

# Rejecting the Margins of Difference: Strategies of Resistance in the Documentary Films of Pratibha Parmar

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Pratibha Parmar's first feature film, *Nina's Heavenly Delights*, is a romantic comedy built around the developing relationship between two women, and is set against the background of a family-owned Indian restaurant in Glasgow, Scotland. In 2006 it was originally released nationwide in theatres throughout the UK, making it available to mainstream audiences there. Outside of the UK, it is being shown in primarily lesbian and gay film festivals, although recently, in the US, it has also been released in selected theatres with the potential for wider distribution. Parmar's previous films have been documentaries covering a range of subject material, many of them made for television in the UK.<sup>1</sup> Outside the UK, they have been positively received at many film festivals around the world. However, their overall distribution has been, and continues to be, limited. Consequently, a whole new generation has been growing up unaware not only of the importance of Parmar's contribution to feminist and multicultural discourse, but also of the great pleasure to be had in experiencing her creative talent. For many people, *Nina's Heavenly Delights* either has been, or will be, their first experience of Parmar's work, and while it may not carry as much critical depth as some of her earlier films,<sup>2</sup> the fact that it has the potential to reach a much wider audience is a valuable asset.

It is a sad fact that we live our lives now at such speed, with such increasing distraction and decreasing attention spans, that we live more and more in the moment, forgetting, or dismissing, the importance of recent creative production. Many of Parmar's documentaries were made in the 1990s, a period often referred to as "back in the nineties," as if it were already becoming lost in the mists of time, no longer relevant to contemporary culture.<sup>3</sup> The question of continuing relevance also appears in the case of feminism. As a Women's Studies instructor, I hear from young women entering the classroom that they have "equality," meaning that they believe they now have equal rights with men. Their opinion is that feminism has served its purpose in bringing about this equality and is therefore no longer relevant today. They are, on the whole, only repeating back what they have learned from superficial exposure to commentary about feminism obtained through mass media sources. This is, unfortunately, a commentary that remains rooted in "backlash" rhetoric, reinforced by strident antifeminist voices and the growing exposure being given to right-wing women's groups, proponents of an increasingly conservative agenda in the West.<sup>4</sup>

It is not my intention here to address this myth of women having equal rights, let alone equal opportunities, and equal standing, respect, and protection at home and in society (this might require the space of a library, perhaps!). However, one of the things I find problematic with this attitude about the relevance of feminism is that it fixes feminism within a limited, rigid, and

static model. In fact, and to the contrary, feminism has evolved and continues to evolve through a process of critical self-evaluation and ever-expanding interaction, or interconnection, with other social concerns, such as racism and homophobia. Feminism plays a vital role in the broader sphere of identity politics, not the least part of which has been its influence on the ways in which people are represented, or represent themselves, within the world of visual culture, and, consequently, the ways in which they are perceived by viewers. Women from a range of disciplines, such as literature, art, and film, have been working to find new ways of communicating, new modes of expression, or new forms of language, that break away from traditionally dominant patriarchal and hierarchical models. It is within this context that Parmar's films are of particular importance and continuing relevance.

Parmar is a writer, theorist, and filmmaker whose work is rooted in identity politics, and postcolonial and feminist theory. She was born in Kenya, is ethnically South Asian, and an immigrant citizen of the UK. Her personal experience of marginalization as a woman, a person of colour, and a lesbian, fuels her interest in making documentary films that form a visual resistance to stereotypical categorizations and identifications of race, gender, sexuality, feminism, community, and class. A significant aim of her work is to destabilize or undermine any reading of identity as being unitary, fixed, or determined by socially limiting constructs of difference, where a person is solely identified as belonging to a particular social group, the parameters of which are rigidly determined by race, gender, sexuality, etc. Resisting the trap of forming a self-identification that is defined only through its opposition to a dominant 'Other,' Parmar works to promote a self-determination that is rooted in the recognition and celebration of the multiplicity inherent in the identity of any individual.

These concepts are reflected not only in the content of her films but also in their style. Parmar has invented her own unique style of documentary filmmaking, her own visual language, in which she often creates a montage of different modes of representation. Interviews may be interrupted by poetry readings; dramatic constructions or reconstructions may be interspersed with archival footage; performance, dance, music, and metaphoric imagery all collude in her work to destabilize any expectation of conventional documentary strategy and often, also, to destabilize traditional use of subject/object viewing relationships. In a world where we are often bludgeoned into resentment or indifference by the traditional blunt instrument of visual didacticism, Parmar's films stand out as being able to challenge limited vision, and limited thinking, as she employs what I consider to be a form of visual seduction; underlying what may be a fairly overt message there is usually a covert reinforcement that operates at a more subliminal, and very effective, level. This can make it hard for viewers to create an emotional distance between themselves and the film, ensuring a greater involvement than might otherwise take place.

Imagery in Parmar's films often plays a metaphoric or symbolic role in the representation of life experiences, emotion, and social and political commentary, rather than that of a direct depiction of reality. In *Sari Red* (1988), for example, Parmar's decision to use her own alternative imagery rather than actual or re-enacted footage of events or people, is particularly potent and very poignant. *Sari Red* was made in reaction to the racially motivated murder in Britain of Kalbinder Kaur Hayre, a young Indian-British woman. Three white youths, who were driving in a van, shouted racist abuse at Kalbinder and two friends with whom she was walking home from college. Kalbinder shouted back at them. As Parmar narrates in the film, "For her dignity and pride, she shouted back." For her temerity, Kalbinder was brutally crushed between a wall and the van driven by the youths and she died from her injuries.

*Sari Red* opens with a sequence of violent or unsettling images: vessels containing a red liquid are hurled and smashed against a wall; a red sari ripples in a breeze; a British flag is in flames. Anxiety increases as a light flashes rapidly onto a figurine of a dancing woman. The flashing is amplified and sent back to the viewer from a metallic red and silver backdrop. Music in the soundtrack builds in a manner that increases the tension of these scenes. A disembodied woman's voice begins a poetic narration of the events leading to Kalbinder's death, a narration in which the words "red" and "blood" are repeated. This visual and aural linking of red and blood doubles the feeling of anxiety and response to the violence of the event. This comes into stark contrast against scenes which follow, calm scenes of daily life and family activities of women and children of South Asian ethnicity living in Britain, walking and playing outside their homes in a housing estate, putting on saris, kneading dough, gardening, and shopping at the vegetable stalls in the streets. It's just a normal day. These are women going about their domestic chores. This is what it means to be a South Asian woman living in Britain. How nice. We walk around in saris, we make chapattis for dinner, and our kids play happily in the street. Then the violence intrudes again. Images of red. Puppet figures of three women dangle from a tree as the narration continues. The light flashes. Vessels of red liquid are smashed against the wall. The brutal reality is that there can be no normal daily life, a life without fear, when violence can erupt so suddenly. This is what it means to be a South Asian woman in Britain. A vase of bright red tulips sits on a table in a peaceful space. There will never be a normal daily life for Kalbinder. A voice repeats that Kalbinder's death is something that "cannot be erased, must not be erased." The intensity and repetition of the imagery in this film ensures that we cannot ignore or forget the violence that has taken place. Blood red. *Sari Red*.

Kalbinder refused to remain silent in the face of racist abuse and the breaking of silence is a constant theme in Parmar's work, appearing in even her earliest films, such as *Emergence* (1986). This film features four women artists and writers showing, reading, or performing examples of their work. Artists, whether visual artists, writers, performers, dancers, or musicians, are a recurring field of interest for Parmar and they appear in a number of her films. This is an important point to note, because artists are communicators. They are people who speak out in

many different ways, using many different media. In *Emergence*, the artists concerned are all women from a variety of ethnic backgrounds who have, or whose families have, been displaced into other countries and other cultures. Sutapa Biswas, Mona Hatoum, Audre Lorde, and Meiling Jin form a group in which there are women who are speaking out; there are people of colour speaking out; there are people affected by diaspora speaking out. In this film, nobody has a single, simple identity such as 'woman' or 'immigrant;' nobody belongs to only one community; no one accepts the position of oppressed and marginalized, silent 'other.'

The artists in *Emergence* speak out through their art: they speak about themselves and their experiences; they are not spoken about. They are women who have found their own voices; they use their own kinds of written or visual language. They are not available for objectification by the viewer. It is this that is the crux of Parmar's resistance as it operates in *Emergence*, and she employs a number of strategies to make certain that her audience is made aware of it.

No authoritative voice or narrator explains the work or lives of the artists in this film. There is no voice of authority with which the audience can ally itself. We hear the intermittent voice of a woman off-screen, but it is a poetic voice, not authoritarian. Other unidentifiable voices are occasionally present, but only as distorted and unintelligible static in the soundtrack. The artists' emotion, their pain, and their passion, are carried by their own words and images. Whether through poetry, through reading, through the medium of paint, or performance, the only voices we hear clearly, and identifiably, are those of the artists themselves; in a disruption of subject and object, the audience is definitively positioned as being 'spoken to.' We are, also, in another turn-around of viewing relationships, 'looked back at' by the artists featured in the film. Instead of being viewed in the passive position as racial or gendered stereotypes, the women in *Emergence* take active command of the picture frame. They gaze very strongly, confidently, almost defiantly, straight into the camera and, consequently, out at the audience. This disrupts any expectation that the audience may have of indulging in a patronizing or dominant viewing experience. Their gaze tells us that they are present in this film as the subjects of their own lives, not as objects in the life of someone else.

Parmar interweaves the artists' readings and performances with evocative images such as that of an unidentified figure in black walking past a long, many-windowed building, views of a British landscape, and scenes of what could be daily life on a tropical plantation. These images are not directly identified or explained but are available to the viewer to absorb or to interpret as being illustrations that relate to the artists' work, or to their lives. Added to these images is a complex soundtrack, composed of a variety of different types of sound: music, voices, everyday noise, static and electronically generated sounds. This film is a creative and complex montage that reflects the inherent diversity of the artists that it features.

Similarly, *A Place of Rage* (1991) focuses on another group of women who refuse to belong to the category of silent, or silenced, minority. This very powerful film, made for Channel 4 TV in the UK, celebrates the work and experience of a number of civil rights and feminist activists in the USA, particularly that of Angela Davis and June Jordan. These African-American women talk not only about their own experience, but also provide testimony to the often overlooked contribution of other women activists, such as Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, to the Civil Rights movement in the 1960s.

Again, this film is a very effective montage of different styles that reinforces its message, and the commitment and beliefs of its protagonists, in both obvious and subtle ways. Parmar foregrounds the women in *A Place of Rage* in such a way as to emphasize, and celebrate, their strength, their passion, their voices, and their ideas. Angela Davis asserts that, as an African-American or as a woman, she does not consider herself to be in a minority, or “a minority within a minority,” but that she exists within a majority. This is not just a personal, conversational nod to the camera. Davis says this is from a podium where she is addressing a large audience of people from many ethnic backgrounds. We are compelled to see her as a person of public importance, who speaks with dynamic self-assurance. June Jordan performs irresistibly passionate readings of her poetry, poetry that speaks out against marginalization, against the suppression of freedom, and against violation of basic human rights. We see her against a background composed of many photographic images of other women who have played important, if often unacknowledged, roles, throughout the long fight for civil rights. Jordan speaks with authority from the accumulated force of history, with a deep understanding of oppression.

We see images of both Davis and Jordan in their positions as teachers, passing on their ideas and their beliefs as feminist and activist role models to a younger generation. This is important, because oppression still exists in many forms. Archival footage and images reflect the time of racial segregation in the United States, and depict scenes from the revolution of the Civil Rights Movement, which brought about an end to that segregation. In a series of talking-head style interviews,<sup>5</sup> Davis and Jordan describe the very important role that women of colour played in bringing about social and political change during the civil rights era. We see disturbing modern footage of the problems of poverty and drug abuse in contemporary Black society. We see TV broadcastings about the Gulf War. What revolution do we need now?

In an interview with Parmar a few years earlier, June Jordan expresses her belief that “every single one of us is more than whatever race we represent or embody and more than whatever gender category we fall into” (Parmar, “Other Kinds” 61). This is constantly reiterated throughout *A Place of Rage*, as is the notion that every one of us belongs to more than any one community. Both Jordan and Davis relate and equate their work as activists, as women, and as

people of colour within the USA, to struggles that are taking place for lesbian and gay rights, and to those occurring in the field of international affairs, particularly in the Middle East.

In *Khush* (1991) and *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun* (1992) Parmar herself brings attention to issues of marginalization and identity experienced in lesbian and gay communities, and emphasizes the fact there is no one, single community to be considered. As she writes in “That Moment of Emergence”: “There is a need also to redefine ‘community,’ and just as there isn’t a homogeneous Black community, similarly there isn’t a monolithic lesbian and gay community” (Parmar, “That Moment” 9).

*Khush*, which can be translated from Indian to English as “ecstatic pleasure,” is structured around a series of interviews with South Asian gays and lesbians living in the UK, Canada, the USA, and India, many of whom use the word to describe themselves. Again, the people in *Khush* speak for themselves, rather than be spoken about, and they speak in a very passionate, positive and celebratory way about their sexuality; the film opens with a woman who describes her experience of being a lesbian as “total erotic satisfaction and endless possibilities;” a man describes how being gay brings to his life a “solidarity in brotherhood and sisterhood.”

The people in the film describe problems arising from their membership in a number of different and often conflicting social groups, including sexuality, race, and class. For those who live in predominantly white countries, there is pressure from their families to be straight and to marry within their ethnic communities, which, as one man describes, tend to be conservative when faced with relentless racism from the society around them. They also find evidence of racism within their own lesbian and gay communities, either in the sense that they are not considered to be politically viable, or they are only seen as sexually exotic objects, “full of eastern promise.” Problems arise from the caste, or class, systems that result in exclusionary practices within many South Asian lesbian and gay groups.

The people who talk about these issues are very clear and speak with intelligence and feeling. It is easy to understand and sympathize with their problems. Yet, and at the same time, there is an undercurrent, a feeling of joy, perhaps even of ‘khush,’ that comes in watching this film. In Parmar’s signature style, weaving in and out of these interviews are a number of other happenings that are celebratory, seductive, or loaded with erotic possibility: an outrageous dance performance by Juanito Wadhvani covered in red body paint, clips of women dancing from an old black and white Bollywood movie, images of richly coloured and erotic works of art, and a dramatic staging of two women meeting and becoming physically close with each other. The film closes gently, yet titillatingly, with their kiss. Being khush has its problems, yes, but it also has many rich rewards.

Similarly, in *Double the Trouble, Twice the Fun*, a film about lesbian and gay people who are disabled, there is a sumptuously staged seduction scene involving two gay men in wheelchairs, a scene which is an affirmation not only of their sexuality, but also of the fact that disabled people are sexual beings with sexual desire. As in *Khush*, the people interviewed in *Double the Trouble* have to contend with issues such as racism and exclusion on account of their sexuality. But they also have to contend with isolation within lesbian and gay communities as well as within society at large, on account of their disabilities. As June Jordan questions in *A Place of Rage*, why anti-racist, feminist, and GLBTQ groups are not supporting each other's causes, so, too, does Parmar raise a similar issue here.

Parmar is a filmmaker who has the courage to take on difficult topics in her work even where such engagement exposes her to criticism from other feminists and postcolonial theorists, as is the case with *Warrior Marks* (1993), which she made with the writer Alice Walker.<sup>6</sup> The focus of the film is the subject of female genital mutilation (FGM), a practice that is widespread throughout Africa, but which is also, as the film reveals, present in other countries such as the UK, France, Canada, and the USA. In addition to talking with women in the UK and France, Parmar and Walker traveled to Africa to film and interview women involved in the practice of FGM, women who have suffered from it, and women who are fighting against it. This has given rise to criticism that the film is anthropological as Parmar and Walker come from outside, from First World countries. They have also been criticized for making a film about something that could be read, because of the way in which it is portrayed in the film, as primitive and barbaric, thereby reinforcing racist stereotyping.<sup>7</sup>

This is a question Parmar herself considered with respect to the fact that the film would be viewed in the UK and the USA: "how much do you expose in a hostile racist society? How much do you expose negative or harmful practices within cultures that are not dominant?" Parmar goes on to say that she did, however, decide to go ahead with this film about FGM because it is "an issue that I felt committed to as a feminist – as someone who has a history of involvement in campaigns against violence against women" (Kaplan, "An Interview" 94).<sup>8</sup> It is an issue that she feels is part of the universal problem of gendered violence and, as such, an issue that needs to be considered internationally. It is not a problem to be restricted to the concern of "them but not us," it is a concern for everyone.

Other films include *The Colour of Britain* (1994) and *Brimful of Asia* (1998) that examine the changing nature of British identity as it becomes influenced by immigrant populations, something that is happening in other countries worldwide. (Even more so, perhaps with the added influence of the Internet.) *The Righteous Babes* (1998) engages the popular music scene to investigate, and demonstrate, the continuing importance of feminism for younger generations. Her films are powerful, passionate and positive, a combination it is hard to resist.

Parmar has created a unique visual language; her films are multi-layered and multi-textured compositions that deepen and intensify the viewing experience. They operate both through their content and their style to encourage viewers to think beyond the boundaries of convention, and to expand their ideas of how identity can be constructed. Viewers drawn towards a film because it is about gays and lesbians will find themselves crossing into issues of racism or disability; others, wanting to see favourite rock stars, will be encouraged to think about feminist issues. Parmar's work does not attempt to bring individuals and communities considered marginalized or excluded into the centre, or mainstream, of society and culture. Rather, Parmar works to bring the centre, or mainstream, out to the margins. *Nina's Heavenly Delights* has had national release in the UK and is now available on DVD. It is in the mainstream of popular culture. It is a tribute to her earlier films that Parmar has been able to make and distribute this film today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Parmar's early films were mostly self-funded and were originally shown mainly to the relatively small audiences of the film-festival circuit, but many of her later films were commissioned by Channel Four TV in Britain and thus had an audience potential there of millions; an audience perhaps more monolithic in the sense that it was more mainstream, but also one which was made up of people from many different backgrounds, different age groups, different communities.

<sup>2</sup> There is much to be said about *Nina's Heavenly Delights* both as an individual film and in comparison to Parmar's other works, but it lies outside of the scope of this essay, which deals primarily with reviewing some of Parmar's earlier documentaries. I feel it is important to just note, however, that while the treatment of subject material in *Nina's Heavenly Delights* is somewhat light-hearted and follows a more mainstream style than do her documentaries, it nevertheless presents a number of provocative happenings, not the least of which is an interracial lesbian love affair. Beneath the sugar coating of this "urban fantasy" as Parmar has described her film, it is possible to see that she is still working to present some of the issues about which she feels very strongly.

<sup>3</sup> Parmar started making films during the late 1980s and early 1990s, a time when many changes were taking place in the world of film - and video. Her work can be considered part of the emerging, and highly energetic, queer indie film scene, a good introduction to which can be found in *Queer Looks* (see Parmar "That Moment," in the list of works cited). However, as Parmar's films are often complex vehicles for her to explore more than one area of interest, often crossing boundaries between racism, queer issues, feminist concerns, and so on, it actually can be hard to place her work within any singular category. For background information about the development and context of her work, there is a transcript of an excellent interview with Parmar, and excerpts from a master class, in Jacqueline Levitin, Judith Plessis and Valerie Raoul, eds. *Women Filmmakers: Refocusing* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Feminist discourse on this problem of anti-feminist rhetoric is very wide-ranging and part of the greater discussion about the current and future conditions of and for feminism in general. For quick reference, Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women* (New York: Crown, 1991, reprinted in 2006), remains a basic text that uncovers a lot of the myths underpinning anti-feminist media pronouncements. Rhonda Hammer's more recent *Antifeminism and Family Terrorism: A Critical Feminist Perspective* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002) gives a critical and in-depth analysis of



the consequences of increasing media popularity for conservative “feminism,” and anti-feminist “feminists,” such as Camille Paglia, Christina Hoff Sommers and Katie Roiphe.

<sup>5</sup> One of Parmar’s reasons for employing the talking heads technique in *A Place of Rage* is her belief that it is “crucial for viewers to be challenged in their assumptions that only white men have an opinion about world matters. So here, the use of talking heads was a conscious decision . . . partly as a comment on white male hegemony” (Kaplan, “An Interview” 87) She goes on to say that “not only were the women in the film talking historically, but June Jordan is talking about something as current as the Gulf War” (92).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, “Warrior Marks: Global Womanism’s Neo-colonial Discourse in a Multicultural Context” in Matthew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo, eds. *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Kaplan poses one argument against this in proposing that *Warrior Marks* should be considered as propaganda. This is due in part to the fact that the film was supported by “Forward International,” an African women’s group that fights against FGM, but it is also due to her reading of the film’s lack of neutrality.

The project comes close to anthropology in the women’s interviewing of indigenous women about the ritual, and in their documenting aspects of the ritual on film. Where it differs is in its explicit taking up of a position against clitoridectomies. Ethnographic film usually pretends to a “neutral” stance, although no stance is ever really neutral within prevailing ethnographic film codes. *Warrior Marks* is clearly best located as one kind of propaganda film (Kaplan, *Looking for the Other* 182).

<sup>8</sup> For Knippling, what is significant here “ is that Parmar refuses to let the prescriptive criticism of liberals alter her agenda” (121). Knippling considers Parmar’s rebuttal of criticism about her decision to film *Warrior Marks* in the context of Parmar’s constant support throughout all her work of an identity politics that refuses to enter into a binary structure: “Thus, it would seem that Parmar’s position on questions of race, sex, nation, and empire differs from the leftist-liberal position that paradoxically relies on the fixed binary of oppressor and oppressed and thereby bolsters the structures of oppression” (121). Whether or not Parmar agrees with Knippling about leftist-liberal positions, or with Kaplan about propaganda, she recognizes that the different debates stirred up by *Warrior Marks* are effective in increasing the visibility of her agenda.

For me, the important question to also ask is ‘how does this film and the critical, theoretical and political discourses generated by it, serve or not serve the campaigns against female genital mutilation, as well as women’s need for representations that promote ‘their egalitarian, autonomous, and multiple place in society?’ (Kaplan, “An Interview” 95)

## Filmography

See a list of Pratibha Parmar's films at: <http://www.wmm.com/filmcatalog/makers/fm48.shtml>

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