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Child of Empire

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Child of Empire

Abstract

This is a review of the VR short film, *Child of Empire* (2022), created by Project Dastaan, which includes the artists Sparsh Ahuja, Erfan Saadati, Stephen Stephenson, and Omi Zola Gupta.

Keywords

Virtual Reality, Partition, Animation, India, Pakistan

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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.



Child of Empire (2022), dir. Project Dastaan

Child of Empire, which provides a “docufiction” VR experience of the 1947 Partition of British India, was inescapably personal for me. My father, who was 16 at that time, was one of the ten million refugees that comprised that largest forced migration in human history. Because his father was a clerk in the railways, their family was able to travel by train, making the journey from their original home in Rawalpindi, now part of Pakistan, to the unknown capital city of New Delhi (with metal trunks against the windows to fend from attack and a requisite stop when my grandmother went into labor with my youngest uncle). Everything they owned perished along the way—including my grandfather. So, you can imagine why *Child of Empire* was one of the first on my list of 2022 Sundance films to screen. As it turned out, I found my experience in the animated environs of Partition altogether disorienting—but not for the reasons one might expect.

Child of Empire initially positions the viewer before a short paper-theater production that offers viewers a swift, if unavoidably simplified history of the events leading up to British India being separated into two free nations, India and Pakistan.

Thereafter, we join two elderly male friends ruminating over tea about their childhood experiences of the actual events of Partition. One is a Muslim whose family migrated to Pakistan by foot, the other a Hindu who reached India by train. As the men reminisce, viewers are physically transported into their experiences. We join travelers who, while bound for India by train, will be massacred en route (with a gas lamp put into our hand to allow us an eerie lighting up of their abstractly rendered corpses). The elderly Hindu swears that, upon surviving that carnage, he saw Krishna dancing on the head of the venomous snake demon Kaliya. Then, we journey alongside those making the interminable trek on foot toward Pakistan, with the exhausted occasionally dropping, their bodies dissolving before our eyes, then transmuting into ascending filaments of Urdu verse. Thus does the film attempt to blend tragedy with poetry, the darkness of traumatic times with the bearable lightness of being. Or, as the elderly men themselves concede, fire has the capacity to ignite but also to illumine.

The story is exceedingly careful to give the Hindu and Muslim “sides” of the story equal weight—not only in terms of length or legitimacy, but also vis-à-vis an elicitation of pathos. This is a film that wants to promote healing—with all adversarial sentiments projected onto the British (though not without a little humor, mind you). At the end of the 16-minute experience, the elderly men will likewise dissolve: into butterflies transported upward, as we hear a mournful song, with filaments of its lines which float all around us (in English, Urdu, and Hindi) revealing the substance of its lament: how these two nations were not supposed to be born of ashes.

The intentions of *Child of Empire* are admirable, to say the least. But there is something disconcertingly amusement park dark ride-ish about the way one is transported

from inside one three-dimensional diorama to another: sometimes by invisible moving car; other times by upward flight or unexpected entry into an alternative space. And when in the aisle of that train—my own father’s train had come a hair’s breadth from enduring a similar outcome—I was too enchanted by the technology to absorb the scene’s evocation of a tragedy. I was more captivated by my abilities to manipulate that gas lamp and, later, by the magic of walking amongst those migrating to Pakistan—because, oh look, a woman in a bullock cart passing me by!—and, oh! I’m rising above the village-cum-map of India (never mind that it’s in a state of CGI conflagration). I was simply too seized by the novelty and conveyance potentials of my new environment to give the tragedy of Partition its due.

Would knowing less about the events of 1947 have mitigated the incongruities of my experience? (I’m not sure.) Was my response the unavoidable byproduct of seeing trauma play out in animated form? (Films like *Waltz with Bashir* lead me not to think so.) Perhaps, then, it was more a consequence of the VR technology’s nascence: My experience of the film was too infused with the same titillating magic and awe that the original spectators of moving images, or photographs or even woodcuts, must have felt—even when what they were looking at was the airship Hindenburg bursting into flames, or Civil War battlefields strewn with corpses, or Albrecht Dürer’s *Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*. In the end, I found myself reflecting most on the numinous powers of a new storytelling form.