

## Miral Study Notes



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**Directed by:** Julian Schnabel  
**Certificate:** 15  
**Running time:** 112 mins  
**Release date:** 3 December 2010  
**Synopsis:**

Set against the backdrop of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, *Miral* charts the adolescence of a Palestinian girl who is torn between the peaceful, non-political ethos of the school she attends in Jerusalem and the radical, confrontational methods of Palestinian militants. The influence of three women upon the title character Miral (played by *Slumdog Millionaire*'s Freida Pinto) is also explored: Hind, the founder of Miral's school; Nadia, Miral's troubled Mother and Fatima, a woman imprisoned for terrorist activity. As the First Intifada erupts around her, Miral must choose between political radicalism and a peaceful life...

**These Study Notes are designed for use in GCSE and A Level Film and Media Studies lessons and equivalent. Teachers of History approaching the Arab-Israel conflict should also find this a useful introduction. Teachers working with *Miral* should ensure they are familiar with the history to the conflict in the Middle East. A useful starting place is:**

**<http://www.guardian.co.uk/flash/0,,720353,00.html>**

## Before viewing: Schnabel's previous work

Director Julian Schnabel's three previous feature films (*Basquiat*, 1996; *Before Night Falls*, 2000 and *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*, 2007) all share key features:

- they are based on true stories
- they feature a male protagonist who is somehow imprisoned or restricted physically, metaphorically or literally
- the protagonists are artists or writers (as Schnabel himself was before becoming a director)
- the theme of escape features in all
- each is set in a distinct region – New York, Cuba and Paris

When you view *Miral*, consider whether it shares any of these conventions and be ready to pick out any similarities with or differences to Schnabel's previous work (see Film Education's study guide for *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* – search by title at [www.filmeducation.org](http://www.filmeducation.org) – for more information on this director.)

## After viewing: storytelling devices

Schnabel uses a number of distinctive storytelling devices to enrich and contextualise the narrative including multiple perspectives and newsreel or stock footage.

- Title cards, text and original footage of historic events, violence and war are used sporadically in the film. Why do you feel the director chose to include this?
- Could the same footage have been recreated, perhaps?
- In your opinion, does this device enhance the narrative or pull you out of the story?
- The first half of the film gives equal screen time to the characters Hind, Nadia and Fatima, but all three are either sidelined or disappear completely from the film once Miral is introduced.
- Did you find that the focus on the other three women enhanced your understanding of Miral's character, or did it leave little time to explore her more thoroughly?
- A different colour is prevalent in the mise-en-scène when each woman is onscreen. Hind = gold or warm tones; Nadia = blue; Fatima = white and dark; Miral = red. What might these palettes be intended to say about each character, metaphorically?
- To what extent do Hind, Nadia and Fatima represent different sides of Miral's personality?

## Israel and Palestine

The incredibly sensitive topic of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is central to the film. *Miral* was deemed by many critics to be bold and courageous yet over-simplified in its depiction of the conflict.

- The story is told from the Palestinian point of view. Research Schnabel's personal and family history; why might he be sensitive to this subject?
- How are Israelis and Palestinians represented?
- How does Miral change and what does she learn and experience when she leaves Jerusalem to stay with her exiled Aunty?
- Does the film condemn or support either side of the conflict? Use examples to support your answer.

## Criticism

Miral's middle-eastern protagonists frequently use the English language; the film also features Anglo-American supporting characters and references to key historical events. Because of this, Total Film's summation of the film was that it '*...feels a bit like the intifada for dummies...a drawn-out history lesson*'.

- Is this a fair criticism?
- Is the film trying to reach a wider UK/US audience by using some of the methods above? Has this led to any compromises in terms of storytelling or historical accuracy?
- What examples from the film may have led Total Film to these conclusions? Consider dialogue, characterisation, pace and editing.

## Activity

Schnabel's trademark of capturing beautiful scenery and playing with sunlight and soft focus enables his protagonists to escape their dire situations, if only for a few precious moments. Select a true story or person from history or the newspapers; film a trailer or a sequence that portrays beauty and escape despite a tragic or oppressive situation.

*Written by Gareth C Evans*