

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* - Adaptation to Script and Deepa Mehta's Movie-An Artistic Failure

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Midnight's Children (1981) is a Salman Rushdie's novel and its British-Canadian film adaptation appeared in 2012 with a screenplay by Rushdie and directed by Deepa Mehta. The film shooting began in Colombo in February 2011 and was concluded in May 2011 with cast of Satya Bhabha, Shriya Saran, Siddharth Narayan, Ronit Roy, Anupam Kher, Shabana Azmi, Seema Biswas, Shahana Goswami, Samrat Chakrabarti, Rahul Bose, Soha Ali Khan, Anita Majumdar and Darsheel Safary. The film was shown at various Film festivals and was a nominee for Best Picture and seven other categories at the 1st Canadian Screen Awards, winning two awards. Rushdie cut down the 600-page book into a 130-page script. (Nolen, Stephanie)

Rightly does *New York Times* remark , "To do cinematic justice to novel , it would take a razzle-dazzle entertainer with Bollywood flair and a literary bent, someone equally at home with comedy and allegory, ghosts and little snot-nosed boys, Indian history and Indian myth". (<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/26/movies/midnights-children-adaptation-of-salman-rushdies-novel.html?>)

Nishi Tiwari said, "Midnight's Children" is a must watch for people who have yearned to experience Salman Rushdie iconic storytelling in a more accessible format." The critical consensus states that "Though *Midnight's Children* is beautiful to look at and poignant in spots, its script is too indulgent and Deepa Mehta's direction, though ambitious, fails to bring the story together cohesively."

"The film is fable and a tribute to the Nehruvian (Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's style of politics) India's broken secular promises". (<http://www.imdb.com>)

The bigger story, about India, is told through a smaller one, about a family, and especially one boy: Saleem Sinai, born at the stroke of the midnight hour on Aug. 15, 1947, the very moment of India's birth as a free country. There are thousand children born at that hour, all with special powers, but many have died by the time Saleem (Darsheel Safary as a boy; Satya Bhabha as an adult) discovers that he can hear the other children's voices in his head as if he were some kind of all-India radio.

Salim is a boy born at the stroke of midnight of India's Independence from British occupation. He is supposed to be the son of Indian Muslim family but is actually the son of a local Mumbai street singer who had affair with a British gentleman during his empire's final days. The street singer dies during child birth. The hospital nurse Mary, because of her social beliefs regarding the nation's so called Independence, decides to switch the newborn son of the poor street singer to the rich born kid of a Muslim couple.

The destinies of the two new born are not only entangled by the switch but also with the gift that they possess along with every other children who are born on the

stroke of midnight with a new born nation with promises of its richly diverse population.

Each of those new born children is metaphor for the nation's promises of what it can achieve if those natural gifts are used effectively for better means. They all possess different powers. Salim is able to telepathically communicate with each one of the Midnight's Children. The couple's real kid ends up with the husband of the street singer named Shiva who possesses the powerful destructive powers, while Parvati is a magician who is destined to be Salim's soul mate. Salim's destiny is forever bonded with the nation of his birth and hence we are taken to a journey through modern Indian history.

When the midnight's children join Saleem for chatty, contentious meetings, the camera's focus goes soft, which seems fitting, as the children are mostly indistinct here, practically an afterthought, and without much metaphorical power. When "the Widow" -Mrs. Gandhi (Sarita Choudhury) -persecutes them during her Emergency. They take a back seat to Saleem and his family's story. There are infants switched at birth - one rich, one poor - revelations about parenthood, amnesia, war, riots, sudden shifts in fortune and, most satisfyingly, a kind of mother-son reunion between Saleem and his ayah that would do a Bombay talkie proud.

Mehta seems most at home detailing the family life of the young Saleem in Bombay. The two women who rule that universe, his mother (Shahana Goswami) and the ayah (Seema Biswas) - the perpetrator of that baby switching - give the film emotional ballast that's lost when Saleem leaves for Pakistan.

The source material for the film is a literary classic. Mehta gave no space for any character development and the second rate cast does not do any favor to the films flow. The main lead Satya Babha who plays the grown up Salim, is not able to come up to the expectations of the audience. "A small actor in American sitcom, Satya did not have any facial expression or emotions that could light up even the most well written scenes. He fails to carry the film on his shoulders and makes it a stretch for the audience to continue with the film. The only noteworthy and perfect though stereotypical performance is Seema Biswas's Miss Mary". (<http://www.imdb.com>)

Some of the best parts of the novel are the Bangladesh war and Indira Gandhi's emergency days. In the movie, no sense of history is evoked during those sequences and to those who may have very scant knowledge of those events may remain disillusioned.

Forrest Gump maintained a smooth flow even with its long generational trajectory and allowed character development by concentrating on only the main character rather than his entire family tree. But Midnight's Children ends up becoming a fast paced narration of the novel that deserved a better movie version.

"Mr. Rushdie and Miss Mehta spoiled a perfect opportunity to create a memorable journey through modern Indian history and placed this cobbled screen adaptation as footnote in their respective careers". (<http://www.imdb.com>)

"There are some beautiful moments and some decent performances, but it's also something of a slog and ultimately fails to engage on an emotional level", "There's

humour and heart here, but it's an overlong tale as meandering as the Ganges." and "Watchable without ever feeling essential". (Wikipedia)

Deepa Mehta's socially engaged naturalism becomes a mismatch with Mr. Rushdie's gleeful too-muchness. Mr. Rushdie as screenplay writer meets Deepa Mehta halfway. "In wrestling his bursting-at-the-seams, sometimes wearying epic into movie-acceptable size, he has pared it of authorial quirks and compressed it, lopping off subplots and characters and flights of fancy". (Horton)

The story is rather told straight throughout without any of the novel's compulsive prognosticating and backward glancing. That may suit the straightforward style of Ms. Mehta but it makes the movie a bit dull that feels drained of the mythic juice of that Booker Prize winning Book.

Their more compelling grotesqueries shorn or diminished, the characters march in a now-this, now-that way through history, from the early part of the 20th century to independence to the days after Indira Gandhi's state of emergency in the '70s, and dart around the subcontinent, from Kashmir to Agra to Bombay to West Pakistan to East Pakistan (Bangladesh).

Rushdie is no doubt a writer of magical realism and an observer of the partition between India and Pakistan. *Midnight's Children* "predates all that, yet its absurdities depict the maelstrom out of which such chaos comes. And when the new film adaptation was in production in Sri Lanka, it encountered lingering hassles related to Rushdie's notoriety" (Horton). "But he had the power to be "disrespectful" enough to condense his sprawling coming-of-age story about a boy's search for identity and India's quest for independence". (www.wordandfilm.com)

Thus, the movie is a streamlined version of the novel. The 146-minute running time conveys some level of epic sprawl. The narrative springs from the precise moment India becomes an independent nation in 1947 concomitant with the birth of two boys switched in the hospital. Saleem is shuttled off to a wealthy Muslim family and his life collides with the tumult of India and Pakistan over the course of 30 years. "Saleem is also telepathically bugged by a score of other children born on his and India's birthday; these supernaturally-gifted entities crowd around and bicker and generally make trouble inside his head. For these scenes, Deepa Mehta fuzzes up the screen and piles on the ghostly auras". (Horton) This becomes the worst possible approach to conjuring up magical realism.

It is a sprawling tale of babies switched at birth and the tumult of India and Pakistan over the course of the decades, and though director Deepa Mehta does not really capture the flow of Rushdie's magical-realist world, the movie has got a great cast and a fascinating backdrop.

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