

Postmodern Intertextuality in Film Adaptation of Tess of the D'Urbervilles by Michael Winterbottom

Avantika

Research Scholar

Department of English

Gokul Das Hindu Girls College,

Moradabad (U.P.)

MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, U.P.

Email: avantibhardwaj7946@gmail.com

Prof. Charu Mehrotra

Principal

Gokul Das Hindu Girls College,

Moradabad (U.P.)

MJP Rohilkhand University, Bareilly, U.P.

Email: charubareilly@gmail.com

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Received: 29.12.2024
Accepted on: 21.03.2025

Avantika
Prof. Charu Mehrotra

Postmodern Intertextuality in
Film Adaptation of Tess of the
D'Urbervilles by Michael
Winterbottom

Vol. XVI, Sp.Issue Mar. 2025
Article No.12, Pg. 111-117

Similarity Check: 02%

Online available at <https://anubooks.com/special-issues?url=jgv-si-gdhg-college-mdbd-mar-25>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2025.v16iSI03.012>

Abstract

The 2011 film Trishna, directed by Michael Winterbottom, is a cinematic reimagining of Thomas Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles (1891). Trishna is a postmodern adaptation in its approach, and it adapts the text to a twenty-first-century Indian setting. Today, literary adaptations include many forms, such as transposition, analogy, and commentary. Postmodern approaches like intertextuality, cultural translation or localization, and recontextualization have entered the realm of adaptation. As a result, the act of literary adaptation has been transformed into an innovative endeavour rather than a straightforward transmission of the material. Winterbottom's film adapts the text by recontextualizing it according to contemporary subjects, and postmodern approaches have played a significant role in the final manifestation of the film. The paper reads or reflects the process of adapting Tess as Trishna in light of postmodern intertextual aesthetics within the film.

Keywords

Winterbottom, Trishna, literary adaptation, postmodernism, intertextuality.

Introduction

Soon after its inception in the late 19th century, cinema became a preeminent entertainment medium for the masses, which resulted in the creation of a large number of film adaptations from diverse literary sources. Hardy's literary masterpieces have been recreated several times for television and film versions, including the renowned film adaptation of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* by Roman Polanski. The practice of transposing a literary text to celluloid dates back to 1899 with the inaugural book-to-film adaptation of Charles Perrault's *Cinderella*. Afterwards, the practice of adaptation has evolved into an experimental and innovative process. *Trishna* continues Winterbottom's attempts to adapt Thomas Hardy's novels, following his earlier films *Jude* (1996) and *Claim* (2000), which were based on Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* and *Mayor of Casterbridge*. Sara Maier notices that existing period film adaptations of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* "seek to capture the complexity of Hardy's novels" (186). The plea for having proximity to the text is a modern approach that rejects the possibility of an alternative interpretation, while Winterbottom's take on the text seeks to create a fresh rendition by crossing the socio-cultural boundaries of the text while still honoring the authorial intent. As a result, the adaptation emerges as a different product: a replica of the original text that reflects the postmodern production industry.

Postmodern Adaptation Criticism

The issue of adapting a literary work into a film has sparked a debate among academic scholars, who have struggled with establishing various criteria for assessing such adaptations. Conventionally, the evaluation of a film adaptation has been based on its fidelity to the original text. Postmodernism in film adaptation stands for the elements considered perplexing according to fidelity criticism, such as the alterations in the cultural context and updating the themes. The new interpretations of a source text were scorned in the initial development phases of adaptation studies. Now, in the twenty-first century, the tables have turned, and the creative landscape is acknowledging the transformative power of the film as an art form that supports the performative role of the director and inter-textual elements in a film. In the postmodern epoch of the adaptation field, there has emerged a promising recognition of creative inventions in adaptations. Critics like Robert Stam and James Naremor emphasize that a film adaptation cannot be confined to a single source and often incorporates elements from numerous other sources. A text with a strong authorial

presence may find it challenging to sustain its authentic content and narrative structure in the process of transmission from one medium to another. This may hamper the other possible interpretations and recontextualization of a text. “Once the author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile” (Barthes, 147). The postmodern literary concept of “intertextuality” ascertains a connection between two texts through various means such as allusion, pastiche, quotation, imitation, and commentary. Inter-textual components can be integrated purposely or traced as an influence. Robert Stam utilized the concept to explain the intrinsic nature of adaptation. Intertextuality represents a dynamic synthesis within a text, observable in the interrelation of a text with numerous others. An adaptation assimilates elements that align it with broader production codes, borrowing specific patterns to follow for an effective creation. Intertextual lenses can read various influences and subtle patterns that weave a text. “The concept of dialogics and intertextuality, as theorized by Mikhail Bakhtin and adopted in film studies, notably by Robert Stam, can help us move beyond the stark choice of ‘either...or’ to a thoroughly open appreciation of art as, in Stam’s words, the endless permutation of textual traces” (Brooker, 112).

Trishna As a Postmodern Film Adaptation

The adaptation embodies Winterbottom’s abiding idea of relocating *Tess of the D’Urbervilles* to an equivalent cultural dimension, transposing the text from nineteenth-century England to twenty-first-century Rajasthan and Mumbai. The act of transferring the novel to an Indian setting interlaces the film with several Indian cultural and artistic intertexts. Trishna (Slumdog Millionaire featured Freida Pinto) is a simple and beautiful girl from Ossian, a rural area in Jodhpur, Rajasthan, who receives Tess-like treatment from patriarchy and her lover. Her sombre beauty and calmness attract Jai (Riz Ahmed). Jai is the son of a business tycoon, Roshan Seth, who has settled in the U.K. and runs a business in India. Jai, who has come to India to care for his father’s business, becomes the symbol of power and wealth. We can perceive a sense of smugness and responsibility in Trishna’s character; she works as a waitress and helps her father load and unload stuff in their family jeep. The same Trishna, who works hard for her family, abandons them to live a life of her choice with Jai and later murders Jai, who has transformed her into an object that he uses for his sexual gratification. “Trishna is a woman recreated as the Hindu embodiment of earthiness, beauty, and complexity” (Maier, 188). Winterbottom’s footprints as a director are visible in the creation of Trishna. Winterbottom’s cinema explores themes

of class, inequality, and sexuality. *Trishna* explores how power becomes the way to control and manipulate the female mind and body. Winterbottom grasps the core of contemporary society. Jai does not seem to have a sense of superiority, yet it appears in his domination over Trishna. The movie speaks of the deeply rooted gender and class discrimination, though not so visible, but it feels at a subtle level. This enticing tale of love, betrayal, and fate appeals to Indian schmaltziness and socio-cultural dynamics, allowing Winterbottom to form a parallel world near Hardy's depiction of the Victorian world. *Tess*, as a novel, addresses issues such as gender bias, social prejudice, and class discrimination that continue to exist in the world and, more distressingly, in Indian society. In the film, one can see the use of multifaceted camera lenses to capture the living experience amid the constant shift that naturally captures the socio-cultural and economic turmoil of the country. Scenes from local bazaars, roads, rural households, and Indian weddings present cultural images of twenty-first-century India.

The film adaptation establishes an intertextual relationship with several subtexts. It is not possible to read the adaptation without understanding Hardy's narrative techniques. *Trishna*, much like *Tess*, finds herself perpetually in motion yet never achieves stability, continually struggling against the circumstances that dictate her actions. Winterbottom skilfully adopts Hardy's use of symbolism and foreshadowing, achieving artistic fidelity while transforming the context into an analogical situation. The etched image of an apsara (a god's female attendant in Hindu mythology who pleases by singing and dancing), alongside *Trishna*'s sudden appearance in the temple of Osian, which is visited by Jai and his friends, serves to foreshadow her impending role in the film. The cinematography captures the rural life in Osian, echoing *Tess*'s joys and hardships. Winterbottom meticulously frames the nuances of life within *Trishna*'s community in a rural area of Rajasthan, and the people like Jai who share a double identity. When the film starts, *Trishna* works as a waitress in a hotel, cherishing time spent with her younger siblings and delighting in dancing to Bollywood songs. *Trishna* knows the value of education and encourages her siblings not to miss school. Similar to *Tess*, *Trishna* often appears indifferent to the events of her life, seeing them as the natural course of existence. Winterbottom sketches *Trishna*'s character as meek and submissive, reflecting the societal pressures surrounding her. Both *Trishna* and Jai embody a complexity of character; they are neither good nor bad, but they are of their kind. Winterbottom follows the Hardsque practice of recording the truth of human nature.

Apart from having themes that hold a wider cultural appeal, the film appeals to Indian cinematic creation. Indian cinema has long been linked to Victorian literature. The social world depicted by Hardy was never unfamiliar to Indian audiences. *Tess* is one of the first Victorian novels adapted into Hindi cinema. The film follows the Bollywood way of adapting the text by migrating from the source text to create a new copy. Adaptation as a cultural product entwines the cultural necessities of an era; here, the story is recontextualized according to the current Indian scenario, but the message is the same. The film, through cinematic transformation, touches upon the usual issue that Indian cinema presents: the identity crisis and mental clash that resulted from that. Trishna's identity gets blurred between the contradictions of traditional and modern, rural and urban, grounded or rootless. The musical numbers in the film contain the aroma of Bollywood songs and imitate the Bollywood style of narrating the essence of the whole movie through a musical number; the song "*lagan laagi re tujhse piya re*" of the film narrates the inseparable paths of Trishna and Jai that destiny has written. The scene where Jai saves Trishna from goons mimics a typical Bollywood scene. Former Hindi replacements of *Tess*'s story (*Dulhan Ek Raat Ki* 1967, and *Prem Granth*, 1996) place *Trishna* not only in a matrix of Hardy-esque adaptation but also in a wider matrix of Eastern cultural commodification. Winterbottom's attempt to transplant *Tess* is observed by scholars as a commercial task. The word *Trishna* is of Sanskrit origin, subscribing to the meaning 'desire', and *Jai* means 'victory'. In the film *Dulhan Ek Raat Ki*, the name of Alec's character is *Ranjeet*, which also allocates the symbolic meaning to the name. "Film is not an isolated art form as it inhabits a common expressive culture fed by tradition, cultural memory and indigenous modes of symbolic representation" (Singh, 34). The recreation and reinterpretation of *Tess* certainly add to the relevance of Hardy across cultures. Winterbottom portrays the authentic picture of life and people of time and place, the idea of transposing *Tess* conceived by him but executed by the time and place factor that has worked as an intertextual subtext.

Transnational Film Production

Bruce Bennett studies Winterbottom's cinema as existing on borders: "borders between art and commodity, media borders between film and television, geographical and political borders between regions and nations, imagined borders between communities and classes, gendered borders between men and women, intimate borders between individual and communities"(2). Many of his films truly define what postmodern, transcultural and transnational cinema is. There has grown an

interest in adaptations that relocate the text to a totally different geographical setting in recent years. The film *Trishna* discusses broad themes that communicate with a variety of people and underlie the concept of transnational cinema. It is a global practice to reach the audience worldwide and aim at attaining contemporary relevance. "Transnational cinema as an art form, based upon its extensive and elaborative usage of signs, symbols, codes, angles, shots, etc., communicates the complications, intricacies, and densities of society." (Sharma, 3). It has become a general phenomenon in a globalized world that connects nations on the basis of shared themes and aesthetics. *Trishna* is a British-Sweden-Indian co-production featuring a musical score by Amit Trivedi, an Indian composer and Shigeru Umebayashi, a Japanese composer. The film *Trishna* pertains to a balance between Indian and Western filmic creation; it blends Indian music with elements of Hollywood romance. This approach is reminiscent of the film *Bride and Prejudice*, directed by Gurinder Chadha. The film authentically represents India, showcasing both its grime and its glories through heritage sights as well as scenes of local bazaars, government hospitals, and transportation services. In depicting genuine images of India, the film aligns itself with movies like *Slumdog Millionaire* by English filmmaker Danny Boyle. This practice of reworking is very clear in the film *Trishna*, which reconfigures or remixes elements that are evident in many of the other films" (Bennett, 203).

Conclusion

Trishna exemplifies the postmodern creation of decomposing the boundaries of a text. For Winterbottom, the world itself serves as a text, and there is no boundary between fiction and reality; hence, his films blend reality with cinematic plots. The film does not intend only to satisfy the specific image of the author by adhering to absolute fidelity, but here, the role of the director is that of a second writer who illuminates the 'auteur theory' of postmodern adaptations. *Trishna* displays the inherent fear of class and gender exploitation. The convergence of Alec and Angel into Jai first creates anxiety about losing the aesthetic flavors of Hardy's depiction of complicated human relations. However, Winterbottom transfers the timeframe and location of the text and accordingly shifts the focus to diverse minds and multiple identities in the present era. The function of a film is to entertain the masses by connecting to their emotional understanding and aesthetic sensibility; it contains various instances of intertextuality in subject and representation. Intertextual elements

can be derived from literature and cinema. As Stam notes, “The text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-lasting grids of interpretation” (57). An adaptation is not a distinguished act deprived of any external influence outside the source text; rather, it appears as an outcome of the multiple factors influencing adaptation. This vigorous fusion contributes to the richness and depth of the adapted work, breathing new life into the original text while offering a fresh and captivating perspective.

References:

1. Hardy, T. (2016). *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. United States: Xist Publishing.
2. Barthes, R. (1977). *Image–Music–Text*. London: Fontana, Pg. **142-148**.
3. Bennet, B. (2013). *The Cinema of Michael Winterbottom: Borders, Intimacy, Terror*. United Kingdom: Columbia University Press.
4. Brooker, P. (2007). Postmodern adaptation: pastiche, intertextuality and re-functioning. In D. Cartmell & I. Whelehan (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. (pp. 107-120). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
5. Hutcheon L. (2006). *A Theory of Adaptation*. New York: Routledge.
6. Sharma, M. (2014). Transnational Cinema: A Cross-Cultural Communication Medium. *J Mass Communicate Journalism*. 4(9).
7. Singh, I. (2007). *Gender Relations and Cultural Ideology in Indian Cinema: A Study of Select Adaptations of Literary Texts*. India: Deep & Deep Publications.
8. Maier, S. (2016). From Wessex to India: Adapting Hardy's *Tess* in *Trishna*. *Literature Compass*. 13(3), Pg. **186-195**.
9. Webster, R. (1993). Reproducing Hardy: familiar and unfamiliar versions of “Far from the Madding Crowd and Tess of the d'Urbervilles.” *Critical Survey*. 5(2), Pg. **143-151**.
10. Stam, R. (2017). Revisionist Adaptation: Transtextuality, Cross-Cultural Dialogism, and Performative Infidelities. In T. Leitch (Ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*. (Pg. **239-250**). New York: Oxford University Press.