

From Text to Film: Analyzing Filmic Representation of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to delve deeper into the politics of adaptation and transmutation of the Booker Prize-winning novel *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie into a movie titled *Midnight's Children* released on 09 September 2012. Both the novel and the movie mirror each other in many aspects but to bring the five hundred pages long novel into a feature film the length of the book was reduced to almost one hundred and sixty pages. The shooting of the film was done in Colombo as the director Deepa Mehta was afraid that it would be an onerous task for them to complete the shoot of the movie in Pakistan or India. Rushdie took almost a year to bring the book down to the length of the screenplay. *Midnight's Children* portrays post-independence India. Similarly, the movie tries to retain the elements of the novel in the form of a screenplay. The novel as well as the movie is based on postmodern, postcolonial themes and magical realism. The movie also has tried to capture most of the aspects as they were in the novel but it is also beyond doubt that the screenplay differs from the book.

KEYWORDS

Politics; Transmutation; Screenplay; Postmodern; Postcolonial; Magical Realism.

Midnight's Children (1981) is the second novel by Salman Rushdie which turned out to be a huge success after the failure of his first novel. Rushdie's life remains surrounded by controversies and the squabble around *The Satanic Verses* (1988) does not seem to be ending within the foreseeable future. Recently, on August 12, 2022, the novelist was attacked while delivering a lecture at Chautauqua Institution in New York. Amid death threats and multiple attempts on his life, Rushdie remains resilient and indomitable. Rushdie received The Man Booker Prize in 1981 for authoring *Midnight's Children*, as well as The Best of Booker in 1993 for the same book. The book is divided into three

sections and each section is divided into multiple chapters. The novel's storyline centres on the protagonist and narrator, Saleem Sinai born on 15th August 1947 "On the stroke of midnight..." (Rushdie 3). Along with him, 1001 other children were born with whom Saleem shares a connection and only 581 manage to survive till the age of ten. Saleem was swapped with Shiva (the antagonist in the novel) after birth by Mary who works as a nurse in Doctor Narlikar's Nursing Home. All the midnight's children can connect telepathically and Saleem has the power to convene all of them. Along with the narrator's life, the novel depicts Indian National history, and the narrator

erroneously believes that he has a significant part in the occurrence of every single incident that takes place. The story progresses and unveils the catastrophes that have befallen the protagonist, however, the narrative concludes on a hopeful note.

In 2011, Deepa Mehta, an Indo-Canadian film director along with Rushdie decided to make a movie on one of his novels written by him. Mehta's original preference was to work on the film adaptation of *Shalimar the Clown*, but after obtaining Rushdie's agreement, she opted to work on *Midnight's Children*. After choosing the project's novel, it was required to condense the story so that it could be converted into a film. It was at this point that Rushdie took charge and reduced the nearly 500-page long novel to 160 pages. Mehta took up the job when the novel's length was reduced for the adaptation. She had planned to shoot the film in India and Pakistan, but due to the intense controversies surrounding Rushdie, the idea was scrapped. However, before beginning filming, the proper cast had to be found. Satya Bhabha played the role of Saleem Sinai in the film, and his nose is quite identical to Saleem's. After several great actors refused the job, he was chosen by the director. Alongside Bhabha, Sriya Saran played the role of Parvati-the-witch in the movie. The other cast includes Darsheel Safari (as young Saleem), Sahana Goswami (Amina Sinai), Rajat Kapoor (Adam Aziz), Ronit Roy (Ahmed Sinai), Rahul Bose (Gen. Zulfikar), Siddharth Music (Shiva), Seema Biswas (Mary Pereira), Soha Ali Khan (Jamila), Anupam Kher (Ghani), Harish Khanna (Joe), Samrat Chakrabarti (Wee Willie Winkie), Kulbhusan Kharbanda (Picture Singh), Zaib Shaikh (Nadir Khan), Charles Dance (Methwold), Sarita Choudhury (Indira Gandhi), Anita Majumdar (Emerald) and many more.

Rushdie, who wrote both the script and the novel, serves as the film's narrator

and his vibrant voice has resulted in an excellent match for the narratorial voice. The movie begins with the same line as the novel "I was born in the city of Bombay ... once upon a time" (Rushdie 3). Viewers who are familiar with the novel will notice that many portions of the novel are missing from the film, and the plot moves at a rapid speed. The story immediately moves to the life of the narrator's grandpa, Adam Aziz, after briefly introducing the narrator. Because of this transition of the novel into a movie, one crucial reference in the screenplay is lost: Scheherazade which comes from *The Thousand and One Nights*. Similarly, Padma, the listener in the original work, is eliminated in the adaptation.

Padma, the listener in the novel appears in the opening section too, a plump muscular 'goddess'. Where Scheherazade had the king, Shahariya, as her listener, Saleem has Padma... (Gunrah 93).

Padma's disappearance from the film as a character was done on purpose to allow the narrator to tell the tale or present his own story to the audience.

Every time a novel is made into a movie, there is a possibility that the work chosen will be underrepresented because novels are typically complex and multifaceted, although there is also a chance of overrepresentation in some circumstances. In most circumstances, the director is responsible for bringing the depiction to life, however, in the case of *Midnight's Children*, Rushdie re-authored the script himself. Also, he admitted that at first he was afraid to do the adaptation himself and said: "I am a novelist, not a professional screen writer" (Salman Rushdie Gave). In this instance, we are aware that the author had to favour some portions of the book while marginalizing others to adapt it for the big screen. Rushdie acknowledged these politics during a press conference, saying:

There are many parts of the novel and characters which were not essential to the central story. That was the question. What's the essential storyline of the movie? It is very difficult with *Midnight's Children* because it is deliberately a digressive novel. We sacrificed a lot of stuff. We had to delete some very good scenes also. (Was Nervous About)

This is how just the content that the writer deemed necessary made it into the script and the rest was omitted. Even though the novel is digressive, yet when we read it, we find every element vital and connected to the story.

There are plenty of characters in the novel, but only significant ones were adapted into the film, and others were barely mentioned. During an interview when Rushdie was asked about digressions, he said:

I think that they are absolutely crucial . . . digressions are almost the point of the book . . . When I started writing, I just tried to explain one life, and it struck me more and more that, in order to explain this life, you had to explain a vast amount of material which surrounded it, both in space and time. In a country like India, you are basically never alone. (Durix 13)

Though Rushdie completely understands the potential value of digressions, the screenplay prioritizes only the important characters to depict Saleem's life. Many of them—including Ramram Seth, Alice Pereira, Homi Catrack, Lila Sabarmati, Commander Sabarmati, Mustapha, Sonny Ibrahim, and Evie Lilith Burns—were cut from the final version of the script. Rushdie agrees that digressions are crucial since they make up a book's heart, although, in a movie, visual effects can be utilized to illustrate the digressions. A book, for example, must be constructed, yet in a film,

cinematic effects and fewer elements can suffice.

The opening chapter of book two informs us that a newspaper honoured his birth, and after reading a piece in *The Times of India*, Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru wrote and congratulated Saleem. Later in this chapter, we learn that Amina devotes all of her time to caring for her kid, which makes Ahmed envious. He begins to flirt with his secretaries, and as a result, they all quickly abandoned him. Due to this, he fights with his wife and drinks excessively. There is no mention of any of this in the film, and as a result, Ahmed Sinai in the film looks to be the ideal husband, whereas, Amina's relationship with Nasir, which is explicitly depicted in the film, gives the impression that she is a woman with no morals.

Furthermore, many intertextual elements and references are lost in the novel's transmutation. *Midnight's Children* is a postmodernist text that incorporates intertextual elements from diverse sorts of kinds of literature as well as movies and songs. *Arabian Nights*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (by Gabriel Garcia Marquez), *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* (the great Indian epics), *Shree 420* (Bollywood movie), *Quentin Durward* (by Walter Scott), and *Tristram Shandy* (by Laurence Sterne) are a few examples of texts used by Rushdie that exemplify his intertextual tendencies. The reference to Saleem's nose comes from *Tristram Shandy* But [Rushdie himself clarified that] there were references that were uniquely Indian, which Western scholars tended not to notice. "The nose is a comic version of the trunk of the elephant-headed god Ganesh, to whom Saleem compares himself a few times" (Ross 3). These allusions are obscure in the film, making them hard to pick up on. However, they are mentioned very explicitly in the book, as when Saleem says in one of the chapters: "(...I am very fond of the image trunk-nosed, flap-eared Ganesh solemnly taking dictation)"

(Brackets appears in original text) (Rushdie 206). Additionally, the former Indian Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi was referenced as “the widow”. “Indira Gandhi sued Rushdie for defamation of character for his portrayal of “the widow” in *Midnight’s Children*” (Reder xii). This reference was left out of the film to avoid Indian censorship because it would have easily offended a specific political group in India.

The novel's main themes, such as magical realism, postcolonialism, and postmodernism, are nebulous in the film. Similar to the novel, the primary focus of the movie is post-independence India and Pakistan, with a brief mention of East Pakistan's war for independence. Many critics regard the adaptation of the novel as a failure because it was unable to carry forward the majority of the novel's motifs. According to a review of the film by Firstpost:

However, critics don't seem to have warmed up to the film version, alleging – what most movies adapted from books run the risk of – the film doesn't do justice to the book (Critics Verdict)

The conversion of a book into a film can be beneficial in attracting people because many people despise reading, but in most situations, much of the substance must be deleted to make it a suitable-length movie. In recent years, the public has been more interested in visual culture than reading, yet books are significant because they transport the reader into an imagined world, whereas movies offer that world without the need for imagination. Images and film, without a doubt, are important sources and influence the spectator, but as

literary students, reading informs us about many subjects and writing styles.

In book three of the novel, Saleem narrates the story of his arrival in East Pakistan and describes another war that took place after the 1965 Indo-Pakistan war which we come across in book two of the novel. This time war takes place for the liberation of East Pakistan from West Pakistan. Parvati-the-witch brings Saleem back to India in a basket using her magic. Later Saleem marries Parvati and also agrees to be the father of Shiva and Parvati's child. All of these occurrences are cut short in the screenplay since it is commonly understood that screenplays cannot be extended or else viewers may lose interest.

The adaptation of the novel was not well received because of the erratic plot and the viewers may easily lose connection with the movie as one scene transitions to the next rapidly. In many instances, it becomes difficult to make an association with the storyline. Though adaptations have the potential to touch the emotions of the viewers, in this adaptation a spectator may identify with Saleem's tragic fate in the last part when he is tormented.

To sum up, in the politics of privileging and marginalizing Rushdie himself failed to do justice to his work. In order to adapt the novel into a two-hour-long movie so much material was left out and the essence of the novel could not be transferred into the movie. As we know the novel is divided into three books, which are usually seen in epics, therefore the vast material that it offers was not considered fit for the screenplay. It would have been much better if the novel was adapted as a series for television or the web.

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