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Abstract

Film adaptation of literary works is a process of selection and omission. A filmmaker attempts to take a story, many a times out of its context and milieu, and tries to create a new artwork out of it that could appeal to the masses in a different cultural and social context.

Mira Nair's cinematic adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel The Namesake is a study of this process of selection, omission and change. This paper attempts to scrutinize the process in terms of Nair's portrayal of themes, characters and plot. It also discusses certain theoretical aspects of adaptation.

Keywords

Adaptation, cinema, plot, theme, characters, isolation, alienation, fidelity.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

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Notions Dec 2023,
Vol. XIV, No. 2,
pp. 22 - 32
Article No. 4

Online available at :
<https://anubooks.com/journal/notions>

Nilanjana Sudeshna Lahiri a.k.a. Jhumpa Lahiri is an Indian American writer of fiction. When she was in her kindergarten at Rhodes Island her teacher would call her by her nickname Jhumpa as she found it much easier to pronounce than Nilanjana. She popularly came to be known by this name that she found meaningless and awkward. This personal experience found its creative rendering in the form of her first novel *The Namesake* (2003). Jhumpa Lahiri's *Namesake* is an engaging account of the lives of members of an Indian family trying to come to terms – sometimes accepting and sometimes challenging - with their hybrid/fractured identities in the United States of America. Mira Nair's adaptation of the novel for celluloid tries to maintain the essence of the original story, yet the essential differences between the two mediums make it possible for her to add further layers to the already complex situations and personalities. This paper attempts to look at both the print and the celluloid versions and to analyze the plot structure, themes and characters to understand how the process of adaptation not only re-tells the story but actually transcreates it into a new creative entity.

Adaptation has always been a part of human existence through the ages. Natural sciences inform us that the species that could best adapt themselves to the changing environmental conditions could survive in the long run. Likewise, a study of the social sciences bears testimony to the fact that cultural adaptation and assimilation have been the reasons that invaders could settle and thrive in alien lands. Adaptation across various mediums and genres has made the canon of fine arts rich and varied. From fairy tales to comic books, fables to nursery rhymes, epics to television series, television series to animation films, we find adaptation in myriad forms around us. 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.

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, the "materialist" paradigm that looks at adaptation as a "product of cultural historical processes" (Cora).

The Namesake, according to Wagner's division of 'modes' can be said to be in the mode of a 'commentary' where the filmmaker has successfully maintained the spirit of the novel, yet has altered primarily the **plot** to some extent to compress a story spanning thirty years to a screen time of two hours.

The metamorphosis from literature to a motion picture is always a tightrope walk for a filmmaker who is required to retain the 'essence' of literature while inventing new directorial strategies apt for the cinematic medium. S/he has to "find the bones" as John Truby calls it. Truby, who has been consulted for more than 1000 film scripts in a career spanning thirty years, says that, to make a good adaptation, a filmmaker should ... first determine the deep structure of the novel. Mark every scene where a key structure step occurs. Those are the events that must be in the script. Study those beats and figure out if the novel's original structure needs to be fixed or changed in some way. Then go back to the novel and see if you want to include any of the non-structural events. These may be in the script, so long as they contribute to the script's basic structure. (Truby).

This brings the whole process of selection and omission to light. The filmmaker has to either expand or trim the story to make it fit into the cinematic plot structure. He has to find some new devices and visual language to convey what has already been told in a verbal medium. Dudley Andrew says that film adaptations are all about "the matching of the cinematic sign system to a prior achievement in some other system" (Andrew 21).

Transforming fiction into film and word into image is a collaborative task as opposed to the independent, solitary nature of the process of literary creation. Cinema is said to be a director's medium, yet it cannot be denied that screenplay, cinematography, music, and above all performance or acting are as crucial to making a good film as the director's vision. When a novel is adapted, this collaboration plays an even more significant role as adapting a novel can be, in certain respects, more challenging than adapting a play. A novelist has a lot of freedom in terms of time and the length of his work. A film has to restrict itself to 120-150 minutes of screen time. A novel may have an omnipresent narrator or a character narrating the story. In any case, a novelist can inform the readers of the deepest dilemmas and the innermost conflicts of the characters using figurative language and abstract ideas. A

filmmaker has to compress everything within a few shots and has to use dense visual images to convey something that the novelist took several sheets of paper to establish.

The process of adaptation of *The Namesake* (Jhumpa Lahiri) must have been chiefly a challenge of omission and selection as this adaptation has been set in its original time and locale. *The Namesake* (Mira Nair 2006) is set partly in India and partly in the United States of America.

Mira Nair's *The Namesake* (2006) is a fairly faithful version of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). The plot covers thirty years of the lives of Ashok, Ashima, and Gogol across Kolkata, Massachusetts, Yale, Columbia and New York City. As has been discussed earlier, the cinematic medium demands that the filmmaker compress everything into a two-hour time limit, and still maintain and convey all the basic emotions and ideas that the novelist took a few hundred sheets of paper to evoke. The novel opens with a pregnant Ashima waiting for Gogol's birth in hospital; it moves back and forth between Kolkata and the USA; ends with Gogol opening and beginning to read Nikolai Gogol's book—whereas the film opens much before Gogol's birth- with the train accident- and closes with a 'retired' Ashima taking classical music lessons. Nair has inverted the back-and-forth movement of the novel and stuck to a largely linear narration while the only important images that keep recurrently haunting the protagonists are those of the train accident that changed Ashoke's life forever. The novel explores the identity issues of Gogol who is born to Indian parents in America and has a strange name that he hates initially as it feels like "an entity shapeless and weightless, [that] manages nevertheless to distress him physically, like the scratchy tag of a shirt he has been forced permanently to wear" (Lahiri 76). The family's frequent visits to India and Ashoke and Ashima's constant longing to go back to where they belong make them feel as if they are in a perpetual, rootless flux. Nair's frequent use of the images of bridges and different modes of transportation, which are conspicuously absent from the book, brings a sense of bonding between the two worlds and the respective restlessness and anxiety of the chief characters. The omission of Gogol's love affairs with Ruth and Bridget in the film only brings coherence to the plot.

The novel begins in 1968 with frequent references to the train accident that took place in 1961 and the action spans around thirty years of the lives of the protagonists. Nair has slightly modified the time of action in the film to make it contemporary for the audience. It is 1977 when Ashok and Ashima get married and it is almost the time of the film's release i.e. 2006 when Ashima comes back to India forever. This slight shift in the time of the action brings the action closer to the

audience's time and yet allows the filmmaker to retain the cultural practices and major themes depicted in the novel.

Theme, generally speaking, is the central idea conveyed in a work of art. It could be an abstract concept, a thought or an idea that might not be very clearly stated, but which could be extracted by analyzing the language, imagery, characterization and plot development in a piece of literature. "Theme...is more usefully applied to a thesis or doctrine which an imaginative work is designed to incorporate and make persuasive to the reader" (Abrams 102). All works of art, whether books, paintings, or films, have an underlying or clearly asserted idea that the creator explores and wants to convey. There is something that gives shape or unity to a work of art. All the action and characterization are developed towards exploring that one concept or idea.

Besides one unifying concept or idea, a piece of literature can have more than one subordinate theme. These themes develop as the action progresses and generally, though not always, they either support or amplify the main idea. The theme that has been prominently represented in the selected text and film is the theme of search for identity and the resulting alienation and isolation. Ashoke, Ashima, Gogol—everyone is fighting battles for identity in their own peculiar ways that suit their individual circumstances. There is the loving couple of Ashoke and Ashima whose whole life in the United States of America is an exposition of the serious identity crisis faced by thousands of people in their situation;

These characters struggle for survival and identity in alien lands. "The question of identity is always a difficult one, but especially so for those who are culturally displaced, as immigrants are, or those who grow up in two worlds simultaneously, as is the case for their children", says Jhumpa Lahiri in an interview. The theme of alienation and cultural displacement forms the crux of her entire body of work. Being a child of immigrant parents, Lahiri explores the dilemmas, insecurities, loneliness, culture shock, and apprehensions of immigrants with autobiographical overtones.

The novel *The Namesake* is about the search for the identity of a boy with an unusual name Gogol Ganguli (not to miss the alliteration that only adds to the peculiarity). Being the son of Bengali immigrants to the USA, he constantly bears the burden of a partial identity. His heart being in the American way of life, he cannot bring himself to understand the Indian ways of his parents. Adding to the complexity of the situation is his name which is so different and strange that it creates an even more difficult web of identities for him to exist with. Being the

namesake of an immensely talented but eccentric Russian writer, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, and being born in America to Bengali immigrant parents, attaches his identity to three different countries, and three different cultures. He keeps drifting from one shore to another to find an anchor that could hold him rooted. His quest for identity is simultaneously similar and different from that of his parents. While there is a sense of displacement and disillusionment, loneliness and helplessness in Ashoke and Ashima's situation, Gogol's life is full of questions and confusion about his roots. As the novel progresses Gogol arrives at a better understanding and acceptance of his situation as an inside-outsider in a culture that he considers as his- yet which is not completely his own.

Ashima's dilemma towards the end of the novel - regarding leaving the USA and going back to India - is indicative of the fluidity and complexity of the question of identity. All these years she never considered America her home, yet she feels pained to leave the country that gave her everything- "the country in which she had grown to know and love her husband" (Lahiri 279), where she gave birth to their children, and where she made a home out of a house.

The need to search for identity generally follows feelings of alienation and loneliness. All the major characters in the novel experience alienation in one form or the other. Ashoka is the most accommodating and least grumbling of the lot. Homesick as he feels in an alien culture, he is more resigned in his attitude towards that culture. Also, he is more reserved in expressing his disappointment or disapproval of it. Ashima, on the other hand, is more expressive and more sentimental. It is a huge emotional challenge for her to adjust to a country that is so far removed from her homeland not just in terms of physical distance but also culturally. She does not want to raise her child in an alien country among strangers. For her living in a foreign land "is a sort of lifelong pregnancy—a perpetual wait, a constant burden, a continuous feeling out of sorts" (Lahiri 49).

For Gogol, this alienation is even more complex. His parents feel strongly attached to and rooted in their native culture. But living, at a very tender age, one kind of experience at home, and another, drastically different one in the outside world, leaves him baffled and confused about his roots initially. He constantly tries to sort out the issue of belongingness. At home he is ill at ease with the practices that are culturally Oriental and that he feels no affinity for; in the outside world, he is no more than a specimen of an exotic culture who is definitely not a part of that world. While holidaying with the Ratliffs, he has difficulty explaining to Pamela that he is as much an American as she is. His alienation at home is in a way self-imposed; outside it is inflicted on him by others.

As has been discussed earlier, this film is a faithful adaptation of the novel in terms of themes as well as characterization. The **characters** depicted in the novel maintain their essential traits and doubts and dilemmas in the film version also. The psychological struggle that the Ganguli couple in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* experiences during their stay in the USA is a struggle that all immigrants can relate to. Ashima is a reluctant immigrant in the beginning who hates being away from family, friends and homeland. She is very sensitive and expresses her emotions of loneliness, alienation, and identity crisis more easily than most of the other characters in the novel. Her yearning in the beginning to eat something spicy reflects her longing for her roots. She finds it extremely difficult to adjust to the new atmosphere and we are told time and again and in various ways that she wants to go back. Her greatest fear at this time is raising a child in so alien a culture as "... she is terrified to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare" (Lahiri 6).

She tries hard to adjust to the new surroundings yet she always feels like an outsider and her children also fail to understand why she is ill at ease with their way of life. They can never share her perspective as for them India is a foreign land and America their motherland. It must have been excruciating for her to see her children adopt the alien culture. Yet she watches everything with patience and adapts herself. She learns to drive, finds a job, and lives on her own when Ashoke goes for his research in Ohio. But Ashoke's untimely death is an irreparable loss as his "utterly private, uncelebrated" love has been her strength and perhaps her only reason to forge ahead in a country she could never call her home.

This is why Ashoke's death leaves her feeling all the lonelier and dejected and after seeing both her children well settled in life, she decides to move back to India. But this move is going to be different from what she always anticipated. Though she feels happy yet all these years in America with her husband and family have changed her perception of the country and she feels sad to leave it. This is a new Ashima that we witness now because though she "has learned to do things on her own, and though she still wears saris, still puts her long hair in a bun, she is not the same Ashima who had once lived in Calcutta" (Lahiri 276). Now she cannot bring herself to sever all ties with the country "which she had refused for so many years to accept" (280), so she decides to spend six months in India and six months in America. The loss of one authentic identity is underlined by the mixed emotions that Ashima experiences before leaving the USA for India, by the very thought that now Calcutta seems to be strange and foreign to her. "She feels overwhelmed by the

thought of the move she is about to make, to the city that was once home and is now in its own way foreign” (278).

Ashoka is not as open about his feelings as Ashima is or maybe his position as a source of strength to Ashima hinders him from expressing openly the feelings of loneliness, homesickness and alienation. That he does experience all these emotions is only natural, but perhaps as the master of the family he takes it upon himself to make his family feel comfortable in the surroundings. He tries to assimilate, and though absolutely nothing has been told about his professional life at the university, we can easily conjecture his efforts at assimilating and accepting the American ways.

His reserve seems to serve as a shield for him in his efforts to become like the others around him. This reserve is not natural to him and this is conveyed to the readers through Ashoke and Ashima’s behavior in Calcutta. Both Gogol and Sonia observe that, “Within minutes, before their eyes Ashoke and Ashima slip into bolder, less complicated versions of themselves, their voices louder, their smiles wider, revealing a confidence Gogol and Sonia never see on Pemberton Road” (81).

Only two aspects of his personality are exposed fully in the novel—Ashoke the husband and Ashoke the father. As a husband Ashoke is very protective, caring and accommodating. He shares a very intimate and deep emotional bond with Ashima and both of them depend upon each other for emotional support. As a father, Ashoke is very mild and easygoing. Despite his uneasiness with American manners, he never chastises Gogol for following them. He never complains, never loses his temper and never forces his children into doing things they do not want to do. It is a surprise, then, that Gogol maintains a distance from him and avoids him for so many years. Or perhaps this relationship is troubled because of the very fact that he says or shares so little with his children. When he shares the secret of the accident and Gogol’s name with him, Gogol’s perception of his father changes completely and he feels a compassion and curiosity for him that he has never felt before. This revelation adds another layer to Ashoke’s personality and makes Gogol realize that there is more to Ashoke than his Bengali roots and a job at the university. He begins to see his father in a new light. And perhaps this is the most poignant fact about Ashoke’s life - that his son starts appreciating and understanding him only when it’s too late.

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose, / By any other word would smell as sweet...” (Romeo and Juliet II ii 43-44) claimed Shakespeare long ago but

Gogol seems to have spent a good part of his life coming to terms with this fact. This is interesting to note here that Ashoke was reading 'The Overcoat' by Gogol at the time of the accident and was inspired by this story to name his son after the writer. This story also has a character whose strange name Akaky Akakievich Bashmachkin makes him the butt of jokes in his office, and who is also confused about his identity and attaches it to an overcoat. As a boy Lahiri's Gogol loves his name and is not ready to part with it. The 'good' name that his parents have chosen for him, Nikhil, sounds very strange and "[h]e is afraid to be Nikhil, someone he doesn't know. Who doesn't know him" (57).

But as he grows up, he starts disliking his name because it is so strange and funny. He feels uncomfortable with it and finds it difficult to explain to his friends that this is not an Indian or Bengali name but the last name of a Russian author whom his father admires very much. Why on earth did his parents name him after a Russian author? Could they not find a sensible Bengali name to help him justify the root and meaning of his name to his friends? These are the questions that keep tormenting him during his growing-up years. This name has tied him to a strange mixed identity and he is desperate to get rid of it before he enters college. But he fails to realize that a name can decide one's legal and to a certain extent cultural identity, but it does not and cannot change one's personality, upbringing and virtues. Without a doubt, he feels more confident as Nikhil and is eager to sever all ties with his past, his family and his culture.

Living in New York with the Ratliffs, he tries his best to be as much like them as possible. But the more he tries to be like them the more acutely aware he becomes of the fact that however hard he might try, he will always be part of an exotic cultural heritage for them and "he is conscious of the fact that his immersion in Maxine's family is a betrayal of his own" (141). The revelation of the history of his name and the near-fatal accident of Ashoke brings about a deep understanding and compassion for his cultural background and filial bonds. Gogol shaves his head to follow the Indian ritual observed after one's father's death and signals a change in his perception regarding identity. Ashoke's untimely death finally opens his eyes to the fact that however bitter it might seem, he cannot completely do away with his complex cultural identity - part Indian, part Russian, and part American, that he occupies a unique space in his parents' life despite the fact that he has always avoided them, that Gogol is just a name and it does not define the person that he is, that it is perfectly alright to have a strange name so long as one has a loving and caring family. He realizes with a remorse that, "Without people in the world to call him

Gogol, no matter how long he himself lives, Gogol Ganguli will, once and for all, vanish from the lips of loved ones, and so, cease to exist. Yet the thought of this eventual demise provides no sense of victory, no solace. It provides no solace at all” (289).

All this psychological turmoil has been captured dexterously by Nair in the film but with great economy. She has maintained the essential shades of the characters but with different brush strokes. Despite the fact that Mira Nair has remained very close to the source novel while adapting it, the inherent differences between the two mediums make it necessary to adopt certain images and symbols that would convey in a single image or shot what the author took perhaps a few hundred words to express.

The story of the novel spans around thirty-five years of the lives of Ashoke, Ashima, and Gogol across two continents. Put beautifully and economically in two hours of screen time, the film captures the essence of the novel, dealing with all the themes in very much the same warm and compassionate spirit. For practical reasons, Nair selects certain scenes and omits others to bring home the struggle against loneliness, alienation, and rootlessness; the struggle to maintain a balance between tradition and the newer ways of life in an alien land; the struggle to survive with many partial, fragmented identities instead of a whole one; the conflict between cultures and generations. Many characters like Alan and Judy Montgomery, and Ruth, who contribute to the depiction of cultural contrast, have been omitted in the celluloid space. Still the film captures the embarrassment, confusion, insecurity, rootlessness, alienation, loneliness, and defiance of Gogol with much the same understanding and warmth as the novel. Indispensable as this selection and omission process is for the metamorphosis of the novel into a film, it helps in creating an independent piece of art out of the source text. The compelling imagery of bridges used in the film which is not a part of the written word conveys the invisible bridges Ashoke and Ashima are creating all the time in their endeavor to bridge the cultural gap. The fleeting image of a trunk carried by a porter at a railway station, which appears on the screen every time a journey is to be made, does bring home the apprehensions of Ashoka, and the impact that the fatal accident makes on their lives. Family ties, tradition, cultural conflicts, hopes, love, loss, grief- everything comes across strongly, meaningfully, beautifully, and powerfully. The film maintains the ‘feel’ of the novel, yet the very difference in the language of both the mediums ensures a different aesthetic experience.

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