peculiarities of nation and nationhood and the features of mainstream national cinema to assess how far they swerve from the standards, norms and formulae of this cinema in the reframing of the nation. This encompasses a study of the diasporic motifs and traits in the films as well as the ways in which the films affect public opinion and become correctives to the parochial tendencies of nation and nationalism.

Chapter 2

A Female Diasporic Reframing

The nation, it is increasingly evident, has the potential to turn into a regressive entity that limits the lives of its citizens by endorsing the principle of collectivity over individual preferences, by a process of homogenization and the wiping out of differences and aspirations and by enforcing and perpetuating national ideals by repressive and coercive measures. The reframing of the nation that happens in the female diasporic cinema of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and the revamping of the national discourse in them are to be seen as attempts to strongly resist and react against these regressive tendencies. Apart from subverting hierarchies and notions of belonging and rightful control of the nation, the narratives of the nation available in the films of Nair and Mehta construe it as a liminal space marked by “the heterogeneous histories of contending people” (Bhabha, Location 212) and thwart the tendency of the nation to exclude histories, narratives and voices of certain sections of people.

The present study interrogates the reframing of the nation that happens in the narratives of two groups of people who come within the nation’s liminal space -- the
diaspora, which exists outside the territorial confines of the nation state and yet has moorings within it, and the women of the nation, who despite being conceived of as symbolic of the nation’s ethos and values, are subjugated and marginalized within it. Such an interrogation is imperative as both the aspects, the female as well as the diasporic, have substantially influenced the vision and craft of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta -- sometimes, one element outweighing the other, and sometimes, both of them working in unison to make their films what they are. Since Nair and Mehta speak of/as the marginal woman and the diasporic subject, who occupy the liminal space of the nation, their films are potent enough to defy the homogenizing and totalitarian impulses of the nation and become counter narratives. The chapter makes a detailed study of the nuances of diaspora and women in connection with the nation to trace the common factors in the female and the diasporic condition apropos the nation, factors that permit the consideration of the female diasporic identity of Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta as composite and fused. This includes an assessment of the locus of women and diaspora with respect to the nation, followed by an evaluation of the attempts made by diaspora and by women to narrate the nation which coalesces with a study of women’s cinema and diasporic cinema, an endeavour taken up in the latter part of this chapter.

While it may be easily granted that women are placed in the forefront of the long list indicating the nation’s others and it’s marginalized, objections may be raised about the diaspora’s position in such a list as the diaspora’s relation with the nation is complicated and fraught with ambiguity and contradictions, which must be clarified and explained. The first opposition to regarding the diaspora as the nation’s other stems from the legendary proclivity that the diaspora is said to have for the homeland and the identification with and glorification of the homeland that the diaspora is involved in, literally and figuratively. This is especially true in the older readings of
the diaspora which evoked a history of exile, persecution, angst and victimization. The
chief proponent of this classic version of the diaspora is William Safran, who provides
a defining model of the diaspora in his essay titled “Diaspora in Modern Societies:
Myths of Homeland and Return,” which appeared in the first issue of the journal
Diaspora. In the words of Safran, the diasporas are “expatriate minority communities
… dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign,
regions” and who maintain a “collective memory, vision, or myth about their original
homeland” (83). Since the diasporic people believe that they can never be fully
accepted by their host country, they nurture the dream of returning to their ancestral
homeland and are committed to its maintenance and restoration (Safran 83-84). James
Clifford summarizes the features of the diaspora as derived from the classical view as,
“a history of dispersal, myths/memories of the homeland, alienation in the host (bad
host?) country, desire for eventual return, ongoing support of the homeland, and a
collective identity importantly defined by this relationship” (305; emphasis added).

While there are several groups of people who can be classified as diaspora,
including Armenian, Turkish, Maghrebi, Palastinian, Cuban, Greek, Chinese or the
Polish, none of them “fully conforms to the ‘ideal type’ of Jewish diaspora” (Safran
84). There has always been a tendency to associate diaspora with the unpropitious
Jewish tradition mentioned in the Old Testament of the Bible, a catastrophic tradition
that implies forcible dispersion and scattering of people, who had forsaken the
righteous path, to alien lands as punishment. Having lost the Promised Land, the Jews
were condemned to forced detention in Babylon. As a result, the Babylonian exile
became the trope of “the negative, victim, diaspora tradition, emphasizing in
particular the experience of enslavement, exile and displacement” (Cohen 507) and
Babylon “became a code-word among Jews (and, later, Africans) for the afflictions,
isolation and insecurity of living in a foreign place, set adrift, cut off from their roots and their sense of identity, oppressed by an alien ruling class” (Cohen 508).

The classical version of diaspora, therefore, is based on the diaspora’s pining for the homeland amidst the afflictions in a foreign land. When the homeland becomes a place that is held dear and is longed for by the diasporic people in the midst of the tribulations of the host country, an unprejudiced assessment of the former becomes a remote possibility. Oftentimes, the diaspora’s devotion to the homeland and longing for authenticity and tradition are carried to such extremes that the diaspora is drawn into the nation’s “absolutist logic” and made to “function in tandem with different national agendas” (Gopinath 7-8). Moreover, the nation attempts to court its wealthy diasporic population scattered abroad and the nation and the diaspora “function together in the interests of corporate capital and globalization” (7). An example would be the Hindu nationalist organizations in India which “effectively mobilize and harness diasporic longing for authenticity and tradition and convert this longing into material linkages between the diaspora and (home) nation” (7). Floya Anthias in “Evaluating Diaspora” shares the concern that the diaspora “may assume a heavy sense of guilt and overcompensation, a ritualistic and symbolic fervor often found in the attempt to retain the old ethnic ingredients (leaving groups in a type of time-warp)” (565). The diasporic people abroad very often emerge as fierce propagators of cultural nationalism and upholders of nationalism in its most stringent forms. When the sense of attachment that the diasporic people have towards their nation is carried to such extreme proportions, nationalistic fervor may assume hues of fundamentalism.

Even as we grant that the diasporic people are party to the trends of global
capital and may exhibit nationalistic fervor disproportionately, we should not lose
sight of the “traditionally hierarchical relation between nation and diaspora, where the
latter is seen as merely an impoverished imitation of an original national culture…the
abjected and disavowed Other to the nation” (Gopinath 7). This perception, which is
an offshoot of the nation’s inclination to regard anything external and foreign as an
impurity, threat or anomaly, is stronger in older notions of the nation and diaspora,
where any contact with the exterior world was regarded as a kind of pollution:
“distance and dispersion from the homeland … were incompatible with the normal
existence of the nation; the scattering of a whole people was a terrible curse, while
dispersed life was seen as a provisory situation until return to the land could occur”
(Dufoix 1365). At the same time, any external contact that was beneficial to the nation
like colonization, domination and adding of territories to the nation was encouraged.
For other kinds of emigration, links to the host country were most of the time,
subordinated to the existence of a “spirit of return” to the homeland, as though
“physical and temporal distance from the home territory was tantamount to affective
distance from the nation itself and to the probable weakening of the allegiance to the
state” (Dufoix 1364). The “national reluctance concerning distance” resulted in the
denial to emigrants of most of the rights and duties of citizenship, like the right to
vote, thereby making them second rank citizens (Dufoix 1364-65).

Globalization and advance in means of communication and travel has resulted
in a shift in the way diaspora has been perceived recently. In comparison with the
older version of diaspora, the newer one is a more positive one, where a
“de-territorialized logic” replaces the “territorial logic of the nation” and facilitates a
“vision of a nation that is no longer confined to territorial limits” (Dufoix 1366). In
the past, being away in space also meant being away in time, since living in a different
country meant living in a different time zone also as each country had its own national time. The contemporary period that witnessed the rise of electronic communication and information technology is characterized by the dwindling of the distance between space and time, whereby a person who is at a spatial distance from the homeland need not be distant from it temporally. Modern technology has made it possible for migrants to instantaneously communicate with and live in the present time of their homeland from a distance, a development that Benedict Anderson had termed “long distance nationalism” (*Spectre* 74). So today instead of the condition of “double absence” which meant being neither here nor there, the diaspora can be in a situation of “double presence”, being both here and there (Dufoix 1369-70). The change in the attitude of nations towards expatriates from the 1960s, evidenced in the policy of granting dual nationality, external voting and political representation also reinforced the possibility of de-territorialized nations. It is in these newer and positive contexts of diasporic existence and experience that Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and their works are placed.

Though it appears that the diaspora has been able to surmount the victim tradition only very recently, evidence suggests that diasporic people have enjoyed the fruits of exile and benefitted from them from very ancient times. Robin Cohen stresses the need for a “revisionist view of ‘Babylon’” that highlights how the first group of exiled Judeans and their immediate descendants profited from their “integration into a rich and diverse alien culture” which endowed them with “a new creative energy in a challenging, pluralistic context outside the natal homeland” (Cohen 509). Such positive developments were evident even in the modern period of Enlightenment and nation-formation among Jews scattered in places like Berlin, Budapest, Vienna and Paris, who made “notable contributions to the professions and to intellectual, literary
and artistic life” (510). According to Cohen, the intellectual and spiritual achievements of the Jews, the material and political success of the Armenians and Irish people in the United States or the contributions made by the descendants of African diaspora in the field of performing arts, music, painting, sculpture and literature would not have been possible without their exposure to alien cultures and the difficulties of exile and diasporic existence (513). The enriching and creative aspects of exile were enjoyed by all categories of victim diaspora and the benefits outnumbered the difficulties faced. The shift in approach from the victim tradition of diaspora is the need of the hour as this shift in emphasis from victim to victor and roots to routes is paradigmatic of the contemporary transnational times.

Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, who have become formidable forces to reckon with in the transnational arena of filmmaking due to their abundant creative energy and success, belong to the victor rather than the victim tradition of diaspora. The victor tradition enables them to make the best of their diasporic condition, to be free of pining, angst or nostalgia for the homeland and to assess it in an unprejudiced way. The lack of diasporic angst and the international stature, success and reputation of these diasporic filmmakers would result in their being deemed as belonging to an elite class cut off from the lives and realities of the unprivileged sections of people both in the host and home countries. But a close look at their concerns and themes as filmmakers prove that they have always championed the cause of the unprivileged and marginalized sections of people in the home and host countries through their cinema and have raised their voices against regressive tendencies around them. More importantly, their films have always attempted to counter and transcend the strictures and limits imposed by nations and nationalism. The broad vision and perspectives of the filmmakers that soar above parochial tendencies can partly be attributed to the
peculiarities of the diasporic condition

Scholars, writers and thinkers are struck by and comment on the enormous potential in the diaspora to counter regressive, parochial tendencies, including the parochial leanings of nations and nationalisms. Weighing the pros and cons of the diasporic condition, we can conclude that though the migrant condition evokes the pain of loss and being rootless, it also enables one to “live in a world of immense possibility with the realization that new knowledges and ways of seeing can be constructed … knowledges which challenge the authority of older ideas of rootedness and fixity” (McLeod 215). Scholar after scholar has thrown light on the liberal and syncretic aspects of the diaspora. Floya Anthias, who has researched extensively, among other things, on trans-nationalism, migration theory and diaspora, looks at the diasporic condition as a “privileged knowledge space” which “produces differential forms of cultural accommodation and syncretism” (561, 565). According to her, “the transgressive potential of the diaspora” makes them “less essentialist and nationalistic…than those who still remain within their original homeland or nation state borders” (567). While Ien Ang, another scholar on diaspora speaks of “the transnational diasporic imaginary” as a “liberating force” and the global diaspora as “a triumph over the shackles of the nation-state and national identity” (3-4), Paul Gilroy goes to the extent of bestowing anti-national attributes to the diasporic condition: “Consciousness of diaspora affiliation stands opposed to the distinctively modern structures and modes of power orchestrated by the institutional complexity of nation states. With the idea of valuing diaspora more highly than the coercive unanimity of the nation, the concept becomes explicitly anti-national” (124).

Professor K. Tololyan, founder of the journal Diaspora speaks of globalization
as the “transnational moment” when the nation state is eroded and diaspora becomes “the paradigmatic Other of the nation-state” (“The Nation” 5). Following this line of thought, Ien Ang is struck by the “liberating force” of the diasporic populations which she regards as “key socio-cultural formations capable of overcoming the constrictions of national boundaries – the means through which people can imagine and align themselves beyond the nation” (3). As she points out,

Much contemporary work on diaspora, both scholarly and popular, represents this transnational diasporic imaginary as a liberating force. Simply put, the nation-state is cast as the limiting, homogenizing, assimilating power structure, which is now, finally, being deconstructed from within by those groups who used to be marginalized within its borders but are now bursting out of them through their diasporic transnational connections…. Global diaspora, in this context signifies triumph over the shackles of the nation-state and national identity. (Ang 4)

The diasporic status of women filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta causes their film narratives to have a transnational touch which enables them to re-articulate/dis-articulate both the gender and national scripts that greatly pervade the national cinema of Bollywood. Such a re-articulation and reframing is enabled due to the diasporic individual’s capability to transgress the closed spaces and borders of the nation state. If the transgression of borders is the first step in the dynamics of re-writing the nation, the diaspora becomes the most likely candidate to undertake such an onerous task given the diaspora’s “transgressive potential” (Anthias 567). Nair and Mehta, as diasporic subjects, have transgressed the borders of the nation literally and figuratively, and this also includes a transgression of the gendered
construction of the nation in cinema and otherwise. If the undermining of nationalist narratives, the deconstruction of the enforced ideals and homogeneity of the nation and the placing of the diasporic condition as being superior to that of nationhood are anti-national, as Gilroy called them (124), Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are culpable of these charges.

The concept of border is closely associated with diaspora and it is essential to go through the nuances of border for a better comprehension of the diasporic condition. Borders are arbitrary dividing lines that demarcate the other from us and create zones of mine, yours or theirs. Borders are instrumental in demarcating territories that are to be “patrolled” against the outsider, the alien and the other. But these very acts of demarcation and prohibition inscribe transgression, an act that the diaspora is implicated in (Brah, “Diaspora” 625). A border is more than a geographical division and has spiritual, emotional and cultural dimensions attached to it. If a border is a “division between two cultures and two memories,” migration is the act of crossing cultural boundaries and assimilating another culture, resulting in the internal transformation of the border crosser (Tatsoglou 201). Gloria Anzaldúa’s theorization of the border as a “metaphor for psychological, sexual, spiritual, cultural, class and racialized boundaries” (qtd. in Tatsoglou 202) and Avtar Brah’s concept of diaspora space as a cultural and psychic one (Cartographies 205) suggest the inevitability of internal transformation that boundary crossing brings to bear upon the individual.

The diasporic individual is best described as a translated person, given that the diaspora space is a site where different cultures and perceptions mix and merge, creating new combinations and hybrid forms that trigger creativity. All discourses on
diaspora must acknowledge and take into account the translation or the change in identity and the shifts in perception that the blurring of boundaries and the complexity of multiple senses of belonging and multiple ideas of home bring about in the diaspora. The multiple positioning, hybridity and translation of the diasporic condition places diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta on an advantageous plane. Their films also become sites of syncretism and reflect both at the thematic and technical level, the liberal and syncretic values that inform the diasporic artists. The films are replete with liminal borders and boundaries of all kinds – cultural, spiritual, moral, sexual and psychic, not to mention the structural and technical borders and boundaries of cinema of different lands and cultures. In addition to this, Nair and Mehta, who have transcended boundaries themselves, proliferate their films with characters who are empowered as a result of being border crossers and transgressors of cultural, social, sexual and moral boundaries and limits.

Closely related to the idea of border-crossing is the sense of elsewhere that is brought to bear upon the diasporic condition and the strain of maintaining a relationship with this elsewhere. It is this element of connection with elsewhere that gives diasporic people their unique identity and way of perception. The elsewhere could be a place that diasporic people often return to and are in constant communication with; it could also be a place that exists only in memory or it could be a mythic homeland. The elsewhere, whether mythic or real, is important in shaping the diasporic individual’s perception as it is a space that “is replete with ideas, culture, a framework for seeing the world and one’s relationship to it, religion, social and family relationships – a recipe for living and being; a culture and an identity” (Berns-McGown 8). Rather than creating a sense of alienation, the elsewhere space is immensely beneficial to the diasporic people as it enables them to balance “two
vectors of connections … [and] what results from being connected to two or more places, worldviews, and recipes for life” (Berns-McGown 9-10). The concept of *elsewhere* is also taken up by the feminist film critic Teresa de Lauretis and described as a space in the interstices or margins of hegemonic discourses, thereby making it encompass both the diasporic and female/feminist experience of life and praxis of cinema. The *elsewhere* is a compelling presence in the frames of Nair and Mehta and manifests itself primarily in the form of longing, desire and memory of the characters for an absent ideal, situation or past status and also in the form of the frames depicting alternative realities, characters and spaces that are usually *othered*, marginalized and rendered *elsewhere* in mainstream cinema.

The elsewhere spaces, the translation, mixture and the poetics of dislocation are all the more potent in the case of the women diaspora who set out to (re)narrate the nation. Given that any kind of narration of the nation by a woman in itself is regarded with misgiving, the diasporic status of the woman narrator/filmmaker further compounds and complicates the situation. The convergence of the female and the diasporic is hinted at by Floya Anthias in her essay, “Evaluating Diaspora”, where she expresses concern over the pitfalls in the conception of the diaspora in academic circles. The chief among the pitfalls in understanding or conceiving diaspora, according to Anthias, is the overlooking of gender and class trajectories. She stresses the need for “Gendering the Diaspora” (571), a highly political act that would yield invaluable results:

The issue of gendering the diaspora can be understood at two different levels. At the first level of analysis, it requires a consideration of the ways in which men and women of the diaspora are inserted into the social relations of the
country of settlement, within their own self-defined ‘diaspora communities’ and within the transnational networks of the diaspora across national borders.

…. [We should] address the extent to which the cultural and structural shifts involved for such women produce more emancipating and liberating experiences, and it may help to fight entrenched systems of gender subordination (or not). (Anthias 572)

Since women undergo a different configuration than men within and without the nation, the permutation of the woman diaspora will also be different from that of her male counterparts. Evangelia Tastsoglou and Alexandra Dobrowolsky, stress the need for a “feminist analysis of migration”, given the “unequal social, cultural, political and economic relations of women as compared to men” both in terms of migration and citizenship (18). While migration offers both men and women “the opportunity to transgress gender roles”, this is more so in the case of women because “[b]y transgressing, immigrant women may contest and re-negotiate not only gender roles, but also women’s citizenship limits” (Tastsoglou and Dobrowolsky 23). This difference in trajectories makes it imperative to examine diaspora, nation and nationalism in correspondence to gender. Without doubt, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, as diasporic filmmakers, gain empowerment from transcending the limits of citizenship and the restrictions of patriarchy. This empowerment and transcendence pervade their films and their female protagonists and characters, who are also emancipated as a result of being figuratively diasporic and crossing figurative borders.

The politics of gendering the nation and studying the importance of women in the nation are as imperative as the act of gendering the diaspora. Though gender is of paramount importance in the construction of nationhood, earlier scholarship on the
nation either ignored the fact or was oblivious of it. Leading male theorists of the nation such as Benedict Anderson, Eric Hobsbawm, and Anthony Smith failed to address the relationship between gender and nation and considered the nation as “a male-constructed space … a male terrain,[and] a masculine enterprise” (Boehmer 22-23). Benedict Anderson’s *imagined community*, which was thought of as a fraternity and a “deep, horizontal comradeship” (*Imagined* 7), could not fully accommodate women in it, given its strong masculine overtones. The nation, especially in the earlier stages was a masculine project within which women had only subordinate roles and were denied full citizenship rights like the right of franchise and the right to hold property. With only limited access to education and occupation, the nationality and political identity of women were linked to that of their fathers or husbands to such an extent that it seemed that “their very political being was circumscribed by their social position vis-à-vis men” (K. See 446-47). The *historic invisibility* of women and other marginalized sections in the production and sustenance of the nation and *the uneven terms* on which women experience the formation, consolidation and continuance of the nation-state are now being increasingly taken note of. As Joane Nagel puts it, “The idea of the nation and the history of nationalism are intertwined with the idea of manhood and the history of manliness…. nationalist scripts historically have been written primarily by men, for men, and about men” (900). Cinema, that audio-visually imagines the nation into being, is also a masculine project that relegates women to the margins. Nair and Mehta deconstruct the masculine script of the nation and the ideas of manhood inherent in cinema by highlighting the stories of women rather than of men and by creating women-centric frames.

Ironically, the masculine construct of the nation is very often symbolized and
represented as a woman and predominantly as a mother. Maternal images and icons of the nation abound world over, Bharat Mata in India, Bangamata in Bangladesh, Marianne in France and the Statue of Liberty in America, being a few outstanding examples. The masculine nation assigns women roles “as mothers of the nation, as vessels for reproducing the nation, as teachers passing the national culture to new members, and as national housekeepers maintaining home and hearth for the nation’s men who are out and about on important official business” (Nagel 900). In the imagination of the nation as the fatherland are embedded the notion of a brotherhood or a fraternity, but there is little scope in the evocation of the motherland for a similar sisterhood. As Zillah Eisenstein rightly argues, “Nationalism reduces women to their motherhood. Nowhere in the iconography of nations is there space for women as sisters, as a sisterhood” (41). The project of envisaging the nation in maternal terms or “uterine nationalism” (Heng and Devan 349) has certain ideological bearings which cannot be overlooked. The abstraction of women in the familial order and the symbolization of the nation as the mother reduce women to a metaphorical level wherein they lose their identities and “become static and unchanging like the constructions of timeless motherhood” (Eisenstein 43).

Such a symbolic abstraction of a woman as a mother places her on a higher plane of morality and purity, wherein she is “desexualized” and “regulated” and “the boundaries of her body” come to represent safety and purity. Real, actual women who do not abide by the dictates of purity prescribed by the masculine nation pose a problem to it (Eisenstein 43). National symbolic boundaries, like moral boundaries, become “sites for the creation and enforcement of the rules of citizenship; the surveillance, apprehension, and punishment of national deviants or “traitors”; and the formation of revised or new definitions of loyalty to the nation” (Nagel 909). In such a
scheme of things, women who break the rules of purity and propriety are susceptible to being designated as deviants or traitors. If both sexual and cultural purity are attributes enforced on the women of the nation, the example of diasporic women and their narratives become a challenge to such enforcements. Diasporic women become impure by transgressing the physical boundaries of the nation and imbibing a foreign culture. Women who leave their nation to live in a distant land and get tainted by its alien culture are *doubly* imbued with the “transgressive potential” of the diaspora that Floya Anthias speaks of (567). The transgression, impurity, deviance and disloyalty that the female diasporic filmmaker is charged with seep into her cinematic renderings as well and become the defining principle of the themes, characters, styles and techniques of her frames.

Given that the concept of diaspora brings to mind a plethora of readings on impurity and transgression which challenge the concept of nationalism, it can be argued that the narratives coming from diasporic women are potent enough to defy the nation’s dictates of purity. The impure and tainted films of diasporic filmmakers like Nair and Mehta deconstruct the masculine representations of the nation and oust traces of the male or masculine principle in cinema, thereby making the space of the cinematic nation more women-centred. Apart from this, they defy the tendency of the nation and national cinema to entrap women in static metaphoric and symbolic constructions of purity, motherhood or family. The pet concepts of the nation and the stereotyped images and symbolic constructions that women are caught in all undergo a reframing in the films of Nair and Mehta. Their women characters transgress the ideals of purity set by the nation, a transgression that happens in terms of sexuality, marriage, family, religion, class and caste, thereby making them liberated and emancipated beings. It would a useful exercise to examine how far the *tainted* quality
of the diasporic and female condition is reflected in the work of the filmmakers, Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta, how far this tainted quality makes their films impure anomalies when set against India’s commercial mainstream cinema and how far their doubly tainted films challenge the usual imaginings of the nation and concepts of womanhood and purity that Bollywood films have engaged in so far. Such an inquiry would prove that the films of Nair and Mehta, first and foremost, celebrate the sexually impure woman and the principle of impurity, thereby combating mainstream cinema’s obsession with the notion that women are containers of sexual purity and national and familial honour.

Jyoti Puri in her book, Women, Body, Desire in Postcolonial India: Narratives of Gender and Sexuality gives us an insight into the ability of women in general and diasporic women in particular to transgress the limits of the nation. According to her, though the bodies of middle and upper class women are regarded as sites where “cultural notions of normality and … social respectability are contested” (Women 2), these bodies have enough potential to challenge and transcend the dictates of purity enforced on them by the nation:

Collectively and individually, middle- and upper-class women are expected to embody national cultural identity…. [Their bodies] are also the sites where fear of loss of national tradition [is] expressed. Cultural beliefs that middle- and upper-class women embody a changing, modernizing national cultural identity are frequently offset by concerns that these women are being corrupted by the influences of modernization, especially, “westernization.” Viewed in this way, at the very least, these women’s narratives on gender and sexuality are hyphenated – neither one nor the other, at most, they challenge what it
means to be “Indian” (Puri, Women 3)

Women’s narratives, cinematic and other-wise are hyphenated and offer a different perspective of the nation as do the narratives of the diaspora. Significantly, while bringing out the role of the postcolonial nation in “generating discourses that shape and constrain” women’s narratives, Puri also highlights the liberating influence that “transnational, globalizing discourses” have on women. According to her, “transnational hegemonic effects on gender and sexuality … destabilize the boundaries of the state, rewrite national scripts, and call into question whether nation-states are adequate as units of analysis for understanding the lives of women in various parts of the world” (Puri, Women 13). Without doubt, transnational, global phenomena like the diasporic condition have a vital part to play in rewriting national narratives and liberating women from the strictures dictated by the nation.

The impact of the films of the female diasporic filmmakers on the nation can thus be fully evaluated only by considering the double marginalization or dual outsider status they experience within the nation, firstly, as women and secondly, as members of the diaspora. The diaspora, having physically and culturally transcended the rigid borders of the nation, is the other of the person who is physically and culturally within the nation and her/his hybrid identity estranges her/him from the cultural purity that the nation cherishes. The diaspora as well as the Others of the nation are by this token, in a way, effeminized and accorded only a secondary status in the nation. In her book, Captive Gender: Ethnic Stereotypes and Cultural Boundaries, Rada Ivezkovic finds an analogy between the nation’s othering of the enemy nation in times of war and its othering of its own woman folk:

In this process the enemy, the other nation, is made the Other, as is the Female
within the unequal gender regime… and the ‘Other’ is attributed ‘feminine’ characteristics…. The symbolic system of nationalism, in fact, needs the construction of ‘the Other’ as an indirect means for its domination; ‘the Other’ is thus its constituent part, painted in the negative and associated with values considered to be feminine. (Captive 5-6)

The nation is in a perpetual state of war against anything that threatens its stability, integrity and coherence, its sacred notions of selfhood and its well-grounded belief systems and in this war waged for safeguarding its cultural purity, the diasporic individual who has left the nation’s territorial confines to become tainted with foreign influence is regarded as the nation’s other or enemy and is cast in a negative light and given feminine attributes. The othering of the diaspora and of the woman is an important aspect to be considered in the study of Deepa Mehta and Mira Nair, given that women writers, artists and filmmakers have always been looked at askance in the patriarchal world of art and culture, just as the works of diasporic writers and artists have been received with misgivings as to their authenticity and authority in depicting the homeland. The acts of censorship and the controversial events surrounding the films of Nair and Mehta are indicative of the rancour and hostility with which the films of the female diasporic filmmakers are regarded.

Like diasporic people, women also experience a sense of duality or double bind within the nation, the situation of belonging to the nation and at the same time, being outsiders. Rada Ivekovic and Julie Mostov outline the duality and double bind of women who are “held responsible for the continuance of the nation, [but] are in some way, always suspect; they are a symbol of the purity of the nation [sic], but always vulnerable to contamination; they embody the homeland, but are always a
potential stranger [sic], “both of and not of the nation” (From Gender 13-14). The dual and precarious situation of women who are “potential stranger[s]” and “both of and not of the nation” is very much similar to that of the diaspora (Ivekovic and Mostov 14). The precariousness of her situation increases when she steps into the zone of impropriety of role, behavior or articulation. To quote Ivekovic and Mostov,

[T]he nation doesn’t trust its women (and resents their vulnerability to seduction/invasion). The regulatory policies of the national-state define the terms of belonging – acceptance of proper roles in the national hierarchy and the dynamic of patriarchy – as well as the conditions of exclusion. Trapped within the boundaries of the state as insider, the ‘disloyal’ or questionable Other (woman/ethnic minority) is an outsider, and risks the normative and legal consequences of this status. Thus, women’s attachment to the nation is based as much on penalties of exclusion, as well as national myths of inclusion. (From Gender 18).

Disloyalty is a highly loaded term, as far as women and the diaspora are concerned and any kind of swerving from the principles of propriety or cultural purity endorsed by the nation becomes an act that calls for censoring and penalizing by the nation. Both women and diasporic people, by the very nature of their mixed and impure identities, have a high propensity to be charged with disloyalty resulting in their exclusion from mainstream national discourses. If most of the women characters in the films of Nair and Mehta are portrayed as disloyal and deviating from the decorum demanded by the nation, the filmmakers themselves are charged with such grievous faults and undergo resistance and hardships as a result. The unseemly events surrounding the release of Deepa Mehta’s Fire, the pre-production obstacles faced by
Water and the legal and censorship issues that Mira Nair’s Kamasutra got embroiled in indicate the pressures faced by female diasporic filmmakers who alter the status quo and attempt to narrate the nation in a different way. Such films are examples of “cultural productions that begin in India, but end up cast as foreign/ Western/Other” (R. Kapur 64).

A notable point of similarity between women and diaspora is their ability to accommodate and assimilate the other in its various manifestations and forms as opposed to the nation’s strong urge to marginalize the other. Rada Ivecovic’s observations about the ability of women to acclimatize themselves to new situations and accept the other ascertain women’s knack for syncretism and synthesis and further accentuates our conviction about women’s parity with the diaspora:

Women are traditionally accustomed and expected, both corporeally and through their socialization, to incorporate the other, accustomed to accepting the ‘other’ within themselves, as evidenced in intercourse and childbearing.… Traditionally, women also adapt to different cultures more easily, giving up their origins more often than men when marrying into another community.… Women symbolically represent, certainly for historical and social reasons, more than men, a space of mixture and meeting — metissage, brassage. It is this metissage, which women accept, create and represent.… Creation, both in the cultural and the biological sense, occurs in mixture; hence the wish to appropriate it and the necessity of controlling women as its symbol and embodiment. (Captive 9-12)

Woman’s receptiveness to the Other and her penchant for mixing and merging happen not only at the sexual and biological level, but also at the cultural level, thereby
making her abundantly creative. The diaspora is also a locus where different cultures mix and merge, creating new combinations, this mixture and merging, this kind of hybridity being a trigger for creativity. Both women and diaspora are open to the Other, to the elsewhere and the impure and to spaces of fusion that have the potency to counter notions of fixity, purity and homogeneity that are cherished by the nation. The compelling presence of marginalized characters and economically and socially underprivileged and morally questionable people in the films of Nair and Mehta and the highlighting of alternate spaces and the unpalatable realities of the nation that happens in them are pointers to the female diasporic filmmakers’ embracing of the other, the elsewhere and the impure in their films.

The mixing and merging and the impurity that the female diasporic condition is imbued with, call for an examination of the dynamics of female diasporic cinema against the framework of Avtar Brah’s concept of the diaspora space which best encapsulates the intersection and confluence of the female diasporic condition. Encompassing economic, political, cultural and psychic processes, the diaspora space is a place where

… multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and transgressive [emphasis added] imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition…. Diaspora space is the point at which the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are contested…. [and] is ‘inhabited’ not only by those who have migrated and their descendants but equally by those who are constructed and represented as
indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the genealogies of dispersion with those of ‘staying put’. The diaspora space is the site where *the native is as much a diasporian as the diasporian is the native.* (Brah, *Cartographies* 205; emphasis in original)

Of special interest in Brah’s conception of the diaspora space is the invocation of the psychic dimension, in addition to the political, economic and cultural dimensions, as it highlights the inner workings of the diasporic mind, the memories and other psychological compulsions of the characters that are all examined in the coming chapters. The delineation of the diaspora space as a site where *the permitted and the prohibited, the accepted and the transgressive* trespass, mingle and interrogate, thereby shaking notions of what is pure is of relevance as far as the films of Nair and Mehta are concerned. The confluence and confrontation of the pure and the impure epitomize the female diasporic condition and is intrinsic to the films studied in the thesis as they deal with the confluence and intermingling of the pure and the impure in terms of theme, characterization, technique and style. Brah’s blurring of the boundaries between the native and the diaspora is also significant, as studies on diaspora usually tend to regard the diaspora and the native as binaries and dichotomies. Realising and granting the presence of native aspects in the diasporic and diasporic aspects in the native is a productive exercise while analysing films made by female diasporic filmmakers like Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta on the home ground on themes and concerns that pertain both to native and international audiences.

The confluence of the diasporic and the native in the diaspora space is analogous to the confluence of the ideas of *reframing* and *returning*. The word *reframe* of the title of the thesis is to be read in association with the word *return* which
signifies the diasporic act of returning to the native place or the homeland. Today, the idea of exile is no longer connected to agony just as the idea of return has been freed of the earlier pinings and longings associated with it. The home is thus more than a material reality, it is also a concept, just as the return home need not be “a physical return, but rather a re-turn, a repeated turning to the concept and/or reality of the homeland and other diasporan kin through memory, written or visual texts, travels, gifts and assistance, et cetera” (Tololyan, “Rethinking” 14-15). As re-turn is also a cerebral and interior happening writ large with the fluidity of memory, imagination and distance, both spatial and temporal, re-turn involves a re-writing, re-presentation or re-articulation of the home. We should remember that re- is a prefix filled with subversive potential and in this case, reframing, rewriting, representing or rearticulating are largely influenced by the political ramifications of being diasporic and female and calls for a probe into the workings of women’s cinema and diasporic cinema, which fall under the rubric of alternative cinema.

Diasporic cinema and its nuances are examined in the thesis mainly on the basis of the studies made by three important scholars -- Hamid Naficy and his idea of accented cinema introduced in the book An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking, Laura U Marks’s concept of inter-cultural cinema and haptic visuality discussed in the book, The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses and Jigna Desai’s observations on South Asian diasporic cinema in the book, Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Cinema. The different nomenclatures used -- accented cinema, diasporic cinema or intercultural cinema -- suggest the slight variations these cinematic forms may have, but the similarities they share in terms of their innovative forms and structures, their location in interstitial spaces, their political intent and the challenges they pose to dominant
discourses facilitate their being substituted by one another. However, the expression diasporic cinema has been used for purpose of convenience since *diaspora* is a broader term that implies and accommodates both the *accented* and the *intercultural*.

Accented cinema, an expression used by Naficy to designate films made by exilic and diasporic people is “by no means an established or cohesive cinema” and has emerged in “disparate and dispersed pockets across the globe” (Naficy, *An Accented*) 4. As differentiated from dominant cinema that is without accent, diasporic and exilic cinema has an accent that “emanates not so much from the accented speech of the diegetic characters as from the displacement of filmmakers and their artisanal production modes” (Naficy, *An Accented* 4). Accented filmmakers occupy interstitial spaces and their situation and identities are strongly inscribed in their films: “[Accented filmmakers] are also empirical subjects, situated in the interstices of cultures and film practices [and] exist outside and prior to their films” (4). The films are writ large with the peculiarities of the diasporic condition, the interstitial positioning of the filmmakers and “inscription[s] of [their] biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location” (4). By foregrounding the filmmakers’ biographical and social inscriptions on cinema Naficy was actually “putting the author back into authorship” and countering a “prevalent postmodernist tendency” that deemed the author insignificant (Naficy, *An Accented* 4). This approach of upholding the auteur theory of filmmaking correlates the work of filmmakers with their personal lives, beliefs and circumstances and forms the main premise of this study.

Accented films are marked by the same duality, ambivalence and interstitial positioning of the diasporic filmmaker in terms of social formations and cinematic practices. As a result of the duality and accent, the films “are simultaneously *local* and
glocal, and … resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that they benefit from them” (Naficy, An Accented 5; emphasis added).

This duality of the accented mode of cinema makes it dependant and autonomous at the same time: “Dependence and autonomy, therefore, are the dual, differentially torqued engines of the alternative mode…. [T]he exilic mode is driven not only by the limitations and constraints that dependence poses but also by the freedom and enablement that interstitial autonomy promises” (Naficy, Home 130). The condition of being dependent and autonomous at the same time is manifest both in financial matters and in the cinematic techniques and practices of the accented filmmakers.

Diasporic cinema at times, deviates from mainstream cinema in themes and practices, at other times, it converges with those very techniques and practices, thereby becoming a kind of hybrid and interstitial cinema To some extent, we could attribute the limitations of accented cinema, namely “its smallness, imperfection, amateurishness, and lack of cinematic gloss” (Naficy, Home 131) to the interstitial position it occupies.

It is noteworthy that accented cinema, diasporic cinema or exilic cinema belongs to the postindustrial mode of film production as against the industrial mode of production. If the industrial mode of production was marked by centralized control of production, distribution and exhibition, mass production of standardized products and manipulation of mass public and taste cultures (Naficy, Home 126), the post industrial mode of cinema is driven “by the fragmentation of nation-states and other social formations, and the scattering, often violent and involuntary, of an increasingly large number of people from their homelands and places of residence – all of which are driven by divergence not convergence” (Naficy, Home 127). This tendency for divergence makes diasporic or accented cinema critique existing cinematic practices
“by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers” (Naficy, *An Accented* 5). The political and ideological edge of the films results from the interstitial position they occupy and their criticism of dominant forms and practices:

[I]t involves inserting politics at the point of the films origination, as well as of its reception, … [and] a powerful criticism of dominant film practices…. Exilic filmmakers are multiply positioned to act critically and to make (un)popular films, thereby becoming minor: ontologically, by living at a tangent to the world and to the industry they inhabit; structurally, by opting for an alternative and interstitial mode of production; and thematically and narratologically, by ignoring or critiquing dominant cinema’s conventions and cultural values and experimenting with new ones. (Naficy, *Home* 131--132)

Filmmaking for the accented or diasporic filmmaker is not an easy task, given the controversial nature of the work undertaken. The length of time it may take to make, distribute and exhibit exilic films, the small audiences, the court battles and controversies, the “split reception” … [and] a combination of political and commercial forms of censorship” are characteristic of exilic filmmakers from the third world (Naficy, *Home* 140). Accented films receive “bifurcated responses” and “split reception” and “exilic politics contaminates the entire film process – whether it is the politics of nations and nationality, patriarchy, gender, class, ethnicity, race, or religiosity” (Naficy, *Home* 140; emphasis added). The exilic filmmakers are mostly seen in a state of anguish and have only a “meager output” as a result of “the antagonistic state-artist relations” and because “their liminality and interstitality … must constantly be checked against the realities of state encroachment and free market
competition” (Naficy, *Home* 142). Diasporic filmmakers are artists who “inhabit a realm of incredible tension and agony” as a result of “mak[ing] distressing and dystopian films” (142). Filmmaking has not been an easy task for Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta and their careers as filmmakers have been punctuated with most of the difficulties mentioned above. The distress, anguish and antagonism evoked by diasporic filmmaking and the strained relationship of the filmmakers with the state and certain sections of society are perceptible in the controversies and hostility elicited by Mehta’s *Fire* and *Water* and Nair’s *Kamasutra*.

Given that Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta are members of the South Asian diaspora of Indian origin on whom Bollywood has made deep impact, Jigna Desai’s book, *Beyond Bollywood: The Cultural Politics of South Asian Diasporic Film*, which provides us with invaluable insights into the cultural politics and multiplicity of diasporic cinema, is of utmost importance to this study. Desai, like Naficy, highlights the interstitial and hybrid quality of these films and maintains that South Asian diasporic cinema is “[s]uspended between and conversant with” the “two giant cinemas” of Hollywood and Bollywood (vi). Rather than being fully pruned of Bollywood as the word *beyond* in the title suggests, South Asian diasporic cinema is a hybrid entity that incorporates elements of Bollywood like “comedy, (melo)drama, action, romance and music… [and] the elaborate and often extradiegetic song and dance numbers” (J. Desai, *Beyond* 39). Though the films are said to be “beyond” the frame work of Bollywood or other dominant modes of cinema, they “are not always oppositional … [but] employ repetition with a difference” (J. Desai, *Beyond* 41) and redefine and reproduce the styles of social realism from dominant Western cinema or melodrama from Indian cinema. In short, “[d]iasporic cinema and its categories of inquiry are fluid and heterogenous rather than fixed and unitary” (41). Re-defintion is
the key word here -- whether it is a redefinition of styles of cinema or the redefinition of the nation in diasporic cinema and we may say that the films of Nair and Mehta are hybrid forms that redefine and reframe the thematic and stylistic elements of both Bollywood and Western practices of cinema.

Like Hamid Naficy, Jigna Desai also gives us a better perspective of South Asian diasporic cinema’s capability to critique the nation and go against the status quo. South Asian diasporic cinema is incorporated into “national paradigms through the logic of multiculturalism and cultural nationalism or through nationalist forms of nostalgia,” and when films such as Fire “do not conform to these expectations, they are rendered illegible or primitive in dominant national and international discourses” (J.Desai, Beyond 34). Very often, these films challenge dominant ideologies by their heterogeneity and interstitial position and by the qualities of polyvocality and heteroglossia:

It is the interstitiality of these films that prevents full co-optation and incorporation into institutionally privileged canons. These films often (but not always) “disidentify” with dominant ideologies…. Although many of these films are read as Hollywood, British, or even Bollywood films, their disjunctures, heterogeneity, and hybridity belie this attempt to define texts by their relation to these dominant cinemas…. [they] are intertextually related to each other and to other minor cinemas with which they align themselves; they may also respond to, mimic, and otherwise engage dominant cinemas. In this manner, many films are characterized by polyvocality or in Bakhtinian terms heteroglossia in that they contain multiple speech and language types. (J.Desai, Beyond 34)
Diasporic cinema is both within and beyond dominant cinema just as diaspora is both within and without the nation. The qualities of polyvocality and heteroglossia inherent in the diasporic films studied in the thesis lend them extra mileage, making them strong critiques of the homogenizing impulses of the nation and its cinema and taking them beyond their narrow confines.

Accented cinema and diasporic cinema should also be examined alongside what Laura U. Marks calls intercultural cinema in her book, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment and the Senses*. Intercultural cinema, according to Laura U Marks, is “an elusive and exciting body of work” which comes “from the new cultural formations of Western metropolitan centers, which in turn have resulted from global flows of immigration, exile and diaspora…. [and is] produced whenever people of different cultural backgrounds live together in the power-inflected spaces of diaspora, (post- or neo-) colonialism, and cultural apartheid” (1). Like accented cinema and diasporic cinema, intercultural cinema is marked by a strong urge to critique and dismantle official histories and lies. This dismantling is done by resorting to a reinvention or reconstitution of established discourses and a moving “backward and forward in time, inventing histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences, and lies of official histories” (24). For this, the artists “must first dismantle the official record of their communities, and then search for ways to reconstitute their history, often through fiction, myth, or ritual” (24-25). Marks emphasizes the importance of dismantling official discourses before allowing minority stories to be told because of the “alliance” that exists “between dominant narrative form and official history” (25-26).

The best possible way of dismantling official discourses and dominant
narratives is by using experimental styles and techniques in the films. An important step in this direction is the evocation of “other forms of memory that slip from both official history and audiovisual record: namely, memories encoded in senses other than the auditory and the visual” (Marks 26). Marks introduces the expression “haptic, or tactile, visuality” to stress the importance of “nonaudiovisual sense experiences” and suggest how “an appeal to nonvisual knowledge, embodied knowledge, and experiences of the senses, such as touch, smell, and taste” can also be evoked through an audiovisual medium like cinema (2). The concept of haptic visuality has a bearing on the cinema of both women and diaspora and is experimental and syncretic in nature:

Intercultural cinema is characterized by experimental styles that attempt to represent the experience of living between two or more cultural regimes of knowledge … [which] cause a disjunction in notions of truth. Intercultural films and videos offer a variety of ways of knowing and representing the world…. Formal experimentation is thus not incidental but integral to these works. Intercultural cinema draws from many cultural traditions, many ways of representing memory and experience, and synthesizes them with contemporary Western cinematic practices (1-2).

Intercultural cinema is thus characterized by experimental styles, novel ways of representing memory and experience and a synthesis of different cultural traditions and cinematic practices. In addition to all this, intercultural cinema falls under the rubric of what Julio Garcia Espinosa called “imperfect cinema” (Espinosa 28-33). Hamid Naficy also regards accented cinema as a minor cinema because of “its smallness, imperfection, amateurishness and lack of cinematic gloss” (Home 131).
Another important feature of intercultural cinema that Marks stresses is the fusion of an “aesthetic and political legacy” (10), a legacy and a fusion that is all too evident in the oeuvre of Nair and Mehta that integrates the pleasurable with the political. Though formal cinematic experimentation is absent in the films of Nair and Mehta, they become sites of hybridity and syncretism and capture diasporic and intercultural experience through vibrant frames that pulsate with haptic visuality.

Women’s cinema, which also works against dominant discourses, is political like diasporic cinema. But we have to be very cautious here because women’s cinema need not always have a feminist edge and the sharpness of its political edge may vary. Even so, given that women have always been in the margins of a highly masculine and patriarchal arena like cinema and filmmaking, any attempt made by women to make her presence felt there, let alone use it as a tool to challenge the norms, becomes a political and hence a feminist act. This in itself warrants a probe into the nuances and history of feminist cinema or women’s cinema. The earliest approach in feminist film studies known as the Images of Women approach happened to be in the early 1970s and was centered around the first feminist film journal Women and Film, founded by a California-based collective. The first books on feminist film criticism, all emerging from the US, Marjorie Rosen’s Popcorn Venus (1973), Joan Mellen’s Women and their Sexuality in the New Film (1974) and Molly Haskell’s From Reverence to Rape (1974), were an integral part of the Images of Women approach. Following a sociological approach in their analyses of cinema, this school of criticism was concerned about the false images of women perpetuated in mainstream cinema and the trend of casting women characters as stereotypes or in positive or negative roles.

British feminist film theorists including Claire Johnston, who published her
first work, *Notes on Women’s Cinema* in 1973, rejected the American critics’ sociological approach to cinema, which considered only the superficial elements of story and character, ignoring how elements like lighting, editing and camera movement work together with story and character to create hidden structures or subtexts of meaning. British theorists like Claire Johnston, Annette Kuhn and Pam Cook deviated from the American trend and used a range of theories like psychoanalysis, French structuralism, semiotics and drew, apart from Freud, on thinkers like Lacan, the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, the anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss, the film theorist Christain Metz and the semioticians Julia Kristeva and Roland Barthes (Shohini Chaudhuri 8). These theoretical approaches enable us to ponder not just over the thematic aspects of cinema, but also on the techniques and methods applied. Though the above mentioned schools of feminist film theory have not been applied in an in-depth or thorough way in the select films, they surely have influenced and figured in the textual analysis of the films in minor and unobtrusive ways. Rather than using any of these theories, the select films are read more on the basis of theories of nation and nationality, postcolonialism and diaspora. Again, though no study of women’s cinema is complete without the aid of Laura Mulvey’s views on voyeurism, scopophilia or spectatrix, the present study is more in line with the idea of feminist social vision propagated by Teresa de Lauretis.

Despite the differences in methodologies used, all the various theories converge on the idea that women’s cinema is a kind of counter cinema that works to “challenge and subvert the operations of dominant cinema” (Kuhn 152). The specific task of feminist counter cinema is to deconstruct “dominant forms [which] are embedded in bourgeois and patriarchal ideology” (Kuhn 153) and to bring about “a transformation in spectator-text relations from the passive receptivity or unthinking
suspension of disbelief fostered by dominant modes of address to a more active and questioning position” (155). But the challenging of dominant ideology can be done in various ways and to various degrees and several categories of films can be realized according to the way in which they deconstruct the dominant forms. Some films are thoroughly imbued with the dominant ideology in form and content, while some others counter the ideological representation both in form and content. Another set of films may have revolutionary content, but their form may not be quite radical. Yet another kind of films may not be political in content, but may have an innovative structure (Bergstrom 80-81). Bergstrom observes how Claire Johnston’s outline of “a potential feminist counter-cinema” in Notes on Counter Cinema can be compared to the concept of “progressive classical film” discussed by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni in the editorial to the October 1969 issue of Cahiers du Cinema (Bergstrom 80). Later published in Bill Nicholas’ Movies and Methods, this editorial by Comolli and Narboni entitled “Cinema/Ideology/Criticism” describes progressive classical cinema as a kind of cinema that “seem[s] at first sight to belong firmly within the ideology and to be completely under its sway, but which turn out to be so only in an ambiguous way…. If one reads the film obliquely, looking for symptoms, if one looks beyond its apparent formal coherence, one can see that it is riddled with cracks” (Comolli and Narboni 27). Johnston in her Notes, called for a feminist film practice that did away with barriers that existed between political and entertainment cinema thereby diluting the requisite that feminist films should be fully free from the dominant modes. The films of Nair and Mehta reflect the ambiguity mentioned by Comolli and Narboni and bring about a fusion of the elements of political and entertainment films.

The innovations that Laura Mulvey’s theories brought to bear on feminist film
theory and practice are a stark contrast to the mild stance of mediation and fusion upheld by Johnston and the other critics mentioned above. Mulvey’s ground-breaking essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”, written in 1973 and published in 1975, took feminist film criticism from the narrow confines of sociological approach to new readings in psychology and spectatrix. Woman in mainstream cinema, Mulvey argues, is “tied to her place as bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” and becomes an object that affords erotic pleasure to both male and female spectators (7). One of the most important pleasures offered by narrative cinema is that of scopophilia, which amounts to considering “other people as objects [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 8). The gaze is often one that is imbued with erotic pleasure when it is turned to women in cinema. In the words of Mulvey, scopophilic pleasure arises in using “another person as an object of sexual satisfaction through sight” (10). Scopophilia is closely linked to voyeurism, which is the “surreptitious observation of an unknowing and unwilling victim” (9). The “conditions of screening and narrative conventions” especially the darkness in the auditorium and the “brilliance of the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen…. give the spectator the illusion of looking in on a private world” (9). Mulvey’s deliberation on the sexual politics of gaze in cinema throws much light on the machinations of mainstream cinema which underplays the role of women and makes her a fetish:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as
sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle…. The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation…. Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen. (11-12)

It is only the female character who is thus objectified and made a fetish, “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification” (Mulvey 12). Instead, he has the active role of “forwarding the story [and] making things happen” (12). The spectator “identifies with the main male protagonist … so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (12). The spectator’s identification with the male protagonist amounts to “gaining control and possession of the woman within the diegesis” (13). The female spectator has no choice but to regress into the pre-oedipal phallic phase mentioned by Freud in relation to what she observes on screen or rather adopt a transvestite position, alternating between genders. As already stated, the theories propounded by Mulvey regarding gaze, eroticism, voyeurism and the active and passive roles of male and female characters can be used to analyze the films of Nair and Mehta, but Mulvey’s advocating of a radical avant garde cinema that destroys narrative pleasure and formal coherence is generally met with dubiousness and resistance.

Mulvey’s aim at the time of writing “Visual Pleasure” was to destroy
narrative pleasure by moulding a feminist cinema “along the lines of radical modernist practice, with its strategies of self-reflexivity, disruption and defamiliarization” (Chaudhuri 39). Mulvey dwelt on the need for challenging the pleasure provided by dominant narrative cinema and the inevitability of using deconstructive techniques in the text to counter the psychic manipulation of films. This was evident both in her theoretical writings and practices as co-director of the film, *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Many critics endorsed the deconstructive and formal techniques advocated by Mulvey at the cost of spectatorial pleasure on the grounds that it created a critical attitude and a questioning position in spectators as opposed to “the passive receptivity or unthinking suspension of disbelief fostered by dominant modes of address” (Kuhn 155). Critics compared deconstructive cinema with Bertolt Brecht’s *epic theatre* which results in a kind of distancing rather than involvement or identification of the spectator with the events of the play. Claire Johnston believed that the deeply flawed tendency of cinema to make women into myths and stereotypes and “ahistorical and eternal” beings (“Women’s” 23) can be rectified only by making women disrupt male-dominated cinema: “[T]he ‘truth’ of our oppression cannot be ‘captured’ on celluloid with the ‘innocence’ of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film” (Johnston, “Women’s” 29).

If on the one hand, disrupting or deconstructing the textual fabric of male cinema was regarded to be an important step in the creation of feminist film praxis, on the other, there have been reservations about the use of avant-garde techniques and the consequent hampering of the linearity, coherence, pleasure and entertainment value of films. Paul Willeman questions Laura Mulvey’s attempt to link “feminist politics to an avant-garde orthodoxy” and points out that purging cinema altogether of scopophilia
and voyeuristic pleasure is like abolishing cinema itself. What matters more is the positioning of the subject in relation to such pleasure (44-45). Teresa de Lauretis is also against the idea that the project of feminist cinema is “to destroy vision altogether” and destroy “all representational coherence” (De Lauretis, Alice 67, 68). She warns us about the dangers involved in destroying coherence and pleasure in women’s cinema by using the strategies of avant garde cinema:

The minimalist strategies of materialist avant-garde cinema – its blanket condemnation of narrative and illusionism, its reductive economy of repetition, its production of the spectator as the locus of a certain ‘randomness of energy’ to counter the unity of subject vision – are predicated on, even as they work against, the (transcendental) male subject…. All of this suggests that narrative and visual pleasure need and should not be thought of as the exclusive property of dominant codes, serving solely the purposes of ‘oppression’ (De Lauretis, Alice 68).

De Lauretis proves her point by analyzing Lizzie Borden’s film, Working Girls (1986), in which the female body is freed from being “a site of sexuality” and an object of male gaze and thereby “de-glamourized”, “de-sexualized”, “de-fetishized” and “de-voyeurized” (“Geurilla” 12). Set in a middle-class brothel, the filmmakers make the audience see the female body through the eyes of the female character herself rather than through the eyes of a male character or through the eyes of one who wields the camera as is usual practice. But, as De Lauretis points out, the film’s didactic project and women-centred sexual politics displeased the audience. As the film was fully “purged of desire” (“Geurilla” 14), it appealed neither to the male nor to the female spectators and therefore could be classified neither as mainstream nor as women’s
cinema. It may categorically be stated that the elements of radical and avant-garde films are conspicuous by their absence not just in the select films, but in the entire oeuvre of Nair and Mehta, which is meant to please as much as to critique or educate the audience.

What De Lauretis concludes after considering the kind of reception that *Working Girls* received is a valuable insight as to what women’s film should be like: “both the critical and the erotic dimensions seem to be necessary: lacking the former, the film would offer no critique of representation, cinema or society, and so lose its connection to feminism: lacking the latter, it would remain didactic, fail to engage the spectator’s desire, and so relinquish its capacity for ‘entertainment’” (De Lauretis, “Guerilla” 14). She upholds the importance of both critique and pleasure in films: “contrary to what was perceived to be the common project of radical, independent, or avant-garde cinema in the sixties and seventies – namely, the destruction of narrative and visual pleasure… feminist work in film should not be anti-narrative or anti-oedipal but quite the opposite” (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 108). Even Claire Johnston who called for the construction and manufacture of truth by disrupting the tenets of male bourgeois cinema concedes that we cannot fully do away with pleasure in cinema. She prefers the use of a strategy that looks at film both as a political tool and a source of entertainment:

Ideas derived from the entertainment film, then, should inform the political film, and political ideas should inform the entertainment cinema: a two way process. Finally, a repressive, moralistic assertion that women’s cinema is collective film-making is misleading and unnecessary; we should seek to operate at all levels: within the male-dominated cinema and outside it.
In addition to the fusing of pleasure and politics, critics are aware of the need for foregrounding factors like spectator-text relationship, principles of production and reception and so on. As Annette Kuhn puts it, “The question of feminist counter-cinema is by no means exhausted by a discussion of feminist or feminine film texts: it has, in the final instance, to be considered also in terms of its institutional conditions of production and reception” (171). Rather than dwelling at length on the institutional conditions of production and reception, the thesis is concerned with the fluid and syncretic approach in which pleasure and politics go hand in hand and in which the elements of dominant cinema are not fully forfeited but are made use of judiciously.

The position taken by Teresa de Lauretis regarding form and pleasure would be more appropriate for this study as it is a more flexible and logical one. Rather than straitjacketing women’s cinema into the rigid terrain of avant garde or didactic cinema, De Lauretis champions the pleasure principle in women’s cinema. More important, she recognizes the scope and potential of cinema in creating a social vision. Cinema, according to her is “social technology” capable of “the production and counter production of social vision” and “the production of a feminist social vision” (De Lauretis, Technologies 134). Without doubt, Nair and Mehta have fully tapped this potential of cinema to produce a feminist social vision. Topmost in the agenda of creating a social vision is the counter production of gender. Gender, according to De Lauretis, is something that is constructed and sustained by various “social technologies” including cinema and it is crucial to envision and reconstruct gender by walking out of male frames of reference. If the effort and challenge of women’s
cinema, is not a complete destruction or disruption of a man-centered vision, but “effect[ing] another vision” (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 135), this is the very task that the films of Nair and Mehta have taken up and *reframing* refers to this counter or alternative vision that challenges male frames.

In its attempt to reframe the masculine world, feminism and feminist cinema engage in an ongoing effort “to create new spaces of discourse, to rewrite cultural narratives, and to define the terms of another perspective – a view from “elsewhere”” (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 25). By “elsewhere”, De Lauretis does not mean “some mythic distant past or some utopian future history: [but] the elsewhere of discourse here and now, the blind spots, or the space-off, of its representations…. spaces in the margins of hegemonic discourses, social spaces carved in the interstices of institutions and in the chinks and cracks of the power-knowledge apparati” (*Technologies* 25). She further describes “elsewhere” as “a movement from the space represented by/in a representation, by/in a discourse, by/in a sex-gender system, to the space not represented yet implied (unseen) in them” (*Technologies* 26). An expression that is akin to *elsewhere* is *space-off*, a term borrowed from film theory which means “the space not visible in the frame but inferable from what the frame makes visible” (*Technologies* 26). If in classical and commercial cinema, the space-off is erased by the rules of narrativization, in avant-garde cinema, space-off exists “concurrently and alongside the represented space” and includes both the camera, the point from which the image is constructed and the spectator, “the point where the image is received, re-constructed, and re-produced in/as subjectivity” (De Lauretis, *Technologies* 26).

If *elsewhere*, a concept that also figured in the discussion of diasporic cinema, stands for the hitherto unrepresented spaces including the interstitial and marginal, the
concept of space off accommodates elements likely to be eluded in cinema like the camera, the filmmaker and the spectator. The reframing of the nation initiated by the female diasporic filmmakers can be carried on to fruition with the aid of the techniques of the camera and filmmaking and by the reception and reaction of the spectators. Both ‘elsewhere’ and ‘space-off’ carry the weight of what it means to be female or diasporic individuals in the nation and what it is like to reframe the nation as female diasporic filmmakers. Though De Lauretis used the terms in the context of women’s cinema, they equally epitomize and contextualize the diasporic situation and diasporic cinema and refer to the new frames created by female diasporic filmmakers, frames which are inclusive of what have been hitherto ignored, frames which reframe what already is present and frames which make valid both the creator of the frames and the audiences, frames that go beyond themselves and make a difference and cause a stir. “Reframing” makes possible “a movement between the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses”, such a movement being fraught with “the tension of contradiction, multiplicity, and heteronomy” (De Lauretis, Technologies 26).

The forthcoming chapters explore how Mira Nair and Deepa Mehta effect a reframing of the nation from the position of the elsewhere, integrating in all possible ways, the advantages of the space-off and the tensions and contradictions inherent thereof. The idea of elsewhere or space off signifies the marginal spaces inhabited by women and diasporic people and represents their discourses and accommodates their characters and concerns in literature and cinema. These concepts encompass the interstitial position of the female diasporic filmmakers, their counter-hegemonic discourses and practices and the alternative realities/possibilities of the nation explored in their films. The female diasporic, like the elsewhere, has a direct bearing
on the works of the filmmakers discussed in the thesis, as it is the *female diasporic perspective* and the *frames from elsewhere* that reframe the nation. These *elsewhere frames* of the select films foreground the stories of the marginalized and the impure and bring out the everyday transgressions of the rigid nationalisms present therein.

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Chapter 3

In a Frame: the Marginal and the Impure