

'Recontextualising National Identities : diasporic translations of cultural transformations'

I locate my work in the Indian diaspora. Diaspora “disrupts the fundamental power of territory to determine identity by breaking the simple sequence of explanatory links between place, location, and consciousness”. The idea of diaspora, Paul Gilroy suggests, provides one way out of entrenched “camps” such as race, gender, religion, etc. For some, national identity is seen to be a political identity. One way I transcend identity politics is affirming the diaspora.

Handout- Filmography Mandrika Rupa

“Taamara/Sangam” Film excerpts - (VHS) Researched in Gujarati and English Script in English, translation into Maori, filmed in classical Maori, English subtitles. For overseas viewers, to be subtitled in overhead subtitles: Gujarati, French, Hindi, etc.

Beginning

John Pakau singing Rupa Waiata for Mahanga

Mahanga waiata for Rupa whanau -(woven into history through song)

Nari Shakti Oral History Tapes in Gujarati and English 1992 (audio tape)

1. Rami Rupa- interviewed by Shanti Patel
2. Dayben Keshery- interviewed by Mandrika Rupa

Spectrum - National Program Radio Broadcast “An Indian Summer”- 1997 Mandrika Rupa interviewed by Jack Perkins (audio tape)

Newton Gully, Auckland- “where are the Pakeha?”

The Blockhouse Bay Subdivision- “99% white working class”

India Interviews in Gujarati 1991 Research of lineage history (VHS)

Umba Masi
Sibby Maji

Overhead Projector- Broadsheet Magazine Interviews

“International feminism”- Nighat Said Khan, leading Pakistani feminist/author/film maker

interviewed by Mandrika Rupa 1992

“Reclaiming An Identity” - Mandrika and Mandy

Speaking to Jesvier Singh 1987

As it appears, there are constant translations in my work, into a modern culture which embraces many different cultures and subcultures. Since the day I left India as a child, my life has been one of *translation*.

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From the point of view of my films, the work is located in diasporic history, the collective memory of my people- my exilic clan- from India. They recontextualise themselves into new cultures, thereby challenging an enforced national identity from where they came.

Through images I show how one culture translates into another, for example in "Laxmi" the little girl mimics from an early age the white woman and her white glove. She sees in her western context that this image fits her and transforms it for herself, translates it into herself. The mother gives the other child a white doll with blonde hair, and this is juxtaposed with an image of an ancient ritual of putting the coal around her eyes, warding off evil spirits. The men in the film dress like western gentlemen and play poker, Humphrey Bogart style, with Maori and white American soldiers. They imitate colonial culture in New Zealand by having a picture of the British king on the wall in the background as the Indian man sips his chai from a saucer. In earlier scenes his daughter Laxmi mimes sipping tea delicately from a cup, imaged from her western environment. These instances illustrate the process of recontextualised images of diasporic translations.

There is an urgency for these characters to do this. The national identities that they left behind kept them imprisoned within that tradition/ideology. They were oppressed by their nationality which pitched them at the bottom of the caste ladder, therefore as diasporic people they rose above that status which kept them hidden from history. These characters embody a new identity, sloughing off the national identity of India. They translate from another world, to recontextualise themselves outside the Hindu hegemony.

National identity for these people was caught up in the struggle to oust the British with the anti-colonial nationalists, but the real issue for these diasporic people was not nationalism. Gandhi's nationalism was a dogmatic tradition. Within that, poor people that suffered with class disparity got used, and were called "The Children of God" for political propaganda, so Gandhi could incorporate them into his elite program of control. Gandhi's mentor, Tilak, who fought the British applaudably until the bitter end, was a right wing Hindu fundamentalist. The disenfranchised were given a caste identity, were part of the Hindu fold.

The diasporic characters in my films were kept separate in India along caste lines, but when they came to the new lands they embraced other peoples readily. The ideology of nationalism did not work for them. What they valued was their culture, preserved through lineages. This ancient culture was important. Institutionalised Hinduism tried to nationalise them with that sole identity. But for the characters in "Taamara/Sangam"(The Joining of Two Peoples) and the other films, the changes are organic, new forms of identity are composed through cultural interweaving, constantly evolving. Westerners saw them as 'Hindoo', like they saw all Indians. Even Sikh, who wear turbans, were called 'Hindoo'. In "Laxmi" there is juxtaposition of nationality and class. For example, all the men are working class. Within these scenes what is played out is class negotiating race. American soldiers thought the Indians ate everything curried, even the wafers. They also saw them as "niggers". These identities lead to a closed-end notion of a white nation and a black nation. Through my characters you get an insight into the cultural spaces and the negotiation of transformation of those spaces. Within the sharing of the social space in the film, you have a sense of how this is happening. With "Taamara/Sangam" two culturally different groups come together, to create shared identities.