

Midnight's Children

Salman Rushdie has been known as one of the most prominent writers of English prose since his breakout novel of 1981, "Midnight's Children." A critical (Booker Prize winner) and popular success, the book has been considered as a film project for years, but its vast canvas of the subcontinent and its real/surreal qualities made it a daunting prospect for the screen. It took more than 30 years, but finally Rushdie himself came up with a screenplay, and the project found a director attuned to the subject, Deepa Mehta.

How does it come off as a film after all these years? Exotic, yes; handsome? indeed; epic sweep? Sort of. Storytelling? Only dutiful.

With Rushdie himself providing the over voice narration, the tale begins in Kashmir in 1917, with the courtship and marriage of the narrator's grandparents. The grandfather, a doctor (Aadam Aziz), establishes a practice in Agra and has three daughters, one of whom, Mumtaz (Shahana Goswami), marries and is due to deliver a child at midnight on 15 August 1947, the moment of India's independence from Great Britain. The narrator and protagonist of the story, Saleem Sinai, is born at the stroke of midnight, along with several hundred other India newborns.

However, a nurse named Mary (Seema Biswas) switches Saleem, the offspring of a lowly street-singer, with the Sinai's actual child so he grows up with the well-off Sinais, cared for by the now guilty Mary who swapped him in the first place. As a boy, Saleem discovers that he can mentally envision all the children who were born on that stroke of midnight, and all of whom have individual magical powers. These midnight children include his eventual nemesis, Shiva.

Years later, with Saleem a teenager (played by Satya Bhabha), nurse Mary confesses her crime, crushing the family and completely alienating Saleem's stern father. The young man is sent off to Pakistan to live with his uncle General Zulfika (Rahul Bose) who is preparing a coup on the eve of the 1965 Indo-Pakistan War. Saleem eventually becomes enmeshed in the 1971 breakaway of East Pakistan as Bangladesh and is able to escape with the help of another midnight child, Parvati (Shriya Saran).

The summary above is only the barest of outlines for what is this movie's abundance of plot. That very narrative fecundity, in fact, in which the novel relishes, makes for some rough going for a film that perhaps tries to cover too much in its relatively languid two hours and 20 minutes.

Deepa Mehta, too, would seem a sound choice to helm this kind of grand Indian tableau. Born in India, she made her way to Canada in the early 1970's, but she has kept her film-making focus on her homeland, particularly in her trilogy of Indian stories, "Fire," "Earth," and the splendid "Water" (the last released in 2005). She was able to conjure up her Indian story by using locations in Sri Lanka. Still, faced with the Rushdie screenplay, Mehta may have felt a bit compliant in going along rather too faithfully with what the novelist himself had written.

A particular example: the novel's rich fantasy sequences, mingled with real events, are fully acceptable and flow seamlessly on the page, with contemporary readers accustomed to the devices of "magic realism." In the film, however, these

sequences appear clumsy and out of tone with the rich evocation of Indian life, photographed convincingly throughout the rest of the picture. Evidence of this is the fact that the fantasy sequences are used less and less as the movie progresses, underlining their wispieness and relative unimportance.

Bottom line: if you are looking for a suggestive introduction to another part of our world, give "Midnight's Children" a tumble. If you are looking for a fine cinematic mingling of reality and fantasy, rent "The Life of Pi."
(*The film, in English, Hindi, and Urdu, runs 149 min.*)

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