

## TRANSCREATING THE HISTORY: SALMAN RUSHDIE'S *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* AS A CINEMATIC NARRATIVE

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### **Abstract:**

*Film adaptation of literary texts has been persistent and popular rewriting throughout the ages. Literature and films have created a fusion ever since the earliest days of cinema and films are considered to be the most dominant art form of twentieth century. The aim of the study is to critically analyze film adaptation of classics which assist in generating the interest of younger generation in literature and help in developing analytical thinking skills. The main interest lies in analyzing how Deepa Mehta's *Midnight's Children* (2012) reflects the volatile trial of past independent era vis-à-vis Salman Rushdie's breakthrough novel *Midnight's Children* (1981). Likewise, an exploration of the struggle for identity and the relation of personal life to that of nation's history have been examined through the comparative analysis of cinematic and original text. The study also examines cinematic techniques adapted by the writer himself, thereby assisting in its transformation. Adaptation theory has been employed highlighting whether cinema is the reinvention and rebirth of the original creativity or not. The result will be based on whether this tendency of adaptation assist in blurring the hierarchy that exists between two art forms and in negating the critical opinion which disregards film as inferior.*

**Keywords:** *Adaptation, cinematic text, history, narrative technique.*

### **Introduction**

Adaptation as the process of transcreating original text into target text has been done since centuries; it has become a need for younger generation to know about value of Literature classics in the contemporary decade. When one delves into adaptations of original or source text, the pertinent question that strikes is how well the incident has been justified through its adaptation. One must look deeper into the relationship between the text and the film while analyzing adaptation process. Novels, being written form of narrative, use language to influence society whereas, films, being visual medium relies on descriptions to perform the significant actions. Academic criticism and journalistic survey call adaptations as unoriginal, subsidiary, derivative, “belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior” (Naremore,p.6). In a similar manner some think that adaptation does not provide the real essence of the original text and moves towards a new path, deriving from what has been said in the books, as “The debate on the cinematic adaptations of literary works... dominated by the question of fidelity to the source... prioritize the literary originals over their film versions” (The contemporary dilemmas, p.3-19). Adaptations marks its beginning transformed from Shakespeare in the 1600s film adaptation towards the present decades when page has been transformed into screen. Many critics like Aeschylus, Goethe and Da Ponte adapted various texts into the new form of work of Literature with visual references. Although most of criticism has been going on film adaptation prevails in our contemporary scenario. “Adaptations were seen by most critics as inferior to adapted texts, as “minor,” “subsidiary,” “derivative,” missing the emblematic richness of the books and lost their spirit” (*A Theory of Adaptation*, pp12-13). Despite the fact that most of work has been adapted from classics are not faithfully provides all information that has been portray in the text still adaptation exist. *Midnight's Children* as a “Booker of Bookers” it has been adapted thrice adaptations impinge upon the fact

that it is a significant source text that needs to be adapted. "Cinematic as well as theatrical adaptations have proved to be an effective media of transposing meaning across historical times and cultures...making it a more inclusive enquiry". (Simran Preet Kaur, 1). Adaptation makes a streak of unity between techno world and literary world. The scenes in film help to improve understanding of the thoughts of adaptation of work in cinematic description. Earlier folk tales and story tales were ideal method of storytelling. But these days with the arrival of technology the simplicity of accesses to stories is only a mode of retold the story. Adaptation as genre are now being analyzed as product of imaginative creativity trapped up in the ongoing rotate of inter-textual transformation, with no clear point of origin. Adaptation as new art form followed everywhere that is why these days in schools visual classes are introduced so that the students will develop the tendency of reading the text right from beginning onwards. Adaptation are so much a part of western culture but still recognize the epical as well as Classics literature which is the need of present generation.

The adaptation theory is employed to examine four significant scenes both from the Cinematic text and to project how the movie reflects the reinvention and the rebirth of the Nation, thereby shaping it into something new. The research paper is analyzed from the perspective of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) which claims that all genres provide some significant information in their own domain be it verbal, written or visual one. The adaptation of a literary text is significant effort at studying, understanding and interpreting the contemporary events and situation. While undertaking the task of adaptation of a text to film or one art form to another art form "Transposing to another medium, or even moving within the same one, always means change or, in the language of the new medium, reformatting... And there will be always to be both gains and losses" (Stam 62). Theatrical and Cinematic adaptations have proved to be a powerful medium of transporting meaning which gives effective side of historical times and culture. Adaptation helps to make text alive during translation and translation is not giving one meaning, repetition or paraphrased, moderately "it is an engagement with original text that makes us to see in different ways (Walter Benjamin, 77)". Both Theatrical and Cinematic adaptation of classics and epics prove to be well-versed mirroring the image of culture and society. Adaptation of Classics is rooted in all cultures, be it ancient or modern. Even when the plot sets up, the characters, the dialogues are modified to suit a diverse mass culture, the human consciousness imitate exactly. Double definition of adaptation "as product and as a process is... to address the various dimensions of the broader phenomenon of adaptation (Linda Hutcheon's, 24)". There have been various events which admired adaptation of classics subverts the original work with altered edition. The text is attracted to carry on important theme of the book, while adding the elements that do not provide the objective of adaptation. It is because of these accepted venues that film adaptation have rewrite that gives the classics ground of popular culture. But still strong and serious words hit "film adaptation of literature "tampering", "interfering", "violation"(McFarlane, 12)". It is required to consider whether the adaptation manifests as distortion of the literary classic or makes a new addition. An adaptation as interpretation does not have to capture all the nuances of the books difficulty but it has to remain a work of art, an independent, coherent, and credible creation with its own subtitles of meanings. The decline of the reading of the original work of art has been common but adaptation moves people to new route.

### **Research Objectives**

The present study has following objectives:

- a. To assess how text acts as a mediocre assisting the younger generation to absorb the complexities of narrative.
- b. To explore various incidents that has been adapted from novel to film and also to justify both the art forms as significant.
- c. To analyze how far the struggle for identity and relation of personal life to that of nation has been constructed in film adaptation of the novel.
- d. To examine how far the cinematic text is an emblem of original text truly reflecting the art of

characterization.

### Critical Analysis

Creation of cinematic techniques makes Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* as one of the favorite texts of the twentieth century. Although it has been adapted three times, firstly in television, next in theatre and finally as film adaptation in 2012 proving to be most recurring way of transcreating nation's history. The impact of cinema on established genre of the literature has become much more prevalent in the present scenario keeping in consideration the narrative techniques employed by the cinematic text. *Midnight's Children* as a magic realistic novel contains diverse elements which make it a cinematic text from the beginning till the end. The novel begins with autobiographical elements infused within the text. Saleem Sinai, the protagonist born at midnight on India's independence with telepathic power, massive and drenched nose having sensitive sense of smell. The novel contains characteristic features of both Bollywood and Hollywood with western concoct in Saleem's characterization suggesting assistance for cinematic text. The narrative consists of historical events in sequence and their connection with Saleem's life, all portrayed in a dramatic and exotic way. *Midnight's Children* as text functions as equivalent to the film as it traces significance and reality of his life. Further, the narrator describes it in a fast paced manner which is equivalent to theatrical effect, reflecting the uniqueness of cinematic text. As the novel moves there is an incident when Saleem comments on his mother's adulterous relationship with Nadir Qasim, which is similar to intricate codes of behaviors between lovers in a cinematic creation. The language of Saleem's narrative also makes it a cinematic text as playfulness in postmodern Literature containing conversational film language is used in the novel through the use of local Indian words. By using local Indian words like Gunda, Chup Amma, Takht etc. the narrator also shows that despite the fact he is living in western community, he is connected to Indian culture and the roots of his forefathers. On the other hand, if one traces the tone of films it is generally escapist and melodramatic which is also present in the novel like corrupt politician, exchange of rich and poor children at the time of birth, dramatic reversals of fortune etc. which have also been a recurring phenomenon in the typical commercial Hindi films. In addition to this, narrating history of nation with the help of a life of a single person also makes narrative technique cinematic which fulfills the desire of encouraging adaptation in the contemporary scenario. *Midnight's Children* as postcolonial text lies between two culture and two different communities. It investigates relationship between reality and imagination and uncovers the true identity of India.

“Modern translation theory argues that translation involves a transaction...an act of both intercultural and inter-temporal communication” (Bassnett, 9). Keeping in cue with the aforesaid, *Midnight's Children* (1981) as postcolonial novel provides accessibility to reader by showing cinematic techniques in novel which strikingly catch the attention of the audience and develops creative thinking amongst the spectators. By portraying his autobiography, Rushdie moves towards nation's history and makes it lifelike with the help of cinematic techniques. The skillful blending of narrator's life and public events are well versified in both the art forms. Both novel and film highlights the important events of nation's history and negate the fact that the adaptation blurs the binaries between the texts. *Midnight's Children* as a historical tale of India revisualizes the catastrophic experiences of the partition in both film and the novel. The cinematic and the original text as a mixture of deep seated visual imagery and political discourse, its power of enlightening the English language with allegory, fable and absolute legalities of Indian writing prepares a striking interference. Salman Rushdie explores lives of three generations: his grandfather, father, and himself with overtly visualizing the history of nation that has been extremely diverse and moves the curiosity of audience towards Literature classics. The novel reconstructs Rushdie's passion for writing his autobiography, re-visiting the nation's past, which allows for the never-ending variety of experiences, cultures and perspectives that create a chronological sequence of the ever concealed and quiet voices of history. Holding a new western concept of film adaptation to Literature classics has increased the strength of the younger generation to know about historical past that has been

earlier found only in books. Likewise, D. Rombes in his essay "The Satanic Verses" (1988) also highlights cinematic techniques of Rushdie which he uses not only to "visual images... but also to shape the narrative" (Rombes, 47). In similar manner Rushdie himself as screenplay writer along with director Deepa Mehta, assisted in the adaptation of the novel into film which has become a recurring theme in Literature and provides a connection between a work of Literature and a work of art. Rushdie himself as a screenplay writer throws a positive light on adaptation. According to him, adapting a work of Literature to film "Everyone accepts that stories and films are different things... source material must be modified, even radically modified, to be effective in the new medium. The only interesting question is how? and how much?" (Rushdie). Because of these reasons Rushdie makes the narrative technique cinematic from beginning till the end of the novel. Writing or constructing India's past that has been somewhere found in history books with his autobiography, Rushdie uses cinematic technique to convince reader to know what had happened in our past. One significant anecdote that reflects Rushdie's narrative technique is when riots quiver the country in the earlier days of independence, he claims, "Close-up of my grandfather's right hand: nails knuckles finger... Clumps of red hair on the exterior edges. Thumb and forefinger pressed together... In short my grandfather was holding a pamphlet" (MC, 36). The use of cinematic technique like close-up in describing his grandfather as a young man trace the elements of Rushdie's style of writing found in the novel. Another important element which is based on structuralism ideology is that of Jallianwala Bagh massacre, "Leaflet newspaper mosque and wall are crying: Hartal! Which is to say, literally speaking, a day of mourning... But this is India in the heyday of the Mahatma, when even language obeys the instructions of Gandhiji, and the word has acquired... Hartal-April 7... Gandhiji has decreed that the whole of India, on that day, come to a halt" (MC, 37) Rushdie employs the cinematic techniques in the massacre to influence and have a long lasting impact on the audience through visual images. Another prominent instance in the novel is the depiction of coincident wanderings of Saleem's parents in Delhi; "One journey began at a fort: one should have ended at a fort... One foretold the future; the other settled its geographical location... and here is Amain Sinai beneath the high walls of the Red For... (MC, 104)" Also, the novel vividly portrays the moment when Saleem's mother meets Nadir-Qasim, her lover after many years of her marriage and the similar incident is uttered in extremely romantic way where couples cannot kiss but they accomplish it representatively by kissing the items, "Two strangers, each bearing a screen-name... hands raising a half-empty glass of lovely Lassi... lips pressing gently, nostalgically against the mottled glass; my mother's hands handling the glass to her Nadir-Qasim;... to the opposite side of the glass..." (MC, 301). Another incident portrayed towards the end of the novel also contains cinematic feature by showing parallelism between the watching of a film and narrating the story, "Reality is a question of perspective; the further you get from the past... it inevitably seems more and more incredible..." (MC, 229)"

The four incidents both from film and novel lay emphasis upon the fact that the literary essence, thematic matter, characters and conflicts in creative recitation of filmmakers opens a new route that reaches a wide range of audience. If one looks at the plot structure of the book and the film, the cinematic form faithfully visualizes all scenes that are relevant. Beginning from 'perforated sheet' till 'Abracadabra', all adhere at establishing that film acts a simulacra of the novel in requisites of scene order and insertion of all to facilitate what happened "once upon a time" (MC, 3). Further, the novel depicts the occurrence of different wars concurrently with the life of Saleem Sinai which serves as a great source of cinematic fodder. Rushdie's narration of Nation's history and Saleem's quest for identity run parallel in both text and movie. Both the art forms began with the narration by the protagonist as, "I was born in city of Bombay once upon a time... At the arrival of India's independence, on the stroke of midnight, I trembled forth into the world". (MCF 00: 33. MC, 3) Next the scene gives description of Kashmir in 1917 and reveals that "my life began on the shore of Dal Lake in Kashmir" (MCF 1:04). The link among the author and spectators is to know well and unbreakable throughout authorial vanity. Moreover, the bottom character of the novel



Boatman Tai gives first priority to Indian language than using English in order to accomplish the outcome of linguistics societal practice. Rushdie himself writes an autobiography that is related to post independent era and has been divided into three books: "Perforated Sheet", "The fisherman's pointing finger" and "The Buddha" respectively. As the story begins with perforated sheet and ends with Buddha's description, it provides a newness that gives knowledge of nation's history, man quest for his identity and religious awareness. The novel and film both represents the similar struggle for identity and relation of personal life to Nation history. Adaptation of such type of novel which is an allegory of India assembles people to know about their history through the life of a single person. Another important scene in the film that gives an exceptional information when his physiognomy is compared the "Indian Deccan peninsula hanging down" and on both side of face birthmark stains to geographic contours of Western and Eastern Pakistan by his teacher while he utter "In the face of ugly ape you don't see the whole map of India?..See! The Deccan peninsula hanging down...the birth mark on the right is East Pakistan and this horrible stain is West." (MCF 1:01:00)

One of the most dramatic scene in the movie is the exchange of babies at the time of birth when Mary is immersed in the feelings of her lover who proceeds a task declares, "Let the rich be poor and the poor, rich". The film highlights, "Two babies in her hands. Two lives in her power. She did it for Joe. For her own private revolutionary act. Love me Joe..." (MCF 38:36).

One of the most significant events in the film and the novel is the death of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru followed by the succession of Indira Gandhi. The scene in the text as well as movie portrays the grief and seriousness of the incident quite vividly. The scene is not only self explanatory but also depicts the grim reality of Indian politics. Rushdie and Mehta remain successful in projecting the dark reality with utmost grace and conviction. "The emergency, everyone called it... four hundred and twenty of us stood blinking in the sunlight and then dispersed into the healing privacy of the crowd..." (MCF 2:05:00, MC, 167)

The novel and the film both moves in parallel direction, even the prominent characters like Saleem and Shiva continue remains uniformed the whole time. The discussion between them at the end of the film attests to this information:

Saleem: I stole your life.

Shiva: Bastard! Rich Boy...I am leaving to get your life away. Bit by bit. Similar to you took mine. (MCF 2:04:53)

Even though the character of Padma in the film is not the part of the novel, it still maintains uniformity between the novel and the film. Padma's surprised voice is restored into declarative sentences by the narration of storyteller which damned by various critics as of gender perception, claiming it to be because of the authorial self-image. The original text has an open end where Padma is doubtful about what happens to Shiva, "To tell the truth, I lied about Shiva's death...I'm still terrified of him" (MC, 510). On the other hand, in the film, he dies at the last part, portraying the truth that films are seldom release for interpretation.

### **Saleem/ Shiva vis-à-vis Shiva/Saleem: Changed Identities**

The main characters of the novel Saleem and Shiva both remain constant with film and novel from beginning to the end. One of the nurses Mary exchanged the children for the sake pleasing her lover Joseph D'Costa. Although Shiva is too born at the same point in time as Saleem, the latter is significantly honored than the previous because of his family rank. Saleem, an Anglo-Indian novelist, essayist and protagonist of the novel born at the moment of Britishers' departure from India was sanctified with the telepathic powers having drenched nose with responsive sense of smell. He comes across as a highly aware narrator who aims to modify self-image and is a vital part of the allegorical depiction of India's Independence. He is born, along with one other child, at the accurate minute of India's Independence. His individuality, however, is switched at confinement. As a result, he is raised by wealthy family in Bombay, at the same time as his counterpart and future opponent, Shiva, is raised in scarcity. "He is referred to variously as The

Snotnose, Stainface, Badly, Sniffer, Buddha...” (MC, 3) Being born at midnight hour of independence, he was subsequently engaged in the recreation of momentous part in the history of India. His sufferings begin from the time of his birth when one of the nurse namely, Mary alters his nametag with Shiva, another midnight child. This action leads to various changes in his life. He is associated with the Indian past by diverse means of relation, through several relationships, both accurate as well as allegorical. Saleem does not give any impression to require individuality; rather various identities force down upon him and represent the disintegration and diversity of the country and the intermingling of societal, spiritual, local and regional identities which mirrors Indian experience.

### **The 'ignored' character of Padma**

Padma, as an excited listener and one of the significant character in the novel acts as a narrator as well as Saleem's beloved. Despite the fact she is nowhere found in the film, she plays crucial role in the novel to fulfill her role as a confidante. Serving as a key for the way the reader response to Saleem's tale, Padma behaves in a similar manner as King Sharyar does to Scherherazade's tales in *A Thousand and One Nights*. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* explore the leading female character Padma, a listener of Saleem Sinai's autobiographical recitation which is not found in the cinematic narrative. She loves Saleem from the core of heart and performs all kinds of actions for the sake of gaining love. But Saleem on the other hand is not aware of her feelings towards him and is not even thankful for sacrificing her life for him. Padma is accessible as a stereotype, active and confidante for Saleem. Padma as a character is distant from reading and writing and publicized as an uneducated woman in the novel who is in love with a man who berates her. Occasionally Saleem is also seen insulting her and she utters her pain by saying “So then I thought how to go back to this man who does not know love...only does foolish writerty?” (MC: 267). However, in the literary text her character becomes important to unleash Saleem's character traits and adds layer to Saleem's thoughts and actions, which is absent in the cinematic version of the text.

### **Conclusion**

Concise glances at the scenes analyzed above showcase that *Midnight's Children* negates hierarchical divisions and establish distinctions between art forms by applying both literary and cinematic devices. The language of Saleem Sinai resound what Rushdie as a *sui generis* aims at which is a ground-breaking similarity between the text and its tailored description. The novel and film contains similar events which are parallel to each other and both are significant in their own domain but still films easily imbibe the spectators. Adaptation as “reading, reconstructing, translation, transmutation, dialogization...” (Stam). Film as mediocre assisting younger generations to absorb the complexities of narrative also compares and contrasts in order to give an idea of memory scape. Emphasizing upon various incidents that has been adapted from novel to film makes it easy to experience the hidden history of a place by listening to the memories of inhabitants with the help of visual images. Although, the transition in adaptation process takes place from recent years, it imitates the already existing material “what happens therefore, when the filmiest undertakes the adaptation of novel, given the inevitable mutation, is...is a kind of paraphrase of the novel” (*Novels into Films*, p.62). Therefore adaptation of *Midnight's Children* tends to emotive individuals that the Cinematic narrative in the novel negates the idea that there exists hierarchy between two different medium and thus makes it open handed for cinematic adaptation.

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