

The Dynamics of Cinematic Literary Adaptation: A Socio Literary Perspective

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Abstract

Mireia Aragay in the introductory chapter *Reflection to Refraction: Adaptation Studies Then and Now* of her book establishes that “the history of adaptation is as long as the history of cinema” (11), while George Bluestone in his book *Novels into Films* proposes the theory where “spatial liberation of the cinema was its unique achievement” (24). Robert Stam reports the ‘moralistic tone’ and ‘outraged negativity’ of film adaptation critics (54) with terms such as infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation and vulgarization and desecration.

The thick garb of the uniqueness of ideas, originality, copy, faithfulness, plagiarism, and breach of copyright shrouds adaptation studies of literary texts into films. Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* advocates for cultural aspects of adaptation over other formats fostered even by George Bluestone.

The adaptations studies recurrently makes incriminations against the filmmaker that either the book was better, or the book has been murdered in the movie, or the spirit of the book is muffed up in the movie. However, the differences between the two mediums arise during the process of translation from one medium into another even though the subject remains the same. Through this paper, I am not boasting of the superiority of one medium over the other and hence propose to diverge from this very familiar Novel/Film deliberation. In the contemporary Indian scenario, I

propose to ascertain the course of adaptation and its formidable influence on reader/audience as a whole.

A movie, to the common viewer who hardly cares for the technicalities of movie making, is either good or bad. A very small percentage of a well-read audience is critical as well as analytical about the movies. Cinematic adaptation, to them, always plays a second fiddle to literature. During the process of translation, this particular literary elite group matters to the filmmaker when it comes to re-evaluating a movie. A large chunk of non-decision-making audiences constitutes a bigger chunk of the film viewing population and probable instrumental in deciding the box-office fate of a film.

The middle and upper-middle-class population sandwiched between the critical audience and the non-decision makers have a critical eye for the rational and scholarly approach and the onus of setting the inclination and current perception of emerging cinematic ideas. The progressive idea of the author and the cinematic view of the auteur come close to all those who shore up social and political change. They not only propose to raise the living standards, but also, buttress the psychological, mental, emotional, physical and social problems of the society.

They have the onerous task of ushering the world of yore into a technologically advanced world of metros. Hence, adaptation to them is helpful, because an author writes about the society, which majorly encompasses the gradually emerging metropolitan culture. Joseph Conrad's statement as a novelist and his concern and intention is echoed in the Preface of his book *The Nigger of the Narcissus*:

“My task which I am trying to achieve is by powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel- it is, before all, to make to see”.

The germane theory of adaptation by Darwin, when used in the context of arts takes a scientific route. Michael Bakhtin, the embryonic intertextuality theory by Kristeva, the theory of signifier

and the signified by Saussure, and the sprouting theory of contextual words and meanings can willfully trace the roots of adaptation studies to the nascent concept of Dialogism. Each critique, in its own right, unambiguously proposes some specificity in the details that makes the work original or unique. Ancient Greek theorists like Plato and Horace respectively talk about imitation and poetical works in their respective books *The Republic* and *Ars Poetica*. Their views on intertextuality were later endorsed in the 20th century by T.S. Eliot in his much acclaimed critical work *Tradition and Individual Talent*. Hence, intertextuality is a creative endeavor of an author and its reflection in the creation of the auteur. Every author tries every possible combination originating from a pre-existing set of ideas. Salman Rushdie comments “No story comes from nowhere, new stories are born out of old” [1]. It is a perception, that every new story is just an illusion of originality.

The importance of the study of films in institutions was not established until the mid-twentieth century for the crystallized understanding of the theory of adaptation. In his 1957 publication, George Bluestone, opens with a critical statement that “the film in recent years has become more and more insistent on its claim to serious recognition”. (1957, viii) The earlier film industry was claimed to be the popular form of entertainment resorted to a much more respectable and canonical form of literature for their stories.

A film, through adaptation, enlarges its precept of an audience beyond the lower class, for the workers who are illiterate to the tastes of the middle-class audience who have a taste for the classical and literary modes of narratives. However, such conjectures have always led to a highly defined hierarchical relation between the film and literature. However, the commercial success is the powerhouse and the motivational force behind commercial success and it

becomes the main thrust for every filmmaker in the industry to achieve, whereas only few are successful in their attempt.

Literature has always been appreciated as the most authentic and original form of art, whereas, the film is considered merely as its shadow. Hence, the question of fidelity emerges as the focal point while pondering over the issue of adaptation. Jack Boozer in *Authorship in Film Adaptation* focuses on the “textual transposition of a single track medium of published writing into a document that embraces a scenic structure and dramatic codes of the multi-track medium of film.” (Boozer, 1). During the adaptation, the screenplay occupies the forefront theoretically bringing the authorship to the fore against the semantics and post-structural conception of the intertextuality of culture.

Films based on novels question authorship. It has been a practice with the filmmakers to draw on literary sources. Especially, culturally prestigious novels as films are an established narrative medium. The discourse of the inevitable connections between literature and film has established the fact that adaptation has been given little sustained attention. Adaptation, as any other issue related to films, has attracted a lot of critical attention for its fascinating appeal.

The fascination for this subject of adaptation lies in films where literature is treated as its precursor. For example, the film *Umrao Jaan Ada* emotionally fosters to the close identification of the audience with the character of Umrao. The audiences are emotionally driven into a desire of uniting her with everything that she has lost be it her mother or her lover. The audiences, with the strong sense of identification with the character of Umrao, experience the isolation of character that Umrao undergoes from her loved ones throughout the film. Umrao exhibits stoicism and is resigned to her faith which further deepens the response of the audiences.

The incidence of cinematic representation based on literature has also been found in scholarly books apart from glossy film magazines. Reflecting on any film, based on literary adaptation, is treated as serious, complex, and ancient addressing the different aspects as well as trivial, simple, and recent. McFarlane in his book makes a broad distinction between “the novelistic elements which can be transferred and those which require adaptation proper, the former essentially concerned with narrative, which functions irrespective of the medium and the latter with enunciation, which calls for consideration of two different signifying systems. (McFarlane, 195)

The transmutation between film and literature is an ongoing process. Keith Cohen’s book *Film and Fiction* has an impressive account of this process. Spiegel, in his book *Fiction and the Camera Eye*, with an avowed purpose, investigate “the common body of thought and feeling that unites film form with the modern novel”. (Spiegel, xiii) The film, according to Spiegel, is the “concretized form” and Flaubert emerged as the first exemplar of this in the nineteenth century. This form supplies a great deal of information, which is visual in its format. In this book, Spiegel also credits James Joyce for respecting and crediting visual object rendering as a presence palpable to the observer. (Spiegel, 63)

There exists an integrative approach between literature and screen-based media like digital media and television. Literature genres have traveled across electronic planes, thereby, making it a heterogeneous medium. The poetry rendered on acoustic or performance created a verbal or visual constellation in the form of print or cinematic or cinematic versions.

Literature, which worked on a single track and is a viable print media has made a significant impact on technology. The location of literature is no longer limited to a single material. For the comparison of literature as multi-dimensional, the mapping of literature is done from the page to

the screen with the help of technologies that involves all forms of digital media including films and television.

To analyze the relation between the text and the cinematic screen, we need to understand that in the absence of new technologies pages of the novel have operated as screens. With the advancement of the cinema, the screen has challenged the domineering existence of the text.

Naturally, the cinematic screen stands in opposition to the literary word medium where cinema and digitization are considered liberating forces, which frees the human love to live within the textual constraints.

The book is allegedly a dynamic structure offering the most mobile of letters. The related animosity is conversely vilified by the emergence of technologies and its users like e-readers without whose promotions, books couldn't have been replaced. "As a body of literature, is the page not only a screen, or a 'scenic' mode? Screens are frames, or rather they frame, and framing is crucial to literature as it is a condition of possibility for fiction- a demarcation of the imaginary."

(Wurth, 2) Therefore, the screen should be considered as a topical concept in literary studies. Jack Boozer credits "screenplay, not the source text that is the most direct foundation and fulcrum for any adapted films. As a film's narrative springboard, it guides the screen choices for story structure, characterization,

motifs, themes, and genre". (Boozer, 4) Hence, the motifs with the main thematic concerns in different genres are also addressed. Thus, the screenplay of the adapted film indicates the choices made by the filmmaker on what is to be chosen and what is altered besides what is to be rejected. Therefore, the filmmaker exhibits his conceptual perspective, which is essential as well as creative in the construction of the film. The original novel can only be read at the pace of the reader but the screenplay is designed and creatively structured within the timeframe of the

filmmaker. The filmmaker enjoys the benefits served by the screenplay adapted from the text and uses it to tone down the metaphorical narrative. In the process, the filmmaker, an auteur sets the tone and the cinematic mood to organize the audio-visual codes for addressing the cinematic specificity and creating the mobility of the iconic images with the literary adaptations like *Lajja*, *Garam Coat*, *The Namesake*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Pinjar*, Deepa Mehta's Element Trilogy, *Sussana's Seven Husbands*, *Maya Memsahib* and *Choker Bali*. Similarly, the filmmakers willing to adapt the text are thrown the open challenge of visualization specific to the novelist and decipher the metaphorical observation of characters.

Here, the reference to the cinematic narratives becomes crucial in the study of adaptation of *The Namesake*. From the semiotic standpoint, film *The Namesake* as an cinematic art can be likened to its equivalent novel in terms of the diverse systems of sign, it could not narrate and vice versa. Ultimately, when Gogol tries to obliterate the earlier nomenclature, and becomes secluded from his kinfolk and family, here, the literary account is transposed efficaciously into the film narrative. Mira Nair employs self-reflexive and poignant camera angles to identify and portray the inner conflicts of Gogol and replicate his intimate relationships with women. Camera pans up, down, away and with close up while he despairingly scuffles with his hyphenated identity, his matrimony, which does not last long and while his wife, Maushami, discloses the secret of his previous name, which becomes the main reasons to terminate their marriage.

On the other hand, filmmaker Mira Nair takes the cinematic liberties appreciated more than accuracy to the adapted text *Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri. The cinematic liberties emancipate the literary text *The Namesake* into cinematic codes and narratives that releases the film with a note of incomparable supremacy to the literary text. Some of the vital questions explored during the process of this research are the relationship of the literary text and its cinematic adaptation

and whether this rapport that exists between the two mediums be illuminated beyond the narratives. Do literature and film share the common element of narrative; or is narrative transposed from novels into films? How far faithfulness can be considered a problematic issue? What is the legality of filmic additions or omissions to the narrative? Do literary classics undergo narrative expansion in the film; how far literal fidelity to literary source feasible? According to Jack Boozer, it is the screenplay and its composition that “illuminates the evolution of ideas that will determine the film production’s relationships to its source text...Focusing on the screenplay in adaptation necessarily foregrounds issues of authorship in a theatrical environment that has been weighted toward semiotics, poststructuralism, and broadly conceived influences of cultural intertextuality” (p.1)

Cinema across the world is flooded with numerous examples of scripts adopted. In the process of film adaptations, the screenplays of some of the films, are produced and written with certain actors in mind suggesting that when the performance of casting is involved, it changes the course of the screenplay. Jack Boozer calls it “bankable” stars as these actors can “push certain roles in certain directions on the set to the point that character and story direction are significantly changed”. (Boozer, 8).

For example, Bimal Roy in 1955 and Sanjay Leela Bhansali in 2002 have conceptualized the cinematic adaptation of *Devdas* by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya keeping in mind the stardom of Dilip Kumar and Shahrukh Khan respectively. Prominent film director and film theorist Eisenstein proposed a relevant montage technique used in cinema that sparks of not only intellectual but also emotional response by cinematically juxtaposing images by editing; similarly, in fiction the same process of encoding of images is done. Now the question arises, how an innocent teenage writer Saratchandra, who wrote *Devdas* at the age of 17 in 1917,

turned out to be a director's obvious choice. Is it because, he promotes an uncomplicated and naive skill for storytelling. Cohen, while referring to Dickensonian themes and narrative, referred to "the more or blatant appropriation of the themes and the content of the nineteenth century bourgeois novel", the same stands true for Saratchandra Chattopadhyaya as well. Without resorting to over the top scrutiny and overestimating the literary finesse in Saratchandra, the literature of the early decades of the twentieth century replete with its rich culture 'full of sound and fury' though signifying something, has been the most palpable bait for critics and filmmakers. The most intriguing has been the deeply entrenched assessment of the novelist Saratchandra and the filmmakers P.C. Barua, Bimal Roy and Sanjay Leela Bhansali who, in their own way, with their own inputs have 'attempted' to translate the novel *Devdas* into film ever since the emergence of Indian cinema.

Second example, when parallel cinema with fast emerging strong feminist introspection, and commercially popular actress Rekha was busy churning out one successful blockbuster after another, Muzaffar Ali offered the role of Umrao to Rekha that raised the eyebrow of the critics. However, Rekha in her award-winning performance assayed multiple emotions of a betrothed, of a loyal courtesan, who falls in love with Nawab Sultan, one who is agonized when he does not marry her, was convincingly infused from head to toe in the subtle delineation of Umrao on the screen doing great justice to the character of Umrao and the novel. The understated and controlled acting by Rekha in *Umrao Jaan* and the tight close-ups taken by the filmmaker evokes the spatial and a non-spatial response. Hence, the response of the audiences towards the suffering of Umrao becomes twofold. While at one hand, we understand her tragedy but, on the other hand, our suffering is enhanced by the fact that her entire life is tragic. The director projects the intensity of her inevitable disappointments through tight close-ups of film actor

Rekha, exploiting her stardom to project the thematic concerns of the film, related to the resignation of Umrao, where she completely lacks human comfort and trust rapt within her utter isolation.

There are several innovative moves in terms of adaptation, which focus only on adapting new kinds of novels. The changing trends in Indian cinema emerged with the thundering success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, when maximum Indian filmmakers started taking cognizance of the narrative power of the written text. As a result, Indian filmmakers are turning towards the world of literature for establishing an industry to compete with the world of International cinema. Films like *The Good Earth*, *The Godfather*, *Schindler's List* and *Slumdog Millionaire* are all based on popular novels and have won Oscar in the category of Best Films. With the turn of the centuries, few filmmakers favored less canonical and more contemporary popular writers like Chetan Bhagat, and Ruskin Bond re-conceptualizing the idea of adaptation. Filmmakers like Vishal Bharadwaj, for example, were less interested in fidelity to an original text than in synergistic collaboration between two artists which produces experimental films more reflexive as a cinema as well as consciously literary, but surely not conventional. The cinematic narrative differs from the literary narrative and hence always been a matter of great contention between the two medium. The controversy of the authorship between the filmmakers of *3 Idiots* and the authorship of *Five Point Someone* has raised the issue of the creative inputs of the writers and the how far an adaptation can be claimed to be an inspiration for the film. It also raises the question whether a particular film is an adaptation or is a creative inspiration. However, the entire film industry internationally is agog with the films made on adaptation. Nevertheless, adapting the necessary literature requires a precise combination of related sound, setting and script along with other

cinematic combinations of related signs and codes. The novels of Chetan Bhagat deal with subjects that are youth-centric and therefore are instant hits with the filmmakers. Similarly, many films may not be called adaptations per se even though they have everything to do with the traditions of the novel and hence these filmmakers, in the process of digression, formulate their aesthetic principles about adaptations. A filmic adaptation, it is believed, is not a shameful practice or in any way parasitical in nature, rather is a productive and creative process, and has evolved as a catalyst for the progress of Indian cinema.

Critics, like Balzac, in his essay “In Defense of Mixed Cinema” while debating it in his book *What is Cinema?* have criticized those who cried foul as they felt that films are outrageous toward literature. He felt, rather, that adaptation should be seen as a democratization of literature, which makes it popular amongst those who cannot read, or don’t read or don’t have time to read. It adds a new dimension to cinema believing firmly that the “cinema has been influenced by the example of the hallowed arts”. (56) In his other essay “Adaptation or the Cinema as Digest”, Bazin propagating ‘the digest phenomenon’ has spoken against calling adaptation an illegitimate practice as this has been a perennial practice in all the arts where “the problem of digest and adaptations is usually posed within the framework of literature” (2014, 41). Bazin contemplates the complexity of “cinematic adaptation is not insolvable” (42) and has been solved through different adaptations. Quoting films like Malraux’s *Man’s Hope*; Jean Renoir’s *A Day in the Country*; *Grapes of Wrath* by John Ford, he tries to prove that though not everything in a film is always a success but also believes that it is not because there is some ‘ineffable aspect of the original’. (2014, 42)

Adaptation can be faithful but also a refraction of a novelist in the creative consciousness of the filmmaker. D.W.Griffith re-echoes the cinematic intention while “the task I am trying to achieve

is above all to make you see". (Jacobs, 119) Films, like *2 States* are faithful to the spirit of Bhagat's story while at the same time benefitting from the filmmaker's consciousness. Films, like *Umrao Jaan*, reconcile a certain fidelity to artistic independence where the writer and the filmmaker meet on equal platforms. Critics have excoriated a specific genre of adaptation for turning classics into predictably well furnished, well-spoken, and stylistically formulaic films.

Adaptation for some screenwriters becomes an excuse to smuggle into the literary source and exploit to introduce a limited set of ideas and flatten out the heterogeneity of literary sources. The adaptation studies hang in balance with discourses of fidelity and theoretical discourse of intertextuality. David Lean, who filmed *Passage to India* with the same name, can be said to have filmed an adaptation that is legitimate as well as successful, as he does the same thing as a novel, not only does the same thing but also does it better differently and interestingly. Adaptation can turn a novel into a best-seller and can save a relatively obscure novel from oblivion. Adaptations demonstrate the capacity of the adaptations to exercise creativity rather than servility. Illustrating the contention on the theoretical plane, the adaptation ideally consists of a reading of the novel and the writing of the film. Adaptations rather than doing the same thing as a novel can also do better. Sometimes the filmmaker more than copying the novel explodes the literary texts into discursive fragments, re-conceptualized, and reassembles them to form the collage of alien materials from other sources.

Modern filmmakers show modern men and women onto the screen with modernist artists with modernist techniques. Adaptation, being a recombinant practice of freedom is not only concerned with faithfulness toward the literary source but also with withdrawing all the positive energies required for creativity. The filmmakers draw these creative energies from sources other than the texts, which might include other novels, films, and plays, but from the artistic practices

of creating collages and montages. The filmmaker re-orchestrates the texts that are pre-existing and streamlines the main plot of the novel. In a novel, there are continual turnarounds in a narrative in the form of new liaisons, shifts in moods and temper, and unexpected turns of hurdles leading to systematic discontinuity and rupture of events. The filmmakers interject many intertextual materials during the shooting schedules.

Ra One, the most expensive and a very heavily loaded computer graphics film in India, sets the benchmark in the world of cinema. Though the film is a technologically high-end film that was realized in 2011 with an ambitious project of 1500 million, where the film producer Shahrukh Khan had hired 50 foreign-trained technicians. *Ra One*, the main villainous character is remodeled in his modern avatar of the mythological character of Ravan from the ancient Hindu epic *The Ramayana*. Every cultural myth has its heroes and villains that become the living model for the myths inevitably produced by the culture. The mythical villains remind the generations of what society sees as evil.

The creative re-conceptualization of the mythical character of Ravan is a technologically reconstructed character. The filmmaker, to remind the technologically perceptive new generation of the values inherent in our culture, uses modern techniques. The filmmakers use myths, human hopes, and fears as an extension of consciousness to create a narrative of survival as it is handed down to us by ancient cultural poets. "Archetype is a literary form that applies to an image, a descriptive detail, a plot pattern, to a character type that occurs frequently in literature, myth, religion, or folklore and is therefore believed to evoke profound emotions in a reader because it awakens a primordial image in his unconscious memory and thus calls into play illogical but strong responses". (Holman, 8) Thus, *Ra One*, the archetypal character,

connects to us instinctively through the collective consciousness which we share with the originators of the mythical stories.

With modernism itself becoming a stale term and giving way to postmodernism and itself becoming more or less a stale term, even modern cinema is marching towards the post celluloid media, normally termed as the New Media. Post celluloid adaptation expresses an existing source in traditional media to a new digitized medium for instance much talked about film *Ra One* can be cited as the best example of post celluloid adaptation of the Ravana from *The Ramayana*. The New medium recreates visually dynamic and convincing creatures based on the popular characters thus in a way adding a more substantial proof to Coleridge's theory of 'Willing Suspension of Disbelief'.

Mind mapping is done at multiple levels while watching the adaptation on the screen vis-à-vis lateral mind mapping is constructed after reading the text, which, consequently leads to the tracing of a deeper relationship between the two different mediums. The extent of the audience's belief in the events and incidents going on in the movie entirely depends on how precisely the filmmaker has rendered those events in the movie. Certain incidents depend on factuality and actuality and such events do not welcome even the slightest imagination or tampering with reality. The precision of rendition in simple terms can be interchanged with reality. There has to be a justification for every act performed by every character in the film so that audience can digest it easily. Gone are the days when the hero would survive the most fatal of accidents or revive after being shot at by innumerable bullets from machine guns.

Another pioneer in the field of adaptive studies is George Melies who bags the credit for introducing the narrative dimension to films. Formerly an illusionist, Melies was from the entertainment background, and adapting theatrical conventions to a different medium was not a

Herculean task for him His very first films were travelogues, scenes from everyday life, and magic tricks, which later evolved into documentaries and stage performances. With time, the art of cinema evolved incorporating various techniques like fade in – fade out, jump cuts, and lap dissolve. "Cinema always substantially transliterates the original and adapts new elements carefully and following audience expectations it has developed over the years." (Viridi 22) The political radicalism of academia in the west conforming to intellectualism and prioritizing the theories over content and the east conforms to the cultural hybridity. In the present scenario, Indian filmmakers have resorted to the intercultural adaptation retaining the narrative elements conforming to ideological affinities within the paradigm of socio-historical and cultural, pertaining to discursive, economic and political aspects. The cinema and literature may be two mediums rooted in their respective characteristic features, however with the encroachment of the technological medium in the life of an individual the cinema shares a complex audio-visual interrelation, as Mcfarlane records draws on “aural, visual and verbal signifiers”. However, the adaptation studies are, incorporated within the paradigms of cultural studies as Bluestone indicates at the adaptation, comparing it to the alchemist’s ‘firing pit’ sometimes yielding lead acceding, at other times, the surprising deposits of gold and “As long as cinema is omnivorous as it is for story material, its dependence on literature will continue.” (Bluestone, 219)

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