

Mogul Mowgli

(Bassam Tariq, 2020)

Component 1, Section C: British Film Since 1995

Core study areas:

- **Key elements of film form**
- **Meaning and response: aesthetics and representations**
- **Contexts**

Specialist study areas:

- **Ideology**
- **Narrative**

Rationale for study: *Mogul Mowgli* is an emotional and often hallucinatory examination of contemporary identity. Zed/Zaheer is a rapper on the brink of success who finds himself torn between his ambitions, his family and his culture – when he falls seriously ill, he goes on a phantasmagorical journey into his own fractured psyche.

STARTING POINTS – Useful sequences and timings:

‘Opening gig and the aftermath’
00:00 – 07:32

‘Culture Clash’ 43:54 – 50:27

CORE STUDY AREAS 1 - STARTING POINTS: Key elements of film form (micro features)

Cinematography

- The director Bassam Tariq uses a variety of film styles to show Zaheer’s experiences, and the different sides of his persona. The opening scenes seem like a music documentary following ‘Zed’ in New York, utilising mobile phone footage. Later, Tariq uses what looks like grainy home movie texture to show Zaheer’s memories and a more arthouse aesthetic to show the ‘inherited’ memories of his father’s train ride.

Mise-en-scène

- One of the key uses of costume in the film is a *sehra*, a headdress worn by a groom during South Asian wedding ceremonies. In the film, this garb is worn by ‘Taba Tek Singh’, a hallucinatory figure that haunts Zaheer during his illness. The cascade of flowers hides the face of this figure, leaving its identity – and meaning – ambiguous. He could symbolise the Pakistani culture that clearly makes Zaheer uncomfortable when he returns to London, but it could also be mocking Zaheer’s marital status and the fact that medical treatment for his condition will make him infertile.

Editing

- Throughout the film, montage editing is used to show the dreams, denials and hallucinations that haunt Zaheer. In the opening sequence, the first thing we see is a mysterious shot of a train interior with feathers floating in the light; this fades into Zed’s performance, giving the impression this ‘inherited’ memory is lurking below the surface of his consciousness.

- In the second sequence, two realist scenes in the hospital juxtapose the approaches of modern and traditional medicine. Between them, Zed performs a rap about being torn between two personas: his twenty-first century, British youthful rapper self and the history of his immigrant parents. Consider why Tariq chose to arrange these scenes in this order. How is this expressing the divisions within Zaheer/Zed's psyche?

Sound

- Zed's performances underpin and often comment on the dramatic action in the realist sections of the film. During a rap at the start of the film, he seems proud and confident about his racial and personal identity: "I spit the truth and it's Brown!" The rap he performs in the second sequence, after his diagnosis, expresses the conflicts within. The doctor's comment about his illness also alludes to this inner schism: "Your body can't recognise itself, so it's attacking itself."
- During the more hallucinatory sequences, the sound design is deliberately loud and distorted, complimenting the intensity of the camerawork.

Performance

- Riz Ahmed's performance was praised by critics for anchoring the clashing and delirious visual elements of the film. At times, Zaheer can be an unlikeable character. However, Ahmed adds humanity and vulnerability to the role, revealing the complexity of his ambition and his frustration at both his condition, and his relationship with his father.

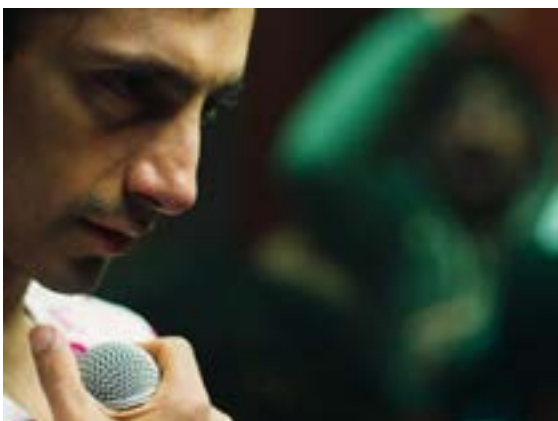


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CORE STUDY AREAS 2 – STARTING POINTS: Meaning and response

Representations

- Both Tariq and Ahmed have been vocal about their desire to represent Muslim culture and lives in a way that avoids stereotypes and associations with terrorism. "In my films, I want to show real lives, not socio-political symbols."
- Watch Bassan Tariq's TED talk here: https://www.ted.com/talks/bassam_tariq_the_beauty_and_diversity_of_muslim_life. Consider how Tariq and Ahmed (who also co-wrote the film) have achieved these aims with *Mogul Mowgli*.

Aesthetics

- The visual style of the film reflects the way it blends different genres. At times, it seems like a musical. Sometimes it looks like a music documentary. After this, the film shifts into a domestic drama, a satire (particularly in scenes involving the clownish RPG character) and also explores magical realism. Consider these shifts in genre – how does the visual style and sound design express compliment these? How could these shifts also reflect the different, conflicting elements of the protagonist's psyche?

CORE STUDY AREAS 3 – STARTING POINTS: Contexts

Social

- The main theme of the film is the clash between the desire to make oneself anew and maintain the ties to family, as well as deeper cultural heritage. This is a conflict common in many children of parents who are immigrants but can also have resonance with all young people. Zaheer is a complex character who feels discomfort with – and seeks to escape – the very roots and heritage that make his art seem 'authentic'.

Cultural

- Riz Ahmed is a successful music artist in his own right, performing as part of the Swet Shop Boys. Many of the raps he performs in the film are lifted from his own material.

Political

- Both Ahmed and Tariq have spoken publicly about their desire to show a diversity of Muslim lives and experiences. Read this Guardian article about the “problem of Muslim misrepresentation”: <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/jun/11/riz-ahmed-muslim-portrayals-screen>. You can also watch Ahmed’s speech here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ssuhvv0l3bk>. Consider how the characters and messages in *Mogul Mowgli* help achieve this.

Institutional

- Ahmed and Tariq spent two years developing the film. They initially started discussing the tension between artistic ambition and remaining connected to their roots: family, culture, religion and heritage. They used their own production company Left Handed Films to produce the movie, as well as gaining funding from institutions dedicated to representing diversity in the UK such as the BFI and BBC.

SPECIALIST STUDY AREA: Ideology and narrative

Narrative

- Though the realist elements in the film move in a relatively linear fashion, this is punctuated with memories, dreams and delirious hallucinations. Consider how these conflicting elements are cohesive in a film where the main theme is fragmentation and inner conflict.

Ideology

- Mogul Mowgli* could be analysed from a post-colonial perspective. Post-colonial theory examines the cultural, political and economic legacy of imperialism, and the human consequences. The film explores the deeper psychological schism created by the partition of India in 1947. You could research this historical period and consider how Tariq and Ahmed looks at how it effects the South Asian diaspora.
- Note: ‘Toba Tek Singh’ – the apparition that haunts Zaheer – is a reference to a short story by Saadat Hasan Mento about a man driven insane because he no longer knows whether he is Indian

or Pakistani. You should consider this historical division, and how it influences the other inner conflicts Zaheer experiences.

KEY SEQUENCE ANALYSIS:

Family visit – (0:10:51 – 0:19:06)

This extended sequence includes three key scenes: Zaheer’s return home and conversation with his mother, cleaning his room and encountering his father, and a family *iftar* (the evening meal during Ramadan), where issues of cultural identity are debated and Bashir’s traumatic past is hinted at.

Props in these sequences become symbols of what Zaheer is seeking to escape. The burnt peppers his mother uses to ward off the ‘evil eye’ represent the religious elements that Zaheer is sceptical of; the unwrapped washing machine reveals his family’s disdain for his new-found wealth and fame (also shown when his father says “Does anyone even remember the opening act?”). Another key prop is the cassette tape. Consider Zaheer’s response to these tapes of traditional Pakistani music and compare this to his father’s response. What does this tell you about their attitudes to their shared heritage? Why is it significant that Zaheer has taped his own early musical experiments over the original recording?

The scene featuring the *iftar* is jovial, but also contains a serious discussion of Zaheer’s identity. This encapsulates the protagonist’s attitude and touches on larger debates about diaspora culture. One family member (sporting a traditional beard) challenges Zaheer’s ‘modern’ lifestyle, particularly his choice of stage name. The importance of retaining one’s culture as a defence against racism and colonialism is then espoused by an uncle. How does the filming style and improvised performances add levity to these discussions?

The uncle also refers to Bashir’s traumatic experience on a train after the partition. Zaheer’s father says he doesn’t remember but in later scenes it seems as if – like the hereditary medical condition – Zaheer has somehow ‘inherited’ these repressed memories. Consider the ‘cupping’ scene and how his father’s trauma appears to be drawn to the surface of Zaheer’s consciousness.