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Cinematic Translation of Indian English Texts: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

The paper studies cinematic adaptations of Indian English texts by re-reading cinema and translation theories. The process of adaptation to celluloid, in the age of multiplex cinema has both reprieved movie makers from economic liabilities, and at the same time bargained for sellable celluloid commodity for art. The fidelity towards the 'original' text, when medium and language are both translated, in all the more distanced and proportionally more. The poaching of 'texts' in the industry shows a utile notion of 'art'.

Keywords:

Translation, Adaptation, Indian English, Indian Novels, Indian Cinema

Historically, the film industry has always had a very close relationship with the writing fraternity. Since circa 1930's, during the times of *Anjuman Tarraqi Pasand Mussanafin-e-Hind* or Progressive Writers' Movement, literary scholars were already a part of cinematic traditions. Writers like Sadat Hassan Manto, Ismat Chughtai, Majrooh Sultanpuri, Jan Nisar Akhtar, Kaifi Azmi, Sahir Ludhianvi, and Bhisham Sahani were intimately linked with the film industry as they were constantly writing screenplays, dialogues, directing, giving lyrics and some of them, even acting in cinema. Several literary works from that time were later adapted into movies or television films. In the current paper we shall try and understand this relationship better and see how it has grown and evolved since the latter half of twentieth century.

While Indian writers, from the beginning, have had a very strong influence on cinematic traditions, this paper investigates cinematic adaptations of Indian English texts. In terms of the wide array of literary texts at our disposal, this paper is an ambitious project to study literary texts and its cinematic adaptations, spanning over six decades. However, as one would observe in the course of the paper, several aspects of the translation process remain the same over the decades, and that which does not remain the same, becomes a vantage point from which the translation process can be critically studied.

This paper takes off from two novels written by RK Narayan – *Mr. Sampath*ⁱ (1949) and *The Guide* (1958) – which were later adapted for the cinematic screen as *Mr. Sampat* (1952) and *Guide* (1965). Other primary texts for this paper are Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan* (1956) and its cinematic adaptation in 1998 by Pamela Rooks; Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man*ⁱⁱ (1988) which was adapted by Mira Nair as *1947 Earth*; Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003) which was adapted by Mira Nair in 2006; Chetan Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* (2004) adapted as *3 Idiots* (2009); Chetan Bhagat's *One Night at the Call Center* (2005) adapted as *Hello* (2008) and Vikas Swarup's *Q and A* (2005) adapted as *Oscar winning Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). While

other texts have been adapted from literary texts to movies, the paper does not study contemporary adaptations (post 2010); primarily because the nature of movie making and adaptations have become more nuanced with technological advancements and plurality of mediums.

This paper begins with RK Narayan's novels and study their cinematic adaptations around 1950's to see how the movie industry appropriates the novels. From there we are going to move onto the adaptation of *Train to Pakistan* in 1998 and thereafter, to other adaptations following that. Even though the jump from the cinematic adaptation of *Guide* in 1965 to *Train to Pakistan* in 1998 seems rather extensive, one must not forget that there is a whole list of adaptation of Indian texts in vernacular happening even between this period, such as *Suraj ka Sathva Ghoda*, *Devdas*, *Paheli*, *Pinjar*, *Tamas*, *Charandas Chor*, *Shatranj ke Khiladi* etc. As we move onto the movies in 1990's, we see and find out how the process of cinematic adaptation changes. Moreover, we shall see a very utile aspect of this whole exercise of cinematic translation in the current era of multiplex movie making. This paper also studies the aspect of dual translation; the Indian English texts are not only being translated onto a new medium, but also a new language, which is Hindi (in most cases). Lastly we are going to discursivise if this constant mourning for the 'original' text is at all fruitful, or futile.

Incongruities in Plot

In the Hindi film industry, only few ardent followers of old Hindi movies would not have seen Dev Anand starrer *Guide*, directed by Vijay Anand. It would not be completely fallacious to assume that most would have enjoyed the character of Raju Guide played by Dev Anand in the movie, the heartwarming music of SD Burman and last but not the least, the panache and chutzpah of Waheeda Rehman. However, there was one person who did not enjoy the movie as much – It was none other than RK Narayan. RK Narayan wrote a column in the *Life Magazine* called the "Misguided *Guide*" (stress own), in which he questions the way in which the characters of Raju, Rosie and Marco were portrayed in the movie.

He further adds that while Railway Raju of the novel becomes Raju Guide in the movie, the tales of his childhood days in the city of Malgudi is lost along with it. With it his humane aspect and the duality of his being, constantly swaying from good to bad was also lost. He has been shown in the movie as a womanizer who corrupts innocent Rosie, while his husband Marco is shown as a crude and heartless wrench. In the cinematic adaptation, Marco is shown to be an indulgent man and having affairs with others, albeit in the 'original' text, it was not so – rather, he seems to be a man deeply engaged in his work, so much so that he is often oblivious to the fact that he has a wife. Seemingly, there is a difference in being callous and careless. Similarly, RK Narayan's Rosie is not an ideal wife either and has her own short comings. In the movie, one sees 'innocent' Rosie, driven by the tyrannies of Marco attempting to commit suicide not once but thrice. Several sequences in the movie are added such as the scene where Raju's mother and Rosie travel to meet Raju in the new incarnation of a Mahatma (which was not a part of RK Narayan's novel). The action scenes in the movie where Dev Anand, almost randomly, picks up fight are perhaps aimed at *masala*. The music,

needless to say, was perhaps not taking the diegesis forward in any way, a point we will pick up at a later part in this paper).

In the screenplay, Vijay Anand takes up a narrative, a narrative as subtle as *The Guide*, and then adds the conventions of melodrama to it. But should one grant him the leeway? It was perhaps essential for him to attach the adaptation with the conventions and generic configuration of melodrama.

The ending of the novel *The Guide* is very interesting – Raju ‘felt’ it would rain. It doesn’t matter whether or not it actually rained, but mattered is that he ‘felt’ it. It was a sign that he was redeemed. However, in the cinematic adaptation there is a whole scene of song and dance, as it actually rained.

In the adaptation of *Mr. Sampath*, we see how in its cinematic adaptation in Tamil, the very name of the text changes to *Miss Malini*. The burden of holding the name bearer for the movie shifts from Mr. Sampath to his female interest in the novel Miss Malini. In the movie, *Mr. Sampat*, Miss Malini has a very important role to play. Interestingly, Miss Malini is not a character in RK Narayan’s novel. At best, she is the re-embodiment of Shanti, who is the lead female protagonist in the novel. Shanti is missing from the first half of the novel and she first appears only in the second half of the text. It is interesting how, perhaps, due to the need of a female protagonist in a movie, she dons a very important role in both the cinematic adaptations.

In the Hindi movie *Mr. Sampat*, the lead character of Srinivas is completely missing and we see how in the opening scene, the movie does not talk about The Banner (the newspaper) from Srinivas viewpoint, but begins with Sampath describing his exploits. Moreover, the whole idea of Sampath being “the printer of Malgudi” is missing as there is no mention of any newspaper whatsoever. RK Narayan’s Printing man is transposed on the cinematic screen as a musical drama, revolving around a mere conman.

Similarly, in *Train to Pakistan* (the movie) the scene opens with Magistrate Hukkam Chand, played by Mohan Agashe, describing the village of Mano Manjra and the life of Jugga badmash (a dacoit), whereas Khushwant Singh in his original novel begins with a more serious note on the politics of riots, religion and nationhood. The novel begins with a detailed and objective account of Riots in Calcutta, Bihar and Punjab and gave a detailed and objective view of the 1947 riots before moving onto describing the village of Mano Manjra. The movie on the other hand begins with a deep focus shot of Jugga’s father been hanged followed by a voiceover in Mohan Agashe’s emphatic voice. The shot sequence and the accompanying voice-over makes the audiences empathise with Jugga from the very beginning and see him as a tragic hero. Moreover, the cinematic translation, perhaps intentionally, excludes several critiques on role of political parties of that time. For instance, the Inspector says “...When it comes to an open fight, we can be a match for any people. I believe our RSS boys beat up Muslim gangs in all the cities. The Sikhs aren’t doing their share. They have lost their manliness...” He further goes on to say “They are not the ones to talk. Ask anyone coming from Delhi and he will tell you that all these Gandhi disciples are minting money. They are as good saints as the crane. They shut their eyes piously and stand on one leg like a yogi doing penance, as soon as a fish comes near – hurrup.” The only reasonable reason that one can see in omitting these scathing critiques in the cinematic adaptation is perhaps the scare of censorship and a fear of backlash.

In the cinematic adaptation of *The Namesake* too several important aspects of the narration were lost to translation. One such was the scene where young Gogol Ganguli visits the graveyard as a part of their school trip. Since the narrative revolves around the idea of a namesake this scene assumes importance. It is the scene where Gogol for the first time realizes the oddity of his name. It says “Until now it has not occurred to Gogol that names die over time that they perish just as people do. On the ride back to school the rubbing made by other people are torn up, crumpled, tossed at one another’s heads, abandoned below the dark green seats but Gogol is silent, his rubbing rolled up carefully like parchments in his lap.”

To cite a more recent example, in *Five Point Someone* the cinematic diegesis moves ahead with the plot even as the original text ends. While the narrative in the novel ends with Hari’s life in IIT, the movie goes on to narrate the lives of the three friends. Moreover, the names of all three protagonist changes, and their roles differ from what was prescribed in the ‘original’ text. While this can be seen as a ‘value addition’ to the ‘original’, the instances of anomalies in translation from the ‘original’ text to the translated are plenty.

The ‘Loss’ of the ‘Original’

In the process of adaptation, cinema is mimetically trying to represent the original. Here, the film-text is constantly trying to imitate the original-text. Hence, film becomes a representation not of that which is not real, but the image of the real. The relationship that the film shares with the ‘original’ text is the relationship between translated text and the source text where loss is inevitable. Languages and text alike are ossified and are resistant to adaptations, and in a broader sense, resilient to translation of any and all sorts. In some of the cases where an English novel is made into a Bollywood film, the translation is dual – that of medium and that of language (Hindi), hence the resistance and loss, is proportionally more (Golden 24).

However, the question is how productive is this constant mourning for the ‘loss’, that has always been there. The nostalgia for the ‘original’ and the nostalgic privileging of the ‘original’ text has always been there and whenever one encounters a cinematic adaptation. However, the question is, is this moment mourning fruitful or futile? In the article “Film Adaptation: Text or Prototext?” Patrick Rumble says, “The predominant idea of adaptation theory-whether explicit or implicit-is that of the fidelity of the filmic adaptation to the original text. The logic of this argument places the film in a position of inferiority in relation to the text and usually results in a judgment and interpretation of the film according to criteria of evaluation appropriate to literary texts. These criteria often lead the critic to remain largely insensitive to the peculiarly cinematic elements of the adaptation: any discussion of montage, camera angles and motion, lighting, focus, or contrast is usually overlooked in favor of comparisons of characterization, dialogue, or mise-en-scène. And finally what counts is whether or not the filmmaker was faithful to the intentions of the author or to the spirit of his or her age” (Rumble 1995, 83).

Since the loss is inevitable hence, perhaps, we have to look at the cinematic text as an independent artifact. Hence, the mourning for something that is lost and this

question of loyalty, fidelity, faithfulness with the ‘original’ is something to do away with.

Perhaps, we have to see cinema, not just as the process of translation at work, where the adapted movie is nothing but a product of translation and an imitation of the original text but rather as a whole new order of significance. That is to say, that the process of cinematic signification is completely different from literary meaning making. The diegetic universe of the film has its own agents, implements and tools of meaning making which are different from the literary processes of meaning making. We could perhaps look at them as independent texts rather than mere imitations of the ‘original’.

In most of the cases of cinematic adaptations at hand, be it *The Guide* or *Five Point Someone* or *The Namesake*, the movie takes the narrative beyond that prescribed by the original text. The song, the dance and visual euphoria that one gets out of the movie adds to the flavor. Film is said to be the confluence of several art forms (painting, sculpture, architecture, music, dance, literature, theatre) and hence it has different orders of significations which enmeshes them all, which are constantly intersecting within a film text. This is why, a film text cannot be viewed in same way as a literary text. A literary text in one art form in itself and hence it follows one singular logic of representation, and therefore one singular logic of meaning making. The film form conflates a lot of other models of meaning making, one of which is the graphic form, the literary form, the form of the text. The film form is constantly mobilizing the use of the text which is of the order of the graphic.

Writing, which formulates literature, comes from the word ‘letter’, which means written word or written letter. Writing comes from the Greek word ‘graphur’, which essentially means writing as graphic representation. Therefore, literature is essentially a graphic form of art. Likewise, by using the literary text cinema too mobilizes the graphic form of art. Hence cinema is as literary as literary texts are and perhaps there is a need to see it an individual entity.

Take for example the shot sequence in *1947 Earth*, where the love making scene between Shanta and Hassan is shown. Young Lenny watches the act of sexual communion between the two from one window and she watches Dil Navaz watching it too from another window. The effect that the scene creates in the cinematic adaptation is something that the ‘original text couldn’t bring about as subtly. Moreover, the soundtrack which goes on in the background of this shot sequence creates a deep impact on the audience, almost stirring a *jouissance*.

Similarly, Mira Nair’s camera in *The Namesake* captures the West Bengal and US’ Weltanschauung with great élan. The beautiful amalgamation of montage and deep focus cinematography that we see creates a lasting impact on the audience. Take for instance the scene where the idol of Saraswati is being lowered in West Bengal to commence puja, or the scene where Gogol Ganguli shaves his head after his father dies; these images creates a lasting impact which the text by Jhumpa Lahiri brings out ineffectually. Also, the film mobilizes the use of two languages – Bengali and English, thereby clearly portraying two cultural worlds through them, constantly trying to enmesh with each other in a large portrayal of human characters.

One sees, how it is rather easy to formulate an argument on whether the adaptation is better or the ‘original’ text – a lot depends at the vantage point one is

looking from. Hence, it is essential that we do away with the nostalgic privileging of the original text in cases of cinematic adaptations as the modes and mediums of representations are completely different in both the forms and each of them have a different logic and method of meaning-making (Poague 75).

Moreover, it is interesting to notice the book covers of *Namesake*, *Ice Candy Man* and *Q & A* all have pictures from its cinematic adaptation on its cover. Hereby we see how the adaptation is helping mobilize and push the retail value of the 'original' text. There are several readers who visit the 'original' text after been enamored by its cinematic adaptation. A very good example of the same is *Five Point Someone* whose sales drastically shot up after it was adapted into motion picture as *3 Idiots*.

Then, what really makes a good adaptation? Rumble quotes Millicent Marcus why says, "The good adapter, aware of the unique properties of literary and cinematic form, must first infer from the textual source a pre-literary idea— one that stands prior to its written expression ... the adapter must then deduce its cinematically appropriate form" (85).

The Dual Translation

As mentioned before, the cinematic adaptation is often a process of dual translation – One, in terms of the medium and the other, in terms of the language. For example, let us consider the movies: *Guide*, *Mr. Sampat*, *Train to Pakistan* and *1947 Earth*. Even though they were originally written in English language, through the process of translation and cinematic adaptation, they mobilize Hindi as a language.

However, as we say that, we can still see constant anglicization in the Hindi film industry. Notice the following movie names that are in English – *The Namesake*, *1947 Earth*, *Hello*, *3 Idiots*, *I Hate Love Story*, *Tanu Weds Manu*, *Delhi Belly*, *The Girl in the Yellow Boots* etc.

We see how through adaptation of Indian English novels the Hindi film industry is actually making a move towards English as a language of cinematic communication. Hindi film industry should ideally mobilize the Hindi language, which has its roots in Parsi theatre (definitely a non-anglicized culture). In the recent movies we see how English itself becomes a minimal signifying quantum of the Hindi film aesthetic. This is where the oxymoron lies, because the Hindi film industry needs English as the minimal referent of communication. Despite the fact that there is a history in the Persian tradition, seemingly, there is a constant move towards the colonial language.

This is actually helping the Hindi film industry move towards the international market as well and it is helping the Hindi film in crossing over and get international fund. For example, movies like Mira Nair's *The Namesake*, by mobilizing English as the chief language of communication it does not find it difficult to find international producers like Fox Searchlight Pictures. Similarly, *The Slumdog Millionaire* by mobilizing English as the chief language, even though it shows the slums in India, was able to surpass political boundaries and was a huge success abroad.

Poacher and Poached

Serious Indian cinema (or what is not a part of popular and main stream cinema) has always turned to literary texts for their muse. As mentioned before, movies like *Suraj ka Sathva Ghoda*, *Devdas*, *Paheli*, *Pinjar*, *Tamas*, *Charandas Chor*, *Shatranj ke Khiladi* etc., are all based on Indian literary texts. Satyajit Ray, considered to be a pioneer in the field of movie making, focused his career on adaptations of literary texts which can be seen in his movies *Pather Panchali*, *Sadgati*, *Aparajito*, *Apur Sansar* etc.

This is where the adaptations of extremely popular writers like Chetan Bhagat (*Five point Someone* and *One Night at the Call Center*) becomes interesting. A lot of Indian writing in English in late 80's and 90's was termed 'literary fiction'. These books sold abroad, got critical acclaim, critical respect, but they couldn't sell and get the popularity like Chetan Bhagat. The kind of readership that Chetan Bhagat and other writers enjoy, by the sheer number, is something they (literary fiction writers) could not garner, chiefly because the nature, style, and audience for their writing.

The success of Bhagat's *Five Point Someone* was something that no one could expect and understand – there was clearly a market for popular fiction. This is something no one knew, including Bhagat himself. However, the moment the novel and the movie (*3 Idiots*) succeeded, more literature in the same genre was produced.

This marks almost a new era of writing for Indian writing in English and the movie industry is poaching on Indian English texts. For example, Anuja Cahuhan's *Zoya Factor*, a success in the market is all set for the celluloid screen in 2019.

That said, are authors looking to be poached and write in a way they do, because they want a cinema deal out of their literary work? For example, consider a text like *Q and A*, even though the narrative plot in the novel is perhaps more engaging than the movie (*Slumdog Millionaire*) the text seems to have been written more as a screenplay (as an interactive one on one conversation) rather than as a novel. Here, we see a relationship formulating between the film industry and the new Indian writing in English, the popular Indian writing in English, which are not very high browed, but they are feeding on each other.

Even in Chetan Bhagat's novels *Five Point Something*, *2 States* and *Revolution 2020* we see how the texts are adept to making a good screenplay. Hence, we see how authors are actually writing texts for cinematic consumption. In this age of the popular, the popular cinematic medium becomes an occasion for writing a literary text. However, one can't help but ask, what is the legitimacy of such a project and if one is writing the text for and where does the question of fidelity lie?

With the lack of fidelity, what imitates is this utile aspect of writing literary text, where the motive is not creative satisfaction, but the ulterior motive of making more monetary gains through a possible movie deal. This utile aspect fits well in the current era of multiplex theatre where a cinema no longer has to appeal to a large population to be successful. Multiplex theatre is much more logical and will remain economically relevant for the times to come, as even with a little money one can make profits in the business of film making (Hutcheon 108).

Reception aspect of the multiplex culture too is important as we see the ever increasing needs and ever deepening pockets of the Indian middle class. According to

Gita Vishwanath “The rise of the multiplex reflects the consumer aspirations of a new urban middle class. It is also increasingly shaping itself as a forum that encourages and promotes an entirely new genre of film-making and watching” (Vishwanath 2007, 3289). In the current global consumerist public worldview, the logic of financing has given rise to new kind of film. The idea of blockbuster movie has changed since what one conceived of it in 1970-1990 – A movie that cuts across people of all constituencies. The idea of globalization has given rise to the multiplex era film production. A movie with small finances and target a small audience group and still an average movie can make enough profit. For example, consider a movie like *3 Idiot*, where apart from the star cast, the movie was not gaudy or opulent in anyway.

Gita Vishwanath said “If we examine films from the 1990s onwards, we can see that there is an attempt to circumscribe the effusiveness of Hindi cinema within generic boundaries. Here, the cinematic menu on offer becomes crucial for situating the multiplex within the shifting mythic terrain of the Indian cinema” (3291). Adaptations fall into this genre of movie making too, as at the end of the day, movie making is an expensive business and economic viability at the end of production of a movie is necessary.

However, there seems to be no trend to which literary texts to cinematically adapt – texts which are classics, texts which are current, popular or bestsellers. In the current phase of multiplex cinema, movies of all sorts are being experimented with and adapted as there is always a select audience for a certain kind of film and the economic logic of the multiplex cinema makes it possible. In a way, it is also liberating for the cinema industry and the audience in certain way as more and more directors can engage in trying to make movies with the conviction that due to the logic of multiplex theatre they can give their creative abilities their space, without worrying about box office (Gupta 27).

Hence, the multiplex era has caused the concept of film making undergo a lot of evolution. The cinematic apparatus is trying to promote a certain logic of film making, to promote a certain economic logic of film making to reduce its own economic liabilities.

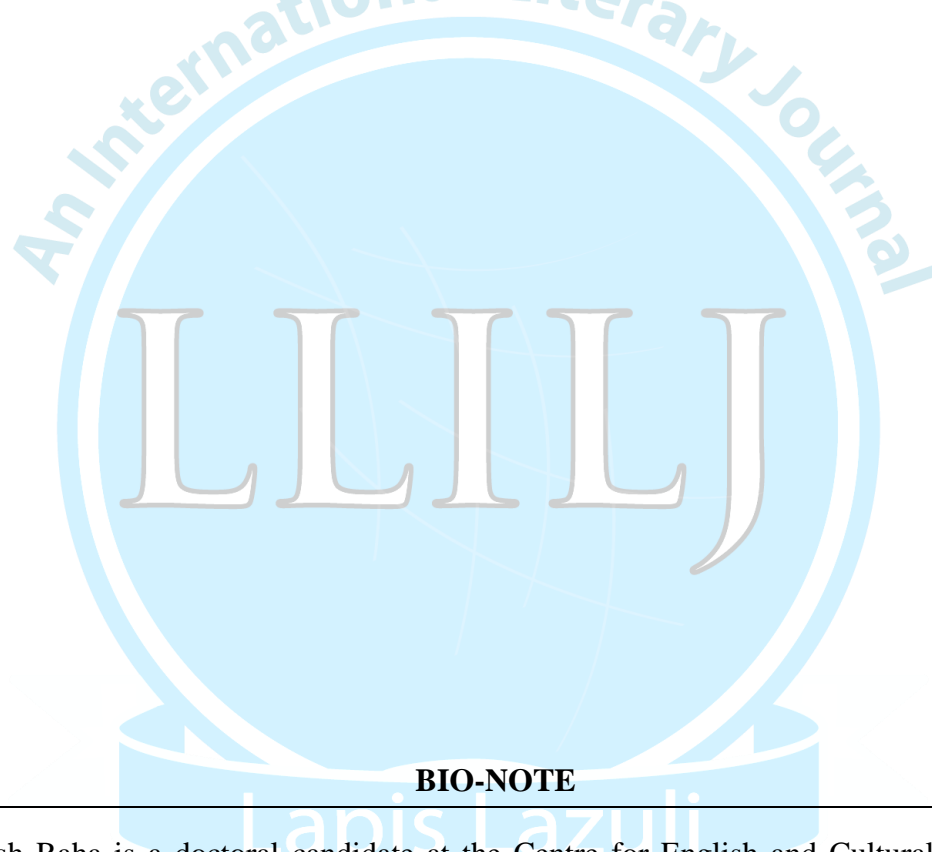
Notes:

ⁱ The text was also adapted into a Tamil film *Miss Malini*, made under the famous Gemini Studio banners. RK Narayan was himself involved in the script writing process for the movie. However, no print of *Miss Malini* exists today making it a lost film.

ⁱⁱ *Ice Candy Man* was later published in 1991 as *Cracking India*.

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BIO-NOTE

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