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CIM211.2

## Critical Analysis of Midnight's Children [Film]

Christopher Cullan

Bachelor of Audio, Brisbane Campus, SAE

CIM211: Cultural Perspectives

Lecturer / Course Coordinator: Nikolche Vasilevski, Ph.D.

5 November 2023 11:59pm

Word Count: 1890

(Excluding headings, figures, reflections and reference list)

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# Introduction

This case study provides a critical analysis of the film, "Midnight's Children", directed by Deepa Mehta (2012), through the application of aesthetic style and critical theory. By addressing the aesthetics, cultural context, audience and critical theory, the case study highlights postcolonial theory, Marxist theory and feminist theory, uncovering the failings of film adaptation.

The film, "Midnight's Children", is an adaptation of the novel of the same name, written by Salman Rushdie (1981). The story is an allegory of postcolonial India told through the eyes of Saleem Sinai, born at midnight, August 14, 1947, when India gained independence from British colonial rule (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2023). The screenplay was written by Salman Rushdie, though it deviates from the more post-modern, time-jumping narrative of the novel, (Dr. Masood Raja, 2021). It uses a linear narrative beginning thirty years before Saleem's birth. Saleem, one of the 1001 children born around midnight, has magical powers that allow him to commune with the rest of midnight's children. Saleem's moves through multiple touchpoints of the Indian cultural tapestry, representing the diversity of India and its partitioning into Pakistan, East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, and the indelible effects of colonial rule within the multiple cultures of then modern India.

# Cultural Context & Critical Theory

The film 'Midnight's Children' opens with a powerful statement by the character Saleem Sinai, the narrator, who declares, 'Most of what matters in our lives takes place in our absence' (Mehta, 2012, 00:00:59). This quote sets the stage for the film's exploration of the theme that one's history and collective destiny significantly shape their life. This overarching theme aligns with critical theories, including postcolonial theory, Marxist theory, and feminist theory in that each reflect upon the collective destinies of; colonised nations, social classes, and women (Felluga, 2015; Daly, 2013; Heckman, 2013).

The narrative introduces a cast of female characters. Notably, Saleem's grandmother, Naseem, originates from a wealthy Muslim family. Mary, a pivotal character, orchestrates the switch between Saleem and baby Shiva at birth, resulting in Saleem's upbringing in the affluent Sinai family. Parvati, one of 'Midnight's children,' later rescues him from Bangladesh, smuggling him back to India in a magical basket.

Anne Sisson Runyan (2018) suggests that intersectional oppression interweaves multiple forms of oppression into unique and individual experiences. In 'Midnight's Children,' these women significantly shape Saleem's life, exemplifying distinctive experiences due to their specific blend of gender, class, and postcolonial circumstances. However, few, if any, have their own voice in the narrative, except for Mary, whose act of switching Saleem and Shiva at birth dictates the story's outcome.

# Aesthetics and Audience

From the opening view of India (Figure 1) to the final scene of Saleem and his son watching Independence Day fireworks (Figure 2), the film's aesthetics are mysterious and rich, characterized by vibrant colours and tones. The cinematography is defined by high contrast, deep shadows, and a dark yet vibrant, earthy palette, lending it an exotic, aged texture that immerses viewers in a historical atmosphere.

## Figure 1

*Opening Scene from Midnight's Children*



*Note.* Opening scene as the narrator's grandfather, a doctor, is paddled across the Dal Lake in Kashmir, to provide services to the lady he will eventually marry (Mehta, 2012, 00:01:05).

## Figure 2

### *Final Scene from Midnight's Children*



*Note.* Ending scene with Saleem and his son looking up at the fireworks, celebrating India's Independence Day (Mehta, 2012, 02:16:29).

The film's aesthetics feature desaturated daytime scenes, creating a timeless atmosphere, and complex set design with rich colour, contrast, and texture. The soundtrack uses traditional Indian instruments for a mystical ambiance. Medium and close shots provide an intimate, voyeuristic feel. Natural scenes are lush, urban settings display worn fixtures, except for the British-owned villa. The film explores mystical themes related to magical children with unique powers and emphasizes its fantasy elements. Native languages in dialogues add authenticity. The linear structure delays the main character's introduction for suspense.

'Midnight's Children' premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2012, marketed as a cinematic masterpiece for an English-speaking Western audience (BBC News, 2012). Adapted from Salman Rushdie's novel and narrated by Rushdie, the film targets Rushdie's fans, Anglo-Indians, and film enthusiasts. Despite being described as 'A Love Letter to India,' its trailer inadvertently reinforces the 'othering' of India (Rotten Tomatoes Trailers, 2013).



Edward Said's 'Orientalism' highlights how Orientalists view the East as a reflection of Western ideals (Said, 1977). Similarly, the film's trailer positions it as an Indian version of Western tropes, presenting India as a mystical and secretive 'Other' place (Moosavinia et al., 2011). Despite Rushdie's involvement, de Zwaan criticizes it for not capturing the essence of the novel, possibly accentuating postcolonial issues and sexism in the film (2015).

Despite Rushdie's involvement, de Zwaan points out its failure as an adaptation due to a lack of fidelity and a focus on words over writing (Beifuss, 2014, as cited in de Zwaan, 2015). Rushdie fails to distil the essence of the novel and present it in a film medium likely accentuating issues of 'othering' and sexism in the film.

# First Analysis – Opening Sequence

## Summary

In 'Midnight's Children' opening, we meet Saleem's Anglicized Indian grandfather, Doctor Aziz. He visits a patient's estate and examines the patient, Naseem, through a sheet with a small hole (Mehta, 2012, 00:00:56-00:07:14). After several visits, Doctor Aziz conducts an examination involving Naseem's breast (Figure 3), creating sexual tension. His infatuation becomes evident in a conversation with his transport provider. This leads to him finally seeing Naseem's face due to a headache, and they consummate their marriage after negotiations with Naseem's father.

### Figure 3

*Doctor Aziz with Naseem*



*Note.* Doctor Aziz is asked to examine Naseem's swollen breast, a result of her time of the month, under the supervision of her father and servants. Naseem stands behind a sheet with a hole that is moved by the servants to allow the doctor to examine the area in question (Mehta, 2012, 00:04:32).

## Aesthetics

In this sequence, Doctor Aziz is immediately captivated by a glimpse of Naseem's cleavage before ever laying eyes on her face. The camera work intensifies this voyeuristic sensation, further objectifying Naseem. Doctor Aziz's journey to reach Naseem signifies the stark contrast between his Western education and colonial India, depicting it as an enigmatic and distant world requiring healing. Notably, Naseem remains silent until Doctor Aziz sees her face, where she comments on his large nose, portraying a passivity that contrasts with the novel's portrayal of her as a strong and assertive character (Bh, 2012).

## Critical Theory

The casting of English-Indian, Rajat Kapoor, with a pale complexion, presents an Anglo-centric perspective, highlighting the postcolonial notion that the West, where Aziz received his education, is seen as essential for maintaining health and order. This notion is expressed in Fitzjames Stephen's quote, "No country in the world is more orderly, more quiet or more peaceful than British India as it is, but if the vigour of the government should ever be relaxed, if it should lose its essential unity of purpose ... chaos would come again like a flood" (Stephen, 1883, as cited in Bhabha, 2012, p. 143).

Horn's essay reveals that the women in Rushdie's novel are described as ugly (Horn, 2014). However, the film takes a more sexualized and youthful approach to Naseem, portraying her as pretty. As the character ages in the film, she is re-cast with an older actress, Shabana Asmi, while Rajat (Aziz) remains consistent. The narration in the opening sequence constructs Naseem's identity, from daughter to an amalgam of body parts (stomach, breast, face), then wife, forming her identity as a subject to both her father's and Aziz's desires (Salih, 2002).

Furthermore, the breast exam scene exemplifies Laura Mulvey's male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), where Naseem becomes the raw material for Aziz to observe and adapt to his needs.

# Second Analysis – Moving into The Villa Sequence

## Summary

Establishing Saleem's historical context and lineage, the film then focuses on Amina and Ahmed Sinai, who will become Saleem's parents. They purchase part of a Villa in Bombay from an Englishman, Mr. Methwold, who insists they maintain everything until the British leave. They join him each day for a drink, entertained by a poor couple, Wee Willie Winkie and Vanita, who sing for spare change (Mehta, 2012, 00:27:07-00:32:22). It is revealed that Vanita is carrying the Englishman's child (Figure 4), which is later revealed to be Saleem.

### Figure 4

*Mr. Methwold caressing Vanita*



*Note.* Mr. Methwold is entertaining the Sinais in the garden as they are entertained by Wee Willie Winkie and his wife, Vanita. Here, Mr. Methwold demonstrates his power over Vanita and implicates her unborn child is his (Mehta, 2012, 00:31:25).

## Aesthetics

The aesthetics include a desaturated background for the outdoor garden shot. Indoor shots are darker, emphasizing Methwold's wealth with crystal, linens, and luxurious items adorning each frame. The absence of music is notable except when Wee Willie Winkie and his wife appear to sing. Mr. Sinai fully adopts English customs, from manners to formal suits. Amina, however, adheres to her Indian attire and rejects her husband's compliance. Wee Willie and Vanita appear with a darker and less refined look. The atmosphere is filled with anticipation and anxiety as Methwold's departure coincides with the end of British rule.

## Critical Theory

Methwold, has not only supplanted the local culture, as seen in Mr. Sinai's behaviour, but that his influence will persist beyond Methwold's departure. His impregnation of Vanita mirrors how his culture has impregnated India. Mr. Sinai's mimicry of Methwold's culture exemplifies Bhabha's concept of colonial mimicry as a form of resistance, acceptance, and hybridity (Bhabha, 2012).

Ansell & Solomos's concept of intersectionality (2013) is evident in Amina and Vanita's unique combination of class and gender. Both maintain their local dress and culture, but bourgeoisie Amina (Johnson & Gray, 2014), actively resists Methwold by slandering him in her native language. In contrast, Vanita can only feign delight, concealing the secret of her unborn, whilst quietly collecting the coins her entertainment earns.

## Third Analysis – Switched at Birth Sequence

### Summary

Saleem's story officially begins as India gains independence from British rule. Mary, the nurse, is surprised by Joe, whom she secretly loves. He tells Mary that the real revolution is now, compelling her to act. Both Amina and Vanita are going through labour at the same hospital. Interwoven with celebratory fireworks, they scream as their children are born, Vanita doesn't survive (Mehta, 2012, 00:35:24-00:39:22). Desperate for Joe's love, Mary follows his words and switches Vanita's child with Amina's, sealing their fates (Figure 5).

#### Figure 5

*Saleem and Shiva just before the Switch*



*Note.* Nurse Mary looks upon both babies as the narrator speaks of her own private revolution upon which she switches their ID bracelets and Vanita's child goes to the Sinais while the Sinai's child goes to the destitute widower, Wee Willie Winkie (Mehta, 2012, 00:37:42).

## Aesthetics

The sequence features rapid scene edits, creating a sense of frenzied anticipation for an impending event. While we understand that India's independence is imminent through the fireworks and narration, the music carries a dark and ominous undertone. It accompanies Vanita's death and hints at even darker developments. The rich and saturated earth tones persist throughout. The sequence is briefly interrupted by stock footage of India's independence, adding a touch of historical authenticity.

## Critical Theory

Mary acknowledges her powerlessness and carries out an act of class-based revolution, recognizing the inefficiency of the existing social and political systems (Schaff, 1973). However, the irony of the switch, given Saleem's father is Methwold, undermines its significance. The narrator reveals that her motivation is to symbolise her unrequited love for Joe serving to resolve Joe's dilemma and, effectively, that of the narrator, Saleem, whose story relies on Mary's act (Wolff, 1972, as cited in Russ, 1983).

# Interpretation

"Midnight's Children" beautifully illustrates the hybridity of postcolonial India and the unavoidable nature of such hybridity, exemplified by Saleem's parentage. It delves into the conflict between tradition, British subjugation, and class as India emerges from centuries of British rule, revealing the complexity of modern India's origin. During the red-carpet press line at the Toronto premiere, the film's costume designer, Dolly Ahluwalia, an Indian national, acknowledged that the film increased her awareness of India's history (FilmicafeMedia, 2013). However, the film itself does little to challenge dominant Western cultural values and beliefs.



# Conclusion

In conclusion, "Midnight's Children" strives to convey the postcolonial masterpiece of the novel but succumbs to the challenges of film adaptations, where the intricacies of the novel can be overshadowed by the nature of mass-market cinema, prioritizing visual storytelling over textual depth. Regrettably, this results in unintentional depictions of subjugated women that reinforce contemporary gender stereotypes. Additionally, the film's fantastical elements and aesthetics further cement the postcolonial 'Othering' of India as a realm of magic and mystery, simplifying the profound complexity shaped by its colonial past. The script, lacking the novel's depth, reduces the story to a visually appealing travel brochure.

# Mid-Project Reflection

The most beneficial activity was in week six when the lecturer presented videos, and the class identified applicable critical theories from a list. Quickly, we all grasped various critical theory elements, making the case study analysis more manageable by separating the complexity of each critical theory from identifying applicable theories to the video. Before this exercise, I felt anxious, struggling with the volume of research material, theory debates, and organizing the analysis of my selected media text.

Week four was pivotal, focusing on postcolonialism, the central theme of my selected text. It was essential for me to critically examine the imposition of an external, dominant culture on a subservient one, given my heritage as a descendant of a historical imperialist empire (Tobin, 2020). The most significant pre-class activity during that week was the Shifting Representations Padlet exercise, which led me to discover "Midnight's Children." I had come across about a dozen potential films related to postcolonialism, but "Midnight's Children" and another caught my eye. "Midnight's Children" captivated me, perhaps due to personal connections, such as my childhood friend Asit Patel or a past infatuation with a Hindu girl during my senior year of high school, where I briefly intervened in her arranged marriage including a very awkward, yet delicious home cooked dinner with her parents.

Deciding on "Midnight's Children" [the film] as my media text, I had two main tasks: watching the film at least twice and developing an academic interpretation. The latter was greatly aided by lectures on the novel from Michael Moir at Georgia Southwestern State University (2023). These lectures offered a critical perspective, facilitating my analysis, research, and deepening my understanding of the source text.

An inspiring but indirectly related article by Robin Dembroff (2018) led to a critical analysis of women in "Midnight's Children." During a class discussion about societal coding, Dembroff's statement, "...but I replied, with my female-coded voice. His demeanour shifted completely." (2018, para. 26), made me realize that the female characters in the film, especially Vanita, employed coded behaviours to navigate situations.

Moir's lectures introduced me to Dr. Masood Raja, a Pakistani-American and former associate professor of postcolonial literature at the University of North Texas. He offered a firsthand perspective on life in Pakistan and possessed extensive knowledge of postcolonial theory and both the novel and film, "Midnight's Children." Dr. Raja's insights enhanced my ability to critically assess what I perceived as significant shortcomings in the film adaptation. They also deepened my appreciation for India's achievements in the contemporary world (Dr. Masood Raja, 2021). As Dr. Raja explained, the novel delves into the hybrid nature of postcolonial India and its intricate plural culture intertwined with its colonial past. However, the film takes a more superficial approach to this topic, inadvertently reinforcing the issues of postcolonialism rather than shedding light on them.

I'm encountering difficulties in locating the origins of critical theories, such as Edward Said's contributions to postcolonial theory in his book, "Orientalism." Some of the reading links, like Said's, on the course's unit site redirect to a main page on the EBSCO database, making it challenging to access the source. I'm postponing some of this research until later stages as I focus on the main aspects of analysis.

# Project-completion Reflection

## Appraisal

I'm encouraged by the depth of the case study and research. Opting for a media text outside the provided list has led to a robust critical analysis of the film. Notably, the film, despite being based on a seminal postcolonial novel, seemed to conceal much of its nuanced themes beneath Hollywood conventions.

While the analysis focused on only three sequences, it necessitated an understanding of the entire film's context, and to a lesser extent, the novel's context, resulting in a considerable scope. The abundance of applicable critical theories, analyses of Rushdie's writings, and of the source novel, added to the wealth of available research. Given the limited word count, the case study effectively integrated the research, although further insights could be uncovered with additional research time.

I've enhanced my APA formatting skills by including full captions for the analysed film sequences and ensuring proper indenting throughout the report and references, surpassing my previous submission. My research skills have also improved, enabling me to identify potential sources through various methods rather than relying solely on subject-based searches in the library portal. These improvements were particularly crucial due to the tight timeline for this assessment alongside my external commitments.

## Challenges

Editing poses the most formidable challenge in my academic journey. It's not so much the final editing process, but rather the editing of my thoughts and my analytical approach. The issue stemmed from my choice of media text with its extensive scope and a wide array of research materials derived from the film adaptation's source novel. Even after identifying the critical theories I intended to apply, I kept stumbling upon additional relevant theories, such as sexology and intersectionality, feeling

compelled to address each one. The real challenge here lies in maintaining conciseness and adhering to the prescribed word count, rather than embarking on an endeavour that resembles a doctoral thesis.

When delving into extensive topics like feminist theory, the sheer volume of available material becomes overwhelming. I often found myself getting lost in the wealth of information, partly due to my genuine interest in the subject matter and partly because I wanted to define my own internal theory and thus felt the need to comprehend all the preceding theories, even though it was beyond the scope of the assessment.

Locating primary or seminal sources presented another formidable challenge. While I was confident that my target source was from a specific author, such as Edward Said, accessing their core work demanded a significant amount of time. I would often find dozens of resources citing the original text but was challenged to locate the original text itself, for example, Said's "Orientalism".

My other notable challenge was time. I efficiently managed my schedule, considering my external commitments over the four weeks from the first assessment to this one. While this approach did exert substantial pressure toward the end of the assessment period, I successfully fulfilled all my external commitments while meeting the assessment deadline effectively.

## Future goals

I received initial feedback on the concept and idea from the course coordinator, and I was pleased to solicit that feedback as an objective following the first assessment. Moreover, despite my apprehensions about the scope of work I was about to undertake, I found encouragement in the feedback from my peers. While the fear was not unfounded, it transformed into an enjoyable challenge, in line with our lecturer's belief that learning happens when we are having fun.

As I move forward, exploring additional methods for organizing my thoughts and research will be a crucial step in enhancing how I record and structure my research, ultimately improving the assessment's overall layout. While the Google Slide outline provided in week five was a good starting

point, transitioning to a more dynamic tool, like Trello, can further boost my efficiency. Although I already extensively use OneNote, its limitations in terms of notebook, page, and subpage dimensions prompt me to consider other options, such as a mind mapping tool.

Looking ahead, my goal for the next assessment is to submit work to both the course coordinator and the lecturer at an earlier stage. However, due to my tightly packed schedule, it was not feasible to have a substantial piece ready for review with a reasonable lead time (e.g., a full week). This will remain a target for the next assessment.

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