

Midnight's Children: An Expedition from the Novel to the Film

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Adaptation is an integral part of literature in which one genre is transformed into the same or the another. The person who adapts any literary product generally adds or deletes, maybe something or maybe many things, from the original and recreates a new original proving Linda Serger's statement, "...adaptation is a new original", right.

DeWitt Bodeen claims that, "Adapting literary works to film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood."

The concept of the transfer of a novel into a feature film is known as 'Novel into Film'. It is considered in modern western culture as a type of derivative work. Popular novels are frequently adapted into films to take advantage of the popularity of the written literature. The reason is to reach the audience easily in order to make commercial benefit. Obviously, the more successful the source novel is, the more likely it is to attract a larger audience. By now many novels have already been converted into films but there is still no definitive theory of adaptation, thus the critics and scholars ponder over adaptation, yet cannot seem to agree on what makes an adaptation a success or a failure. On successfully observing both the genres without any prejudices, the observer can realise that the change is a new creativity that also helps in better understanding of the texts.

The modifications that have been adopted in the course of adaptation of *Midnight's Children* does also deal with the changes in the movies from the novels based on filmmakers' views, the change in time of the release of each genre and even the change in the social scene in which each was made.

Midnight's Children is filled with exciting and fun factors. The love story where Saleem's grandfather catches his first glimpse of his wife through a hole in a sheet – 'the perforated sheet', the swapping of babies at birth, Jamila's singing, the villainous politician razing slums and forcibly sterilising the poor, the location changes from idyllic Kashmir to cosmopolitan Bombay to political Delhi, Saleem's unspeakable sister-love, the supernatural powers of the midnight's children. Rushdie's incredible sense of humour decorates the book. The characters are idiosyncratic and delightful while the plots provide unending entertainment due to its twists and turns. Everything about the novel is larger than life.

In 2012 Deepa Mehta directed Salman Rushdie's Booker Prize winning novel *Midnight's Children* with the same title. By that time, many critics had opined that turning a novel like *Midnight's Children* was an impossible task. Even Rushdie admitted the fact after the release of the movie.

Mehta, an intelligent filmmaker, took a bold decision to adapt *Midnight's Children* into a movie but with no intention to turn the book into an extravaganza. Trying to articulate her vision of the film, Mehta said she wanted to combine wide shots with tight shots, an alternating of opening and constriction of the lens, to film the more realistic and the magical or absurd events in the same film. She insisted that the magical elements will be classy, not showy, subtle, not over the top, a blend of both lyrical and classical elements.

In the journey from the novel to the movie, *Midnight's Children* bypasses many plots and remains faithful to many. At the very beginning, the episode of Padma being a faithful audience to Saleem's story is replaced by direct narration but the episode of the famous perforated sheet remains faithful to a good deal.

Adam and Naseem have comparatively become smaller characters in the movie. Thus, Tai turns into a character of an unrecognisable youth in the movie and the episode of Naseem's breaking of silence after a gap of three long years is omitted.

As Ahmed and Amina directly shift to Bombay, the part in which Amina saves Lifafa from being killed by the mob and Lafifa's cousin Shri Ramram Seth making mystic prophesies about Amina's son fail to get a place in the movie.

Even Saleem's prowess in digging deep into people's minds evades in the motion format. In the movie, Saleem has the power to get connected to the midnight's children only, and his power to get into anyone's mind is missing. Thus, Saleem's one-sided love with Evie Burns as well as his attempt to push into Evie's mind is lost. Similarly, the episode of using his mental abilities to follow Amina around the town to discover her affair with Nadir is replaced by a monotonous observation through overhearing.

The movie tries to keep Saleem's image clear enough and therefore the scene in which Saleem sees his mom, Amina, masturbating; while reciting the name of a man who is not Saleem's father, and Saleem having a glance of his mother's butt while she is about to pee; is reduced to a scene where Saleem watches his mother being passionate and taking the name of her former lover.

Unlike the text where Saleem is hospitalised for a cut in his fingers, Saleem in the motion genre is hospitalised soon after a teacher badly punishes him. Then after, in both the formats, Saleem's parents discover that Saleem is not their biological son.

The entire episode of Saleem being sent to live with his filmmaker uncle and movie-star aunt is replaced by the episode where Saleem is sent to his aunt, Emerald, whose husband, Zulfikar, is Pakistani Army's one of the supreme officers. And unlike the text, Saleem becomes youth in Pakistan in the movie. Thus, instead of travelling to Pakistan with his family, Saleem reunites with them in Karachi. But, from his journey from childhood till youth, Saleem was alone, with no friends, except the friends of his mind – the midnight's children. The irony remains that in the text, Saleem fails to connect with the midnight's children while he was in Pakistan.

In Pakistan, Jamila becomes famous as a singer as in the original genre, but Ahmed fails to enjoy moderate success making bath linens in the movie.

The movie doesn't agree to emancipate the feeling of incest in Saleem, like in the novel. Therefore, his love for Jamila and his unnecessary justification towards a love relationship between both of is erased from the motion format.

In the movie, Saleem undergoes a nasal surgery not because he gets a severe sinus infection, like in the novel, but just because Ahmed forcibly makes that happen. But similar to the text, Saleem realises that he has lost his power of telepathy, but in its place, he is endowed with a powerful sense of smell where he can even smell the perfume of new love.

The text shows the revolt of the midnight's children against Saleem in the lines

... that same night, the children of midnight launched a concerted assault on me, I had no defence. They attacked on a broad front and from every direction, accusing me of secrecy, prevarication, high-handedness, egotism; my mind, no longer a parliament chamber, became the battleground on which they annihilated me. No longer 'big brother Saleem', I listened helplessly while they tore me apart; ... Even Parvati-the-witch, for so long my fondest supporter, lost patience with me at last. 'O, Saleem,' she said, 'God knows what that Pakistan has done to you; but you are badly changed.' (414)

But the movie rejects the idea of any sort of revolution by the midnight's children against the protagonist.

Unlike the novel, the movie shows that in the air raid even Jamila dies along with other family members of Saleem by leaving him all alone. But being faithful to the text, the movie keeps Saleem aloof from his memory for a while, including his name, and sends him to fight for Pakistan in the East Pakistan region.

The entire jungle scene is cut short in the movie where there lies no existence of magical realism as there remain no ghosts or spirits.

But like the text, in the movie, Parvati and Saleem meet when the Indian Army comes into Dacca with a triumphant parade. That's when Parvati reminds Saleem of his name. She conceals him inside her basket of invisibility and smuggles him back to India.

At times, the novel shows Saleem in a grey shade. May it be his attitude towards Shiva that makes the midnight's children revolt against him or may it be his incest attitude towards Jamila; the reader finds it difficult to sympathise wholeheartedly with the protagonist.

But, in the movie, Saleem's character has been made extremely sympathetic. May it be the teacher's heinous punishment or loss of entire family; Ahmed's increased hatred or torture by Shiva and other cops during emergency; criticism by fellow Pakistani soldiers or his loneliness in Pakistan; even his costume and makeup, everything makes the viewer sympathise with Saleem.

Most importantly, the pessimistic end of the text that heads towards the dark moment ahead takes the shape of optimism in the movie. As every literary product is a product of its time, so is the case with the novel as well as the film. The novel was released in 1981. And in the past decade, Indians had witnessed the fury of war from both the fronts, had suffered from the havoc of emergency and forced mass-sterilisation. The fate of India was unpredictable during that time, and the same is symbolised in the novel. After 31 years in 2012, India had become one of the most powerful countries in the world, both in military power and economic strength. Therefore, the movie, being a child of its time, is decided to be optimistic at the end. The pessimistic conclusion is changed into hope for a better future. The suffering and insecurities are overpowered by celebration and happiness.

The novel *Midnight's Children* ends with no hope towards a secured future with the pessimistic lines,

Yes, they will trample me underfoot, the numbers marching one two three, four hundred million five hundred six, reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his, and his who will not be his, until the thousand and first generation, until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died, because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight's children to be both masters and victims of their times, to forsake privacy and be sucked into the annihilating whirlpool of the multitudes, and to be unable to live or die in peace. (647)

But the movie replaces pessimism with the optimistic lines "A child and a country were born at midnight, once upon a time. Great things were expected of us both; the truth has been less glorious than the dream. But we have survived and made our way and our lives have been in spite of everything - acts of love."

Despite a number of transformations and interpolations, the film helps in understanding the novel in a better way. Being an adaptation of the novel, the film stands on its own right as a distinct literary product, but it still helps us in understanding the novel clearly because through the movie, we get concrete figures for the abstract pictures that dwell in our imagination while reading the novel.

Linda Serger, in her book *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film* rightly states that "the adaptor looks for the balance between preserving the spirit of the original and creating a new form."

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