

Cinema Vis A Vis Literature: Rethinking Adaptation Criticism

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Biological adaptation has been the basis of human evolution and existence on this planet. All species of all the creatures who have survived this process of evolution have been those that could best adapt themselves to the changing environmental conditions. The species that could not adapt became extinct in due course of time because of their unsuitability and inability to survive in the ever-changing climatic and environmental circumstances.

Adaptation has been a part of our everyday existence in different forms and different mediums. Pizza, pasta, and chow mein get an Indian seasoning when served in India. Lehanga is promoted as a variation of long skirts when sold in the USA. Our traditional six meters long saree has been changed into a three-piece, ready-to-wear ensemble to make it more comfortable for the younger generation to adopt. Stories are rewritten as plays, folklores as songs, fables as nursery rhymes, and mythological stories as cartoon series depending upon the need of the hour. From one medium or genre to another, it has been a very basic human instinct to transpose and permute narratives, or any other form of art for that matter, to different contexts and circumstances to make them more acceptable and enjoyable in a given milieu.

Adaptation has once again caught the fancy of the latest generation of filmmakers. Vishal Bharadwaj is known for his fondness of the Bard (*Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, *Haider*) and Ruskin Bond (*Chhatri Chor*, *SaatKhoonMaaf*); Farhan Akhtar tries to recreate the magic of Amitabh Bachchan's persona with *Don* and *Don2*; Sanjay Leela Bhansali does not seem to have just one favorite writer, but has given cinematic face to the characters of as diverse writers as Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay (*Devdas* 2002), Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Saanwariya* 2007), and now Shakespeare (*Ram Leela* 2013). The success of *Bol Bachchan* (a remake of the 1979 classic *Gol Maal* by Hrishikesh Mukherjee) and *Agneepath* (a remake of the 1990 cult film of the same name by Mukul Anand) has given a new thrust to this trend. Adaptation is the new mantra of success at the box office today, adaptation in the form of remakes of old celluloid classics, and adaptation of books - new and old- for the silver screen.

Hindi cinema is no exception when it comes to adapting stories from real life or the world of literature. The early decades of filmmaking in the country are full of cinematic adaptations of myths, legends, history, and literary fiction. Strongly influenced by the Parsi theatrical tradition, filmmakers relied heavily on scriptures and legendary characters for the success of their cinematic creations. "The glory of Hindu mythic figures had been a mainstay of Parsi theater since the *Inder Sabha* arrived in Bombay from post-Mutiny Lucknow" (Kathryn Hansen). From Dada Saheb Phalke to Sohrab Modi, from J. F. Madan to Ardeshir Irani all major filmmakers of

the initial generation of filmmakers tried their hand at adapting stories either from scriptures or mythology or literature - English and Indian. Whether Ramayana, Mahabharata, or Shakespeare, filmmakers have always been fascinated enough to explore and exhibit in an innovative way the deepest conflicts, enigmas, dilemmas and emotions of our favorite characters. "...[I]t is a well-accepted fact that right from the birth of this new art form in the twentieth century, filmmakers had to turn to literature, and especially novels, to go on supplying them with the essential ingredient upon which their narration is based, namely the story" (Mandal 45).

To a certain extent, adaptation is to cinema what translation is to literature. Like translation, every time a work of art is adapted, the one who adapts adds some element of his personality and vision to the original creation. In translation, the selection of words by the translator is of paramount importance as it can make or mar the impact of the original thought conveyed. In adaptation, a good choice of location and time ensures that the film, despite an already-known story, will be able to connect with and interest the audience.

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines the word 'adapt' as to "make something suitable for a new use, situation etc; modify something; alter or modify (a text) for television, the stage etc" (13). Change, in form or otherwise, is inevitable and essential to adaptation of any kind. Adaptation implies borrowing from an already existing, and often established, source and cutting or expanding it to fit into a new social, cultural, political, and economic context. "Among its multiple connotations, the word "adaptation" may signify an artistic composition that has been recast in a new form, an alteration in the structure or function of an organism to make it better fitted for survival, or a modification in individual or social activity in adjustment to social surroundings" (Shiloh). This definition makes two things very clear – first, adaptation means change; secondly, adaptation is required to make something survive and/or become acceptable in new surroundings.

Initial adaptation criticism is biased in favor of the superiority of literary/ source texts over their cinematic adaptations. But Linda Hutcheon observes in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* that "to be second is not to be secondary or inferior; likewise, to be first is not to be original or authoritative" (xiii). She discusses adaptation as a "*formal entity or product*" (7) - as a transposition of a work into a new medium and a new form; secondly, as a "*process of creation*" (8) – as "(re-)interpretation and then (re-) creation (8); thirdly, she takes into account the "*process of reception*" (8) which involves intertextual interpretation of the adapted text. Finally, she tries to establish a comprehensive and inclusive definition of adaptation as.

- "An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works.

- A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work.” (8).

Re-creating and re-casting in a new mold an already popular and established piece of writing is not an easy task. Should it be done word by word without making the slightest of changes or can some liberties be taken with the story and characterization to make it acceptable in the contemporary scenario? Retain the locale and the time frame of the original work, or give it a modern touch, or place it somewhere in between? Answers to countless such questions need to be searched and found before embarking on the journey of adapting a literary piece for cinema. The story might not change, but the novelty in storytelling is what makes all the difference. “Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication” (Hutcheon 7).

Erich Von Stroheim’s 1924 film *Greed*, based on the novel *McTeague* by Frank Norris is a classic example of the predicament that a filmmaker finds himself confronted with while adapting literary work for the silver screen. Stroheim filmed the novel as it was, literally. The result was a sixteen-hour-long film that had to be cut short several times. In order to make the film short it was edited to the extent that it finally became a two-hour film that was completely incoherent (Wikipedia).

This raises the question of ‘fidelity’ to the original text. It is interesting to note here that the whole discussion about fidelity and integrity of the source material raises its head only when a piece of writing is adapted as a motion picture. Nobody is bothered about these aspects when a play is adapted as a radio play or a story is adapted as a folk song, or when one discusses how Shakespeare took his stories from Giovanni Boccaccio or Saxo Grammaticus or Raphael Holinshed and ‘adapted’ them into plays and made all the necessary changes that could ensure popularity and acceptability of his creations among contemporary audiences. Reasons behind the long sustenance of fidelity criticism could be various. Thomas Leitch considers the precedence of literary tradition to be the real culprit. Another reason could be the fact that cinema was not taken seriously as an art form till the first five decades of the last century. Cinema was thought to be an instrument of recreation for the masses, the serious-minded still resorting to literature. Being a new entrant into the world of arts, cinema has had to wait its turn to attain respectability.

Critics like Geoffrey Wagner focused their attention primarily on the aspect of ‘fidelity’. Since the adapted text is termed as the ‘source’ material, the very term defines the superiority of the ‘original’ text. He “divided film adaptation into three ‘modes’: the *transposition*, in which a novel is directly given on the screen with a

minimum of apparent interference; the *commentary*, where an original story is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect; the *analogy*, which must represent a considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art” (Mandal 46). On similar lines, Karen E. Kline talks about four paradigms about evaluating/analyzing adaptations, namely the “translation” paradigm that focuses on absolute fidelity to the source text; the “pluralist” paradigm that talks about maintaining the ‘spirit’ of the primary text; the “transformation” paradigm that accepts the fact that an adapted piece can also be an independent artistic work; and lastly, “materialist” paradigm that looks at adaptation as “product of cultural historical processes” (Cora).

Lately, there has been a thrust on pushing ‘fidelity criticism’ to the background and on searching for new aspects such as intertextuality or transtextuality to analyze adaptations. Critics like Robert Stam, Thomas Leitch, Sarah Cardwell, Morris Beja and Brian McFarlane have strongly condemned the fidelity approach as “a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation” (McFarlane 10). Thomas Leitch vehemently argues, “Fidelity to its source text – whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or the effect of the whole – is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation’s value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense. Like translations to a new language, adaptations will always reveal their sources’ superiority because whatever their faults, the source text will always be better at being themselves” (161). Robert Stam enumerates various reasons such as the inherent differences between the two mediums, for an urgent need to jettison fidelity to redeem adaptation studies and to challenge “the axiomatic superiority of literary art to film” (Stam Qtd in Kranz 79).

But this whole argument about superiority, fidelity, and maintaining the ‘sanctity’ of the text overlooks one important aspect - the question of inherent differences in the two mediums. Writing a book is an essentially solitary activity where the creativity of an individual is exercised to create a work of art. Cinema on the other hand is of a collaborative nature where a filmmaker has to hire the creative input of a screenwriter, editor, cinematographer, actors, a music composer and several other technicians to put together a film. Robert Stam asserts that achieving fidelity is rather impossible as it demands a “shift from a single-track, uniquely verbal medium such as the novel... to a multitrack medium such as the film” (Kranz 79). “Movies are distinct from both literature and history because a movie has to move on multiple tracks, combine two or more types of media... As literature and history advance beyond their oral stage, they demand the written word (or print) conveyed by reading.

The medium of movies needs images in motion which are conveyed by a projection onto a screen. In all works of art, there is a hierarchy of media. For movies, the image, icons, dominates” (Dean). Cinema talks and conveys through visual images whereas literature depends on the power of words to create its magic. As word is the basic unit of literature, image is the basic unit of film as a sign system. An image or a single shot in a film may have incredible complexity that might require more rigorous mental activity to decode than reading about it. Parker and Klein rightly point out that “[a] well-made film requires interpretation while a well-made novel may only need understanding...” (Klein and Parker 6). Cinema’s primary objective is “to create mood, rhythm, emotional intensity, and thematic development through a flow of visual images” (Mandal 59). Literature, both novel and drama, is more about telling a story, and conveying ideas with the verbal maneuver. Though, as Joy Gould Boyum says in *Double Exposure*, “[i]mage and word both “mean”, both involve perception and cognition, and both involve what has recently come to mean as the process of decoding,” (25), both the mediums are essentially different and hence should be treated differently. The techniques, principles, and materials that go into making a good piece of writing cannot be adopted to create a good film and vice versa.

Adaptation, therefore, is an art in itself. While adapting a piece of writing the filmmaker is creating another piece of art, independent and authentic in every sense of the word. Adaptation, rather than being the same story through different mediums, is more about different interpretations of the same story. The filmmaker’s interpretation of a text might not be the same as the literary critic, but it does throw a different light, shows a new aspect, and opens new possibilities. Besides, the content of a piece of writing is so delicately interwoven with the form of the work that they become inseparable. To adapt a literary work demands that the content is transferred to another form in another medium, which cannot be achieved without making significant changes in the way the story is told. “Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary” (Hutcheon 9).

However, all this negation of fidelity approach, and its shortcomings should not blind us to the fact that whenever something is adapted or ‘fashioned’ on an already established, often popular piece of art there is bound to be a comparison with the source material. Our reading of literary works as well as viewing of films is guided, modified, and sometimes conditioned by earlier reading and viewing. That is why Hutcheon calls adaptations a “palimpsest thing” (9). The need of the hour today is not to shun the fidelity approach completely

but to free adaptation study of its shortcomings, its overindulgence in establishing the superiority of the source text, its overlooking of intertextual analysis, and its failure to do a balancing act between the inherent differences of the two mediums and their strengths. We need to shift the focus of comparison from merely what was changed into what was in the adapted piece to why it was changed the way it was. We need to locate the adaptations in their respective cultural, social, political, and economic contexts.

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