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Midwives

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Midwives

Abstract

This is a film review of *Midwives* (2022), directed by Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing.

Keywords

Islamophobia, Rohingya Muslims, Myanmar, Buddhism, Genocide

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Author Notes

Sheila J. Nayar teaches at the University of Utah, in the department of Film and Media Arts. Her research interests include the interplay of narrative and phenomenology, especially in the context of orality and alphabetic literacy. She is the author of several books on that subject, including *Cinematically Speaking: The Orality-Literacy Paradigm for Visual Narrative* and *The Sacred and the Cinema: Reconfiguring the "Genuinely" Religions Film*, as well as articles in such journals as *Film Quarterly*, *PMLA*, and the *Journal of the Academy of Religion*. Currently, she is working on a book project on secularism and Hindi popular cinema.



Midwives (2022), dir. By Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing

If film opens windows to other worlds, Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing's feature documentary *Midwives* daringly and sensitively opens one for us to a region otherwise shuttered to virtually everyone outside it: the Rakhine State of Myanmar. While we may have all seen footage of the one million Rohingya refugees who fled to Bangladesh because of ethnic cleansing, how many of us have been privy to—or have any real sense of—what lies on the Burmese side of the border? As a native of the region, Snow Hnin Ei Hlaing was able to travel there, where she filmed—not without risk—at the height of the conflict over the course of several years.

But *Midwives* is neither travelogue nor news documentary. Rather, it wants to help us make sense of the Rohingya crisis via citizens who are themselves trying to grapple with the events in their state, with the politics thereby unfolding through the personal. The lens is directed primarily on two midwives: Hla, the roughly-hewn but eminently likable Buddhist owner of a ramshackle clinic that continues to serve Muslim clientele, and Nyo

Nyo, her young and enterprising Muslim apprentice, who will eventually start up her own clinic (cum-grocery store-cum-tailor shop).

The film is a creative exercise in juxtapositions, perhaps as much from necessity as art. It opens with a bird's-eye view of a Burmese landscape freighted with myth and nostalgia—of foggy mountains pinnacled by Buddhist temples. But this gives swift and appropriately deflating way to goings-on on the ground: motorcycle traffic, dusty roads, pedestrian monks, and a woman in labor being brought in a bicycle sidecar to Hla's clinic. Whatever beauty we may find in the ensuing birth of the newborn Muslim boy, it soon yields to a street demonstration, with a speakerphone pronouncing (amid some protestors in the recognizable saffron robes of monks), "Get out, get out! Terrorist Muslims! We won't live with them!"

The "them" can even bleed micro-aggressively into the clinic's environment. "We have three Buddhist patients," Hla's husband says, "the rest are 'them.'" And in spite of Hla's clear pride and affection for Nyo Nyo, she also effortlessly and repeatedly calls Nyo Nyo "kalar"—darkie—and can caustically lash out if Nyo Nyo displays any ineptitude, "You couldn't be my clerk, bitch." *Midwives* does not shirk from the ambivalent edges of the women's relationship, but this makes the film even more compelling, capturing as it does the complex and oft contradictory nature of human beings. After all, Hla also urges Nyo Nyo, "If conflict comes you need to know how to birth babies"—not to mention, that Hla is taking serious risks in being a "Muslim supporter." Upon their listening to news of a recent protest, Hla even suggests to Nyo Nyo that the Muslims should protest. After all, life for "them" is hardly easy: beyond having to endure the growing hostility—"It's time to cleanse this area of Muslims," the sloganeering continues, "Remove these barriers so we

can burn this Muslim village”—the Rohingya minority in their area is not allowed to travel or go to the city; they are denied identification cards; jobless men now earn what they can selling popsicles (thanks in large part to Hla); and Muslim children can no longer attend the government school, which is why Nyo Nyo’s husband is now teaching the ones of their village ad hoc.

It’s often in what seems like mundane downtime, with the women bantering inside the pistachio-walled clinic, that we learn of recent flare-ups, or a temple on that idyllic Burmese hillside now going up in smoke. These come by way of television, smart phone, and radio, as do, too, the state’s “cultural songs,” which Nyo Nyo despises. And no wonder, what with creepily prosaic lyrics like, “Our state will definitely become independent. . . . We must protect and fight for our state.” Thus is the wider crisis funneled through and commented upon by these midwives, which prevents the film from losing its humanity to the cold face of reportage. Besides, the bombs can also strike dangerously close to home, as in the case of Nyo Nyo’s village. By that time in the years-long stretch that the film documents, the fight between Muslims and Buddhists has shifted into one between armies. Hla’s response? “We have no weapons so how can we stop them? We go about our business. If we don’t we won’t have food on the table.”

Indeed, when February 2021 arrives and Aung San Suu Kyi is ousted by the Armed Forces who have seized power, the midwives *do* go about with their business. Even more, Nyo Nyo is now also raising another child, a daughter. And it is because of their dedication to their respective businesses that the film ends with a sense not of melancholy but expectation. Nyo Nyo, deservedly proud of having started her own clinic, expresses hope

that one day her daughter will be able to go to the city to study; and that perhaps, one day, she, too, will elect to become a midwife.