

How *Gandhi* Became Orientalist: The Misrepresentation of Mahatma Gandhi and Indian Decolonization in *Gandhi*

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ABSTRACT

Through examining the movie *Gandhi* directed in 1982 by Richard Attenborough, this essay aims to reflect on the pervasiveness of biased representations in Western cultural production and the legacy of imperialism in Western media. The inaccurate portrayal of Gandhi as a political figure extends to an incomplete narrative of Indian independence since India's story of independence is strongly tied with his political identity. The movie *Gandhi* essentially serves as an introduction to India for the Western audience. Due to this, it is essential to reveal potentially misleading parts that the film depicts. Since the film primarily focuses on the characterization of Gandhi, each aspect discussed will show how the film has failed to adequately portray Gandhi's character during the tumultuous period of the India's decolonization process.

Introduction

Through examining the movie *Gandhi* directed in 1982 by Richard Attenborough, this essay aims to reflect on the pervasiveness of biased representations in the Western cultural production. Although Attenborough's *Gandhi* actually fares relatively well in its portrayal of non-Western subjects, the film still, as Salman Rushdie has said in his critique of the film, "satisfies certain longings of the Western psyche."¹ It is therefore not immune to tendencies described by Edward Said in his famous work *Orientalism*. According to him, Orientalism is not merely about the Western colonization and its aftermath, but also the Western perceptions shaped by the distinctions between the West and East; the West has the need to represent the East in order to control the discourse and legitimize its domination.² During this process, the intention to understand the Orient has devolved into a form of overgeneralization that portrays the East as the Other. While *Gandhi* does offer some instances of complexity, it still fails to paint a complete picture.

During the filming, Attenborough expressed how Indians are unable to view Gandhi in an objective manner due to the controversy surrounding him: "The Indians are unable to separate the man historically due to what they have been taught emotionally. I wanted to tell the story of Gandhi the man, and all the connotations and premises and peripheral matters don't matter to me."³ Perhaps Attenborough does make a fair point about how Indians may not be able to remove their bias when creating the character of Gandhi in film; however, he fails to recognize his own inherent bias. With the notion of the Orient deeply embedded in the Western consciousness, Attenborough is also unable to view the matter of Indian independence and characterize Gandhi in

¹ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (London: Granta in association with Penguin, 1991), 102.

² Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 11, 20.

³ Joan Goodman, "The Empire Shoots Back," *Film Comment* 19, no. 1 (1983): 31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43452750>.

an objective method. He failed to reflect in his own positionality as British, which resulted in considerable subjectivity in thematizing the decolonization of a country once conquered by his predecessors.

Surely, no movie can do full justice to complex historical figures. In that respect, *Gandhi* certainly is a step forward when compared to some precedents, such as David Lean's *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962).⁴ However, in this case the inaccuracies of the portrayal extend to an incomplete narrative of Indian independence, since India's story of independence is strongly tied with the political identity of Mohandas Gandhi. *Gandhi* essentially serves as an introduction to India for the Western audience. Hence this case merits detailed scrutiny to reveal potentially misleading parts, to which end I am contributing an analysis of four aspects that I find striking. Since the film focuses on the characterization of Gandhi, each point discussed below will show how the film has failed to properly portray Gandhi's character in the context of Indian decolonization.

Gandhi's Liminal Personality: Gandhi Between the Worlds

It is important to acknowledge that one of the most important aspects of the discussion of Indian independence and decolonization is the role of Mohandas Gandhi. However, *Gandhi* does not adequately explore this topic since it primarily offers a one-dimensional analysis of the evolution of his character and omits any reference to his political ideology. The description of Gandhi's identity cannot be categorized into simply his original identity as a Hindu; especially his political identity, since his origin and experience as a politician comes from complex origins. Although Gandhi's first political campaign had proven to be successful through continuous nonviolence, he did not begin his journey as an effective nonviolent advocate. In the scene where Gandhi is seen on a train in South Africa, he is depicted as a well-dressed young lawyer who is on his way to Pretoria to handle business for an Indian trading firm. Despite looking extremely different to later portrayals in the film, Gandhi still stands firm and practices nonviolence when faced with discrimination from the European passenger and the conductor. Rather than spewing discriminatory language towards the other like the Europeans (who call him a "coolie" and "kaffir"), he uses logic to persuade them that he has a rightful place on the train. When told that there are no colored attorneys in South Africa, Gandhi responds with irony and tells him that, based on his credentials, "I think we can deduce that there is at least one colored attorney in South Africa."⁵ Even though the encounter still resulted in Gandhi being thrown off the train, viewers can see how Gandhi has a way of letting the oppressors see their own faults. A "civilized" version of a savage (the colonized) is what in theory the British wanted to see since one of their primary justifications for the act of colonization is to help people out of a state of savagery and to teach them their ways of being civilized like the Europeans. However, when the European passenger and conductor are met with their own "creation," who is a Western-educated colored member of the colonized, they still do not treat him like one of their own, and subject him to discrimination and segregation.

Gandhi's liminal personality is established at the beginning of the movie in South Africa, and since Gandhi's liminal background can resonate with many people, he gathered a large following. He essentially embodies the entirety of India, as he has stated, "I am a Muslim! And a Hindu, and a Christian and a Jew -- and so are all of [the Indian population]."⁶ He has, throughout the movie, described his identity as an amalgam of all religions and cultures that are associated with India, and in fact he was exposed to the mixing of religions during his childhood (when he told Mr. Walker that the priests at his local temple read from the Koran and the

⁴ Luciana Bohne, "Leaning Toward the Past: Pressures of Vision and Narrative in 'Lawrence of Arabia.'" *Film Criticism* 15, no. 1 (1990): 2–16. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44075914>.

⁵ *Gandhi*, directed by Richard Attenborough (1982; Burbank, CA: RCA/Columbia Pictures). Film 06:32-07:37.

⁶ *Gandhi*, 02:38:07 to 02:38:23.

Gita simultaneously). His political role went beyond representing the Hindu and India; he desired justice for everyone who was wronged by the discriminatory British.



Figure 1. Gandhi's portrait taken in South Africa, where he worked as lawyer. (*Gandhi as a lawyer in South-Africa, 1906*. Wikimedia Commons. May 12, 2005.[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gandhi_\(costume_1906\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gandhi_(costume_1906).jpg))

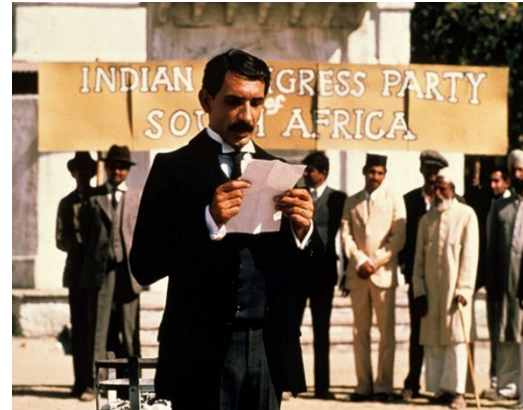


Figure 2. Gandhi peacefully demonstrates against the passes in the film.

The roots of Gandhi's movement, *satyagraha*⁷, also explains his liminality. His ideals for nonviolent resistance had traversed geographic boundaries, and first found success in South Africa. Indians were required to present their passes to any officers who required to see them, since the entry of Indians and Chinese were controlled by the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance (which was passed by the British administration in the Transvaal). The film showed the development of Gandhi's principles of nonviolence and how they were applied in South Africa, with his peaceful demonstration of burning the passes.⁸ Although in reality, General Smuts did not actually repeal the act as he had promised,⁹ the movie still adequately highlights the development of Gandhi's determination to help those around him gain the rights they deserve.

Attenborough does an effective job of portraying Gandhi as a complex character during his time in South Africa; the film sets up a successful premise for his struggle with his own identity around his internal conflict that occurs within him as a Western-educated person who is nonetheless oppressed by the British. It gave him a reason to pursue protest against this type of discrimination, starting with a small-scale demonstration that eventually led to the eradication of the passes entirely. It began to highlight the origin of Gandhi's beliefs and practices. In spite of this strong start with the promise that the movie would display the liminality and flexibility of Gandhi's character, the movie becomes less complex as it begins to characterize Gandhi as a mystical, flat character who is known for his advocacy of civil disobedience.

The Sanctification of Gandhi: The Otherworldly Gandhi

⁷ *Satyagraha*: Sanskrit for "truth force" or "holding onto truth"; a particular form of nonviolence or civil disobedience.

⁸ *Gandhi*, 13:14-15:08.

⁹ "Gandhi and the Burning of the Passes," South African History Online, February 1, 2017, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/gandhi-and-burning-passe>.

Gandhi's spirituality guided him as a political leader; however, in the film, his political identity has been largely brushed over and he is portrayed as a spiritual spokesman for nonviolence.

As a historical figure, Gandhi is undoubtedly deemed a spiritual leader who influenced Indian politics through offering his perspectives on mysticism and spirituality; he frequently spoke of a spiritual force guiding his actions and developed the technique of *satyagraha* from the Jainist principle of *ahimsa*^{10, 11}. He was able to develop ways to apply these principles to improve the human condition. Attenborough's *Gandhi* centers around Gandhi's spirituality and how his beliefs of nonviolence were used to discourage violence. Gandhi in the movie repeatedly fasts to halt violence and it worked on every occasion he did so, which displays the efficacy of his nonviolent strategies. While spirituality does play a significant role in Gandhi's journey as a political figure, the problem arises when the film puts significant emphasis on his spirituality, which detracts from Gandhi's identity as an Indian politician and illustrates him as an otherworldly saint who is disengaged from the political reality of India. In reality, Gandhi was a political figure who gave spirituality a special importance and utilized it as a guide for his political views. Gandhi's spiritual beliefs go hand in hand with his political practices, and as Vithal Rajan said in his article "Gandhi: The Colonizing Object," Gandhi's ethos as a politician does not negatively affect his title as a spiritual person, but instead, "it gives corporeal historical substance to that spirituality."¹² However, this film somewhat lacks this "historical substance," particularly its discussion of caste oppression and struggle.

Gandhi cannot adequately discuss the complexities of Gandhi's political identity without the discussion about the caste system. Furthermore, the caste system is the intersection between spirituality and politics; the film fails to shed light on this topic, which makes it unable to explain the complexities of Gandhi's spirituality. The caste system is a class structure determined at birth; the five ranks (Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudras, and the Untouchables) decide an individual's social status and essentially their fate in Indian society. Caste oppression is backed by the religious beliefs of many Indians, and it is an institution that is particularly difficult to change. The Untouchables (also called Dalits), who were descendants of slaves and prisoners, often had to perform jobs that are "unclean" and exceedingly menial. Even though this caste system has been an indelible aspect of Indian history, the British colonists managed to exacerbate the tensions between the castes, typically giving privileged positions to members of the higher castes through their system of indirect rule.¹³ Despite being a topic of heated discussion during times of decolonization, the film *Gandhi* fails to thematize this significant issue. The film continues the narrative of Gandhi being a revered saint, without touching on his involvement in the caste discussion. Even though Gandhi was a staunch advocate for equality and solidarity among his Indian compatriots, he had to restrain himself from directly attacking the caste system. In order to gain a large backing, he needed to appeal to the Hindu casteists—who had considerable political power compared to others—and support the principles of *Sanātama Dharma*¹⁴ that governed casteist India. In his debates with B. R. Ambedkar, a social reformer who supported the destruction of the caste and openly condemned discrimination against Dalits, Gandhi explains his support for the varna system: a different version of the caste that is based on merit and action. As Mohandas Gandhi describes: Caste, insofar as it is based on untouchability, is an institution of the devil, and we must get rid of it at any cost. But I have explained repeatedly that caste

¹⁰ *Ahimsa*: (in Hindu, Buddhist, Jainist tradition) the respect for all living things and the avoidance of violence.

¹¹ Mandakini Mahanta, "Jainism: Philosophy that Inspired Mahatma Gandhi," *Prācyā Journal* 12, no. 1 (2020). <https://www.pracyajournal.com/article/98/12-1-18-965.pdf> (accessed February 15, 2022).

¹² Vithal Rajan, "Gandhi: The Colonising Object," *Economic and Political Weekly* 41, no. 15 (2006): 1427. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4418078>.

¹³ Shashi Tharoor, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2016), 90.

¹⁴ *Sanātama Dharma*: the "eternal" or absolute set of duties or religiously ordained practices incumbent upon all Hindus, regardless of class, caste, or sect.

expressed as varnadharma is an eternal law which we may not break except at our own risk The law of varna was discovered by our ancestors ages ago; and ... it has appeared to me a wholly beneficent law. But like many laws and institutions of Nature this law of varna has been distorted.¹⁵

Gandhi essentially tried to conciliate two opposing ideas that were concerning his society during that time. He argued that the caste system has maintained order throughout society due to its emphasis on distinct levels; however, the discrimination that accompanies it should not be tolerated. Despite this, his critics such as Ambedkar often point out that Gandhi's advocacy for the varna system is a deliberate tactic to maintain upper caste control over the Hindu society. As Ambedkar has stated, Gandhi's version of varna was "merely a differ-



Figure 3. Mahatma Gandhi taking his last meal before the start of his fast in Rajkot, 1939. (*Gandhi Fasting at Rajkot*. Wikimedia Commons. August 13, 2019. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mahatma_Gandhi_taking_his_last_meal_before_the_start_of_his_fast_-_1939.jpg)



Figure 4. Gandhi talks to Jawaharlal Nehru during one of his fasts in the film.

ent name for Caste for the simple reason that it is the same in essence—namely pursuit of ancestral calling.”¹⁶ According to him Mahatma was guilty of “terminology inexactitude”¹⁷ when Gandhi advocated for the following of one's ancestral calling, since this thought did not follow the merit-based varna system, but rather the caste system. Gandhi had to constantly reconcile the conflict between gathering support from caste Hindus and arguing against the caste through his promotion of the varna system; this is the type internal struggle that Gandhi was facing, and the film and does not provide a nuanced approach to examining how his commitment to spirituality was challenged as a politician.

Another aspect of Gandhi's saint-like characterization is portrayed through his civil disobedience. During his protest in South Africa, Gandhi is seen able to take beating after beating,¹⁸ which shows how he does not allow the colonial officer to terrorize him, and that is where he derives his power from. He subjects himself to persecution, (depicted through the various instances of starving himself throughout the movie) to uphold the dignity of his people. Through the cycles of starvation and stopping protests and riots through non-violence, he has continually been portrayed as a person who has the ability to save India from Britain, and later, amend the rifts between the Muslims and Hindus. The scenes of him portrayed as sickly from starvation and

¹⁵ Mohandas K Gandhi. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: Volume 62* (New Delhi: Government of India. The Publications Division. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1999), 450.

¹⁶ Bhimrao R. Ambedkar. *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches Vol. 1*. (Mumbai: Government of Maharashtra, 1979), 124.

¹⁷ Ibid, 125.

¹⁸ *Gandhi*, 13:54 to 15:09.

then later remedied by the news of the cease of violent protest seems to be cyclical and often depicted in a similar manner. Despite this repetitiveness, the film puts an emphasis on the (temporary) effectiveness of Gandhi's nonviolent actions on the people he leads. However, Shashi Tharoor has said, "[civil disobedience] could only work against opponents vulnerable to a loss of moral authority, governments responsive to domestic and international public opinion, governments capable of being shamed into conceding defeat."¹⁹ Nonviolence had worked in India and mobilized millions of Indians to act against oppression. Despite this, Tharoor highlights the notion that there are conditions behind the use of nonviolence, since it is a method that cannot be implemented in every case of social revolution. It is not entirely wrong to depict Gandhi as a virtuous figure, since his own writings and actions do reflect his high moral standards through nonviolence; however, problems are created when the filmmaker makes deliberate decisions to make Gandhi as a one-dimensional character who is primarily known for nonviolence. In the movie, when Margaret Bourke-White interviewed Gandhi, she asked if he could use nonviolence against someone like Hitler, Gandhi replied, "not without defeats and great pain... You must make the injustice visible – be prepared to die like a soldier to do."²⁰ The film implicitly promotes the idea that nonviolence is the best solution, which as Rushdie has said, is "dangerous nonsense." He argues that India did not gain independence because they had higher moral authority, but because Indian politicians were "smarter, craftier, better fighting politicians than their opponents."²¹ The false narrative depicted by the film of how Gandhi defeated the British empire as a saint, is a story that is largely appealing to the Western palate and disregards the political work by Gandhi and other Indian politicians.

During the making of this film, John Briley, the screenplay writer for *Gandhi*, admitted to the difficulty of selecting events from Gandhi's life that would make a good introduction of Gandhi to the Western audience. He claimed that he wanted to focus on making the man look real and the drama exciting.²² It can be concluded that the goal of the movie is to inform the Western public about Gandhi with a dramatic storyline that incorporates his belief of nonviolence into a film that can yield large returns from the box office. The film has managed to become a popular film, but its depiction of Gandhi is oversimplified, and at its core, somewhat stereotypical. In his comment on the impact of electronics on post-modern stereotypes, Said claims that "television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient.'"²³ While *Gandhi* does not necessarily "demonize" the "mysterious Orient," the film is still inherently Orientalist. Briley's characterization of Gandhi as a stereotypical saint, however, may not be intended, since he did stress that he did want to do "the man justice" and avoid making the film a "commercial."²⁴ Despite the screenwriter's intentions, stereotyping Gandhi became inevitable when Briley needed to simplify and cherry-pick aspects of Gandhi's life to make the movie more understandable and appealing. The West's attempt to understand Gandhi's saintliness can be interpreted as a form of exoticization.

The Portrayal of Violence in *Gandhi*

¹⁹ *An Era of Darkness*, 195.

²⁰ *Gandhi*, 02:28:19 to 02:28:46.

²¹ *Imaginary Homelands*, 105.

²² Elena Oliete-Aldea, "Filmic Representations of the British Raj in the 1980s: Cultural Identity, Otherness and Hybridity," University of Zaragoza (2009): 250. <https://zaguan.unizar.es/record/3260/files/TESIS-2009-057.pdf>.

²³ *Orientalism*, 34.

²⁴ "Filmic Representations of the British Raj in the 1980s," 255.

The decolonization of India was unquestionably a violent process, and *Gandhi* does attempt to capture this violence. However, the film ultimately failed to discuss the context of the violence during Indian decolonization and towards Gandhi, and therefore could only offer a naïve perspective on violence during Indian decolonization.

The Amritsar massacre was the turning point in Indian history, as well as the moment the British lost their moral authority that justified their rule over India. In the movie, right before the massacre, a Muslim speaker is seen echoing Gandhi's doctrine of nonviolence, while holding his journal in front of large crowd of supporters: "If we riot, if we fight back, we become the vandals and they become the law! If we bear their blows, they are the vandals –God and His law are on our side."²⁵ Despite being a peaceful demonstration, General Dyer ordered fire on the massive crowd without a warning, killing and wounding thousands. During his interrogation, various commissioners put an emphasis on his brutality by highlighting the fact that he ordered "[his] troops to fire into the thickest part of the crowd"²⁶ and willingly killed women and children, who were defenseless. Despite the fact that this atrocious act had the power to undermine the morality and civility of the British, Attenborough's characterization of the event in the movie does not convey this critical point. Even though there are scenes in which General Dyer is questioned for his brutal actions, the film does not explore to the full extent to which the event has affected Britain and India. Although many criticized Reginald Dyer for his massacre on the Muslim crowd, Attenborough did not include the fact that Dyer was not punished for his actions at Amritsar. He was even revered as a hero in some areas back in Britain, where people raised money to support him for his "charitable work" of massacring the Indians.²⁷ The commentary that could have been given on the ludicrousness of the British society's reaction to Dyer's massacre would have been impactful; it would have further criticized the loss of morality of the colonial system, which is an important argument against colonization and one of the main reasons why decolonization was urgent.

In reality, the massacre was a part of a series of fear-instilling acts performed by the British to intimidate Indian people; the Rowlatt Act, enacted due to the fear of revolutionary nationalists in India, eventually



Figure 5. The assassination of Gandhi on January 30, 1948. Nathuram Godse can be seen in the background, restrained. (*The Assassination, Jan. 30, 1948*. Columbia.edu. June, 2013. http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00routesdata/1900_1999/partition/gandhideath/gandhideath.html)



Figure 6. Moments before Gandhi's assassination in the film, Godse clasped his hands in front of Gandhi before pulling out a gun to kill him.

²⁵ *Gandhi*, 01:25:37 to 01:25:58.

²⁶ *Gandhi*, 01:28:47 to 01:28:57.

²⁷ Sarika Sharma, "Rudyard Kipling gave £10 for Dyer fund," *The Tribune*, April, 11, 2019, <https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/archive/punjab/rudyard-kipling-gave-10-for-dyer-fund-756595> (accessed April 6, 2022).

inspired leaders like Gandhi to carry out hartals (strikes) and more large-scale nonviolent demonstrations. Despite the Amritsar Massacre scene being hauntingly powerful, Attenborough did not adequately address the historical backdrop of the massacre. As one of the most important turning points in Indian history, the massacre did not receive enough recognition in the movie, as it was conveniently avoided. Attenborough could have further stressed the undermining of morality of the colonial British when Dyer was unpunished, but that was never addressed. When discussing the decolonization of India, even in a biopic of Gandhi, the massacre is something that cannot be overlooked. The depiction of the massacre in the film prevents the British colonial officers responsible from taking accountability which delegitimizes India's struggle against the violent forces of colonialism.

The violence that Gandhi experiences firsthand is also characterized in a naïve manner, especially in the scenes of Gandhi's assassination, which is another violent act in the film that is given no context. The assassination is depicted twice in the film, at the beginning and end, but the film still fails to provide the context needed to explain the killing of Gandhi. The unexplained killing, along with other characterizations throughout the film, also elevates Gandhi as a saint and infallible leader "who is too good for this world and therefore sacrificed on the altars of history."²⁸ The violent act renders Gandhi as a sacrificial lamb, which reinforces his noble and saint-like character throughout the film. Another reason why the depiction of Gandhi's death is problematic is the film's portrayal of Nathuram Godse, whose background was not mentioned even once in the film. With the limited clues the film gives about his character, the audience may reduce Godse's character into an insignificant one. In reality, Godse was an extremist of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (R.S.S.), an organization that stresses Hindu unity and desires to create an independent Hindu nation. Therefore, contrary to what the film implies, Godse did not act alone; he was involved in a larger group of people who all opposed Gandhi's vision for India. Based on his background and beliefs, Godse, like others of the R.S.S., desired a Hindu nation, while Gandhi wanted an inclusive India. Although Godse's act of killing was motivated by political factors, it is portrayed in a mystical and emotional manner. Furthermore, the imagery of Godse emerging through the crowd to kill Gandhi offers a perception of India as a place where violence and extreme zeal are inherent characteristics of Indian, or Eastern people, in general. The namelessness of various Indian mobs portrayed in the movie, such as the group of Indians who burned a police station at Chauri Chaura,²⁹ are also depicted as violent and fanatic.³⁰ This harmful discourse about Indian people may contribute to a false narrative of how they are only capable of dealing with sensitive matters with violence. Indians in *Gandhi* are reduced through the portrayal of their violent tendencies, and because the film lacks sufficient context, it fails to explain the complexities of India's societal disorder. The film's inaccurate and insufficient portrayal of historical characters also extends to political figures directly involved with Gandhi.

Representations of Other Political Figures in *Gandhi*

Besides the selective characterization of Gandhi's political role in Indian decolonization, the depiction of other political figures in *Gandhi* is also inaccurate. Throughout the film, Jawaharlal Nehru has essentially devolved into a "naïve and spineless politician" and Muhammad Ali Jinnah is "presented on villainous terms."³¹ Nehru in the movie is seen as Gandhi's disciple as he never questions Gandhi's decisions. But in reality, Gandhi and

²⁸ *Imaginary Homelands*, 102.

²⁹ *Gandhi*, 01:44:11.

³⁰ "Filmic Representations of the British Raj in the 1980s," 275.

³¹ Udayan Gupta, "Untitled," *Cinéaste* 32, no. 3 (2007): 82–84. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41690534>.

Nehru had differing political opinions and visions for India during that time. Nehru advocated for state-sponsored industrialization to let India catch up with the modern world.³² On the other hand, Gandhi supported the modest agrarian communities and condemned the European definition of civilization. In his *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi discusses how railways—which are a typical symbol of civilization—“increase the frequency of famines...and accentuate the evil nature of man.”³³ Due to Nehru’s opposition to this belief, they constantly debated the economic future of India. Nehru’s polarizing political opinions on the economics of India had also transformed Gandhi’s outlook on Indian society. Without acknowledging the transformative conflict that Nehru and Gandhi had, the film offers a simplification of Nehru’s character.

Moreover, *Gandhi*’s ineffective portrayal of political characters also extends to Muhammad Ali Jinnah, who also played a significant role in Indian politics during decolonization. The Partition of India was a product of British imperialism, and Gandhi’s methods of nonviolence had not worked in this situation. The British had already pitted the Muslims and Hindus against each other, and there was no doubt that religious conflict would ensue after the British had left.³⁴ This is exhibited through the tension between Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Muslim leader and eventual founder of Pakistan, and Gandhi when they were deciding on the fate of the nation after the British leave. While Gandhi had the desire to unite the nation and wanted communal harmony between not only all Muslims and Hindus, but also all others who call India their home, Jinnah, on the other hand, wanted to create a separate nation for Muslims, in order to avoid their marginalized status in India as a minority. Jinnah claims that he is assessing his decision based on the fact they are in the “real world” and not everyone is Mahatma Gandhi.”³⁵ Despite persuading him, Gandhi was still unable to sway Jinnah’s views on partition.

³² Suranjan Das, “Nehru’s Vision of a New India,” *The Hindu*, July 26, 2011, <https://www.thehindu.com/books/nehru-vision-of-a-new-india/article2295280.ece> (accessed March 19, 2022).

³³ Mohandas K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1939), 41.

³⁴ Nisid Hajari, *Midnight's Furies: The Deadly Legacy of India's Partition*. (London: Penguin, 2015).

³⁵ *Gandhi*, 02:35:28 to 02:35:31.

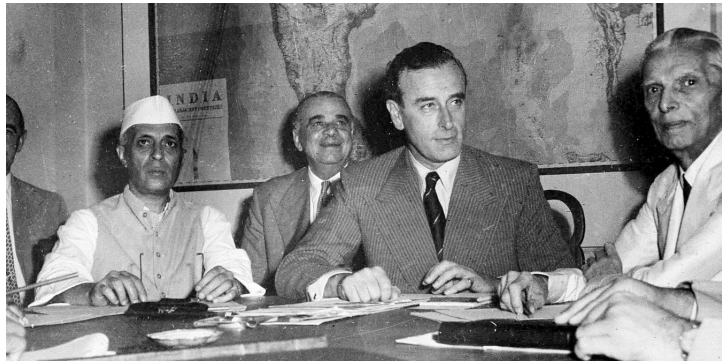


Figure 7. Lord Mountbatten discusses the Partition of India with Nehru, Jinnah, and other leaders of India. (Max Desfor, *India Round Table Conference*. AP (Associated Press) Images. June 2, 1947. <http://www.apimages.com/metadata/Index/India-Round-Table-Conference/050691268b2ef111a28b50a19f207b2517/0>)



Figure 8. Gandhi discusses the Partition with Nehru, Jinnah, and Patel in the film.

Jinnah's portrayal in the movie is of particular controversy; the screenplay for the film describes him as "slender, ascetic looking, but dressed impeccably" and essentially characterizes him as an "antagonist" who prevents Gandhi from actualizing his goal of universal peace within the nation. While it is true that the movie's main focus should be on Gandhi and his journey as a politician, it does not justify the director's choice to depict Jinnah in a negative light in order to uplift Gandhi and support his saintly practices. The polarizing difference between Jinnah and Gandhi is obvious throughout the movie, from their demeanors to their clothing. In the scene where Gandhi is talking to Bourke-White, Gandhi implies Jinnah's disingenuity to the independence movement: "Jinnah has – has cooperated with the British. It has given him power and the freedom to speak, and he has filled the Muslims with fears of what will happen to them in a country that is predominantly Hindu. [...] That I find hard to bear – even in prison."³⁶ Attenborough's version of Gandhi heavily contrasts with his Jinnah: Jinnah in *Gandhi* is someone who is willing to collaborate with the enemy to gain power in his struggle for Pakistani independence and use his political platform to incite Muslim violence. However, in reality, Jinnah's views on the Partition are far more complex than depicted in the film. Jinnah was an advocate for Hindu-Muslim Unity during his early career as a politician. He signed agreements such as the Lucknow Pact between the Indian National Congress and Muslim League, but later shifted his views when he disagreed with certain plans of the Congress.³⁷ The film seems to place the blame for the deadly Partition on Jinnah for his inability

³⁶ *Gandhi*, 02:26:56 to 02:27:14.

³⁷ Stanley Wolpert. *Jinnah of Pakistan*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 46-49.

to see past the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. This bias against Jinnah also creates a dangerous narrative about Indian independence, since it overgeneralizes and simplifies the nuanced conflict between key leaders of the movement into black-and white-situation. Gandhi's depiction as a saint and advocacy for equality and non-violence is simultaneously trivialized when Jinnah's characterization is also oversimplified. India's experience with the Partition is deeply intertwined with the fruition of Pakistan, and the film fails to explore this internal struggle in a complex manner. Furthermore, by emphasizing this contrast, the film deflects attention from the British, presented in this historical situation by the last viceroy of India, Louis Mountbatten. Although initially reluctant to allow the creation of the two nations, Mountbatten eventually agreed to the Partition. Mountbatten had mishandled the sensitive conflict by ordering the drawing of the boundaries in a hasty and careless manner, which contributed to violence that ensued after Indians and Muslims realized that they were on the wrong side of the border.³⁸ The British officials are reduced to the role of perplexed spectators, and therefore spared of immense responsibility for the way Indian and Pakistan gained independence.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have pointed out where *Gandhi* failed to offer an accurate depiction of Mohandas Gandhi and Indian decolonization in general. Even though *Gandhi*'s director and screenwriter have openly declared their dedication to producing a real image of Gandhi, they fell short due to the oversimplification and omission of many aspects of his complex character. As stated in this essay, Briley has even conceded that the simplification of Gandhi's political and personal life was necessary to make the film more accessible to the Western market, who know relatively little about the prominent Indian leader. While *Gandhi* does not explicitly depict conventional stereotypes of the East as a violent and savage place (which is common in many movies that mention the East), it still offers potentially misleading portrayals of India, due to its deification of Gandhi and the lack of discussion of many nuances of the decolonization movement. The film has avoided discussing any political ideology or process that eventually shaped modern-day India, with its focus mainly on the saintly-figure of Gandhi.

The main reason why these depictions have the ability to become harmful is the influence of *Gandhi* on its Western audience. It has essentially become the most accessible way to try and understand India. When the West seizes the discourse and decides the way India's story will be told, it runs the risk of being inaccurate and subjective, even if the movie is supposed to include real events. Due to this control of the Eastern discourse, the film is still an example of Orientalism in practice, and it does not fully represent the reality and struggles of Indian independence. The movie has essentially commodified the Indian struggle for independence and transformed the story into one that could be understood by the Western audience. Undoubtedly, it was difficult to condense Gandhi's life into a three-hour film, but the selection and depiction of certain events in Gandhi's life ultimately simplified his life, which renders the film Orientalist in nature. Moreover, an inaccurate portrayal of Gandhi also extends to an incomplete narrative of Indian independence.

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³⁸ Steven Brocklehurst, "Partition of India: 'They Would Have Slaughtered Us,'" *BBC*, August 12, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-40874496> (accessed March 19, 2022).

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