4] ibid., pg. 272.

acknowledges the freedom of all members of Canadian society to preserve, enhance and share their cultural heritage.

(c) to promote the full and equitable participation of individuals and communities of all origins in the continuing evolution and shaping of all aspects of Canadian society and assist them in the elimination of any barrier to such participation.[5]

Multiculturalism has suffered various political criticisms over the last 25 years, however it has suffered more vehement attacks in the past ten. There is no single reason for this, but it is safe to say that the sharp rise of global capitalist forces in recent years has led to a corresponding shift in the principles that guide the decisions of Western governments. In order to compete, national economies have become deregulated and privatized, and free trade, flexible labour markets, and fiscal austerity have reduced the range of functions of individual governments. Specifically, Canadian federal and provincial governments have made it their focus to cut spending at whatever cost, abandoning their long-standing commitment to socially driven considerations. Over the last several years the Liberals have slashed the budgets of cultural institutions, welfare and unemployment insurance, and provincial transfer payments for social programs like health care.[6] In addition, both supporters and critics of the federal and provincial governments have made it their job to support whatever it takes to "balance budgets," "cut the deficit," and "reduce government spending." A global political swing to the right has had its effect on the most socialist of leaders and countries. In effect, the social and cultural policies that were inherent to 1970s liberalism in Canada have been eschewed in favour of economic ones.

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[5] Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, Canadian Multiculturalism Act. Ministry of Supply and Services, 1988, p. 13.

[6] The 1999 federal budget, as well as its provincial counterparts, has tried to remedy some of the drastic measures taken in the mid-'90s, as a result of intense public pressure in the areas of health care and education.

Therefore, achieving economies of scale has become the measure by which governments must justify their actions, and their support for policies like multiculturalism. This sort of 'barebones' thinking has seeped into the administration of arts and culture in Canada. In 1995 the Department of Canadian Heritage undertook a review of its multicultural programming activities, something which hadn't been done since the Multiculturalism Policy's inception in 1971. The stated purpose for doing so was to "respond to the public's desire for better management of limited resources, by ensuring the delivery of efficient and cost-effective programs that show results."[7] The review was launched not because of the need to overhaul the dated approach to multiculturalism's programs, but because of pressure for the Department to become fiscally responsible. And there are signs of this sort of thing all over the map of Canadian cultural institutions and operations.[8] This is not to say that the spending of federal monies in these areas should continue unchecked or that top-heavy bureaucracies in some way facilitate a superior creative process. However, it is evident that when we talk of cutting back, the 'surplus' functions of our social and political structures are critically, if not unfairly, put to the test.

Thus it is with this accumulated burden – shaky political origins and an environment of reducing bureaucratic excess – that the merits and purpose of the Multiculturalism Policy are questioned. The rudimentary way in which the policy was originally devised is perpetuated by the way the term multiculturalism and its surrounding discourse is put into practice. Indeed, the term has rarely been fully explored and a simplified understanding of what it signifies allows multiculturalism to be easily manipulated by a spectrum of

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[7] Department of Canadian Heritage. "The Context for Renewal."
http://www.pch.gc.ca/multi/html/context.html (October 1, 1998).
[8] The NFB is a perfect example of this type of cost-cutting, where the most efficient and unique components of its function have been razed by bureaucrats who have no tangible relationship to film or Canadian culture, and fulfill their jobs as political appointees.

political interests in Canada. The term is so openly indeterminate that it can be used effectually by the Right to conjure up thoughts of misdirected political correctness, undesirable affirmative action programs, and high-level immigration. At the same time, the Left uses multiculturalism as an indication of its commitment to the problems and issues of minority communities, which often allows its supporters to skate over the complex problems of racism, sexism and classism. Both sides critique the other for their chosen usage. And, it is difficult to say which type of usage is more damaging; the type which tries to elicit feelings of distrust and fear, or the type which purposefully ignores the depth of the crises which plague our society. In short, the term multiculturalism is continuously reconfigured within a range of meanings based on the political, and social intentions of the user.

Discussions about how the discourse of multiculturalism in Canada affects an understanding of identity remain locked in equally polarized positions. Detractors of the policy say it undermines the potential strength of a unified population. Neil Bissoondath, a Canadian cultural commentator, says "Its provisions seem aimed instead at encouraging division, at ensuring that the various ethnic groups whose interests it espouses discover no compelling reason to blur the distinctions among them."[9] Proponents of official multiculturalism insist that it continues to increase fair treatment for minorities and tolerance of different cultures: "Multiculturalism maps differences....mapping differences can be a positive as well as a negative thing; it can be a way both of celebrating those differences (while still remaining within Canadian culture) and of resisting assimilation."[10] As persuasive as these positions may appear, they both rely on a perspective which assumes that ethnic communities are harmonious – that there

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[9] Neil Bissoondath, Seling Illusions. Toronto, Penguin Books, 1994, p. 43.
[10] Linda Hutcheon. Splitting Images. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1991, p. 48.

is no internal dissention or difference in the process of making Canada their home. Debates about the role of multiculturalism never seem to be able to escape the constraints of an already fabricated set of categories and assumptions. In other words, the discourse has standard features such as how dominant and minority communities should interact, and how different religious groups are sanctioned; it champions facts such as the number of services for ethnic groups, their growing visibility in non-traditional sectors, and it focuses on simple dichotomies like assimilation versus integregation.[11]

My biggest criticism of multiculturalism is the inability of any institutionalized version of it to address the realities of a growing segment of the Canadian population. I am speaking about the group of people that I fit into: second-generation Indo-Canadians. We may or may not have been born in Canada, but our defining feature is that we have been raised here from a relatively young age, and therefore our sensibilities have been strongly influenced by the dominant social structure in Canada. Yet at the same time, we have not abandoned our ethnic origins, or ignored the influence of the other cultures that form our identities. The needs of this community of people are not and cannot be addressed by the dated ideals of multiculturalism. In writing about the Multicultural Policy Scott McFarlane says, "it assumes that individuals and communities emerge from discrete cultural origins and possess both a recognizable history and autonomous set of cultural practices."[12] If multiculturalism as a conceptual framework is to have any value in the present, the discourse surrounding it must begin to include more voices from communities who did not emerge from "discrete cultural origins" and whose cultural practices communicate what is different about their experience.

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[11] Fleras and Elliot, Multiculturalism, pg. 25.
[12] Scott McFarlane, "The Haunt of Race," Fuse, vol. 18, No.3, Spring 1995, p. 22.

Even though I am critical of it, I do value the resolve and basic sentiment of Multiculturalism. The *Multicultural Act* gave credence to the culturally divergent styles of the thousands of peoples entering Canada during the late '60s and '70s, especially in the face of the pure-bred, pure-wool Christian ethos that dominated Canadian history and politics at that time. Subsequently, Canada's ethnic communities have reaped benefits from the federally funded programs of the Multiculturalism Policy. For instance, the Multiculturalism Program – which is the primary vehicle for implementing the ideas stated in the policy – reflects a basic understanding that changing belief structures is not solely a didactic process that can be achieved by institutional and legal means. To this end, the federal government has targeted voluntary and non-profit organizations, educational and non-governmental institutions, individuals and private sector companies for projects which address the priorities and objectives of the Multiculturalism Program. The Department of Heritage outlines the three fundamental goals of the Program:

> **Identity:** fostering a society that recognizes, respects and reflects a diversity of cultures such that people of all backgrounds feel a sense of belonging and attachment to Canada.
> **Civic Participation:** developing, among Canada's diverse people, active citizens with both the opportunity and the capacity to participate in shaping the future of their communities and their country.
> **Social Justice:** building a society that ensures fair and equitable treatment and that respects the dignity of and accomodates people of all origins.[13]

This type of purposefulness is evident in the support the Multiculturalism Policy lends to many cultural groups and projects. For example, the Montreal-based theatre company *Teesri Duniya* has received financial support from the

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[13] Department of Canadian Heritage. "The Context for Renewal."
http://www.pch.gc.ca/multi/html/context.html (October 1, 1998).

Department of Canadian Heritage, out of the pocket of the Multiculturalism Program. The company pursues the inclusion of a diverse range of voices in its productions and has managed to evolve into an experience-based type of multicultural voice. It is growing steadily in size and in recognition among the local and national arts community. *Teesri Duniya* provides some evidence that the multicultural legacy of the Trudeau government has proved beneficial to a range of minorities groups in Canada.

Still, I question what guides decisions to fund companies like *Teesri Duniya*. Is it because the decisions made on behalf of the Multiculturalism Program take the company's progressive approach into account, or is it because they are seen as a unanimous body acting in the name of some authentic South Asian immigrant experience? Given the fact that very little has been done to change the policy and its philosophical underpinnings, I believe it is the latter. Multiculturalism remains an idealistic, ill-defined policy, one that historically has supported the public display of one's mother culture in lieu of recognizing an evolving, complex, multi-racial society – even though it may do so inadvertently.

Multiculturalism also has broader social implications that support racial divisiveness. One one hand, in its effort to be all-inclusive – to cover all its bases – multicultural policy has served to consolidate negative feelings against visible minorities. On the other hand, multiculturalism also communicates that ethnic minorities *can only ever be minorities*, and that everyone else lives outside its purview. Within the context of multiculturalism in Canada, my dominant identity continues to be fixed as a minority, with all of the problems therein. However I am somewhere beyond the simple associations of "ethnic minority." It is not out of disdain that I want to distance myself from this collective group, but rather that I cannot identify with the lineage and associations of that term. The issue is further complicated by the fact that I do not belong anywhere else, but at

the same time, others might not quite see me as "Canadian."[14] Furthermore, I am

resistant to the terms by which I must enter that nation-state status. To echo M.

Nourbese Philip,

> I carry a Canadian passport, I therefore, am Canadian.
> How am I Canadian, though, above and beyond the
> narrow legalistic definition of being the bearer of a
> Canadian passport, and does the racism of Canadian
> society present an absolute barrier to those of us who
> are differently coloured ever belonging? Because that
> is, in fact, what we are speaking about – *how to belong*
> – not only in the legal and civic sense of carrying a
> Canadian passport, but also in another sense of
> feeling at 'home' and at ease. It is only in belonging
> that we will eventually become Canadian.[15]

Would these criticisms levelled against multiculturalism change if the

policy was clearer, more precise? Would the issues I am confronted with be

resolved? Not if the policy continues to be a top-down, instructional and

prescriptive policy. Officially sanctioned versions of multiculturalism feel forced,

they create resentment, inevitably fuelling feelings of racism, and they confuse

what it means to be "welcomed" with what it means "to belong." If multicultural

policy is to shed its negative associations and be a legitimate social tool in the

coming years, which it has the opportunity to do,[16] it needs to become more

organic, to take a form which facilitates how to truly belong.

The problems that I see with multiculturalism are echoed throughout

various communities in Canada. Negative reaction to the Policy comes from any

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[14] In March of 1999 an Albertan MP retorted to a member of the opposition party who was of
South Asian origin and has been in Canada for over 20 years, "go back to India!" *The Globe and
Mail*, March 19, 1999, p. A11.

[15] M. Nourbese Philip, Frontiers, Stratford: The Mercury Press, 1992, p. 16 (emphasis mine).

[16] "In the next twenty years, the representation of visible minorities is expected to rise so that by
the year 2016, it is estimated that visible minorities will likely comprise close to 20% of the adult
population and 25% of children." Victoria M. Esses and R.C. Gardner, "Multiculturalism in
Canada: Context and Current Status," Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science, January 1997, p.
2. Metropolises like Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto already have visible minority populations
that exceed this breakdown – Toronto's is approaching 45% of its total population.

number of corners, however ethnic groups have been particularly vocal in articulating dissatisfaction with and concern over the implications of official multiculturalism. There is a growing awareness among these communities that the sort of organic change to the Policy that I am espousing begins at the level of discourse, which I argue is where the actual power of multiculturalism lies. Part of what constitutes that discourse are the cultural representations that these communities produce. These representations express a growing concern over the way cultural identities are configured. They come to multicultural discourse from a critical perspective, one that elucidates precisely why the meaning of multiculturalism needs to shift. In other words, cultural representations provide an important entry point into the broader issues that the discourse of multiculturalism invokes.

To this end, I want to address an idiom that has established a foothold in cultural and artistic forms across Canada. It might be an antidote to the disaffection within our multi-racial and multi-cultural society. It is evident across all types of cultural representation – in theatre you can see it in the work of *Teesri Duniya*; in dance in the work of José Navas, and in literature with the writings of Kerri Sakimoto and Shyam Selvadurai. Issues of cultural confluence and cultural conflict figure centrally in this mode of expression – in fact, these representations are often borne out of the problems that cultural difference advances. However, this idiom is not concerned so much with introducing a diversity of cultures to the mainstream, it is about accepting their presence and influence in the midst of it. The inevitable integration of cultures is seamlessly intertwined into the narratives, aesthetics and politics of these cultural forms, to the point where cultural difference is completely naturalized.

As I've said, I am dealing with an idiom that could and does appear in different media. However film is especially good at conveying the ideas I am

describing because of its tremendous power to facilitate the recognition and absorption of ideas. Thus, it is through film that I want to show what this "vernacular" looks like and how it sponsors a different type of engagement with multiculturalism.

The term "hybrid" is commonly used to explain this language. While the term has a broad cultural and historical presence, it evokes specific meanings in the current lexicon of cultural/film studies. The most recongizable features hybrid films share are that they blend classical Hollywood narrative and form with the narratives and forms of culturally different cinemas; and secondly, that their subject matter regularly dwells on the juxtaposition of different cultures, often as a legacy of a colonial past. These sorts of films have made their appearance in countries that have been subject to high-scale immigration such as England, Australia, and Canada. I am referrring to films such as *Passion of Rememberance, Looking for Langston, Rude, Handsworth Songs, Sammy and Rosie Get Laid, Bhaji on the Beach, Sam and Me.* All of these films illustrate the complexities of migration, and they also provide some insight into the way culturally diverse populations have evolved – not in a way that that displays the best of a particular cultural heritage, but that raises questions about what it means when different cultural communities interact.

Masala, the 1992 Canadian made feature-length fiction film, fits well in this genre. It is directed, produced by and stars Srinivas Krishna, a young Toronto-based filmmaker of Indian descent, and deals with a group of South Asians living in Toronto. **Masala** uses a range of techniques and perspectives which marry South Asian cultural influences with the formula and devices of Western cinemas. I am interested in the film precisely because this style and

content generated a fair degree of controversy when the film was released.[17] Its treatment of certain "sacred cows" – Lord Krishna, the Canadian Minister of Multiculturalism, and of issues that are usually left unspoken – racial discrimination, overt sexuality – raised the eyebrows of the Indo-Canadian community, the political community, the old cultural guard, and of just about everyone that saw the film. Younger generations seemed to like it and agree with its content, older audience members were offended by its audacity. **Masala** troubled an official and traditional understanding of multiculturalism, which in my opinion, is exactly the first step in reviving the discourse.

Chapter Two of this thesis reveals how **Masala** confront official multiculturalism through an analysis of the way in which **Masala** renders the complex dynamics of a South Asian community in Canada. In other words, I chronicle some of the elements that contribute to the process of hybridity as they occur in **Masala**. Specifically, I want to examine how the film communicates the key issues of one's culture by referring to its aesthetic and discursive elements. While placing the film within the hybrid genre gives me the opportunity to talk about the film text itself, it also lets me talk about an alternative type of multiculturalism.

Chapter Three utilizes a set of terms that borrow from Linguistics, but that have become manifest in interesting and revealing ways in cultural studies approaches. I use Homi Bhabha's concept of "cultural translation" as a guiding concept to talk about **Masala's** hybridity and its context for reception. Doing so takes the focus off film language and puts culture and politics at the centre of my thesis. I survey a range of reviews, periodical articles, and interviews that were

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[17] Kobena Mercer claims that "it is precisely this dissensus that indicates something important is going on!" In "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain," Blackframes: Critical Perspectives in Black Independent Cinema. Claire Andrade Watkins and Mybe B. Cham, eds. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988, p. 51.

produced as a result of the film's release and commercial success. I am interested in the relationship between the aesthetic and discursive elements in the film and the way they are then "translated" for Canadians through public discourse. In other words, I am focusing on the way that cultural criticism shapes our understanding and provides frameworks of interpretation for "reading" **Masala**.

The term translation permits me to address the way in which the signs and symbols of cultures are communicated, used and turned over to create new meanings. It is a framework for understanding the idiom that I am referring to – one that takes from and gives back both in the reproduction of artistic forms and in the representation of cultures. Cultural translation allows me to conceptualise the process of cultural exchange as something that is neither assimilationist nor about static traditionalism. And, even though there is a long list of internationally known films that precede it, **Masala** is the first *Canadian* film of its kind – a significant step in the attempt to create a responsive environment in which to live. Because of this, its public and critical reception also warrant further scrutiny.

The conclusion returns to the discussion of multiculturalism in Canada and addresses the consequences of the language of hybridity and cultural translation and how they might extend Canadian multicultural discourse and policy. To think about a culture being translated as an ongoing activity might be a useful way to think about multiculturalism, bearing in mind that cultures cannot be treated as objects with timeless attributes or fixed objectives. My goal in using the metaphor of translation is to invoke an approach to thinking about cultures – an approach that calls for an holistic understanding of the object under study – be it books, cultures, films, a piece of art. The benefit of a good textual translation is that it constantly considers the original text while adding a surplus – the possibility of accessing new meanings. Similarly, in the case of good

cultural translation, I'm suggesting that opening up the possibility for new ideas about multiculturalism depends on the quality of its discourse.

There are several reasons for pursuing this type of research. First of all, I think it's important to identify this new idiom and appreciate its import. I would argue that this cultural form is imminent and therefore it is necessary to document its emergence. If the idiom does contain signs of a cultural birth, then we must consider new frameworks of interpretation that discard essentialist notions of identity and static boundaries.

Secondly, the need to find ways of living with difference must be one of the inevitable concerns of a multi-racial society. However, it seems that calls for cultural awareness or similar claims under the rubric of multiculturalism are viewed with suspicion: "You may wonder, in fact, whether there isn't a connection between the thinning of the cultural content of identities and the rising stridency of their claims... some of them fear that unless the rest of us acknowledge the importance of their difference, there soon won't be anything worth acknowledging."[18] This glib comprehension diminishes what it means to feel connected and rooted, and to feel accepted. Stuart Hall's fluent language more suitably evokes the process of cultures' evolution:

> Though they seem to invoke an origin in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, actually identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not 'who we are' or 'where we came from', so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves. [19]

[18] K. Anthony Appiah, " The Multiculturalist Misunderstanding," The New York Review, October 9, 1997, p. 34.

[19] Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'," in Questions of Cutlural Identity, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, London: Sage Books, 1996, p. 4.

To do what Hall says, we need to introduce new ways of thinking and talking about the subject at hand, about multiculturalism. To paraphrase Coco Fusco, the literal mentality that governs Western culture assumes that didactic correctives such as public policy will somehow eliminate the cultural ignorance in our society, and ignores the fact that our reliance on these simple causal models has done nothing yet to change more deeply rooted structures of belief. Clearly, institutional mechanisms alone are ill-suited to respond to the needs of our evolving Canadian landscape. The question therefore becomes, how do we introduce elasticity to the current model of Canadian multiculturalism? Perhaps to get beyond the sort of literalism which pervades the creation and reception of policy and its associated structures, we need to seek out a different language, a different level of engagement that allows us to surmount the entrenched dynamics of Canadian multiculturalism.

CHAPTER TWO:
Interpreting Masala's Hybridity

> I don't think you should call it [Masala] hybrid, I
> don't know what the hell that means. I think it's a
> word you learned somewhere and you use because it
> seems to refer to something that's meaningful, but it
> doesn't.[20]

The following chapter demonstrates what I believe to be the value of

Masala – it's distinctive approach to the life of cultural communities in Canada,

in particular the Indo-Canadian community. Despite the director's thoughts on

the film, I want to demonstrate that Masala's hybridity presents us with a

perspective on ethnic and cultural difference that is revitalizing because it's

unpredictable – unlike the dominant understanding of multiculturalism where

"categorizing keeps difference in its place."[21] Hybridity has many applications

however, simply stated, it refers to the blending together of two things – plants,

animals, humans, cultures. The word hybrid has bearing on genetic experiments

like animal cloning, in agriculture it refers to producing stronger or hardier

plants, and it also refers to a person of mixed cultural origin. But as I am using it

here, it relates to the conjoining of different film styles. Masala is a hybrid film

because it blends distinctly different film styles together. At the same time,

hybridity acts as a metaphor that opens the door to a discussion of different ideas

about cultural communities. Within this context, hybridity has important

consequences when it comes to communicating ideas about multiculturalism.

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[20] Srinivas Krishna, Personal Interview, April 22, 1999.
[21] Laura U. Marks, "A Deleuzian politics of hybrid cinema," Screen 35:3, Autumn 1994, p. 251.

The use of hybridity in contemporary cultural theory is contested because of a range of negative connotations, and indeed its history is complex. Its scientific roots, where two components were brought together to produce a third specimen, have been manipulated in various ways. For example, scientific hybridity helped to inform nineteenth-century colonial discourses of racism and discrimination. The logic of "segregationists" relied on the negative results of scientific experimentation as a way of arguing against inter-racial mixing.[22] A similar logic prevails in white supremacist ideologies where creating a white Aryan race can be thought to be achieved by mixing "pure" genes. Obviously this scientific racism has been widely discredited, but the term has not lost all of its negative association. Many critics feel that hybridity is too deeply infused with the principles of biologism to have much value as a progressive approach to understanding the confluence of cultures. The theoretical paradigms of culture which employ hybridity are interested in doing away with the hierarchies that are founded on notions of purity and origin, whereas scientific racism uses the "racial impurity" that results from hybridity to maintain those hierarchies. According to Johnathan Friedman, hybridity's use in cultural theory is problematic because it assumes the same foundations as scientific hybridity – that cultures and peoples are distinct in the same way as apples and oranges. Friedman says, "It is a discourse that is predicated on the presumption of the existence of once pure cultures that may have existed before the age of international capital compressed the globe."[23] He goes on to say that all cultures are de facto the product of ethnic mélange, co-optation and integration. He feels the problem with using hybridity rests in the same desire to label – to lay claim to

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[22] Nikos Papastergiadis, "Tracing Hybridity in Theory," in Debating Cultural Hybridity, eds. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood, London: Zed Books, 1997, p. 258.
[23] Johnathan Friedman, "Global Crises, The Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnics and Nationals in an Era of De-Hegemonisation," in Debating. p. 83

some essential characteristic – as underlies other questionable ethnic, religious and racist types of identification.

An important distinction has been lost in cultural theory's application of hybridity, which may be why it is subject to this type of criticism. Cultural hybridity is a metaphor, scientific hybridity is not. Science talks about bringing two known, definite objects together which produces fixed results. It is a concrete process where the outcome will be understood. Cultural hybridity also brings two things together, but this is where the parallel ends. Culture does not have the same determinates as they exist in science. The elements are abstract, therefore the conclusions can only be speculative. But this should be viewed positively because it leaves open the possibility of creating outcomes, rather than having them pre-determined. The resulting space is open – in this instance, a discursive space exists for us to discuss new possibilities for multiculturalism. The freedom exists to take two cultural objects and create something unexpected. In short, the causality of science is a restriction that doesn't exist in culture.

With this in mind, we can accept that the associations of hybridity have value in a culturally cosmopolitan milieu. Homi Bhabha claims that the aim of hybridity is not to define or to delimit, which is the type of closing down of identity that critics are concerned about. Hybridity's usefulness is in opening up a discursive space where other transformations are made possible: "...the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge."[24] Cultural hybridity acknowledges that identity is the consequence of negotiating difference, and that transgressing boundaries of any

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[24] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha," in Identity, Culture, Difference, ed. Johnathan Rutherford, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, p. 211.

sort – racial, cultural, social – leaves open the possibility of creating new ways of thinking about the issues that these "categories" raise.

This is not the same as doing away with cultural boundaries or difference, a subtle but important distinction. Boundaries are desirable – they ground us, shape us, give us the basis for our identities. What Friedman and other critics overlook is that the metaphor of hybridity does not aim to erase cultural differences, but to erase the inequities that are associated with them. Bhabha's "third space" addresses the limitations of language that structures human experience, and how re-thinking language might help to liberate us from such inequities.

In light of the ongoing debate about the meaning of the term one must understand that it is not causally linked to international migration. Friedman says, "In today's world ... in which cultural flows are seen to meet one another and form new combinations, hybrids are assumed to be a real historical product of the increasing globalization of the world."[25] Invoking hybridity is the product of a conscious desire to shift the grounds of identification away from narrow definitions. To resolve this tension, hybridity should be recognized as a question of practice, which Friedman argues "can be understood only in terms of its social context and the way in which acts of identification are motivated."[26]

Hybrid cinema is a way to talk about the effects of merging different styles together, but it also allows me to talk about Masala as an impetus for opening up a discursive space, for facilitating a change in the way we think about multiculturalism. The hybrid cinematic form has been defined as the following:

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[25] Friedman, "Global Crises," p. 85.

[26] Friedman, "Global Crises," p.85. The hybridity that I refer to only really applies to the First World. I concur with Spivak who says that hybridity does nto have the same bearing in the Third World post-colonial arena as it does for diasporic identity in the First World. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader, eds. P. Williams and L. Chrisman, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990.

> a hybrid form, in which autobiography mediates a mixture of documentary, fiction and experimental genres characterizes the production of people in transition and cultures in the process of creating identities. One defining quality of hybrid, or experimental diasporan, films is that they are necessarily produced in a contentious relation to a dominant language: in this sense they are properly termed a minority form.[27]

Films that fit into the genre that Marks defines are motivated by the desire not only to characterize diasporan experience, but to also assert that working through the dilemmas posed by cultural difference is actually a valuable exercise in itself. In other words, these films tell us something about the range of creativity that cultural difference accommodates, in addition to the fact that they represent unspoken-for segments of the population.

Do "hybrids" like **Masala** have the power to heighten reflexivity in a world where cultural difference is celebrated and consumed like other market wares? I would argue that they do, especially in the face of simplified renderings of difference, the kind which official multiculturalism has a hand in producing and perpetuating. Whatever else one might choose to say about it, **Masala** exists as a provocative example of a type of cinema whose total aesthetic expression is distinctive. To refer to it as hybrid does not close down other types of analyses or points of view, nor is it a simple matching of theory to subject. Hybridity gives us an understanding of Masala's legacy – as a deliberate aesthetic challenge to the dominant cultural identity. Looking at the film's hybridity is an alternate way to think about how cultural differences cannot be reduced.

In this regard, I should say that I have no intention of providing a definitive explanation of what **Masala** is trying to say, or what it all means. I realize that filmmakers have specific ideas that their films are trying to

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[27] ibid., p. 245.

communicate, and that those meanings should be respected. However as Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and other cultural studies theorists have shown, one cannot ignore that cultural texts take on a more expansive role; communities and individuals interpret images and text according to their own diverse experiences.[28] It is through this co-optation that society forms its meanings and is able to use the information available to it to shape its perceptions about the world. It could be argued that it matters very little what you or I think the film is about – meanings are derived, taken away and used accordingly. This is why I disagree with Krishna who argues that his film is not hybrid or about multiculturalism per se. He seems to place too great an emphasis on his ability to produce the meaning he prefers his film to have. Of course preferred meanings do exist. Krishna is right when he says that Masala is simply about people living in Canada's South Asian community.[29] But apart from setting a partial context, it is naive of him to think that the film doesn't have special meaning as an "Indo-Canadian" film. He is an Indo-Canadian filmmaker and his film is infused with references to his background which identify his frame of reference – the Air India explosion, the Minister of Multiculturalism, Lord Krishna and so on – all which contribute to a particular style which I call hybrid.

Films like Masala are being made and are socially significant because they attempt to articulate an experience that has been overlooked by mainstream cultural production. In addition, Masala shows that issues affecting cultures everywhere – migration, globalization of economies, the confluence of cultures, nationalism and so on – are conditions we all share and are trying to negotiate. These conditions manifest themselves differently in each community they touch, but their effects leave us all equally uncertain.

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[28] In the '70s, Russian filmmaker Nikita Mikhalakov lamented that as soon as his films hit the screen they were no longer his own.
[29] Krishna, Personal Interview, April 22, 1999.

Masala is a richly textured film, and is one of the first to share with audiences the experience of living in Canada as a second-generation Indo-Canadian. Not only does it have hybrid moments, for example fusing '30s Hollywood musicals with the song and dance of Hindi films, but it's richness also comes from its style which lends to its singular aesthetic. Masala has a performative quality – the characters, plot-lines, and mis-en scène are overtly staged as they communicate the film's ideas. As I mentioned, Bollywood codes, Hollywood musicals, dream sequences, and the send-up of government officials are regular fixtures in the film and draw attention to its unconventionality. But they can also be interpreted as a commentary on the broader social context. Evoking the performativity of Masala helps us conceptualize certain elements in the film as a response to the social environment that the film was made in, or to a specific set of events that preceded it. To take it one step further, Masala is trying to represent an interculturality – not a fusing, or accumulation of cultural information, but its overlap. In this regard, the idea of intercultural performance works as a bridge to what takes place in Masala. Intercultural performance, as described by Fusco, works as a metaphor for Masala's aesthetic. It draws a parallel between Fusco's performance in a cage, and the representation of minority cultures.

Fusco describes intercultural performance as "performing the identity of an Other."[30] In 1992, Fusco collaborated with Guillermo Gomez-Pena in a series of performance pieces where they acted out the day-to-day experiences of so-called "savages" living in a cage – natives of a forgotten, primitive culture. Their goal was to put the findings of early European ethnography on display using the

[30] An "Other" is a foreign person, an alien body, a being who is obviously different to those around him or her; it can be seen in the colour of skins, the languages people use, their distinct belief systems, and often refers to the speaking position of the individual be it based on race, class, or gender.

stereotypes coded by anthropologists – the rawness, the physicality, the wildness – to assert that much of the construction and understanding of ethnic Otherness was and continues to be based on the body. That is, Fusco and Pena were interested in showing Western audiences how we have historically interpreted non-Western cultures: as a series of superficial, unrefined objects which are confusing and understood as inferior. In Fusco's words, their intent was to "create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other."[31]

Not surprisingly, the mock theatre generated a wide range of responses: some people found it completely believable, some viewers found its potential breach of academic integrity disgusting, others were fascinated by its sheer spectacle. In almost all instances it evoked the same extreme responses regardless of the nationality or ethnicity of the audience. These responses to the performance also revealed that ethnic parity and blood ties are no guarantee of shared community or of shared sensibility. Gomez-Pena and Fusco's commentary demonstrated that many of the spectators showed some degree of complicity in perpetuating and reveling in the performance's stereotypes.

The important aspect of intercultural performance for this thesis is its function as social commentary, which is not a realist intervention, but is analogous to the role that Masala serves as a comment on multiculturalism. Fusco's essay captures the clichés, the perceptions of spectators, and conveys that the idea behind the performance was to confuse established points of view. In similar ways, Masala plays on real conditions of cultural association in Canada. It illustrates the collusion of different cultural practices: it enunciates and negotiates the stereotypes, the issues, conventions, material structures and events

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[31] Coco Fusco, English is Broken Here: Notes on the Cultural Fusion in the Americas, New York: New Press, 1995, p. 38.

of the association of South Asian and Canadian cultures. In its treatment of the day-to-day lives of its characters, and the larger issues that inform them, **Masala** enmeshes important aspects of what it is to be a Canadian, a Nationalist, an Indo-Canadian, a second-generation Canadian – it takes these "categories" of identity and wraps them up with issues such as the loss of religion, language, racial intolerance, community in-fighting, and different social practices. The film utilizes the clichés and performs stereotypes of South Asian and Canadian culture and turns them on their head with wit, satire and humour. Its treatment of reality borders occasionally on the surreal – dream sequences, talking Gods, impossible happenstance. Performance refers to all of these aspects in **Masala** – the playfulness, the parody, the irony, the aesthetics, the choices a director makes and the meaning that the characters' actions convey.

Although it does not do complete justice to **Masala**, the simplest way to explain its aesthetic is through certain identifiable tropes that occur in the film. The film touches on a number of issues broadly applicable to the Indian diaspora. Some of these tropes have been recognized and talked about in theoretical terms within the discourse of hybrid cinema. In other words, they have been chosen for their regularity, for their conceptual import, for their metaphoric value in discussing the mindsets and experiences of diasporic cultures and communities. This sort of analysis also allows me to conduct what Aijaz Ahmad refers to as a "symptomatic reading: the concentration on a symptom which is itself vividly central but one which may also, in the same sweep, give us some understanding of the structure as a whole."[32] My objective is to look to **Masala**'s features to shed light on the complex formative elements that shape Indo-Canadian sensibilities, as a way of suggesting that

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[32] Aijaz Ahmad, In Theory, London: Verso, 1992, p. 152.

multiculturalism is a flawed perception of the dynamics of cultural communities in Canada.

Masala focuses on the activities of a South Asian extended family living in Toronto. Masala's story derives largely from the movements of Krishna, the wayward son of a relatively tradition-oriented family. Briefly, the story is as follows: we are introduced to Krishna, an ex-junkie (played by the director) five years after the death of his family in the Air India explosion of 1985. Left without his immediate family, Krishna turns from aunt to uncle, looking for some means of survival and direction. Krishna tries to find work, he steals and borrows money to get by, depends on the generosity of his family and finally receives money owed to him. All this is done it seems, with the intent of escaping to Vancouver where he intends to start a new life. Krishna eventually comes to the conclusion that he should stay in Toronto where there are people who genuinely care for him. Unfortunately, this realization comes too late; he loses his life in a racially motivated act of violence.

Throughout Masala, we are introduced to a series of supporting characters: Lord Krishna, otherwise known as the "preserver" in the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses; a wealthy uncle and scheming aunt involved in negotiations with a Sikh "separatist;" an idealistic uncle bent on guarding a precious stamp – stripping the federal government of a valuable piece of Canadian heritage; a caring, pious grandmother who seems to have God on her side; and a sweet cousin scorned by her lover and thwarted by the conventions of traditional Indian marriage.

There are a sequence of occurrences at the beginning of Masala which introduce a number of key tropes in the film. In one of the first scenes, Lord Krishna and his older brother discuss the responsibilities of Supreme beings. Their dialogue is witnessed by the audience through television monitors in an

airplane. His brother says to him, "Krishna, this is not a comedy, it's a tragedy." Their conversation about the role and responsibilities of religious figures continues with Lord Krishna eventually postulating, "Why can't God simply be a man?" The mise-en-scène is whimsical and light and contrasts strongly with the weighty content of the dialogue. The two-shot set takes place among the clouds, Krishna with his bright blue skin and ornate head-dress, a group of courtesans dancing to the dulcet tones of a flute. It is a dream-like scenario which makes the impact of the following shot even more unexpected and unsettling.

The second event is a visual re-creation of the Air India explosion that took place off the coast of Ireland on June 23, 1985. The director cuts to a scene of a jet crossing the night sky, moments later it is ripped apart by the fatal blast that killed all 329 passengers and crew on their way to India. As the credits roll over top, a series of random personal affects, a sari, a jacket, a stuffed toy, are shown to be falling from the sky. This tragic scene is blunt and unsentimental, the enormity of its impact resounds in the isolation of the explosion.

In the next scene, we are introduced to the protagonist of the film. Krishna confronts an ex-girlfriend looking for money owed to him because, as he says, "I have no where to go." Instead of giving him the money, she offers him the option of selling heroin. Krishna tells her that he's gone through detox precisely to rid his life of drugs. He's driven away by the woman's gun-toting boyfriend who comments, "Man, you're living on luck."

The next event brings us fully into the "here and now" of the film. We meet most of the main characters in the film – the aunts, uncles, cousins, acquaintances and a host of lesser players – with Krishna's ominous arrival at the house of his wealthy aunt and uncle. They are in the midst of hosting a party to honour the Minister of Multiculturalism – a gathering where personalities, family dynamics and inter-relationships are quickly made known. The audience

is invited to witness the exchange of cultures in Canada, the official sanctioning of that exchange, and its execution in the personal relationships of the characters in the film.

Both the form and content of the preceding scenes display a range of tropes, which I think make the film worthy of discussion as it tries to communicate the experiences of life as an Indo-Canadian. The scenes are dramatic, tragic, they traverse fantasy and reality, and they resonate with specific cultural, political and geographic signposts. The subject matter they raise – tragedy, the notion of home, status, authenticity, the influence of community, discrimination and racism – are often presented as pointed satire, and use ridicule, irony and sarcasm to lampoon accepted attitudes. In short, the hybrid form and content of **Masala** provides us with an interesting and dynamic approach to contemporary Canadian multi-racial society. Of course these components alone do not make **Masala** a rigorous commentary on multiculturalism, but the particular blend of elements takes it beyond what might normally be a straightforward depiction of a "slice of Indian life." The film presents the audience with multiple points of view and a unique style, both of which animate the presence of cultural communities in Canada. To clarify what I mean, I have shaped my interpretation of the film's hybridity based on what I perceive to be significant tropes that link the film to the ideas of multiculturalism.

• **Loss**

In the first scene of the film the audience is told, point blank, that **Masala** is a story about loss. It is a significant concept in the film that is relayed to us through plot twists, but on a broader level, is also made clear through the presence of Lord Krishna, his personality and his interruptive encounters with

other characters. His foibles and outlandishness draw attention to religion and its diminishing role as a guiding force in contemporary culture. Throughout **Masala** Lord Krishna questions his divine powers. His character expresses the transformation of a religious society to a secular one – in deriding the character of Lord Krishna, **Masala** plays itself as a cynical comment on the faith that we put in God, a faith which allows our own weaknesses to be masked. Throughout the film we are reminded that God has fallen from grace in the eyes of humans, failing to receive the respect that religion has historically claimed. Lord Krishna is therefore depicted as 'one of us,' flying planes, consorting with concubines, feeling pain and pleasure.

When Lord Krishna asks, "what happens to Indians when they go to foreign lands?" he's questioning the loss of certain moral and ethical codes that necessarily occur with migration. It is an acknowledgment of the necessity to change but also of the corresponding fear of loss when one leaves "home." His question is answered in the following scenario. Lord Krishna appears before a group of characters at the end of the film with the intention of "scaring" them into releasing a kidnapped woman. However, he is confronted with characters who claim to have no need for His "pantheistic Hindu crap, " and is faced with the prospect that he has little to do with the meting out of justice.

The group's negative reaction to Lord Krishna's arrival represents a challenge to traditional Indian religious practice and belief systems. Inevitably, living in another country with new circumstances configures the way traditional Indian beliefs are observed. With this comes a sense of loss. Salman Rushdie, speaking about himself as an emigrated writer, points out the discomfort that is simultaneous with leaving one's cultural traditions: "The Indian writer, looking back at India, does so through guilt-tinted spectacles...We are Hindus who have crossed the black water; we are Muslims who eat pork. And as a result...we are

now partly of the West."[33] A hard thing to accept perhaps, but one that **Masala** throws in the audience's face by creating a Hindu God equally affected by western cultural influences and by the needs of humans. Lord Krishna's inscrutable ability to shape the characters' lives is questioned, leaving open the possibility that divesting long-standing beliefs may be liberating, in this case for Indo-Canadians tied to a tradition-based religious culture.

If Lord Krishna's human-like qualities represent the erosion of religiosity as a way of life, Krishna the human character illustrates the complex symptoms of displacement. One of Krishna's first lines in the film is "I have nowhere to go." Krishna no longer has any real roots, no existing ties to any one place – his parents and younger brother are dead. His aimless trajectory throughout the film takes him from place to place – from friend to aunt to uncle, from job to job, on a bus to Vancouver and a flight back to Toronto. Ghosh and Sarkar remark that "Films dealing with displacement seem to involve a remarkable amount of movement by the protagonist. The protagonist is always in search of a comfortable "location," and in this aspect, films on displacement are like films on travel – there is a constant traversing of space."[34] Krishna is a "rebel without a cause," uncomfortable in his surroundings, and unable to accept any particular location as permanent or desirable.

In the few relationships he has within the Indian community, Krishna is denigrated and told that he is inadequate – everyone from his smack-addict ex-girlfriend, to his onanistic cousin, to his sari-selling uncle proclaim him to be a failure. Even when he tries to establish credibility in the eyes of others – he dons a suit and works at a travel agency – he is laughed at. When he says to Rita, "you'd be better off going out with me," she responds, "my father would love

[33] Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands, London: Granta Books, 1991, p. 15.
[34] Bishnupriya Ghosh and Sarkar Bhaskar, "The Cinema of Displacement: Towards a Politically Motivated Poetics," Film Criticism. Fall/Winter 1995-96, p. 111.

that, wouldn't he." Similarly, Krishna is always having to define and explain himself to others, not just his day-to-day actions, but also his identity: in the process of trying to get the money owed to him by his ex-girlfriend, she tells him that importing heroin from Pakistan should be easy since he's from there. She shoots up, becomes oblivious after which he responds, more to himself then to her, "I'm not from Pakistan, I'm from India."

But Krishna's exile from the community is also self-motivated. He has chosen to be a "rebel," rejecting the traditions and the cultural signifiers that underpin his family and the larger Indian community. In a narrative break, the audience hears his father say that Krishna is no longer his son because he has chosen not to go to India with the rest of the family. Ien Ang notes that "there is also among many members of minority groups themselves a certain desire to assimilate, a longing for fitting in rather than standing out, even though this desire is often at the same time contradicted by an incapability or refusal to adjust and adapt completely."[35] Krishna and the other characters his age illustrate this identity split – not succumbing to the traditions of Indian culture, but also never squarely fitting into any kind of homogenous culture in Canada. The director himself has said in interviews that one can only try and negotiate two disparate worlds, two communities, for so long...."eventually that gulf becomes very difficult to bridge, and often you're put in a position where you have to go with one or the other."[36]

In cultural terms, the condition of being hybrid is generally assessed as a productive state. But as Aijaz Ahmad reminds us, it is a recent way of thinking that comes with accepting the impact of global forces. Ahmad claims that the

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[35] Ien Ang, "On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of the Diaspora," New Formations, vol. 24, Winter 1994, p. 9.
[36] Cameron Bailey, "What the Story Is: An Interview with Srinivas Krishna," Cineaction 28, 1992, p. 42.

"current metropolitan milieu, with its debunking of any 'myths of origin' and 'metaphysics of presence,' does not really authorize any sustained acknowledgment of such [dislocation] pains."[37] At an emotional and physical level, the reality of displacement may be quite different. Krishna's character in Masala provides evidence of this. The loss of stability in his life, as well as the anxiety of dislocation are writ large in his defiant and troubled personality. His position in the Indian community is never really resolved either: as the film draws to a close Krishna is looking for Rita, but neither her father nor anyone else is willing to help him find her. Unable to locate her, he goes to her home but is confronted by the young racists that he faces throughout the film. Krishna's murder at their hands comes as a surprise, however the fact that the community spends little time mourning his death leaves the audience uncertain how to interpret his place within it.

• **Recognition**

Recognition, respect, social standing – all are foundational in the story-lines of Masala. Similarly, the need to be validated by both the country one has adopted as home and by the family and friends in ancestral homelands is also evident in the film. This idea plays a significant part in the development of relationships both inside and outside the Indian diaspora: I can think of no Indian immigrant who does not feel the need to justify leaving their homeland. In Masala, we hear recurrent comments made by virtually all of the characters surrounding their desire for recognition. They want to make sure their voices are heard, that their opponents are taken care of, that their needs are properly met, that the rules of fair play apply to them, but most of all that they receive the

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[37] Ahmad, Theory, p. 134.

respect and attention that they feel is their due. In Masala, the search for validity and respect affects the actions of even the most grounded characters.

For example, the character of the Sikh separatist is an immigrant who still has strong connections with India. Badhur Sahib, as he is known, was a successful professor of modern history in India but made the decision to come to Canada after witnessing the Golden Temple raid and murders. In the film we are told that he came to Canada to seek a more tranquil life and (as is increasingly typical for educated immigrants), was able to get employment only as a taxi driver. The audience learns that Bahdur Sahib is most preoccupied with his responsibilities as part of the network of Sikh separatists trying to create "Khalistan." Badhur Sahib's involvement in this network may be because he feels remorse over leaving India, over leaving behind the scene of "the battle," and seeks validation from his community by staying involved in their common struggle. He pursues recognition, not as audiences have come to expect, but by using the tactics of an intellectual and modern man: he wants to export toilet paper to India which has the history of the Sikh people printed on it. The director has used a well-known character type – the Sikh separatist-as-terrorist – and subverted it precisely to draw attention to the audience's complicity in the creation and perpetuation of this stereotypical representation.[38]

The immigrant's desire for recognition is also witnessed in the actions of Mr. Tikoo, a timid postal worker. He is struggling financially, with bank officers appearing at his door and his mother constantly chiding him to do something about it. A precious historical Canadian stamp worth $5 million miraculously

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[38] Sikhism is a religious philosophy which has its historical roots in Hinduism. The Sikh people are concentrated in the Indian state of Punjab, but have a strong diasporic community in Canada and the West generally. For the last 50 years, Sikhs have been fighting for an independent nation-state in India known as Khalistan. As members of a minority group, Sikhs feel they are discriminated against and treated poorly in the rest of India – the 1984 Golden Temple raid in the Punjabi capital Amristsar was perpetrated by Indira Gandhi's government at a time when suspicion of Sikhs was at its highest.

ends up in his hands. Instead of negotiating the sale of the stamp so that he might improve his lot, Tikoo wants to keep the stamp in his own private collection. Through the course of the film we come to realize that this is because his most critical desire is to be known and to have his rightful place in Canadian society acknowledged. As he states, "a plane with 400 people on it blows up and nobody cares, I get beaten up on the street and no one pays attention, I have this damned stamp and everybody knows who I am!"

The statement is sad and ironic: it suggests that little attention was paid to the Air India explosion, or his beating, but that a single stamp, precious as it is, is worthy of more attention than the lives, welfare and issues faced by countless immigrants living in Canada. In this instance the irony in his declaration of desire may carry a second message. ".... Irony allows 'the other' to address the dominant culture from within without being co-opted by it and without sacrificing the right to dissent, contradict, and resist."[39] Hutcheon's understanding of irony is that it may be a way of coming to terms with the duplicity and narcissism of the dominant culture, in this case one that claims to consider all of its citizens equal, but at the same time reveals weaknesses in dealing with the significant questions raised by racial and ethnic conflicts.

There are a range of sequences where the issue of moral righteousness and social justice are raised, where the dialogue or the mis-en-scène revolves around the importance of place, of status, and of confirmation through the eyes of others. For example, Tikoo's wealthy cousin, Lallu Bhai Solanki, also seeks acknowledgment for his hard work and perseverance. His ambition to be a world-renowned sari trader is made known to Masala's audience by way of a dream sequence. The audience sees "Sir" Lallu Bhai parading up and down a catwalk with a host of international 'sari-clad darlings' to a mixed up chorus of

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[39] Hutcheon, Splitting Images, p. 49.

My Way. His dream is to be recognized world over for the fact that he is a self-made man, audacious and creative. His reverie is broken by his Sikh friend, whose money and promises to make Lallu Bhai the sole sari magnate in Khalistan will no doubt help him obtain knighthood status.

The desire to be accepted and validated resides to a large degree with first generation Indians, but it also expresses itself in the form of a burden of expectation on the second generation. For example, Rita Tikoo puts on an Indian accent as she explains to Krishna that her father's wish is that she attend medical school and that she and Anil Solanki set up a medical practice together. In fact, Rita wants to take flying lessons but fears getting thrown out of the house if her father finds out. Anil Solanki is in medical school, a common profession for the children of Indian immigrants, and is pressured to specialize in a prestigious area. And Krishna constantly makes illusions to his troubled relationship with his parents and their failed expectations. As Ganguly notes, a child who has "gone astray" or in other words, who has not followed the straight and narrow path to success, is likened to betrayal in the eyes of Indian parents.[40] Masala's character types and storylines point to social status and good placement in the Indo-Canadian community hierarchy as being highly desirable, while also pointing out that social status affects virtually all levels of relationships and interaction.

• **Home**

Masala configures the relationship between "here" and "there," between "home" and "away," in the form of small, seemingly insignificant acts. "Here" and "there" aren't just evocations of geographic distance but are also abstract

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[40] Keya Ganguly, "Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood," <u>Cultural Studies</u>, 1992, p. 37.

references to signs and symbols that represent emotional and cultural distance. These are the elements that pose the greatest challenge to the diasporic subject who is faced with conflicting interests – an external "pressure toward diasporic identification with the mythic homeland,"[41] and the need and desire to establish oneself in a new home.

In **Masala**, the actor Saeed Jaffrey plays the roles of Lord Krishna, Lallu Bhai Solanki, and Mr. Tikoo. He is a well-known actor in India, England and more recently, in North America. He has traversed the impasse between the escapism of Indian film to act in a number of Hanif Kureishi's films, epics like Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, John Huston's *The Man Who Would be King*, as well as a number of BBC productions. Jaffrey's international acting career confuses the traditional boundaries of culturally-based nationalist discourses and, interestingly, the diversity and range of character that Jaffrey exhibits in **Masala** turns what Stuart Hall calls one of the predicates of racism on its head: that "you can't tell the difference because they all look the same."[42] In all of his roles Jaffrey consistently performs a different component of the diasporic identity – the immigrant concerned for the welfare of his children, the displaced patriarch, the successful businessman, the Hindu God who jokes about being unable to administer miracles in Canada due to "jurisdictional conflicts." Jaffrey's performance across these roles is an excellent example of the structural complexity of **Masala**. The director and actor have brought certain issues forward by confusing the identity of the actor with the characters he plays, in a sense, pointing to the Indian diasporic experience in as complicated and myriad a fashion as it occurs.

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[41] Ang, Chinese, p. 5.
[42] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in The Post-Colonial Studies Reader, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, London: Routledge, 1995, p. 225.

The Lord Krishna character in **Masala** is also an interesting way to address the conflict between "here" and "there." He is presented as a slightly crazed, kitschy God who pours out a constant stream of witticisms through the only medium that a modern God could, the television. In this instance, the television and VCR become conduits for creating connections between India and Canada. He is "the master of the airwaves," a comical figure who likes to raise the differences between Indians in Canada and those "at home." The TV and VCR bring Lord Krishna to the grandmother who wants to improve the financial status and general welfare of her family. In his effort to help her out, Lord Krishna materializes as a heavenly apparition wearing his crown and a *Toronto Maple Leafs* jersey, shooting a puck to disrupt a truck driver and the audience's notion of how a God should deport himself.

Through the dialogues between Lord Krishna and the grandmother, the audience sees a disjuncture between a "modernized" society, and visions of an idealized homeland: "help us Bhagvan, we are outsiders here, make life like it was for us before we came to this land of supply-side economics and no-money-down real estate." However, unlike much diasporic film, **Masala** avoids capitalizing on nostalgic emotion, or simply using past/present or east/west dichotomies as a means of creating drama. If anything, the grandmother revels in other aspects of modernized living: she wants the best kitchen implements and tools that the West has to offer. Therefore while the past is very clearly a point of reference, the film deals with the contradictions and the confusion of an Indian community trying to make Canada its home.

Home means something completely different for the Sikh character. By making the desired homeland Khalistan, an imaginary place, the film draws attention to the untenable idea that one can go "home," or that an ideal homeland actually exists outside of the imagination. The representation of

diasporan peoples and their relationship to their homelands is interesting, and in this instance raises an important question – would Badhur Sahib return to Khalistan if the Sikhs were awarded an independent state? Is he still fighting for the same "home," or does the very fact that he's made a life in Canada shift his perception of what "home" should be?

One of the conversations that occurs between Bhadur Sahib and Lallu Bhai Solanki represents the way migrant sensibilities shape the concept of home. It reflects opposing viewpoints on the idea of a homeland that are almost certainly an example of an internal dialogue that many immigrants experience. The conversation raises the question of geographically bound nationalisms – the displaced Sikh professor is one of thousands of non-resident Indians willing to make sacrifices to help out some cause in India, if only for the sake of having some "spot on a map" to call home and live under the law of his God. Lallu Bhai responds by saying "this is your home now, look at what you've got in this country, I will help you set up in business." These opposite points of view express the nature of the debate on Canadian multiculturalism. On one hand, proponents of integration suggest that one can be completely attached to their homeland – the Sikh character does not want to abandon his place of birth, and his psychic attachment to India is conveyed through his continuing support of Sikh separatism. On the other hand, assimilationists advocate complete submission to the philosophies of a new country, a new home. Masala does not resolve this question for the audience, it only raises it as a problematic consequence of migration.

As a final point, Masala responds to the question of what it means to be at "home" through its deployment of language. English is the main language used, however Hindi is liberally interspersed throughout the film. It is a pointed way of making the audience aware of the dominant/minority interplay of the film – it

forces an audience to stop and consider what is taking place. Mercer claims that when language is used as a hybridizing mechanism it plays a subversive role: "Creole, patois and Black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of "English" – the nation-language of master-discourse – through strategic inflections, reaccentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes."[43] As Mercer's statement describes, the use of Hindi in **Masala** does not neutralize the role of English but undercuts it, in effect accentuating its presence by pointing to what is almost always absent.

The Hindi that is spoken in **Masala** is reserved for the in-jokes, for insults, yet at the same time illustrates the familiarity and comfort of a mother tongue. As the filmmaker points out, those scenes where Hindi is spoken are not critical to grasping the interaction that occurs. More importantly, in multi-racial cosmopolitan cities like Toronto, individuals are often unable to understand the languages spoken by those around them. Similarly, **Masala** refuses to be simple to understand, or any more transparent than the communities in which we live.

• **Generation and Gender Gaps**

Hindi is also strategically used to demonstrate the cultural divide between first generation and second generation Indians. Grandmother Tikoo speaks to her grandson in Hindi, a language which he is unable to understand. Instead of telling him what she has actually said, his father's translation of her comments makes a more pointed criticism: "your grandmother wants to know when you will learn your mother tongue." Similarly, Krishna tells his uncle who makes wry comments in Hindi, "you know I don't speak that gibberish..." Language

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[43] Kobena Mercer, "Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination: The Aesthetics of Black Independent Film in Britain." In <u>Blackframes: Critical Perspectives in Black Independent Cinema.</u> Claire Andrade Watkins and Mybe B. Cham, eds. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1988, p. 57.

illustrates the more problematic elements of the gap between the first and second generation Indians in **Masala**. It is the simplest conduit to understanding culture, and to retaining the traditions of one's cultural heritage. And, as is often true for immigrants, a child's ability to speak his or her mother tongue is a sign of parents' skill in having raised respectful, culturally aware Indians, and bestows the community's respect upon that family.

Varying perspectives on sex, marriage and relationships in **Masala** are also indicative of the gaps that occur between generations, and also across gender lines. Female aerobic exercise is given sexual overtones – the audience and Krishna watch in amazement as "Bibi" Solanki demonstrates her flexibility alongside the nimble women on a televised exercise show. Krishna's view is interrupted when her husband walks in, witnesses his wife's antics, and with lascivious confidence, claims that women marry to get a home, and men to get some action.

The same exercise show provides their son, Anil, with enough enticement to make his blood flow. The audience quickly gets the sense that fantasy-land is nothing new for Anil. During an arranged meeting with a young woman of marriageable age, Anil's imagination drifts to a particularly graphic vision of the woman in photo-spread style, complete with the trimmings of a hyper-idealized bedmate. This particular scene turns the stereotype of arranged marriage on its head, first with the insertion of Anil's "Playboy" fantasy, and secondly with the near-perfect replication of the rules of Indian engagement. The facts that are trotted out by the parents – Anil's medical specialty, her education, their social status in the community – are important to the parents as perceived indications of whether the children will be compatible. The two potential mates never exchange a word; only furtive glances from downcast eyes indicate that there might be any interest at all.

These absurd scenes lay certain stereotypes of Indian women bare while also affirming others – shy, demure, conservative home-makers are turned into sexual dynamos, who seem to exist for the pleasure of men. At the same time, Masala presents us with other female stereotypes – the radical feminist who has turned against Indian men, presumably because of her experiences as a sixteen-year old who was to have had an arranged marriage. Sari Tikoo is the voice of suppressed anger in a community that is dictated mostly by patriarchs. Her character is an exaggeration, but also betrays a frustration with the conservative traditions of Indian culture, traditions that may no longer be valid in Canadian society. As an Indian woman, Sari also undergoes the subtle threat of racism. In a meeting with the Minister of Multiculturalism she is told that the Indian community must play by the rules of "Canadian" culture. Sari stands as an example of a significant subject position in the range of feminist dialogue. Keya Ganguly comments that "immigrant women are subject-ed by the double articulation of discourses of racism and patriarchy. This makes their attempt to negotiate their selfhood in daily life both more interesting and perhaps more exemplary of the contradictions within which subaltern experience is represented and lived."[44] Every comment she makes in the film serves as an indication of Sari's staunch minority feminist political views.

In a strange turnaround, the availability and consumption of Bollywood film in the West is able to bridge the cultural gap that occurs within a community as a result of different gender and generational perspectives.[45] This is despite the

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[44] Ganguly, "Self-hood," p. 38.
[45] The term Bollywood refers to two elements of Indian cinema. It focuses attention on the centrepoint of India's film industry by re-inventing the name "Hollywood." A parallel can immediately be drawn between the two powerful filmmaking centres right down to the manic pop culture references and over-the-top celebrity industry. The term Bollywood also elicits images of a particular type of film, the popular and commercial cinema that is the mainstay of Indian cinema today. These films are kitschy, highly melodramatic and have song-and-dance numbers that often do nothing to move the plot forward.

fact that Bollywood film is simultaneously romantic, naughty, gauche, juvenile, violent, funny, and completely at odds with the with the type of genre films that are produced in the West. For example, marriage is always portrayed as an extremely solemn and chaste affair, replete with every possible religious and cultural ritual that has ever been performed. On the other hand, Indian pop films are notorious for their lewd suggestiveness, but also for the fact that the characters in the films always stop short of actually following through on any allusion – even kissing. This somewhat restrained behaviour has everything to do with strict censorship laws in India, and yet filmmakers are able to maximize on the power of suggestion by providing all the racy elements except those which are taboo. Despite all of this, Bollywood films are enjoyed by virtually all ages and members of the community at large.

• The Canada Motif

Many of the issues that are raised in **Masala** are shared by members of the Indian diaspora, and therefore could take place in any national setting. However, the treatment of certain figures gives the film a distinctly Canadian texture. For example, the director makes brilliant use of well-worn Mountie imagery. The only difference is that in **Masala**, the mountie is not some hulking über-male that comes sweeping in on his trusty steed, but a young woman in a scarlet tunic who dutifully feeds the meter a quarter when she "parks" her horse. The inclusion of a riding Mountie is itself an amusing absurdity in 1990s Toronto, but the scene also points to the reality of Canadian cultural politics: the audience witnesses the Mountie ask for change for the parking meter while secreting suspicious looks at the Sikh character, Badhur Sahib. This brief moment in the film serves to recollect the tense controversy that took place in the mid-1980s over the right of Sikhs to

wear their turbans with the RCMP uniform. Therefore the clichéd image of the Mountie is at once comedic and historically referential.

Masala capitalizes on the power of other similar Canadian government figures. In this instance, Hutcheon's explication of the use of irony in the Canadian social context fits well. She defines irony as "a mode of 'speech' (in any medium) that allows speakers to address and at the same time slyly confront an 'official' discourse: that is, to work within a dominant tradition but also to challenge it – without being utterly co-opted by it."[46] In the case of Masala the 'official discourse' that is confronted is that of multiculturalism. The Minister of Multiculturalism matches the cliché of the sly politician, and even shares the same first name with one of Canada's pre-eminent Ministers of Multiculturalism, Gerald Weiner. His office is filled with all sorts of Canadiana – flags, balloons, beavers and moosehead combine with a dark, dusty atmosphere – all trappings of "capital-C" Canadian Culture. The minister remarks to Sari Tikoo, "you can keep your culture, but you have to play by our rules." This is perhaps the most overt criticism of official multiculturalism in Masala – the acknowledgment that a material distinction exists between immigrant cultures adopting Canada as their home and everyone else is made obvious in the minister's statement, but is always publicly denied.

The other character who represents Canadian cultural stereotypes is the representative for the Canadian Department of Heritage. He is an awkward yet respectful individual, who arrives at the Tikoo residence determined to retrieve a priceless stamp, which is also considered by the government to be a piece of Canadian history. He tries patiently to convince Mr. Tikoo that the right thing to do is to hand the stamp over to him because it rightfully belongs to the state. When his subtle methods fail, he invokes his role as the messenger for her

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[46] Hutcheon, Images, p. 2.

Majesty's government, hoping that the threat of a greater power will change Mr. Tikoo's mind. His ploy ultimately fails however, the scene communicates Canada's reliance on it's relationship with England, not as an aspect of our colonial history, but as something which still affects the present-day operation of Canadian society.

Masala presents us with another extremely powerful Canadian motif in the form of Canada Post. It is an example of an institution that most every Canadian has had the chance to experience, and their inaptitude is legendary. One of the most surreal sequences in Masala revolves around a Canada Post blunder, except in this instance it's engineered by Lord Krishna and not the postal service. In a highly comical scene, Lord Krishna 'appears' in front of a Canada Post delivery truck ridiculously clad in a *Toronto Maple Leafs* jersey. He shoots a puck intended to startle the driver, setting off a chain of events that eventually allows the valuable letter to end up in Mr. Tikoo's hands. Despite Lord Krishna's intervention, the irony of the situation is apparent – who doesn't believe that a letter over half a century old could not end up in the regular delivery routes of Canada Post?

• **The Plane Motif**

Masala is a film about not knowing how to belong. We see this clearly in the actions of the characters but it is also constructed by the visual and textual features of the film – the music, the colours, the ambient sounds. The condition of being unsettled or rootless also inheres in certain spatial features that occur throughout Masala. Offices, kitchens, planes – these "locations" figure regularly in staging this sort of rootlessness. These kinds of locations necessarily establish most modern narratives, however the difference in the instance of Masala or more generally, in a type of cinema which focuses around themes of

displacement, is that they are an integral part of the narrative – the story is shaped and can be understood by the very appearance of these features. Ghosh and Sarkar's excavation of "films of displacement" claims that most of this type of film establishes the protagonist's identity through "attempts at and failures of, self-location" and that "Places – home, streets, bridges, nations – become signifiers of the subject's relationship to transpersonal realities."[47]

In the case of **Masala**, we are introduced to a fairly obvious motif that runs throughout the film, but that also acts as a break in the narrative. The airplane takes on particular significance in **Masala** because it acts simultaneously as a tragic, comedic, and escapist motif. To begin with, the airplane symbolizes Rita Tikoo's desire for freedom. Her interest in flying, in becoming a pilot, communicates her unwillingness to follow a traditional path. She isn't the clear-cut feminist stereotype, but she does represent the eurocentric view that is often applied to women of "suppressed" cultures: "She is seen to crave all that the West has to offer, but according to dominant white gazes her culture holds her back, and only the "rebels" succeed...the second-generation South Asian woman is completely and directly "identified" by relational discourses of difference – white/black, South Asian/British, East/West, and timid/independent, and freedom/security."[48]

The audience discovers early on in the film that Rita is more interested in taking flying lessons than attending medical school. A conversation with her father about her future leads to a drawn-out fantasy sequence of 'song and dance' numbers which convey her secret romantic feelings for Anil Solanki. In the first scenario, Rita imagines herself in a setting which recalls old Hollywood musicals, complete with an entourage of 'cowgirls,' while she beckons to her

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[47] Ghosh and Sarkar, "Displacement," p. 103.
[48] Jasbir K. Puar, "Resituating Discourses of 'Whiteness' and 'Asianness' in Northern England," in Socialist Review, March 1996, p., 26.

cowboy – Anil Solanki – to follow her. She is then whisked away into a version of a Bollywood film, complete with a seductively dressed Rita dancing and singing among the clouds, "leave the world behind, love me instead." Finally, she ends up in a mock music video, flying an airplane, calling out to her boyfriend "I want to fly high into your danger zone." These song and dance numbers function much in the same way as they do in their native cinemas – the sequence uses the conventions of Hollywood musicals and Bollywood film to take the audience temporarily away from the main narrative. At the same time, the airplane helps to convey this suppressed, whimsical side of Rita which is at odds with the traditional future that her father envisions for her.

The airplane also foreshadows plot turns and story-lines. It is used repetitively as a plague on Krishna's psyche. José Munoz notes that reiteration and citation are easily identifiable characteristics of performativity.[49] The plane motif usually presents itself during some moment of personal crisis, be it over money, relationships, or employment. It is a constant reminder to Krishna and to the viewer that Krishna is for all intents and purposes alone, that he is constantly on the move, looking for some sense of belonging.

The recurring image of the plane also acts as a link to his past, to his family that died on the Air India flight. For example, the audience periodically listens in on discussions among Krishna's immediate family as they travel to India. Their conversations revolve around Krishna's absence, and how they will explain it to relatives in India. The conversations reveal a mutual sense of abandonment: the family's loss as his parents and brother return to India permanently without him, and Krishna's loss, as he imagines them denouncing him because of his decision not to go with them. Whether these conversations are

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[49] José Munoz, "The autoethnographic performance: reading Richard Fung's queer hybridity," Screen 36:2, Summer 1995, p. 88.

real or imagined is irrelevant. The point is they are left unresolved because of the plane explosion. The plane therefore acts as a focal point for all of Krishna's angst – about his family, about his future, about his life.

The use of the plane takes a comedic turn when Krishna decides to board a plane in Calgary headed for Toronto. It's a small plane, and his discomfort at flying is obvious. Sitting next to him is a priest who is also incredibly nervous. As the plane dips and careens, the audience gets to see the plane's cockpit. The pilot and co-pilot are none other than Lord Krishna and his brother. While the idea of a Supreme being flying a jet should lend some comfort to an equally nervous audience, Lord Krishna's obvious lack of skill acts as comic relief.

At the simplest level, using the 1985 Air India disaster as a central element in the narrative helps to establish **Masala** as a Canadian film. It brings back memories of the large-scale disaster that affected the lives of a great number of Indian families that had made Canada their home. It also points to a troubling question that all diasporic populations face at some point in their journeys – the possibility of actually returning home. The explosion acts in the film as a tragic metaphor for the filmmaker's answer – no.[50] Ien Ang says that "it is the myth of the (lost or idealized) homeland, the object of both collective memory and of desire and attachment, which is constitutive to diasporas, and which ultimately confines and constrains the nomadism of the diasporic subject."[51] The Air India explosion does away with Krishna's link to Ang's "idealized homeland." It removes the cultural and familial constraints on Krishna – he gains freedom but the costly price is losing his family, losing his link to India.

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[50] "So I thought, there really is no going home. And you realize it's not the home that you left. And you, having left, are not the same person. So the home that you thought was home only exists in memory." Srinivas Krishna explaining the idea of "home" in Masala. Bailey, "Interview," p. 43.
[51] Ang, "Chinese," p. 5.

The many broad issues that I've raised here – feelings of loss, the need for recognition, speaking mother tongues, awkward generation gaps – should demonstrate that the experiences of diasporic communities are far more complex and psychologically rooted than official multiculturalism acknowledges. **Masala** communicates this complexity through varying degrees of hybridity, at the level of film form and content. **Masala** layers these issues with an intensely animated style which blends film techniques – colours, music, genres, narrative devices – with specific cultural underpinnings. The film adds twists to weighty issues, in the process communicating that the experiences of Indo-Canadians are diverse and complex. At the same time, **Masala's** hybridity acts as a bridge to an understanding of identity that is open to negotiation, and therefore holds promise for the re-evaluation of our approach to and understanding of multiculturalism.

CHAPTER THREE:
The Cultural Translation of Masala

This chapter addresses the role that cultural criticism has in situating Masala as part of a broader discourse, and the manner in which it does so. Film reviewers have a potentially significant impact on the way that Canadians consume and understand film. They tell us what interesting things to look for, what the plot consists of, what the mis-en-scène looks like; they might discuss the political or social bent of a film; they instruct us to go see it, or not, depending on their analysis. Reviews then are the columns we see in the *Globe and Mail* or on television entertainment shows – they are usually short and superficial but still have an effect on the way we consume film. As Steve Neale points out, film reviews and film criticism create specific sets of generic labels and set up terms for understanding a film, at the same time as they circumscribe audience expectations.[52] In other words, such discourse puts a frame around our own interpretations, telling us whether we "got it right." Furthermore, the work of film reviewers often indicates the level of success a film might expect to achieve. Indeed, the range of people who review, critique, discuss and spin films are in the service of creating discourse, of creating a "buzz" which in turn creates demand, but which also structures the publics' sense of what's important, what's good.

What the film reviewer does not engage in very often is film criticism. This does not denigrate what film reviewers do, but the distinction tells us that the

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[52] Steve Neale, "Questions of Genre." Screen 31: Spring, 1990, p. 47.

jobs they perform are driven by different motivations. Film critics are primarily interested in the nature of the medium, and the precise methods it uses. For example, they might focus on film history and genre, the way storytelling techniques have changed, or the impact of the steadi-cam. More importantly, they consider the idiosyncratic goals of filmmaking and try to assess the success or failure of the medium itself. Thus for Jean-Luc Godard, the famous *Cahier du Cinema* critic, film is about "a man, a woman, and a gun," and how these elements combine to create a cinematic experience. Cinephiles lift meaning and context out of film language, but their efforts are not necessarily meant for or desired by mass audiences. Where film reviewers and film critics come together is in the area of cultural criticism. Cultural critics take the history of film, its aesthetic goals and its place in popular discourse and try to assess its role and impact in culture. They use the cultural object – be it a film, book or television program as a departure point – a place to begin talking about the issues affecting cultures. In this thesis for example, I want to show how cultural critics use Masala to speak about the Indo-Canadian identity. But in short, cultural critics are less interested in film language or instructing audiences which films might make for a fun Friday night; they are concerned with its content and its ideas.

In practice, the distinctions between film critic, film reviewer and cultural critic are far more fluid – there is a great deal of crossover. I'm raising these distinctions to point out that they exist and lead to important differences in the way film is received. However, I intend to use them interchangeably because I am primarily interested in what it is they are saying rather then what their effects are. Moreover, at one level they are all doing the same thing – they all engage in cultural translation.

Specifically then, I want to look at how Masala is addressed by the film reviewers, film critics and cultural critics who have interpreted and configured

the film for the Canadian public. Their discussions help audiences to understand if and why **Masala** is a film of any consequence. I have argued thus far that **Masala**'s hybridity presents us with a different perspective on the dynamics of multiculturalism, and I am interested in investigating in this chapter whether various interpretations of the film communicate this. The critics' words operate as a form of 'cultural translation' – as a way of creating a dialogue with the film – that potentially evolves the discussion of multiculturalism. I have looked at a range of sources such as reviews from major Canadian newspapers, independent commentary and interviews in Canadian magazines, and a selection of film criticism. Rather than try and evaluate what these critics have to say by some sort of objective standards, I want to assess how they engage the issue of **Masala**'s hybridity by surveying what they say about the film. Instead of condemning or praising the critics for their interpretation, or judging the success of **Masala** by how many reviews it received, I am more interested in reviewing a cross-section of criticism to see if **Masala**'s unique politics and aesthetics are in fact entering Canadian cultural discourse.

Part of the reason for looking at this range of cultural discourse is in response to recent rumblings from cultural studies heavyweights like Lawrence Grossberg. He says cultural studies has to shift its locus from a simple articulation of 'identity' as a self-contained site for political struggle. Grossberg says that "hybridity" has become one of the favoured metaphors around which cultural studies has theorized the problem of identity. Indeed, the preceding chapter was exactly that – a discussion of hybridity as a way of talking about identity. However, on its own, the chapter does not answer questions which Grossberg indicates are now critical. For example, questions like 'what is the identity being put forward for' or, more to the point, 'why is the hybridity of **Masala** important?' take the discussion out of its narrow confines. Addressing

Masala in relation to the context in which it circulates and is interpreted may provide answers to these questions.

Grossberg feels that to have any effect, discussions of identity need to be moved into the broader context of modern formations of power and that

> Cultural studies needs to move towards a model of articulation as 'transformative practice', as a singular becoming of a community. Both models of oppression are not only inappropriate to contemporary relations of power, they are also incapable of creating alliances; they cannot tell us now to interpellate various fractions of the population in different relations to power into the struggle for change.[53]

Grossberg alludes to a problem that pervades the cultural studies approach – it's penchant for insulated academic practice and its subsequent relativizing of knowledge and experience. Other cultural theorists have also recognized the limitations of articulating identities without reference to the environments in which they circulate, and question the extent to which identity politics in their current form can continue to open up alternative approaches to dominant thought.[54]

It is clear that there is a context for the way identity and culture is thought about, but criticism is an important component in the 'modern formations of power' that Grossberg refers to, and thus has some influence in the authentication of the ideas we see in films like Masala. Cultural criticism is a significant part of the apparatus that can revise the way people think about what multiculturalism means in concrete terms. It has the "power," so to speak, to help reconfigure ideas about Indo-Canadian identity. Masala forms part of a broader social commentary, along with other cultural interventions such as the work of

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[53] The two models of oppression that Grossberg is referring to are the 'colonial model' of the oppressor and oppressed, and the 'transgression model' of oppression and resistance. Lawrence Grossberg, "Identity and Cultural Studies: Is That All There Is?" in Questions of Cultural Identity, pg. 88.

[54] For example, Aijaz Ahmad, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

Teesri Duniya, the films of Eisha Marjara, the writing of immigrant writers living in Canada, and so on. Together, these cultural texts help express a view on the changing society. It is within this context that the "difference" in a film like Masala can become central to a collective sense of identity, to raise the possibility of, as Keya Ganguly says, "a representational practice that is premised on the mutual imbrication of "us" and "them."[55] By generating dialogue with a wider audience, critics solicit the contribution of the entire culture in valuing these texts, rendering them politically meaningful. Ultimately then, critics have a role to play in tabling ideas, transforming discourse and seeking consensus in affecting political change.

In interpreting and articulating the film to audiences, critics essentially perform a kind of translation. They choose what elements of the film will be related, how to communicate the details, they decide its tone and the language of their interpretive stance, and on the meaning that they want audiences to take away. "Cultural translation" has been loosely applied as a metaphor to the processes of cultural change and transformation. Homi Bhabha has championed this concept, and employs it in his work to suggest that "all forms of culture are in some way related to each other, because culture is a signifying or symbolic activity."[56] In other words, Bhabha draws a comparison between the grammar and syntax of languages, and the signs and symbols of cultures, as the keys to producing meaning. To continue the metaphor, it follows that all cultures can be translated – that their symbols can be imitated, their contexts of origin transferred, and their original meaning displaced. In the instance of **Masala**, cultural translation expresses two things: the idea that what is being conveyed to

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[55] Ganguly, "Selfhood," p. 19.
[56] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space," p. 210.

us is a culture, the signs and symbols of a "whole way of life,"[57] as well as the idea that cultural critics illuminate the film itself in a new form. I want to see if translations, or interpretations of Masala's aesthetic, get beyond standard frameworks of understanding that rely on either assimilationist strategies or that revert to static, traditional paradigms.

It is important to keep in mind that cultural studies has adopted the term 'translation' from Linguistics. While theories of language are routinely used in cultural studies (semiotics, discourse theory, literary theory), translation is a more recent and unexplored way of conceptualizing the ways in which meanings in culture are produced. Semiotics et al. have generated various schools of cultural theory based on their tenets, but few cultural studies scholars talk about translation, and fewer still have thought of its fundamental elements as a way of creating a theory of culture. As such, there is little agreement on what the metaphor of translation brings to the discussion of cultures and identity.

Steiner, Benjamin, Spivak et al. clearly articulate a need for precision and care in all types of translation – intra-lingual, inter-lingual, gendered language, racialized language, children's language – and to consider the specificities that each idiom demands.[58] This is not a judgment on the quality of different regional, national, or secular idioms; it only implies that each type of language has its own structures, syntax, grammar and codes. In keeping with the call for precision, I want to point out the basic operations of 'translation' before moving on to see whether it might have actually some play in the work of cultural

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[57] Aijaz Ahmad, "Cultures in Conflict," Frontline, vol. 14: No. 16, August 9-22, 1997. Ahmad says that of all the myriad definitions of culture this is the most compelling, if only because it can be interpreted in so many ways. He goes on to say that "social conflicts of various kinds, along lines of class, caste, gender and ethnicity and so on actually leave very little room for a 'whole way of life' to be shared by 'a people' or a whole nation to any significant extent." The implication as Ahmad points out, and the connection I wish to make here, is that broadly sweeping lines of association such as "Indian culture," "Brahmins," "Canadians," are less useful when trying to improve social understanding and material conditions of living.
[58] Steiner, Babel, p. 32-48.

criticism. Sketching out the fundamentals helps to understand how translation – whose primary preoccupation is with semantic characteristics – can clarify the relationship between the hybridity of Masala and the discourse that cultural critics generate.

Translations are undertaken for one basic reason: to make a body of work understood in another language. It's a challenging responsibility, and George Steiner has broken literary translation down into four general principles to facilitate understanding the approach. The principles themselves are a rough guideline – they form a nexus of action that take place more or less simultaneously, and are emblematic of a studied, holistic approach to the process. The first step assumes an act of trust on the part of the translator, there is the belief that there is something worth translating. This step appears obvious – why else does one embark on a translation if not to share its content? But as Steiner points out, one must comprehend the text to achieve the goal of sharing content. He says this understanding derives from a more complex set of assumptions, namely, that there is some correspondence among what on the surface appear to be "formally antithetical semantic systems." More to the point, at stake in translation is a fundamental human undertaking. That is, we see the world as symbolic, "as constituted of relations in which 'this' can stand for 'that', and must in fact be able to do so if there are to be meanings and structures."[59] Therefore it's not so much that a work must somehow prove its translatability, but that the translator must understand that there is something that needs to be interpreted.

The second step in translation is extractive, it endeavours to draw out the meaning of the text at hand. Steiner says this phase is aggressive because extraction itself is an aggressive act – we translate *into* something. It is a tactical

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[59] ibid., p. 312.

manoeuvre – of comprehension – complete with encirclement, attack and ingestion. In other words, we look at the text, we comprehend it, we recover its meaning, and 'bring it home'. The translator sets about knowing and discovering what there is to know about the work in front of them. Again, Steiner makes no bones about it, the act is hostile, it is transformative, "leaving the shell smashed and the vital layers stripped."[60]

Steiner refers to the third step as 'incorporative'. As the translator takes in and processes the information from the original text, he/she is shaped by the material as it is incorporated into their "native semantic field... No language, no traditional symbolic set or cultural ensemble imports without risk of being transformed."[61] The incorporative step tells us the translation is dependent on the extent to which the translator absorbs the original text, and implies that it is ultimately dictated by the translator's own abilities and experiences. In this incorporative phase then, Steiner is demanding two things. The first is to note the profound shifts in meaning that occur with the passing of time. Steiner notes: "A text is embedded in specific historical time; it has what linguists call a diachronic structure. To read fully is to restore all that one can of the immediacies of value and intent in which speech actually occurs."[62] We approach a text in 1999 in a much different way to someone 200 years ago. This knowledge forces us to act responsibly and respect the influences affecting the original writer.

Steiner's second demand is that "we read fully." He admits that translation is no easy task, but contends that as translators we must know the terrain in order to fully penetrate the text and comprehend its meaning. This means becoming familiar with the lexical and historical codes of the subject so that it can be approached without conjecture, and with confidence. He says "An

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[60] ibid., p. 314.
[61] ibid., p. 315.
[62] ibid., p. 24.

informed, avid awareness of the history of the relevant language, of the transforming energies of feeling which make of syntax a record of social being, is indispensable."[63] The security of this kind of knowledge creates a situation where the translator can trust him or herself to be faithful to the reproduction, yet at the same time have the freedom to follow instinct and potentially extend the boundaries of language, thereby creating new meanings. According to Walter Benjamin, Rudolf Pannwitz best articulates the operation of linguistic freedom:

> Our translations, even the best ones, proceed from a wrong premise. They want to turn Hindi, Greek, English into German instead of turning German into Hindi, Greek, English. Our translators have a far greater reverence for the usage of their own language than for the spirit of the foreign works....The basic error of the translator is that he preserves the state in which his own language happens instead of allowing his language to be powerfully affected by the foreign tongue.[64]

Pannwitz, Benjamin and Steiner agree that as we incorporate the meaning of the original text, we create the possibility of deep affectation. In other words, the best way to communicate the essence of a text is to preserve its difference, its otherness, its 'alien' qualities in the translation.

The fourth step of the translation process is the most critical, and according to George Steiner, is the hallmark of good translations. It is the 'enactment of reciprocity', of restitution – a 'giving back' to the original text. This phase is essential because it aims to return equilibrium to the process and remains incomplete without it. In this phase, the translator effectively enhances the original text to make the translation more than just a static mimicry of what has gone before it. The translation compensates for what it has extracted by

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[63] ibid.

[64] Pannwitz in "The Task of the Translator," in Illuminations: Walter Benjamin, ed. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, p. 80-81.

leaving its trace, an intimation of its presence. As Steiner tells us, this act of reciprocity can only occur if the translator exhibits a faithfulness to the original text – *fidelity* to the work that precedes his or her own. It is here that things have become contentious. Steiner believes in translating 'meaning-for-meaning', not 'word-for-word'. When one asks, "what does the 'author' mean," one is taking a great liberty, at risk is not just losing the point, but misrepresenting the original. However, Steiner believes this is the process of translation that must be followed to accurately reflect a book's original meaning and its modern interpretation.[65]

Modern theorists have re-interpreted Steiner's fourth step in concordance with broader shifts in cultural theory. Within this paradigm, the meaning of "restitution" now depends on a shift in the meaning of fidelity. Lawrence Venuti says, "An ethics of translation cannot be restricted to a notion of fidelity."[66] In other words, for the contemporary translator, fidelity to the text may not be as important as a fidelity to one's own set of political beliefs. The answerability, the responsiveness that is implicit in the 'restitution' phase has changed in keeping with a cultural focus on the politicization of texts. The translator responds to the original text by making the reader aware of his or her epistemological assumptions. The following example of feminist translators in Quebec demonstrates this shift in thinking:

> Both translators and women are traditionally the "weak" in terms of their respective hierarchies, literary and sexual. Both are now challenging the power relationship behind traditional ideas of fidelity. Feminist translators, for instance, are more likely to want to affix a preface to their work, to foreground

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[65] Steiner's book After Babel is a guide that presents the philosophy and technique behind good translation and the pitfalls awaiting those who engage in spurious deconstruction.
[66] Lawrence Venuti, "Translation and the Formation of Cultural Identities," in Cultural Functions of Translation, eds. Christina Schäffner and Helen Kelly-Holmes, Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 1995, p. 22.

their presence as the guiding hand of the translation.[67]

Simon et al.'s re-articulation of the notion of answerability makes the process of translation more transparent and knowable. The inclusion of the translator's overt politics serves to underline that the act of translation is a matter of making choices, which are always determined by the context of the work, the convictions and belief system of the translator, and contemporary concerns. Steiner would also acknowledge that the politicization of texts is one route to affecting change – indeed, the best way to create the grounds for understanding the original text may be to bring it in line with the realities of the day. Where Steiner deviates is in placing a different stress on the importance of fidelity to the text. Maintaining a degree of allegiance to the text guards against the possible reduction of it to reflect only the translator's political beliefs and in the process, prevents the danger of misrepresenting the original.

Steiner has given us a comprehensive breakdown of the hermeneutic of translation as a fourfold process – trust, penetration, embodiment and restitution, which has been re-articulated from various standpoints.[68] Arguably, he has given shape to a process that was previously unrefined in reigning theories of literary translation. His hermeneutic is a vital explication of the fact that translation is about far more than just imparting information. It's goal must be to communicate the sum and substance, the essential content, of its predecessor. More important to this thesis, his is an acknowledgment of the fact that the process of translation

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[67] Sherry Simon, "Translation and Cultural Politics in Canada," in Translation and Multilingualism: Post-Colonial Contexts, ed. Shantha Ramakrishna, Delhi: Pencraft International, pg. 202.

[68] Steiner, Benjamin, and Spivak do not address the receiver in the translation equation. In fact Benjamin says "... another characteristic of inferior translation, which consequently we may define as the inaccurate transmission of an inessential content. This will be true whenever a translation undertakes to serve the reader." in "The Task of the Translator," p. 70. However, the 'pleasure' of the reader/receiver is now cited as a valid part of the goal of translation. See R.S. Gupta, "Translation: A Sociolinguistic Perspective," in Multilingualism: Post-Colonial Contexts, p. 187.

embodies *all* relational possibilities: "...metamorphic relations have as their underlying deep structure a process of translation. It is this process, and the continuum of reciprocal transformation and decipherment which it ensures, that determine the code of inheritance in our civilization."[69] According to Steiner and others, translation is how we understand the functions and relationships which determine cultural exchange. Cultural translation loses the rigidity that the act of translation of languages necessitates, yet represents the fullness of the process that is required to understand and represent other cultural forms. Steiner raises an obvious truism, one that is at the heart of why cultural translation is an important endeavour. He says that Western history has completely shaped our perceptions and our knowledge base, so much so that we are blind to and therefore beyond questioning the historical roots of our means of expression. The number of ideas and themes which inspire our cultural forms – art, film, literatures – are actually quite limited and restrictive.[70] For this reason, it is important to recognize new, distinct cultural forms that have the potential to expand our frames of perception. Or in other words, to achieve any kind of cultural growth, we must not explain their difference solely in terms congruent with Western codes. The goal must be to translate the foreignness of other cultures and to affect change in *our* ways of seeing and knowing. Cultural translation is therefore a break, a critical intervention in our accepted, accumulated perceptions of cultural difference.

Do cultural critics, our modern-day translators of celluloid, stand-up to the criteria established by translation theorists? Do they even need to be assessed in this manner, given that Steiner says translation in fact encompasses 'all relational possibilities'? I would argue yes, if only because cultural critics ward

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[69] Steiner, Babel, p. 485.
[70] ibid., p. 486.

over an increasingly important arena of public exchange. They recall politics, culture, history, genres, emergent movements and so on to greet their subject matter properly armed. As Steiner points out, when time and perspective, and I would add to this a tireless flow of information, are figured into the process, translation must necessarily become more of a conscious technique.[71] Again, this is not to say that these translators must adhere to some strict process, I only suggest that their skill in dealing with non-traditional types of information, in this case the hybridity of **Masala**, could potentially heighten public understanding of our multicultural environment.

Therefore the cultural translation of **Masala** might be similarly understood as a four-part process, and which can be posed as a set of questions. One might ask, does the translator feel or recognize that there is something unique worth translating in the film; does the translator demonstrate that they have absorbed **Masala**, both its stylistic properties and its political makeup; are the translators able to express the significant aspects of **Masala**, not only in conventional terms or language, but in a way that imitates the enthusiasm, outlandishness and unfamiliarity of the film itself; finally, are they faithful to the spirit of **Masala**? Do they factor in relevant social or historical aspects, do they remind the reader of the cultural and political value of the film; in effect, do they present us with engaged writing about **Masala**'s hybridity and its novel attitude?

Masala was generally well-received, and seemed to quickly establish itself in the festival and repertory cinema circuit. As a result, it received a lot of press in virtually every place it had a screening. As if to quell any doubts I might have, the director, Srinivas Krishna, handed me a bound copy of all of the press clipping he had gathered from Canada, the United States, India and other countries where it had screened – this is in addition to radio and television

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[71] ibid., p. 48.

interviews, panel discussions and a fair degree of unit publicity while the film was in production. While this much attention is hardly out of the ordinary for a Hollywood film, it's worth remembering that **Masala** was made with just $1.5 million, it was local in content, and it was never picked up by a major film distributor in Canada, or abroad.

My decision to pick certain reviews over others was complicated by this large volume of source material. However, since my goal has been to investigate whether the reviews address a Canadian-based issue, I focused primarily on Canadian press. Each review expresses nuances about the film, but they all share a suspiciously similar tone, one that leaves me cautious about whether their interpretations convey **Masala's** hybridity. Let me explain. First of all, it's likely the critics received press kits created for the express purpose of highlighting the film's best features. It's common knowledge that to publicize films, producers package the biographical material, details of the story, film credits and so on in a way that is usable for critics. This could explain the constant references made to **Masala's** "saturated colours," the definition of the word **Masala**, and noted aspects of actor Saeed Jaffrey's celebrated film career.[72] These are all important elements of the film and are standard in anything written about **Masala**. The difficulty lies in deciding whether mention of these facts is merely repetitive or whether they open the door to original ideas.

A second, more speculative consideration is that critics may have felt pressure to write flattering comments about a film made by a visible minority. The fear of being branded racist or discriminatory, or of facing public reprisal, is deeply imbedded in the psyches of most socially "aware" Canadians. But cautious writing also has an opposite, and equally deleterious affect. It often

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[72] Masala is defined as a "mixture of spices," Jaffrey is cited in films such as Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette*, Huston's *The Man Who Would be King*, and Attenborough's *Gandhi.*

means that nothing new is produced, and that ideas put forward are therefore perfunctory. In the case of recognizing Masala's hybridity and its particular contribution to multicultural discourse, this would be especially unfortunate.

My goal is to see whether the critics believe Masala is creating a new vision of multiculturalism, one that conforms with the changing face of multiculturalism in Canada. To do this I have raised a set of introductory questions that provide a way of talking about the issues I have articulated thus far. They deal specifically with issues raised in the film; issues like genre and style, fluency with Bollywood film, cultural irony, the translation of language, cultural theory and representation. Needless to say these questions aren't the last word, but they help make a break with theory. The cultural arena is where the dialogue about Masala is taking place – it is in the coffee shops and the cinemas of Toronto and Montreal, it is in the magazines and newspapers of popular culture, it is in the words and articles of reviewers and critics – they all contribute to public opinion around issues like multiculturalism. Again, film and the discourse surrounding it is only one of the elements helping to shape what people think about, but it is an increasingly important one.

- **How does the criticism interpret Masala's style?**

Jay Scott of the *Globe and Mail* describes Masala as a "uniquely surrealistic tour de force."[73] This comment illustrates the general appreciation that most critics displayed for Masala's aesthetic – its blending of various genres, story-lines, cultures, and cinematic codes. Bruce Kirkland of the *Toronto Sun* says, "As writer and director, Krishna shows no restraint, takes no prisoners. He scrambles his images, goes over the top for emphasis and splashes colour on the screen like

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[73] Jay Scott, "A Spicy Metaphor for a Mixed-up, Messed-up World," <u>The Globe and Mail</u>, 14 February 1992, p. C5.

a pop-art painting."[74] Similarly, Rick Groen of the *Globe and Mail* evokes the feeling of the film's pleasurable chaos: "...the film bounces quickly from plot to plot, from English to Hindi, from narrative seriousness to outlandish fantasies (among them, the hilarious sight of Lord Krishna attired in a Toronto Maple Leafs sweater – talk about totem and taboo.)"[75] Craig MacInnis of the *Toronto Star* pays homage to cinematographer Paul Sarossy's treatment of Masala's 'narrative seriousness': "Even the opening airliner explosion is treated in a magic-realist way that describes the horror without fully recreating it. As always, Sarossy's rich, wry images seem more like poetry than current events."[76]

Critics who write about the "musical/fantasy" numbers in **Masala** demonstrate some understanding of their antecedents, tying them mostly to the tradition of Bollywood. Craig MacInnis has this to say: "True to the tenets of popular Indian cinema, the action often grinds to a dead halt to make way for a "production number" – ridiculous musical vignettes that add nothing to the plot (but are enjoyable in their own right)."[77] J. Hoberman from New York's *Village Voice* also refers to **Masala's** 'magic realism' "... it's a form of deliberately low-rent magic realism in which miracles are performed via television sets and gods pilot jet planes....Krishna intermittently stages his own mixtures of MTV music videos and Hindi playback numbers..."[78] Stephen Holden in the *New York Times* recognizes the 'quirkiness ' of Bollywood film, without denigrating it's inclination for fantasy. "Rather than aspire to a traditional Western style of film making for his first feature, the director has larded some of the quirkier aspects of Indian commercial movies into a film that is already an experiment in

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74 Bruce Kirkland, "Adding Color to Cultural Mosaic," Toronto Sun. 7 February, 1992, p. 20.
75 Rick Groen, "Elevating the M-word," The Globe and Mail, Metro Ed., 7 February 1992, p. C1.
76 Craig MacInnis, "Krishna Satire Ranges from Hindus to Hockey," The Toronto Star, 7 February, 1992, p. D10.
77 ibid.
78 J. Hoberman, "Multi Culti," Village Voice, 30 March, 1993, p. 51.

scrambled genres." Holden goes on to explain the film's connection to Indian cinema: "Periodically, the film breaks completely away from conventional storytelling for a glitzy musical-comedy number or an erotic fantasy sequence. Such sudden changes of pace are commonplace conventions in commercial Bombay cinema."[79]

As director Srinivas Krishna has pointed out in several interviews, the musical numbers in **Masala** were inspired by a range of musical influences, not just Bollywood. He says, "... it wasn't the Hindi movie musical that inspired it. It was the idea of the musical, that song can serve as a break from the narrative....in the first musical number I wanted it to be a blend of things. There's the Indian, the Hindi musical, the Busby Berkeley musical, the music-video." With regard to the 'fantasy' sex scenes, Krishna wanted to demonstrate one aspect of the characters' humanity, something which is only ever suggestively referred to in Bollywood cinema: "What I did want to do in the film was show these people as sexualized characters. It was part and parcel of everything else that forms their personalities. I wanted to just have it *there*. There was no particular agenda with it." And, as the director pointed out, the Lord Krishna character represented a similar type of freedom within the narrative of **Masala**: "The god Krishna is a ploy to open up the narrative space. He has the same desires that are important to the musical numbers. He occupies movie space within the movie, narrative space within a larger narrative. He inhabits dreams, he inhabits the nightmare of Krishna ...There are diverse narrative spaces that I play with."[80]

Masala's style is impossible to ignore. Therefore in order to give it significance, the interpretation of the film's style has to get beyond simply

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[79] Stephen Holden, "A Cultural Mix-up, North of the Border," The New York Times, 26 March, 1993, p. C10.

[80] Cameron Bailey, "What the Story Is: An Interview with Srinivas Krishna," Cineaction 28, 1992, p. 38-47.

mentioning its colour, the musical vignettes, the use of Bollywood and the fantasy scenes. It is the seamless integration of these elements –its visual style, its narrative devices, its mélange of truth and fiction – that makes the film unconventional. The majority of criticism takes apart Masala's stylistic features – the magic realism of the aftermath of the Air India explosion, the vibrancy of Lord Krishna's blue skin, the mix of traditional genres – and conveys more than just an appreciation for these components. The criticism raises them in a manner that expressed the idea that Masala's hybrid style is important and foundational to the film.

• **how does the criticism engage the satire and irony in Masala?**

Rick Groen says that Masala is satiric without being cynical, however other critics are not so clear on the success and implications of Masala's satire. Critics do recognize that satire is integral to its story-lines: its ridicule of government figures, its use of stereotypes, and its disavowal of sacrosanct cultural symbols is subsumed to the director's overarching critical gaze. Craig MacInnis, although inaccurately gauging the director's length of stay in Canada, feels the satire is pervasive. "The film's ambient satire is repetitive and deliberately loud – exactly how a newcomer from the other side of the world might regard us at first blush."[81] Similarly, Brian Johnson of *Maclean's* feels that the film's satire exists side by side the imagery, the musical scenes and a wayward multiculturalism: "There is a lot of airplane imagery in Masala, as well as giddy allusions to Indian movie musicals and folktales. The result is a surreal concoction that serves as an amusing satire of the multicultural dream."[82]

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[81] MacInnis, "Hockey."
[82] Brian D. Johnson, "The Spice of Life," MacLean's, 9 March, 1992. p. 52.

Certain critics feel that the satire in **Masala** is excessive and juvenile. Louise Blanchard of *Le Journal de Montréal* thinks the humour in **Masala** is particularly dumb: "Bien sur, certains éléments sont intéressants, par exemple, l'exploration des différents types d'immigrants Indiens au Canada...Mais ce regard critique se perd dans cette fricasée mal structureé, qui use et abuse d'un humour cégépien, au ras-des-mottes. Le film sent las jeunesse, l'immaturité...."[83] Jacob Levich of *Cineaste* magazine thinks the over-the-top satire might have more negative repercussions: "Masala's treatment of Indo-Canadians, though intended satirically, is so relentlessly negative that it sometimes threatens to confirm the worst prejudices of white audiences."[84]

The director feels that the parodies of Canadian symbols are regarded too harshly and that critics and audiences both seem to take for granted unfamiliar constituents of the film. "Mainstream is represented by the icons of mainstream Canada, which is the Ministry of Multiculturalism, as far as so-called multiculturals go. People accept Lord Krishna – a blue god – in the film, but they don't accept the Mounties. 'Why do you have to use the Mounties that way?' They have no trouble accepting Lord Krishna."[85]

Linda Hutcheon says that the use of satire is particularly well-developed in Canadian entertainment. She relates this to our cultural makeup – notoriously quiet, subtle and subversive. The pervasive satire in **Masala** is duly noted by the critics, both as a positive and negative component. However, what isn't given much attention is that the satire raises important questions about the political and cultural status quo in Canada, which is an integral part of the story that **Masala** tells.

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[83] Louise Blanchard, "'Masala' de Krishna: un Film 'combinaison'," Le Journal de Montréal, 26 Aout, 1991, p. 31.
[84] Jacob Levich, "Review of Masala," Cineaste 20, no. 1, 1993, p. 45.
[85] Bailey, "Interview," p. 28.

- **How does the criticism make sense of Masala's inclusion of Hindi?**

Hindi serves as a point of demarcation in Masala. It is never subtitled and rarely explained, as film audiences have come to expect with most films available in the North American market. Instead, it illustrates that multiple languages have been naturalized in a hybrid environment, where the dominance of one language is quickly neutralized by the use of another.

As one of the few Indo-Canadian critics in a mainstream newspapers Manjusha Pawaji in the *Globe and Mail* points to the significance of the proliferation of different tongues: "Masala becomes an understood English word instead of just the seasoning in my family's everyday dinner (this may take time, however: one reviewer incorrectly referred to it as "a stew.")...the more people hear unpronounceable names, the less unpronounceable they become."[86] J. Hoberman recognizes the amount to which the English language has been transformed by Hindi, and that it plays more broadly into the film's themes: "[Masala's] also charged with a love of language. The salutary influence of Indianized English on our so-called mother tongue has been insufficiently recognized."[87]

Jacob Levich of *Cineaste* is the most vocal critic of the way Masala treats Hindi: "...Krishna (the human character) contemptuously dismisses Hindi, a tongue of unparalleled expressivity, as gibberish. Since the film oddly fails to provide subtitles for any of its extensive Hindi dialogue, non-Indian audiences will have no reasons to disagree."[88] Krishna's response to this sort of criticism is that it is a naively optimistic way to view the world: "Subtitles sometimes

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[86] Manjusha Pawaji, "A Bird? A Plane? No, it's Krishna in a Maple Leafs Sweater," The Globe and Mail, 4 April, 1992, p. C7.
[87] Hoberman, "Multi-culti."
[88] Levich, "Review."

wrongly suggest that there is one universal, singular language. My experience in New York and Toronto has been the opposite. You constantly deal with the problem of not understanding what the fuck people are saying...All too often, we expect a film to be transparent, and I wanted to avoid that."[89]

The question of whether the Hindi in **Masala** should have been subtitled is clearly a difficult one for critics to handle. One critic points out that the more humourous parts of the film were delivered in Hindi and therefore inaccessible to many audience members. Conversely, some critics show an understanding of the desire to include Hindi in the film. Some of the criticism points to the significance of "Indianized" language, if not precisely in the text itself, then by referring to the need to increase the awareness of its role in English. The discussion on the use of language in **Masala** takes the understanding of the phenomenon to another level and addresses it as a broader cultural issue.

• **How does the criticism articulate the aesthetics of Masala?**

Many critics seems to recognized that the politics of the film are inherent to the film's aesthetics, that the look and feel of the film is completely tied into its content. Stephen Holden expresses it as such: "...is [Masala's] use of clashing cinematic genres to illustrate the theme of cultural collision and dislocation."[90] Jacob Levich also communicates a sense of having linked the message of the form with the message of the content: "Masala's world, like its esthetic, is one of wildly fragmented cultural influences that mock the imagined purity of a past that never was pure to begin with." He goes on to say "It is through such moments of calculated dissonance that Srinivas Krishna means to translate his experience of the Indian diaspora into cinematic terms."[91] Rick Groen puts it

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[89] Bailey, "Interview."
[90] Holden, "Mix-up."
[91] Levich, "Review."

most succinctly: "...Srinivas Krishna, has taken the M-word – multiculturalism – and elevated it from a political platitude to an esthetic reality."[92] In an interview with Krishna, Cameron Bailey makes this positive assessment: "Using the conventions of disaffected youth dramas, Hollywood musicals, Hindi musicals, European art cinema and Canadian satire, Masala moves beyond the cinema of duty by decentering the whole notion of center-margin as a driving force in the film, and by making representation itself a concern."[93] Bailey articulates the extensive elements that had come together to give Masala's formal elements and that its politics come through its conspicuous aesthetic.

In reference to the evolution of black filmmaking in Britain, Kobena Mercer says that there have been "significant shifts and critical differences in attitude to the means of representation," and that "in this context it becomes necessary to think through the political implications of choices and decisions made at the level of film-form."[94] In making Masala, Srinivas Krishna clearly made a conscious decision to make the expressive elements of the film as important as the referential. However, Krishna argues that Masala was not necessarily interpreted in this manner: "The thing that really galled me at the time was that all they really wanted to talk about was politics. No-one really talked about how I shot the film, what I did as a director, my use of colour, the narrative inventiveness, narrative experimentation... It was just the novelty of a dark kid doing something, which was really irritating... It reveals something of the strength of the film because you are caught by the concept of it, which is good, but it's also a source of irritation for me."[95]

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[92] Groen, "M-word."
[93] Bailey, "Interview."
[94] Mercer, "Aesthetics," p. 50.
[95] Krishna, Personal Interview, April 22, 1999.

The criticism around **Masala** interprets the aesthetics as integral to the stylistic choices made by the director. The film is viewed holistically, with references to both its form and content as communicating an overarching set of messages. At the same time, critics pull the film apart, choosing to speak only about specific aspects. In this instance, speaking about the politics alone belies the failure of the criticism to recognize that the politics of **Masala** cannot be separated from its aesthetic preoccupations.

• **How does the criticism explain Indo-Canadians?**

Director Srinivas Krishna was born in India but came to Canada at a very young age and has lived intermittently in the U.S. and in India. His socialization has been primarily in the West, although it's impossible to say what degree of influence his ethnic origin has on him. Regardless, his attitude both on and off film, in addition to the depiction of characters and the issues they face in the film identify the filmmaker as entrenched in Canadian life.[96] Elizabeth Aird of the *Vancouver Sun* says he's not and claims that **Masala** illustrated the "all-round weirdness of being a new Canadian," and that Srinivas Krishna plays a "Hindu-Canadian."[97] Clearly Aird has not done her homework – Krishna is not a "new Canadian." She also confuses the common label of "Indo" with a dominant Indian religion (unless of course she knows for certain that Krishna follows the Hindu faith).

Farrah Anwar of *Sight and Sound* conveys that the film has redeeming value, but eventually belies her impressions of Krishna: "The character traits that supply the film's rather absurdist plot are accessible enough in movie terms,

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[96] The director would likely object to being so narrowly defined: "people would ask me insane questions that I never would've thought of like "do you consider yourself to be a Canadian filmmaker" or an "Indian filmmaker" and so on– totally insane." Krishna in Personal Interview, April 22, 1999.
[97] Elizabeth Aird, "Frenetic Tale Misses its Target," The Vancouver Sun, 5 June 1992, p. C5.

while they also have their native 'truth' ...accurately reflect the close-knit interdependent world of Asian communities in foreign lands."[98] In the same review she refers to the director as an "expatriate Indian." Expatriate means to leave, to 'withdraw from residence or from allegiance of one's own country.' The implication is that Krishna left India of his own accord, and that his film represents the mindset of someone who has distanced himself from his birthplace. He's not an expatriate, and his film says nothing about that level of willful detachment from one's birthplace. Angela Baldessarre of *Eye Weekly* suggests that the Krishna character is seeking out the fruits of the West, indirectly suggesting that he is not of the West: "the film follows the adventures of a young rebel (Krishna) who wants to adjust to the lifestyle of the Western World without compromising his cultural obligations."[99]

Jay Scott of the *Globe and Mail* recognizes the heterogeneity of the Indian community in Canada: "In **Masala** we meet Canadianized Indians, traditional Indians, "Masala" Indians – they are everything yet nothing ..."[100] Similarly, Rick Groen refers to the diverse range of individuals within a seemingly close community: "The setting is the Indian community of Toronto, a closely-knit but far from homogeneous assembly of rich and poor, young and old, rebel and conformist, Westernized and not."[101]

In an introduction to an interview with the director, Cameron Bailey points to the friction in the Indian community as it exists in all communities: "Rooted in the diversity within Toronto's Indian community – conflicts across generation, class and personality – the film also engages with a diversity of representations."[102] In the same interview Krishna explains some of his

[98] Farrah Anwar, Rev. of Masala, by Srinivas Krishna, Sight and Sound 2, August 1992, p. 58.
[99] Angela Baldassare, "Krishna's Masala to play the Bloor," Eye Weekly, 6 February, 1992, p. 25.
[100] Scott, "Spicy."
[101] Groen, "M-word."
[102] Bailey, "Interview."

motivation for making the film, which, because of his personal experiences, is rooted in creating awareness about the nuances of cultural difference: "You're recognized being here if you serve tea, if you're a waiter, or if you drive a cab or if you're a doctor or whatever, but your story is not recognized, and the telling of the story is not recognized either."[103]

As the director has said, one of the things he was trying to get across with Masala is that there is more to the Indo-Canadian community than just cab drivers and convenience store owners. Masala tells a series of stories that are critical to exposing the limitations of a narrow perspective on identity, the type that official multiculturalism supports. However, except for some of the criticism, the comments express an unawareness of the heterogeneous Indo-Canadian community. To recognize the varying degrees to which the characters in Masala were integrated into Western lifestyles would express a knowledge of the terrain of the film. The criticism is blind to significant nuances, doing little to foster the type of cognition that is necessary to expand the understanding of our multicultural society.

• **How does the criticism translate the discord that ensued among Indo-Canadians after Masala's release?**

Rather than accept it as a point of pride, self-appointed spokespersons for the Indo-Canadian community reacted negatively to the portrayal of certain aspects of Indian culture in Masala. Indians both inside and outside India thought the film's irreverence would have a damaging effect on their status in Canada, while some members of the community felt that Masala was somehow sacrilegious. The director gives his take on the situation: "I didn't make [Masala] to please Indians, and I didn't make it to displease Indians either. I made it so, as

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[103] ibid.

far as Indians go, some kind of debate might come out of it, and some kind of continuing argument. It's not a definitive statement. But people...want to be represented in the most idyllic ways..."[104] Arguably, Masala may have created more debate than the filmmaker anticipated.

Because it's vilification in the Indian community became an important part of the 'buzz' surrounding the film's release, cultural critics called up the Rushdie affair as a parallel. Farrah Anwar in *Sight and Sound* says that "Rushdie, in fact, has already been invoked in the uneasy stirrings that Masala's irreverent portrayal of the Hindu gods have caused among Canadian Hindus."[105] J. Hoberman points to the waves it created internationally: "Speaking of Rushdie, it's interesting that Masala was turned down by the 1991 London Film Festival, reportedly after one white programmer found it 'racist.' It was subsequently disinvited from the 1992 International Film Festival of India because it satirized Sikh separatists and has been repeatedly attacked by Indians in Canada as crass, rude, and blasphemous."[106] Jay Scott also addresses the opposition the film faced in India: "In a weird confluence of art and life, the prejudices in the movies have been confirmed outside the movies: Masala has been denied screenings in India..."[107]

Krishna's perspective on the negative response from the Indo-Canadian community is to place it within a longer period of cultural strife: "By the time the film was released in '92 I think attitudes had become so embittered and hardened. Those attitudes were symptomatic and indicative of what was happening in the culture at large. Really the whole decade has been about a kind of polarization – racial polarization, gender polarization, people splintering and

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[104] Krishna, <u>Personal Interview</u>.
[105] Anwar, "Review."
[106] Hoberman, "Multi-culti."
[107] Scott, "Spicy."

shouting at each other. This film was one of the events in that general tidal wave of reaction." [108]

The commentary on the Indo-Canadian community reaction to the film provides some insight into the influence of cultural stereotypes on the critics' writing. The fact that community reaction is an important element in the criticism points to the success of **Masala's** more controversial subject matter. However, without any background information such as the number and the source of dissenting voices, it also gives readers the idea that the Indo-Canadian community disliked the film for those same reasons. Furthermore, drawing parallels with the Rushdie affair connotes that a broad-based puritanism exists in the Indo-Canadian community. There is no connection drawn between the dissatisfaction with the film and the possibility that it was a result of wanting Masala to be a supportive and positive representation of the community, precisely because it is one of the first feature films made about Indo-Canadians.

• **How does the criticism interpret multiculturalism, its context or the policy?**

Masala relies on historical fact to highlight some of the issues that have affected Indo-Canadians. However, it also communicates that these same issues affect all Canadians. For example, multiculturalism – the policy, its programs and the way it imposes in our day-to-day lives – has achieved a fixed position in the rhetoric of Canadian identity. It quickly becomes a focus by which to discuss Masala. Facts like the Air India explosion are also raised as examples of the clever way in which the director calls attention to pivotal events in the history of the Indo-Canadian community.

Robert Fulford uses the film as a platform to take aim at "official" multiculturalism and at the film-subsidy institutions of Canada, however his

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[108] Krishna, Personal Interview.

impressions of the film are generally positive. The headline in the *Financial Times of Canada* read "The impious film **Masala**: a daring shot at multiculturalism." Fulford provides the reader with a number of poignant reminders about what the film sometimes implicates, but does not spell out. He says, "Who can hear a mention of Sikh agents in Canada without thinking of the Air India explosion of 1985? " Fulford also identifies the sentiment that is widely shared about multiculturalism and the role it has played in Canadian society: "On another level, Masala is also haunted by something less serious but far more pervasive – the dread spectre of multiculturalism, the official Canadian religion. **Masala** both embodies multiculturalism and satirizes it."[109]

Similarly, J. Hoberman picks up on these important bits of context for understanding how multicultural issues have played out in Canadian society: "Masala... touches a number of raw nerves, ranging from the 1985 mid-Atlantic explosion of an Air India flight originating in Toronto to the controversy over the right of Sikhs in the Royal Canadian Mounted Police to wear their turbans."[110]

Jacob Levich takes Krishna's treatment of these issues to be a result of the long-standing relationship that Canadians have had with multiculturalism and gives readers a sense of the loaded political environment that it comes out of:

> ...but suppose multiculturalism represented, not just an oppositionist academic movement or a vaguely leftish social ideal, but an official policy of the central government – would it feel quite so warm and fuzzy? Since 1971, when Pierre Trudeau declared that 'a policy of multiculturalism must be a policy for all Canada,' Ottawa has developed an elaborate bureaucracy designed both to palliate Francophone separatists and to cope with the demands of 'visible minorities.' The film assails multicultural pieties from

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[109] Robert Fulford, "The Impious Film Masala: a Daring Shot at Multiculturalism," Financial Times of Canada, 24 February, 1992, p. 34.
[110] Hoberman, "Multi-culti."

the left – not a Marxist left to be sure, but a kind of postmodern radicalism that comes naturally to many immigrants, whose experience of culture is likely to be as contradictory and heterogeneous as the dislocated spaces in which they live.[111]

In an interview on the subject of multiculturalism, the director refers to a growing cultural awareness of multiculturalism, but also to the urgency of coming to terms with what it actually means:

Multiculturalism has only recently become a hot topic in popular consciousness, in Canada as well as in America. The first screening I had in America...I thought the downtown New York audience would be the hippest I could possibly get in America. Well, people....didn't really know what to say about it. A year later, I showed it in Philadelphia...but by that time, the Rodney King trial and the Los Angeles riots had happened. Suddenly there was no end to the questions and the conversation. I realized that things have changed very greatly about the consciousness of 'how can we live together in this place?'[112]

Jacob Levich has said it best – the film approaches multiculturalism from the perspective of a generation of Indo-Canadians whose participation in Canadian culture is not as respectful immigrants, but as questioning, occasionally confused, 'second-generation Canadians.' The critics I have cited here communicate something of the issues that might lead the director to make such a film, including his own relationship to Canadian culture. By doing so, the criticism reflects a familiarity with the territory – Sikh turbans, the Air India explosion, multicultural policy. However, while they confirm multiculturalism's poor image in the public eye, and its influence in the film, the reverse is not the

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[111] Levich, "Review."

[112] Roy Grundmann, "What is this Place Called Home?" Cinemaya, 23, 1994, p. 23.

case. The criticism ignores the fact that Masala itself might have some impact on our understanding of multiculturalism.

- **Are the issues in Masala communicated as part of the Canadian experience?**

Masala presents audiences with the idea that the perception of "home" is greatly affected by how one is perceived by others. Thus, in trying to establish itself as a Canadian story, the message that the film expresses is that whatever happens to Indian communities has an affect on all Canadians, and vice versa. Craig MacInnis of the *Toronto Star* raises this cross-cultural reality: "While director Krishna doesn't turn a blind eye to racial prejudice – a group of neighbourhood white kids are forever terrorizing the young East Indians...this is hardly a one-way tirade. The Indians in Masala get as good as they give." [113]

Other critics insist on demarcating lines between Indians and Canadians, lines which are hardly quite so clearcut. John Anderson comments: "in Masala, there is no blending, no assimilation, only futile attempts to become Canadian, or to maintain the illusion that they're still Indian – which Krishna the director insists they're not." [114] Similarly, David Noh of the New York-based *Film Journal* feels that the film portrays a culture trying to 'blend' into Canadian life, and yet at the same times sees it as a positive fait accompli: "The film offers a fresh portrait, however satirical, of Indian culture desperately assimilating itself in Canada, of all places. Krishna wisely lingers on nothing, so you never get that deadly tract-like feeling of "See, this is how we live now."[115]

Paul Delean in *The Gazette* tells his readers that Masala reveals that the main character never quite feels part of Canada's social fabric: "Like the offspring

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[113] MacInnis, "Hockey."

[114] David Noh, "Review of Masala," Film Journal 96, April 1993, p. 33.

[115] John Anderson, "Cultural Backlash in Canada's Little India," New York Newsday, March 26, 1993, p. 19.

of many immigrants, he rebels against a lot of the customs and teachings from the old country, yet remains drawn to his heritage. And he never feels completely accepted in Canada, where immigrants still get harassed and their children insulted on street corners."[116] The following piece of information about the Air India explosion is scathing political commentary, but also illustrates why the children of immigrants might continue to feel like outsiders in Canada. Manjusha Pawaji writes, "At the time, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney sent his condolences to the Indian government, apparently unaware that the people on the plane were his people – landed immigrants, naturalized citizens and even, since many were children, Canadian-born."[117]

Critics like Robert Fulford see Masala as a meaningful reproach of the cardinal foundations of Canadian culture, while still seeing the film and the events in it as a distinctly Canadian phenomenon: "Masala resolutely declines to be identified with even the worthiest goals of those institutions. It stands outside both Canadian culture and Canadian multiculturalism, laughing and jeering."[118] Hoberman echoes Fulford's thoughts: "Krishna tests the limits of Canadian liberalism, parodying the idea of multiculturalism, even as he profits from it. Masala is itself a kind of social experiment – as un-Indian as it is un-Canadian (and yet, a film that could have only been made by an Indian in Canada.)"[119]

Krishna has remarked on the fascination with the film's cultural origins, having to define it's roots, and the ramifications for himself: "I don't know how to answer the question 'Is this an Indian film, or is it a Canadian film? Are you Indian or Canadian?' In fact, it never occurred to me to settle on any of those

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[116] Delean, "Energetic."
[117] Pawaji, "Hockey-sweater."
[118] Fulford, "Impious."
[119] Hoberman, "Multi-culti."

names to attach to myself, but this is what I've had to reckon with. Within official cultural circles, I think the film has been very, very difficult."[120]

It is interesting to note that the language of assimilation prevails in the comments of two U.S.-based critics. If anything has come out of Canada's long history involving disenfranchised natives, francophones and visible minorities, it is that the language of assimilation has fallen to the side, and that integration is a more acceptable way to talk about the transformation that takes place among immigrants in Canada. However, their comments also bring to light the superficial language of integration and the goals of multiculturalism as a way to assimilate minorities as "Canadians." What **Masala** demonstrates is that to step inside the Indo-Canadian community is to step inside a Canadian way of life. Krishna's film shows us that immigrants, their children, and their communities are integral to what takes place in Canadian society. The criticism tells its readers this, at the same time revealing the gap between **Masala's** message and Canadian reality, where this process of cultural exchange is still weak.

• **Does the criticism interpret Masala as part of a cultural shift?**

Kobena Mercer describes the change that took place in black filmmaking in Britain during the '80s as the "embryonic articulation of something "new" that does not fit a pre-given category."[121] I believe his comments have a profound echo in Masala. Two pieces of criticism share this sentiment.

One of the more astute pieces of commentary on **Masala** comes from Manjusha Pawaji, who feels that there has been an evolution in thinking about culture in Canada: "These movies make cultural accommodation more than just a one-way street....I suddenly feel like the Indian part of me that's in the kitchen

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[120] Krishna, Personal Interview.
[121] Mercer, "Aesthetics," p. 51.

has joined the world. Either that or the world is suddenly in my kitchen and is interested in what I'm making. We've come a long way. " Pawaji points out the importance of diverse representations in promoting that shift in thinking: "One sympathetic Indian character on screen will go further in dispelling racial stereotypes than a million sensitivity-training programs. A movie full of complex characters, good and bad, wise and stupid, will go far in making an Indian accent not the matter of automatic laughter that it often is."[122] Pawaji's commentary reflects Mercer's important insight on the nature of criticism. He says that black cultural critics can no longer simply celebrate the presence of black film, but that their role should be to clarify the complexity of the so-called "ethnic arts." This is precisely what Pawaji does by leading readers to a broader understanding of the implications of a film like **Masala**. Mercer limits his instruction to black critics, however the inclination to cheerlead minority film rests with many critics. As part of the process of cultural exchange, the objective of criticism should be responsibility to the film, not a simple celebration of it.

Robert Fulford also recognizes that something significant happened with Masala: "..an astonishing new film about East Indians in Toronto and a notable event in the evolution of Canadian culture. It's an unusual Canadian movie in many ways, but perhaps most spectacularly in its refusal to strike an attitude of piety toward issues and events that official Canada regards as dangerously sensitive – including racism, terrorism, minority religion and multiculturalism."[123] The shift that Masala signals is also articulated at the other end of the political spectrum by the likes of Cameron Bailey: "Krishna's feature debut borrows, juxtaposes and subverts a host of stories and ways of telling stories, all with the aim of inventing a new taste."[124]

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[122] Pawaji, "Hockey-sweater."
[123] Fulford, "Impious."
[124] Bailey, "Interview."

The director himself has said there are no Canadian precedents for films likes **Masala**. As noted here, certain criticism reflects **Masala's** singular contribution to Canadian film. At the same time, most critics commented on it's individual qualities, but not on the sum total of what it meant for Canadian cultural understanding. According to Krishna, **Masala** reaches an audience whose stories have yet to be disclosed: "...it's just one of those complex situations where this type of work had not been done for a particular audience...and certainly it should've been. The audience I'm talking about is your true equal opportunity, multicultural audience to talk to – not some self or pre-determined demographic. This is just a group of people, an unrecognized generation that really hasn't been recognized yet. It still today isn't really recognized. "[125]

The elucidation of **Masala** as a part of a cultural shift is raised by only a handful of critics. The same writers demonstrate a level of fluency with what's happening in Canadian culture at large. Much of the criticism also reveals the details of the film quite competently – its impressive style, its mix of genres, the significance of language, its aesthetic properties, and relevant historical facts were generally raised. The challenge to critics is to bring out **Masala's** complexity, not just at the level of its range of properties, but because of what the film represents culturally. The criticism is weak in articulating the problem that this type of film represented for traditional ideas of what Indo-Canadian culture should look like, and by extension, how our multicultural society actually operates.

The are several reasons for undertaking this type of analysis. Cultural criticism plays an important role in the way we consume, process and understand information. According to Mercer, we must conscientiously assess the words and style of critics precisely because of their contribution to

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[125] Krishna, <u>Personal Interview.</u>

understanding different cultural forms. He says: "...insofar as aesthetics concerns the conceptual criteria for evaluating artistic and cultural practices, it now becomes necessary to reflect more rigorously on the role of critics and criticism."[126] The technique of translation is one way to "rigorously" assess the the interpretation of **Masala**, the goal being to see whether the criticism gives surplus meaning to **Masala's** hybridity.

As I've stated before, the goal of good translation should be to communicate the essence of the text. Do these cultural critics translate what I perceive to be the essence of **Masala**? First of all, the criticism reflects the fact that there is some value to the film, that there is something worth translating. Many of the critics articulate what is interesting about **Masala's** aesthetic; they note its blend of genres; its satirical intent; the importance of using minority languages; its unique blend of content and style. They are able to break down the film into its obvious components, and even retain some of what might be alien to the standard way we understand film. Critics include some of the less familiar details that were part of the film, for example, pointing to Bollywood's history and the details of the Air India explosion. However, where I think critics fail is in their overall ability to communicate the social, cultural and political value of the film. In other words, the relationship between **Masala's** hybridity and its broader meaning for the way we understand multiculturalism is not a strong feature of the criticism. The hybridity of **Masala** does not stop at its interesting mélange of style and film form – its hybridity is an avenue to addressing the complexity of Indo-Canadian culture, and the way we understand the operation of cultural communities in general. The film signifies the opportunity to inspire a broader discourse around the power of cultural representations to affect how we interpret

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[126] Mercer, "Aesthetics," p. 50.

official multiculturalism itself. I think at this level, the criticism falls short of its potential to provoke this kind of an evaluation.

CONCLUSION:
Re-Imagining Multiculturalism

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The goal of this thesis has been to entertain a different way of thinking about multiculturalism in Canada. Why is this important? What is the significance of multiculturalism to Canadian society, and why does it need to be examined? The simple answer to these questions is because we need to continue to find ways to live with and comprehend cultural difference. Multiculturalism was designed as an expression of our society's commitment to try and follow through on this belief. Its overarching presence as a set of principles, as a cultural ethos, as public policy, as institutional practice, and as an enshrined federal law are an indication of this fact. However, multiculturalism must change with the times, not only to better accommodate the needs of the people it addresses, but also to defend its objectives against its powerful critics, and to maintain its legitimacy as a guiding force in Canadian life.

Multiculturalism has helped to define Canada to the world for almost 30 years. It is regarded world over as an outstanding contribution, both as a way to understand diversity and as a formal instrument to manage it. Indeed, the entrenchment of multiculturalism in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1985, and the creation of a national multiculturalism law in 1988 make Canada one of the few countries that gives the idea so much official support. Since the late '80s, the federal multicultural policy has also developed provincial and municipal counterparts as a sign of commitment to it's laudable

ideals. Officially, it continues to be considered an important federal objective – a fact born out by the review of its programs in 1995.

When it originated in 1971, multicultural policy was the Liberal government's effort to facilitate the entry of a large immigrant populace – to welcome but to also support their presence in their new home. When it was conceived, multiculturalism was mostly geared to cultural preservation – a significant part of the government's attention went to supporting various ethnic festivals and events, community publications and other modest types of activity. It was, by and large, a formal commitment to the upkeep of tradition-based heritage; it was a celebration of the principle that is now ironically referred to as Canada's "unity in diversity."

Over the course of the last 30 years, multiculturalism has shifted to encompass a broader set of issues. With the influx of more and more visible minorities to Canada, cultural issues preventing these communities from fitting in have changed to more concrete concerns – employment, education, racial discrimination. The multicultural ideals of sharing in the ethnic heritage of others, recognition for diverse cultures and so on has had little impact on the day-to-day problems faced by immigrants. As a result, affirmative action and employment equity programs were created under the rubric of multiculturalism to compensate for certain social inequities, and are therefore often recalled in the same breath. Together these programs represent a set of guiding principles that help to build an equitable society, and fit into a political framework that increasingly invokes social libertarian ideals as a reason for which to do things.

However, multiculturalism's function and value often ends up outside of this framework, which has made it easy for politicians to target in their policy initiatives. For example, in the early 1990s in Ontario, the NDP government of Bob Rae fully supported affirmative action and employment equity policies, and

introduced a range of government programs to promote multicultural ideals. These types of initiatives are part of the NDP's public policy. This is not the case with current Ontario premier, Mike Harris. The Progressive Conservative agenda has been to "slash and burn" those policies it perceives to lack public support, policies that espouse an egalitarian ethos. In this instance, supporting employment equity within provincial government ranks was not only outside its policy initiative, but worked as a political tool to show the public how the Conservative Party was coming to terms with the NDP's excessive and costly social spending. The policy was cut without any review or consideration. Of course the way governments make policy are more complex than simply conforming to what publics think. But the whims of governments with particular social agendas do play a large role in how multiculturalism is handled. This is an example of how the language of multiculturalism has become a flash point for issues around race relations, discriminatory practices, rights, tolerance, identity politics and so on. This set of associations are not in themselves negative or even inappropriate. However, they do lead to mistrust and confusion about the implications of multiculturalism and its political and social mandate. They also point to the need for modifications to the policy.

What I've called for in this thesis is a re-evaluation of what multiculturalism means to us as Canadians. If it is to continue to help characterize us as a nation it has to undergo a structural shift, but more importantly, our society must undergo a cognitive shift. How we envision multiculturalism will affect its future incarnations and hopefully how we feel about our multi-racial society. This sort of a re-evaluation may ultimately save multiculturalism from obsolescence or irrelevancy, especially if its role continues to be undermined. Furthermore, a re-examination may finally lead to widespread

acknowledgment of the fact that difference and diversity are integral to social, cultural, economic and political prosperity at all levels of society.

To try and clarify my point, I have focused on the way specific cultural identities are shaped and understood through the media. It is my belief that cultural representations of multiculturalism are an important way of elevating the discussion around multicultural issues. For my purposes, I chose to look at the 1992 Canadian feature-fiction film **Masala**. I was not looking at it in terms of its effects per se, but to try and interpret the sort of ideas that the film itself communicates to its audiences about cultural issues. This interpretive approach is a challenging one: the desire is to 'read' the film too narrowly – to interpret the miss-en-scène, its dialogue, plot and film elements as one overriding statement on ethnicity, community relations, racism. However Masala, as its director told me, is much more than a film about multiculturalism. It's about people and the feelings experienced by those living in the South Asian community. As a result, I tried to consider a host of things that **Masala** might mean to those people. I considered the film's style and content, I interviewed the director, I read countless reviews and cultural criticism surrounding it and must have watched **Masala** a dozen times. Inevitably however, I made a choice – to see the film as a tool for discussing multiculturalism. Others will approach the film with a different set of goals in mind. So there you have it, my confession and my bias.

I approached **Masala** by talking about it as a hybrid film. This comparatively new genre encapsulates films made by immigrants, by exiles, by individuals preoccupied with articulating their diasporic experiences and cultural identity. **Masala's** mix of satire, drama, comedy, dance, Bollywood fantasy and Hollywood musicals subverts our understanding of what genre films should look like – to put it in the words of one reviewer, **Masala** is *sui generis*. This generic hodge-podge, along with recurrent filmic devices and its

unconventional narrative gives us an understanding of Masala's particular perspective on the Indo-Canadian community. Its elements are unpredictable, which makes it anything but a stereotypical film about minority culture.

The language of hybridity is not without its detractors. Its critics either point out how it erases cultural difference, or claim that hybridity is an essentialist label. What they fail to recognize is that hybridity aims to erase the inequities created by cultural difference – racism, discrimination, intolerance – not the differences themselves. Masala's hybridity does this by pointing to the fact that the things that keep us apart – language, cultural ignorance, generational conflicts, gender stereotypes, the colour of skin, accents – are also often the things that join us together. In other words, these "categories" of understanding stand in the way of other levels of affinity, and also prevent bridging cultural gaps. Discussing cultural hybridity is one way to try and overcome these problematic divisions.

Masala's hybridity may be a productive way of looking at multiculturalism, however it goes without saying that such films are not made in a vacuum. Masala's appearance can therefore not be separated from the environment in which it operates. In chapter three, I looked at the way Masala was addressed, at the types of ideas that circulated in public discourse to see whether they reveal anything about multiculturalism. In other words, I tried to create some correspondence between what I think is significant in the film and the way it is talked about in public discourse.

Cultural criticism plays an important role in the way we consume information. Critics are given the task of sorting through a glut of data, and turning it into authoritative statements that people can read, react to, engage with and understand. These purveyors of information have become important to us as contemporary life becomes more convoluted, more eclectic. We look to

these "brokers" to provide a kind of shorthand that helps us manage complex cultural information. However, the responsibility they have been given should be considered because they table ideas, they inform cultural discourse, in short, they frame discussion. Accordingly, I wanted to assess what they were saying, how it was presented and specifically, what this group of "translators" has to say about Masala.

I used the overarching metaphor of translation to explain the process that cultural critics go through in writing or discussing a film. I used George Steiner as a model to talk about the technique of translation. In his opinion, as in mine, the objective of good translation is to communicate the essence of a text in a holistic form. Of course all translators argue they do this, but I've tried to show how Steiner's four-step process results in a responsible approach to the text and also generates surplus value. These steps act as general guideposts – indications of a way of thinking about the text at hand – that tell us that the process is rigorous and demanding. 'Translation' is an increasingly common part of the discourse of cultural studies, and I wanted to see if the metaphor made sense in relation to an approach to cultural representations. Furthermore, good translation should liberate new meanings in the text, and I wanted to see if the critics translating Masala were able to detach multiculturalism from its weighty baggage and give it new meaning.

A second reason for employing the term cultural translation is that the term alludes to a process of exchange as it occurs between cultures, which is my interest as someone who was born in India, grew up in Canada, and is faced with competing dogmas. The translation of cultures implies that there is an act of imitation and creation – taking the contents of one culture and adding to the signs and symbols of another. Cultural translation connotes intentionality, an

active desire to understand cultural representations without reducing their complexity.

To assess the translation skills of those writers who reviewed **Masala**, I surveyed the writing of a cross-section of mostly Canadian press, and the manner in which critics explained the content of **Masala** to readers. I wanted to know on one hand, whether their dialogue about the dominant content and style of the film expressed an understanding of the film. On the other hand, I wanted to see whether what they had to say challenged the cultural preservation mindset that prevails in official approaches to multiculturalism. In keeping with the technique of translation, I took into consideration a range of issues to see whether their writing was influenced by the texture of **Masala**, and ultimately, if what they had to say about cultural representations like **Masala** might raise questions about the foundation of multicultural policy.

After reading and comparing the various critics, my impression is that cultural criticism surrounding **Masala** translates the film in a way that expresses the originality and the flavour of the film. Critics address the film's history and motivations of the filmmaker; they communicate the creative strategies that Krishna employed; they understand that a common ethnic heritage, in this case an Indian one, does not equal a shared perspective. At the same time, critics also disclose their own cultural predilections, which are not so positive. For example, the notion that the filmmaker is not quite 'Canadian' seemed to be a common inference. As well, there seems to be a reliance on the idea that Indians are a close-knit group, which is not communicated in the film. Many raise **Masala** in opposition to an inferior type of multiculturalism, but many avoid the discussion altogether. Critics generally avoid making what I feel is an obvious connection between the power of cultural representations to make an impact on discourse, on policy, on traditional ideas of multiculturalism. One must ask if there has to

be a connection made between the film and multiculturalism? Obviously not, but I think critics are doing partial justice if they only discuss the superficial elements that make **Masala** interesting for audiences. This may be the first step in recognizing that a change to the status quo is necessary, but without a further dialogue on what **Masala** represents for multiculturalism, the criticism does little for the evolution of its discourse.

The question remains, what sort of direct impact can **Masala** and its associated criticism have on the discourse of multiculturalism and eventually, on multicultural policy? One film does not have the autonomous power to change institutional attitudes or deeply imbedded belief structures. **Masala** is part of a nexus of development – public discourse, government policy, movies, theatre, literature, law, art – and the problems that multiculturalism tries to resolve are a result of every one of these forces acting for or against it. Within this nexus of components I would say the least amount of attention is paid to independent subaltern films like **Masala**. They inevitably suffer from distribution problems. Masala for example, never left the repertory cinema/small theatre house circuit. It's also valid to speculate that the content of these kinds of films prevent them from being picked up by major distributors. And thus, even if they are well-received, they only ever reach a small audience. If their ideas aren't available to see, then naturally there is less chance that their ideas can be disseminated.

Masala is a positive development in the realm of cultural representations. It speaks to complex issues like what it means to belong, intolerance for difference, cultural identity, and the general instability caused by migration. In short, the film provides an alternative perspective on our multicultural environment. At the time of its release, it was well-liked, it stirred controversy, and it fueled discussion. As a result, **Masala** raises the stakes for films like it to elicit a shift in thinking about the way we view our multi-cultural society.

However, multicultural policy will only change *after* the need for revision is widely perceived. Policy development always lags behind the changing attitudes and needs of the citizens it administers. And it is an accepted fact that bureaucratic entropy rules politics at the level of governments. As such, multicultural policy will continue to have periodic evaluations. The last major evaluation took 15 years to come about after the original conception of the policy, but the reincarnation did bear the stamp of the law when it finally emerged in 1988. The point here is that official multicultural discourse, its policy and its programs will shift if the voices calling for it are regularly heard and seen. One of the ways to ensure this happens is to produce and circulate cultural objects like Masala, which communicate that change is already afoot.

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INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR
SRINIVAS KRISHNA
APRIL 22, 1999

Q – You've said in various interviews that **Masala** didn't fit into any specific genre -- could you explain this?

A – It's fairly simple. There are genre films like action-adventure, romantic comedies, buddy movies, road movies and gangster films. It doesn't really fit into any one of those genres. It wasn't really even a straight comedy, or a straight drama. This isn't so uncommon in the late '90s, but in the early '90s it was just out of nowhere. It was also really noticeable that there were no "Canadian" or white characters, so it was really difficult to sell, and hard to find a marketing angle for the film.

Q – Did you have the support of Alliance Films? Were they fully behind you?

A – Alliance at that time was not behind the film. They had wanted the film but in fact I went with Cinephile, which in hindsight might have been a small error on my part, because although Cinephile put up more money they went bankrupt by the time I finished the movie, and ultimately, like most things in this country, this film too is now owned by Alliance. I don't know if it makes any difference to what happens to the film now, because it's a few years old.

Q – But Alliance distributed it, did they not?

A – No, Cinephile distributed it in Canada, I sold it in the U.S. and UK, to Metro Pictures and to Strand in the U.S. By that time Cinephile was bankrupt and it was

bought by Northstar, which was a completely genre-driven film company that mostly did straight-to-video films, or a lot of video releases. And the film never really did well with them because my film isn't a genre film and Northstar doesn't have much interest or many buyers for films that aren't. So I don't really know much about what's happened after I made my two sales. I kind of got burnt out. I was 26 years old and it took me a year or so to mount the whole distribution of the movie after it was done.

Q – When you made the film did you have a specific audience in mind?
A – That's a good question. People would ask me that when I was finishing the film and I would say, "I don't know, there's gotta be." In fact I know there's an audience out there for it [Masala], but I don't know that you have to create one. You have an audience and it exists, it's just one of those complex situations where this type of work had not been done for a particular audience...and certainly it should've been. The audience I'm talking about is your true equal opportunity, multicultural audience to talk to – not some self or pre-determined demographic. This is just a group of people, an unrecognized generation that really hasn't been recognized yet. It still today isn't really recognized... the quality of the generation to come along is just not represented and people still look at cast, and at multi-racial casting in a movie and get all racially fucked up about it. Mostly it's white people who get fucked up about it – especially the white producers and distributors who tend to be hardcore conservatives, and they get all weird.

Q – Most of the people that I've talked to about the film seem to really like Masala ... maybe it's just their political or cultural bias.
A – People do like it, the film was a raging success.

Q – So what do you attribute its success to?

A –It's a good movie, nothing more than that, it's just a really good movie. It's funny, it's entertaining, it does most of the things you want a movie to do and it's really smart, it entertains you, and it doesn't make you feel like an idiot.

Q – I agree. One of the things that I find really interesting is the way it naturalizes or normalizes Indianness. It sort of looks at the way Indo-Canadian culture as it exists alongside mainstream Canadian society, and yet is in the midst of it...

A – I don't take any special attitude towards it...have you seen the feature film *Such a Long Journey*? It's such a pitiable film because it's so respectful and it's such a Canadian film – there's a certain type of Canadian film right now that's so completely boring, especially in its reverence for its subjects, and in that reverence there's an utter lack of any intimacy, or knowledge or familiarity or relatedness. It's a very traditional approach – that sort of reverence has a way of alienating you..

Q – It seems from what you've said that it's perspective is from the inside looking out, it's not assuming that's there some kind of activity happening side by side.

A – I guess it mobilizes in another way, it mobilizes from the stream of television It looks like a made-for-tv movie about good people and some kind of family drama-story, so it fits into a kind of family genre. Everything's clean, there's nothing authentic about the movie at all.

Q – From what I understand the Indian community or the South Asian community generally had a bad impression of **Masala**. Did you anticipate that?

A – Not really, I thought a couple of people would get rubbed the wrong way, but I never really anticipated the degree of negative reaction to the movie.

Q – Why do you think it evoked that kind of response at all?

A – Well, things got really bitter in the '90s. I wrote that script almost 10 years ago, but it was based on experiences of mine during the '80s. By the time the film was released in '92 I think attitudes had become so embittered and hardened. Those attitudes were symptomatic and indicative of what was happening in the culture at large. Really the whole decade has been about a kind of polarization – racial polarization, gender polarization, people splintering and shouting at each other. This film was one of the events in that general tidal wave of reaction. This movie got caught up in that, and people would ask me insane questions that I never thought of like "do you consider yourself to be a Canadian filmmaker" or an "Indian filmmaker" and so on – totally insane.

Q – A good point – why should you have to define yourself?

A – Exactly. Whenever they questioned me it was a frame of reference that I never felt applied, it's not my frame of reference. The words "people of colour," that phrase, it never existed in the '80s when I was in college. I still remember the time I first heard it. I thought "that's neat," or "that's new," "where's that coming from..," but I never identified with the group that used it. I thought it was a distinct type of ideological usage, with a specific politic, and I never knew enough about that group to know whether I could relate to them or not. I tried to work and write and think about it, and then after I made the film at the TFF there was a conference, and the conference was about 'filmmakers of colour' and I was

so clued out about the language that was being used. In the conference I was called a filmmaker of colour and it was the first time I'd been called that and I remember I was so offended. It was kind of irrational because it was the kind of offense that comes from not understanding the context at all. I had been living in the U.S. for a couple of years and I came back to Toronto and I made the film. There was a group of people coming at me and saying and writing "how do you deal with being a filmmaker of colour" and I thought, how dare you print that without asking my permission. I thought they're ascribing not just a name to me, but a whole identity and a set of politics, and I don't know what it means, it's not an innocent term and I don't take to being called this, I don't appreciate it, and this created a huge thing.

Q – So did you raise it at the conference?

K- Yes, I was so pissed off. I heard it, and I interrupted and then I thought there's a whole kind of politics forming here, and I better spend the time to figure it out but really, what's there to figure out? And then my film became among the mainstream media a point of discussion about all this new stuff, this tribalism , and I became someone to be called upon for radio and tv to comment on it. When I realized that this was all people wanted to talk to me about I dropped out and said I'm not interested in commentating about it. I'm interested in making films – I'm not a colour commentator here for society.

Q – Do think the reviews and the commentary around your film helped it to be understood?

A – I think it helped, but did it help it being understood? I don't know, good point. There were a range of reviews, some of them were deeply ignorant in ways that people can't be so ignorant anymore in the late '90s and that's

something that's good about the whole kind of politics that erupted in the '90s. There were some real assholes at the time, although you just never know, they're always lurking, it's just that they may not be as vocal. But there was also some really smart criticism about the film. I think people who took to the film also took it upon themselves to want to tap into, to espouse a kind of attitude that was welcome. It's not an attitude that I adopted– I've had it all my life. It's not an ideology for me, if was life experience.

Q – Do you think films suffer or benefit from the commentary or the criticism that surrounds them?

A – Careers are certainly complicated by it, filmmakers are complicated by it more than the films. The more attention a film gets it grows, but somehow as a filmmaker you get really, almost shackled in terms of what you can do or what you're considered to do. I'm a good filmmaker and I can't get work for some reason.

Q – Because you're pigeon-holed as a particular type of filmmaker?

A – I don't know. I think I'm pigeon-holed as smart, as someone who deals with ethnic issues – they're not strictly "ethnic," but people still have this idea of ethnic and white. I got sick of the people who are the distributors and funders, they're scared if there isn't a sympathetic white person in the film.

Q – The whole discussion that goes on around these films sets up expectations and close down ways of understanding the film, and ultimately the way that producers and distributors perceive the product – it's very narrow.

A – For my film the thing that really irritated me was at the time, is that all they really wanted to talk about was politics. No-one really talked about how I shot

the film, what I did as a director, my use of colour, the narrative inventiveness, narrative experimentation, a certain kind of formalism, the formalism of the film's narrative versus a mid-century modern film's type of formalism – no-one talked about that. It was just the novelty of a dark kid doing something, which was really irritating, and it still is irritating because I realize that all people see when they see this film is that I'm not white. It reveals something of the strength of the film because you are caught by the concept of it, which is good, but it's also a source of irritation for me.

Q – The few reviews that I've read really focus on the politics of the film and they overlook the aesthetics which are really quite unique....they're hybrid, if you want to call it that, in their own right.

A – I don't think you should call it hybrid, I don't know what the hell that means, I think it's a word you learned somewhere and you use because it seems to refer to something that is meaningful but it doesn't. Hybrid, pardon me if I contradict you, I really feel strongly about it, when all of this shit came out about this and I had to confront it just because of the film that I made I felt that hybrid was just a lie because it presupposes, a-priori, two distinct identities which are somehow joined to create a third identity called hybrid, and it's not so. It's much more complicated than that. There were never any distinct identities as such, and they only exist in moments of political stress or in certain moments of life, so I think these identities are not as distinct as people would like them to be, as academics or theorists would like them to believe, it's much more fluid. Hybridity is a construction.

Q – Even so, I think it's a good jumping off point to talk about the confluence of cultures, or identities, or politics that happen, or aesthetics. How would you refer to your aesthetic choices?

A – It's all about kitsch, it comes from the title. The film is always asking about authenticity, or inauthenticity, truth, kitsch – people searching for authenticity and not finding it. The aesthetic of the film is really just playing with that. It's quite a critical aesthetic – it doesn't have it's own tenets or a doctrine, it's more interrogative, a rhetorical kind of aesthetic.

Q – Do you think the way that you assume that Indians are part of this community, do you think Canadian audiences, or mainstream audiences are ready for that?

A – It didn't really matter, because I had to make the movie. It was my first feature film and there were other feature films that I had worked on and stuff and I studied cinematography, and I wanted to write my first feature and I wanted to write something that was personal – Masala was really about my experiences around the late '70s and '80s, when I was in college and it was the time of that Air India explosion, so it was always I mixture of that, so I just wrote what I knew about.

Q – Do you feel compelled to continue in that vein?

A – Well I do, and I've resisted but I've just made this short film that deals with similar themes. Besides, I need to make a living. And Masala was such a success that I figure I'll just do another one now. Besides, whenever I come up with ideas for other projects people just say, "why don't you make another Masala, make a Masala Two!"

Q – Were you generally happy with the way the media handled the film?

A – Well, like I said, I was amazed by what seemed to me to be a neurotic focus on race and cultural politics. It was a complete education in the structure of the film world because when you're making your first feature you're extremely naive, left open for various types of positioning, which really didn't interest me as something to write about. The shit in the film, and the shit that went on after the film was made... in as much as the making of the film is believed to be a suggestion that the times are changing, it also showed me how they haven't changed at all. Like I said, I wish people would've noticed how I made the film.

Q – How do you represent what's not really dominant, do you think filmmakers should try and express their politics, or just tell the story and forget about politics in any sort of overt sense?

A – Well I think you have to focus on the story and your politics will inform the story to a point. Your politics are you as a human being, your emotions, your values, and that comes prior to your story in a way. You start writing and your politics become part of your story, they're not separate from stories, not if you want to make a personal film. If I want to make commerical film – a cable movie, a made-for-tv movie, I'd be for hire, like a hired gun, which I haven't had to do so far.

Q – Do you think your film has had any way on the way that Indo-Canadians are represented or the way they're understood?

A – About that I have no idea. I seem to have gotten a lot of notoriety about the film, which is nothing I really courted or wanted, I just wanted to be recognized as a good filmmaker and to be able to make lots of films. In Canada, on the contrary, I've been able to make very few films, so it's been very disappointing in

some ways. That's why a couple of years ago I aplied for a green card, can't get work here, might as well go there, it can only get better.

Q – do you think you'd have that kind of freedom in the US, or maybe the UK?
A – if I can't do what I want to do, then I might as well make a lot of money, which I can do in the US. As far as the UK goes, I've got an agent there and he's pushed some things, but I'm not Engish, it's not my place. It's a great place that's really interesting and I wouldn't mind making a film there, but North America is really my life, it's where I grew up, it's really my roots. England has a different dynamic than the one we've faced, which makes it interesting, but it's not my home. I could move to America – as an Indian, you've got family all over the continent. For me, Canada or America was never such a neurotic obsession, my identity as a Canadian was never built upon not being American, which I think is really an Anglo-Canadian dilemma.