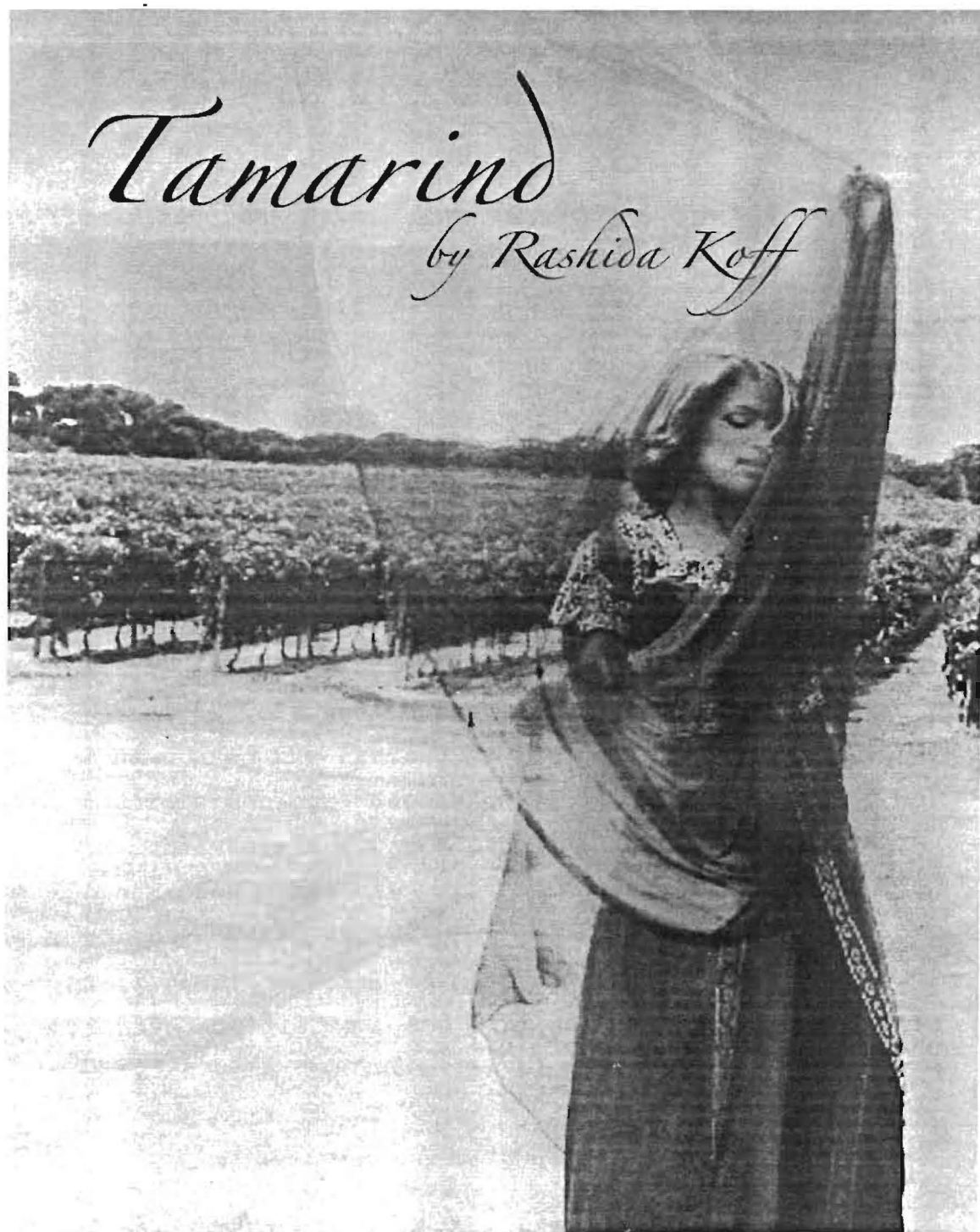


Tamarind
by Rashida Koff



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University of Cape Town

Institute of Film and New Media

MFA Final Thesis Project

"Tamarind - the Ethnic Minority Film and a way beyond"

Full Name: Rashida Koff

Student Number: KFFRAS001

Course: DRM505W

Supervisor: Lesley Marx

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Introduction:

Someone once told me: "In order to write well, you have to write what you know" - this piece of advice seems obvious and simple and yet - as it turned out, it was the most difficult piece of advice to process and follow. The reason: what I knew was that I was a young, female, Cape Malay filmmaker. My experiences, has largely taken place within the Cape Malay community. Religious documentaries aside, I had never before seen any representation of myself, or my community on screen. The task I had set myself seemed impossible. I had researched Third world theory¹ in cinema and the weight of expectation that I felt afterward seemed a burden too hard to carry. This was not because I was in uncharted territory, but because this path has been walked by many before me: African-American filmmakers; Non-resident Indian filmmakers; Pilipino-American filmmakers; Mexican-American filmmakers; Afro-Brazilian

¹ Gunerate, Anthony R and Dissanayake, Wimal (2003) "Rethinking Third Cinema" Routledge

filmmakers; Asian-American filmmakers. The list goes on and on.

The one common thread is that these people felt a need to provide another point of view other than the ones seen in mainstream film and television. Their films have been like voices for the token characters that we've seen in countless mainstream films.

If this path was well-tread, why then did I feel the need to insert my voice among the innumerable voices in post-colonial cinema? The reason is simple and that is the fact that although I was following a well-traveled path, the path seemed beaten down by specific ideologies, intents and formulas.

In this paper, I will outline the formula that most of these films follow, the ideologies behind them and my place in this community that has developed. I will unpack the notion of the Third world cinema and question our internalization of ourselves as the other and our resistance to that label.

In my search for someone to identify with, I have been influenced greatly by both Hollywood and Bollywood films. The reason for the first is obviously volume - I have been exposed to the Hollywood dream factory my entire life - it is only natural that Hollywood films have had some sort of effect and impact on me as a filmmaker. What is more interesting is that in the space of three years, I have been influenced by Bollywood films more intensely. I consumed these films to the point of madness - and still I can't get enough of it. The reason for my fascination and the influence that Bollywood films have had on me will be discussed later on in this paper. The result of my fascination with Bollywood films and ethnic minority films is my final film - an amalgamation of all that I have been exposed to and ultimately - what I know.

Ethnic identity

"Ethnic film - concentrates on establishing a setting that is consistent with a particular group

of people. The storyline develops around characters of the specific ethnic group portraying their lifestyles, belief, culture and life situations" ²

The reason for the emergence of ethnic minority film in my view is that people felt relegated to the background without any representation of them on film and therefore felt the need to make them seen and heard.

"Ethnic minorities are groups of people who share an ethnic identity, which is differentiated from the mainstream ethnicity in society"

(www.longroad.ac.uk)

It is plain to see that the family is the primary way in which an ethnic identity is passed through the generations. Ethnic identity is also passed through "the food you eat, language spoken, festivals celebrated etc" (www.longroad.ac.uk) it is for this

² Long Road Sixth Form College did a study on the formation of ethnic identity in the context of the British Asian community.

reason that I chose to make a film that revolved around a family.

We live in an increasing multi-ethnic society. In the near future, ethnic minorities will constitute a demographic majority - especially in the case of South Africa. By putting the emphasis on a specific culture are we then not excluding many others and creating a false reality for the characters on screen? In this way, any basis in reality is lost.

People might argue that affording representation to previously 'advantaged' racial groups in ethnic minority film would defeat the purpose of creating the film itself. I say that truth and reality are far more important than creating a strange world in which everyone we encountered in our life was exactly like us. Robert Stam and Louise Spence attributed the exclusion of whites in the ethnic minority films as the result of white racism.

"The exclusion of whites from a film...can also be the result of white racism. The all-black Hollywood musicals of the twenties and thirties, like present day South African films made by whites for black audiences tend to exclude whites because their mere presence would destroy the elaborate fabric of fantasy constructed by such films" (Stam and Spence, 1983;p7)

It can also be argued that instead of the seeming rejection of reality - by the absence of white characters in ethnic minority films is rather an embracement of reality. In what way you ask?

The social circles that we inhabit in our daily lives usually consist of family and friends. In my case, I am constantly surrounded by people of my culture. The reason for this is that the Cape Malay community is still quite a closed community. In the case of other ethnic minorities, it seems as if the same is true. Why is that? It seems as if we as a community of ethnic minorities have internalized ourselves as the other. By

having a community that is quite closed off, we found a place where we could shake that identity and proceed with life without that sort of burden.

This is quite a problematic notion and who is right? By excluding white characters from ethnic minority film, are we actually committing an act of reverse racism and losing any basis in reality or are we in actual fact embracing reality?

To answer this question, I have placed a scene in my film that addresses this argument. The bus scene in the film takes place between the two main characters - Irshaad and Ferial. The extras in the bus are all colored people. Is that embracing reality or not? Logically, what are the chances of this happening? On the flip side, these people could logically live in the same area where - in the context of South Africa - it is still quite normal for certain ethnic groups to populate certain areas. The decision is for you to make.

Earlier in the paper I mentioned the countless filmmakers who have made ethnic minority films. Wayne Wang, an Asian- American, made "The Joyluck Club" - a film written by Amy Tan about a group of Asian-American women. The film dealt with issues such as displacement, modernity versus tradition and the problems that the younger generations' hybrid identity caused.

The notion of the hyphenated individual has been dealt with countless times in post-colonial film theory and post-colonial theory in general.³

Hamid Naficy encapsulated the notion of the hyphenated individual in his book "An accented cinema":

"Identity cinema's adoption of the hyphen is seen as a marker of resistance to the homogenizing power of the American melting pot ideology"

(Naficy, 2001; p15)

³ In her book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat makes specific reference to intercultural communication and culture diffusion in motion pictures

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The notion of the hyphenated individual is discussed in length in Naficy's work. This notion is a term in resistance to the tendency to homogenize a group of people into one big melting pot of the 'other'. The term suggests a "divided mind, an irrevocably split identity or a type of paralysis between two cultures" (Naficy, 2001; p15). At first I thought that the notion of the hyphen encapsulated the struggle I felt within myself as a female, Muslim filmmaker. It wasn't as simple as that though.

I realized that Naficy was speaking in the American context and although there are certain common points in his idea of the hyphenated individual, if placed in the South African context, it wasn't as cut and dry as that.

In fact, it was a lot more complicated than I had imagined at first. Because I was making a film about three Malay girls, the problematic notion of the classification of the colored in South Africa came into play.

Problematising the notion of the Coloured in South

Africa

"Coloureds are a unique grouping of people that are of mixed origin. They constitute more than 8.7% of the total population of South Africa. This group of people resides principally in the Western Cape. Within this group there are more specific cultural groupings such as the Griquas and Malays." (www.siyabona.com/africa_coloureds.)

The Malay people are then internally divided into groupings based on origin. The large majority of migrants that came to the Cape of Good Hope in the 17th century were Muslims from colonies such as Ceylon, Madagascar, India and the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia as we know it). It is then plain to see that the simple notion of the hyphenated individual in the South African context is made more complex.

In my example, I am a South African woman who is a hybrid of Malaysian, Italian, English and German. And yet, according to the old Apartheid regime, I was relegated to the enormous umbrella of the Coloured classification.

This umbrella was quite an issue in the casting process. Initially I was set on a mission to cast only Muslims in the film. In my mind, this was the only way in which authenticity could be achieved. After many disastrous screen tests, I was quite frustrated and wondered why it was not working.

One particularly irritating experience in the casting process was when I had approached an Indian male to play Shakur - simply because he looked Malay. When I told him that he would be playing a Malay male he immediately said "Ahhh! You want me to play *Gam!*" (a derogatory term for a Coloured with no class and undesirable habits). I immediately said no - thinking that he must have misunderstood me. He then nodded his head and said "*Gam!* I know - Joe Barber you know!"

It was then that I realized that acting is more about interpretation than anything else. From that point onwards, I set out to find intelligent actors who were able to connect with the characters story first. Secondly, some research and coaching on my part gave some knowledge of the Muslim culture to the actors. This approach worked out well in the end. The Indian gentleman's comment troubled me.

In popular South African film and television Coloured characters have always been presented as jovial gamesters or dangerous gangsters with a flat, unique dialect of Afrikaans. This stereotype is exactly the kind of essentialism that I tried to avoid in my film. In most ethnic minority films - most characters cater to a specific audience expectation. The reason for easy identification is that the characters shown are usually pared down to established characters that are easily identifiable to the audience.

At the same time, most representations of a specific culture, produced by an 'insider', tend to look at that culture with rose-tinted glasses. This is something that I wanted to avoid. Stam and Spence make reference to the insistence on positive images in post-colonial films. "The insistence on positive images obscures the fact that 'nice' images might at times be as pernicious as overtly degrading ones" (Stam and Spence, 1983; p2)

I chose to address this issue with Leila's story. Her boyfriend seems to be a typical Muslim boy but there is a sinister twist to her story. She slinks out of the house to meet him, but eventually realizes that she does not want to be in that environment. The environment alluded to, is not completely delved into, but the viewer gets the sense that it is not completely desirable in an Islamic sense. By presenting both positive and negative images, some dimension was given to the fabric of the Cape Malay society.

By writing and presenting what I know I had to draw on my own experience. That experience, was one of an

English speaking Malay woman who comes from quite a traditional community and yet needs to function in a western society. My family is from a working class background. (Both my mother and grandfather are tailors - a profession immediately associated with Cape Malays) But at the same time, both my sister and I are university graduates. Our friends and family are in the same position in that they were also previously disadvantaged, but are now upwardly mobile - academically and professionally.

This sort of representation of the Coloured has hardly ever been presented in film and television and that is why I steered clear of the normal stereotypes and caricatures that we are used in to and tried to portray characters that I could readily identify with.

"[Identification is] the experience of being able to put oneself so deeply into a character - feel oneself to be so like the character - that one can feel the same emotions and experience the same

events as the character is supposed to be feeling and experiencing" (Ellis, 1982; 43)

In his study, John Ellis illustrates audience identification as an active practice rather than a passive acceptance. We make choices - based on our background - about whom we identify with.

Brown like me:

In June 2002 I was practically dragged into the cinema at Cavendish Square. I came out three and a half hours later with a face red and puffy from tears and a ferocious appetite for Bollywood films. I had just been exposed to "Khabbi Kushie Khabbi Gham" - a Bollywood blockbuster that changed my perceptions of cinema. Never again would I feel left out in that I couldn't easily identify with a characters situation on screen. Quite the opposite happened in actual fact.

The fact that I identified so easily with Bollywood films fascinated me. To my amazement, it wasn't only me, but my whole community as well. All my family and

friends started by buying, renting and swapping Bollywood films. Our local spice shop - Razak's, started selling the latest Bollywood CD's and DVD's. Whole families could be seen going into the cinema to watch "Kal hoo na hoo". Entire rows were booked by each family - most of them Malay.

What had happened and why this easy absorption of Bollywood films? The answer is identification. We could identify with the family structure and values that Indian cinema portrays. And of course, these people are brown - just like us!

The family structure present in Bollywood films is a patriarchal one. In the film "Khabbi Khushi Khabbi Gham", the father, Yash Raichand, was a powerful man who controlled his family. What he said was the law. In western society today, that is not something that you see readily on television and in cinema. It is however a part of daily life within the Cape Malay community. Why then have I opted to exclude the father from my story though?

"Indian women viewers simultaneously comply with and resist the dominant patriarchal representations that saturate Indian cinema" (Ram, 2002; p26)

In the ethnic minority film, a formula is followed - a formula which will be discussed later. In order to subvert this formula and do away with the stereotype of either the docile mother or the controlling matriarch I have decided to make the mother figure quite a unique one in that she usually is the subservient wife and mother and yet, in the absence of her husband, she is forced to take a more dominant role in the family. She has to start making important decisions in her daughters' lives. This is just one way in which I planned to subvert the ethnic minority film.

The values that are presented in Bollywood films are also a factor in its popularity amongst my community. Bollywood films are still guided by a strict censorship code. In most mainstream Bollywood films, it is unheard

of for there to be any lip on lip kissing. The only sort of kissing that is allowed are kisses on the hands and forehead. The only time when it might get a bit riskier is the instance whereby, the two romantic leads break out into song and a passionate kiss to the ... neck of the heroine is given. Given that the older generation in the Cape Malay community is still quite traditional, these sorts of romantic films (Bollywood socials) are specifically the type of films that they have been crying out for in the midst of the current saturation of sex on television and in cinema.

The third and most obvious reason why we identify so closely with Bollywood films is that these films are about people who look just like us. The brown-skinned person is no longer playing the token friend with no sort of character development or the one-dimensional villain. Their stories and characters are fully-fledged - if a little melodramatic.

The melodrama found in Indian cinema is there for a specific purpose. Bollywood⁴ is known as a cinema of spectacle. "The[se] popular films are mostly romantic musicals that offer escapism and fantasy worlds to the movie-goers. Entertainment is their watch-word" (Gokulsing and Dissanayake: 1998; 97). Unlike the mainstream ethnic minority films that are more realistic when compared to Bollywood films, Indian Cinema caters specifically for an Indian audience. This audience, which comprises of Non-resident Indians as well, seems to want that level of melodrama and fantasy in the films that they watch.

The ethnic minority film on the other hand offers a more realistic look at the lives of ethnic minorities. But at the same time, it seems as if these films follow a set formula, which is pretty hard to get out of.

⁴ It is important to note that popular Indian cinema is a new trend in academic film studies. Important references are Dwyer and Patel's book "Cinema India: The Visual Culture of Hindi film; Vijay Mishra's *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of desire*" and Ravi, S Vasudaran's "Making meaning in Indian Cinema"

The Spectacle

The notion of the ethnic identity is based around the belief, that a group of people share origins and traditions. Within that group, individuals feel a sense of inclusion and cultural attachment to others

(www.longroad.ac.uk)

Many mainstream ethnic minority films follow a set formula. At the core of this formula is a spectacle meant to entice the viewer into the world of that community. These films can be categorized into the genre of the family social film - where the community plays a huge role in the story as well.

In most instances, food is used as a device to lure the audience into the world of a certain culture. Anna Willets makes reference to this fact in her study about meat-eating in South East London. She says that "...the categorization of food reflects the distinctness of social groups and classes" and "Food choice is seen as an integral part of who we are and what we believe in. Apparently mundane aspects of food choice are thought

to symbolize not only identity on a personal level, but also culturally defines value systems"

(Willetts,1998;p111)

In the instance of "Eat, drink man, woman" by Ang Lee and the Mexican-American version of the film "Tortilla Soup" by Maria Ripoll, the lives of the three girls and the situations that they are interspersed with images of delicious traditional food.

Food has always been seen as a cultural marker and in what better way could an audience be exposed to a different culture?

The wedding is the all-encapsulating spectacle used to display culture. Where else would you find such concentration of culture, from the religious wedding ritual itself to the food and music afterwards? In the wedding film the viewer is fully immersed in the culture on all sensory levels.

Although these films do well to display culture, they usually lack depth in that the characters that are portrayed are usually just stereotypes of what we know, the docile mother who cooks all the time, the overbearing father who is unhappy with the bride's choice. Usually the outside audience gains an entry point with the use of the unsuitable male who is not from the culture specified - the outsider.

In the end though, all seems well in that the family accepts the suitor into the family and makes him 'one of them' - which is the case in "My Big Fat Greek Wedding".

My Spectacle:

In Tamarind, I tried to steer clear of the usual cultural markers that pervade ethnic minority films. Yet at my presentation I was asked what the spectacle⁵ would be if not the wedding and food.

⁵ Fatima Tobing Rony makes reference to the notion of the spectacle in "The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and the ethnographic spectacle" The book is a study in Visual; anthropology and motion pictures in ethnology.

I was quite upset by that due to the fact that I realized that all films that deal with ethnic minorities are expected to have some sort of spectacle. We aren't able to just make a film about ordinary people in their daily situations.

Later I realized that I was the one who was putting all this expectation on myself. I was the one who labeled my film an ethnic minority film and with that label came certain expectations. The expectation on ethnic minority films is to provide some sort of spectacle for the viewer. The culture is usually shown to be quite exotic and strange to viewers. In order to be true to life, I have chosen to subvert this expectation.

In order to display this, I set my film around Eid-ul-Adhaa (Eid of Sacrifice). This day of celebration is marked by various ceremonies. The men go to mosque to pray while the women get the food ready for the return of their husbands and fathers. The day is spent visiting family and friends who greet each other with congratulatory *slamats* and *Eid Mumbarak's*. The tables

in every Muslim household are spread with all sorts of treats. Usually, on this specific Eid, there is a Kurbaan taking place. The Kurbaan is a ritual whereby a sheep is sacrificed as a remembrance of Allah's mercy. The meat is then distributed throughout the family and given to the poor. Zakaah is a compulsory part of Eid day. Zakaah is a donation given to someone less fortunate and the father usually pays Zakaah for every member of his immediate family.

I have chosen not to display all of these traditions in my film because my intention was to steer clear of any explanation in my film. Initially I had a scene where the girls and their mother spoke about *Eid*. Later I realized that this scene was completely false and had no home in my narrative. My sisters and I would never speak like this to each other simply because we grew up with it. *Eid* was a part of our lives and we would never have that kind of conversation with each other.

This style is present in Bollywood films due to the fact that the audience themselves would come to the

cinema with a specific knowledge. The same could not be said for my audience. It became apparent that I could not completely exclude viewers that were not Muslim. I was in a predicament: how could I give just enough that the viewer knew what was going on without using superfluous explanation?

I have chosen to solve this problem using imagery and innuendo to explain certain things that might not be clear. An example of this would be the *Eid* morning scene. The men are at mosque and they are seen congratulating each other. I then cut to a scene with the three girls preparing the food for visitors. In this way, the broad community story was shown as well as the main narrative.

Now that the film is finished, I recognise that the key to my whole experience is balance. I have learnt to balance many seemingly opposing influences to make a film that is quite unique.

It is a film that is heavily influenced by Bollywood but still maintains the neo-realistic qualities of the ethnic minority film. The transitions between real life and Ferial's dream sequences display this.

I have struck a balance between displaying a culture for an outside audience while still creating unique characters and situations for an audience familiar with the culture.

I have embraced the ethnic minority films and its formulas while subverting it at the same time. This can be seen in the obligatory cooking scene. It is subverted by the fact that we never see the finished product and the girls are not really present in that scene. Nisreen is thinking about the fight she had with Shakur. Ferial is dreaming about Irshaad while Leila is planning on sneaking out of the house.

I have used the idea of the spectacle as a device and transformed into an integral part of the narrative. The fact that it is Eid is a catalyst for the events that

take place in the film. An example of this is Shakur's desire to reveal the relationship that he has with Nisreen to her family. These kinds of revelations usually take place on significant religious days.

My objective for this balancing act is to create a unique tapestry for the ethnic minority film and present a way forward from the expectations associated with ethnic minority films.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, what I learnt most during the course of my thesis project was the fusion of styles, theories and ideas to make a project that is quite unique and textured. I have learnt to use seemingly opposing styles of filmmaking (Bollywood, Hollywood and Ethnic Minority films) to make a film that is multi-textual. I have amalgamated Post-colonial theory in an American context with my own knowledge of the South African landscape.

I have drawn from my own experience to create a film that speaks to people like me who have not easily identified with characters on screen, while still affording people outside the culture enough information to understand the dynamics of the narrative.

I have taken the notion of the spectacle and integrated it into my film to provide a spectacle for all involved - not just the outside viewer.

I have confidence that my film is a synthesis of ideas, theories and styles of filmmaking, which tells a story of the person that I am and that was my original intention.

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