

Mixed-Race Marriage – Hollywood Version

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A VIEW FROM SINGAPORE

The very first images I had of black-and-white sexual attraction were those from *100 Rifles* (Tom Gries, 1969) where Jim Brown makes passionate love to Raquel Welch and in the slick *Shaft* (Gordon Parks, 1971) where the tough private detective Richard Roundtree has a fine wet time in the shower with a prostitute.

The theme of interracial or mixed-race sex and marriage has been, since D. W. Griffith's time, problematic for Hollywood, the world's greatest Dream Factory. The most prominent film to treat this theme seriously is arguably Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (1967). The question of interracial relationship is more sublimated in this film, where Katherine confesses to her mother (Katharine Hepburn), she and Sidney Poitier have not had sex because "he wouldn't let me!" Though controversial in the tumultuous Civil Rights era, it now looks tame and timid as a social drama about the apprehension of a bourgeois white couple (Spencer Tracy and Hepburn) over their beautiful daughter marrying a brilliant research physician (Poitier).

Of course, the famous Orson Welles had long before touched on the theme of interracial relationship in his own production, *Othello*, based on the immortal Shakespearean tale of black jealousy and its tragic consequences. This 1952 film, now enjoying a revival in New York and London, shared the top prize at the 1952 Cannes Film Festival. Here, a black-painted Welles (who plays Othello) is manipulated by Iago into suspecting his white bride Desdemona of infidelity which his Moorish morality would reward with the destruction of his beloved.

Three decades ago, it would be inconceivable for a black film actor to play with authenticity the monumentally jealous and murderous Othello, although Shakespeare's play did specify it. Except on stage, blacks have never portrayed the Moor. Later, two great actors, Sergei Bondarchuk and Laurence Olivier -- both white -- had tackled with some success this subject in two separate film versions, the 1960 Russian and 1965 British one respectively. And like Welles, both had their faces painted black. How about Spike Lee, the *enfant terrible* black-American filmmaker taking on this tale?

Hollywood mainstream films which deal with the problems of interracial romance are very scarce as the genre has not been very popular and thus remains unprofitable. However, there is a fascinating piece which early Hollywood ventured into -- it is Chester Franklin's 1922(!) Madame Butterfly-like melodrama, *Toll of the Sea* which tells the tragedy of a Chinese girl (a superb Anna May Wong) who rescues a handsome Caucasian from a shipwreck, falls for him, bears him a child and then is dumped by him for his own kind.

This author was fortunate to catch this quaint two-colour (in green and pinkish red) silent film at this year's 16th Hongkong International Film Festival. In terms of film history, Franklin's foray into Eastern love masochism -- that of the sacrificing Chinese heroine who gives her everything to an ungrateful and jilting white lover -- had to wait to join the spirit of the modern times until now. When it was originally released, it was largely ignored as such exoticism was considered self-indulgent and disastrous for the studio.

Obviously, controversy-shy Hollywood frowns on a serious treatment of interraciality; it rather opts for a conventional love melodrama played out by whites for yellows (Chinese Asians) -- those petite and demure exotic Chinese girls who yearn for a white man's love. This attitude is borne out in the justly famous *Sayonara* (1957), directed by Joshua Logan, where Marlon Brando as an Army major falls in love with a Japanese woman dancer (Miyoshi Umeki). This popular and moving interracial love story is nevertheless a milestone among Hollywood films and it earned a reputation as a champion against xenophobic America by condemning many prejudices of interracial relationships.

Much more conventional and artistically less remarkable was the sleazy and unrealistic soap opera, *The World of Suzie Wong* (1960), directed by Richard Quine, which stars William Holden as the American architect-turned-painter Robert Lomax who falls "in lust" with Hongkong prostitute Suzie Wong (Nancy Kwan).

Three decades later, Hollywood tried to address more than the issue of Uncle Sam's son falling in love with a sweet Japanese lass. In 1990, Alan Parker made *Come See the Paradise*, about the World War II unconstitutional internment of Japanese Americans who are shown bundled off to a camp in Northern California just after Pearl Harbour. Parker, the US-based British director with some experience in political melodrama (*Midnight Express*, *Mississippi Burning*), charts in bold melodramatic strokes the fortunes of the Kawamuras whose fate becomes entwined with that of Irish-American union sympathiser, Jack (Dennis Quaid) who falls for their pretty daughter, Lily (Tamlyn Tomita).

Hollywood's gallery of stereotypes include Asian Chinese and Japanese women, shown mostly as long-suffering mistresses or prostitutes; they are considered exotic, softly feminine, and alluring -- at least to the macho-male audience throughout the world. The image of tall, handsome Holden or charismatic Brando who sweeps his "chink" lover off her feet smooching her with wild abandonment, is appealing to male whites everywhere. Many even find it romantic, although feminists might consider this view as insulting.

But it is altogether different when a black man has a sexual affair with a white girl; this has always been more or less taboo in the US. The case of Spike Lee's acclaimed *Jungle Fever* (1991) in which middle-class black architect Flipper Purify (Wesley Snipes), married to a light-brown beauty Drew (Lonette McKee) suddenly has an adulterous liaison with Angie (Annabella Sciorra), his white Italian-American secretary, has been stirring up numerous controversies. It also raises more crucial race issues than any American films since *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. "Nuclear megaton Bomb!" says Flipper's neighbour, high-school teacher Cyrus (Spike Lee) when he confides he has made wild love to a white woman -- "I threw her on the table!"

At its centre are the issues of colour, class, interracial love, taboos, passion, happiness, and the family which have never before been treated more intelligently, sensitively and provocatively in spite of the charges by Lee's detractors he has been putting down black women.

In this film (based on Stevie Wonder's song title), black-and white attraction comes about when Flipper has ideas in his head that a white woman is the epitome of beauty and the yardstick everything must be measured against and Angie becomes obsessed with the notion black men make great studs in bed. So when they hit it off somewhat indiscreetly (both confide to friends their affair), they become the scandal of their respective neighbourhoods, Sugar Hill in Harlem and Bensonhurst in Brooklyn.

The wronged or cuckolded Paulie (John Turturro), Angie's long-standing boyfriend, takes it out on a classy black lady, Orin (Tyra Ferrell) in Bensonhurst. Here, Lee hints their relationship is based on true feelings. Besides the two interracial romances, Lee works in a subplot of Flipper's Bible-loving parents who are at odds with his crack addict elder brother.

And, like Rainer W. Fassbinder's treatment of the interracial theme in his 1973 *Fear Eats the Soul*, Lee shows racism is still rife in present-day white-dominated America. While Fassbinder's dark-skinned North-African Ali is married to an older charwoman getting shunned by her white German neighbours, Spike Lee's mixed couple -- Flipper and Angie -- gets the boycott from a black waitress who refuses to serve them; there is an additional harassment from the cops who assume a black man and a white woman sleeping together means a "rape" is being committed.

In the end, *Jungle Fever*, though courageously exposing the contradictions inherent in black-white sexual attraction, finds its black-white lovers returning to their own kind; this retreat dilutes the power of the central theme of racial mixing and hostility.

In a lesser vein and of lesser importance in the contribution of cinema to understanding the nature of interracial love and prejudices, Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1992) comes second in its unadventurous study of a good black youth, Demetrius (Denzel Washington) who sacrifices a college scholarship to support his widowed father by running a carpet-cleaning business; Demetrius is an updated variation of the clean-cut Sidney Poitier character. His lover, Mina (Sarita Choudhury), an Ugandan-Asian woman, is non-conformist, almost a rebel. Her family runs a liquor store for a motel owner (they were expelled from dictator Idi Amin's early 1970s Uganda). Mina, who grows up in Greenwood, Mississippi, calls herself a "masala", a mix of hot Indian spices, she being a child of India and America now.

Racism rears its ugly head once the Indian community learns of the young couple's relationship. Demetrius

is shunned by the entire white community; above that, his carpet-cleaning contracts are cancelled by the Indians who run most of the town's motels. Mina does not suffer as much. Her parents are more protective of her but she yells at them with her self-righteousness -- "I haven't done anything wrong!" Still, the lovers are separated, but not for long, as the determined pair leaves their hostile surroundings to explore the world together.

Nair's film, unlike Lee's, may not be as insightful but she makes up for the lack of depth by her detailed eye for behavioural idiosyncrasies of the prejudiced and ill-informed black and white communities that dot the Greenwood town. *Mississippi Masala* is a social comedy, a satire that pokes gentle fun at the human foibles of xenophobic whites as well as Indians who do not trust blacks.

The syndrome of the mixed race couple is mostly flight -- physical as well as spiritual and emotional. This is also the tale of the white labour organiser Jack and his love, the Japanese-American, Lily, in Parker's *Come See The Paradise*. They run away from a disapproving community, from Little Tokyo in Los Angeles to Seattle, to start a family.

But Parker's syrupy story of the mass incarceration of Japanese-Americans in internment camps during the Second World War concentrates far too much on the banal romance, instead of the potentially powerful theme of institutional racism, perpetuated by xenophobic American politicians who exacted revenge on the Japanese for their attack on Pearl Harbour.

After endless scenes of emotional parting and reunion, we lose sight of the plight of the Kawamura family as victims of social injustice and political persecution -- one son who signs up with the U.S. Army is killed in 1944, the other is repatriated to Japan for refusing to sign the loyalty "oath", the family head dies a broken man in camp, et al. The important fact is that the larger themes of racism and anti-Japanese xenophobia which caused a three-generation family of Japanese immigrants to be unjustly treated as second-class citizens were glossed over in this tedious 135-minute long film.

It is a pity a director of Parker's stature should sentimentalise every stock character, except perhaps for the militant Charlie Kawamura whom injustice transforms into a bitter Japanese nationalist, defiant to his last stand. Dennis Quaid who plays the white lover becomes more like a political caricature and a "noble victim" by his choice of interracially marrying into the Kawamura family. Once again, the film ends happily with the mixed couple's reunion at a train station, in circa 1948 California!

Whether such films are a box-office success or not is of less consequence than the fact that there is a new consciousness of younger audiences who desire more sophisticated and balanced treatment of interracial love on the silver screen. Perhaps what sums up the whole new phenomenon of better educated young people watching films with more realistic interracial relationship is a piece of conversation I caught from a mixed yuppie-looking Singaporean couple in front of a large film theatre, two days after I returned from the 16th Hongkong International Film Festival. She (a sweet pretty Chinese girl) -- "Gee, black and white love. Their coupling is one of the most explicit ever on screen!" He (an Indian Brahmin, probably an intellectual educated at Cambridge or Oxford, answered in his Received Pronunciation accent): "Rather taboo, even by Singapore standards. Thankfully, there is the R(A) -- Restricted Artistic rating. Or else the hot coupling might get looped off altogether. And those strong racial talks! They are something new and vital. I like Spike Lee!"

It is not surprising the best films addressing the theme of interracial sex come from independent filmmakers like Lee and Nair. Parker's glossy mainstream Hollywood soap has to draw in sufficient crowds and keep the box-office tills ringing but at its best, it is less than half the strength of Nair's film. Still, all the three discussed films are exuberant and charming in their own way and they reflect the times we live in -- and a world which seems to be more tolerant of love between races than it used to be.

Author Information

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