

Film Studies



CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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Manto to MantogtAAn: Film Adaptation of Manto's four short stories

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Abstract

Translation takes a text from one realm into another, while crossing linguistic, cultural, geographic and generic frontiers. Translation often enriches the original text by giving it 'afterlife' and takes it to new readers of target language. Like varieties of texts, translation has various types, including literal, literary and adaptation. Adaptation allows for 'free' transfer of subject of a literary work into another work such as Shakespeare's play Hamlet into a new entity 'Haider', which is a Bollywood movie. During the rendering process, the filmmaker exercises the liberty to retain or omit any part of the original work, or modify its content as required for the new form. This paper critically analyzes the adaptation of Urdu literature's celebrated writer Saadat Hasan Manto's short stories into a film titled 'Mantostaan'. The Bollywood movie is based on Manto's four Urdu short stories—'Thanda Gosht', 'Khol Do', 'Assignment', and 'Aakhiri Salute'. It is directed by Rahat Kazmi and was released in 2017.

Keywords: *Saadat Hasan Manto, Short Stories, Adaptation, Film, Mantostaan*

Introduction

Translation of a literary work from one language into another is an age-old practice. But taking a piece of fiction such as a short story or novel into another genre is relatively a modern practice. Filmmakers often adapt a story. There are theoretical debates surrounding translation and adaption. This paper critically analyzes the adaptation of Saadat Hasan

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Manto's four Urdu short stories as a Bollywood film entitled *Mantostaan* that released in 2017.

Translation

Translation takes a text from one realm into another, while crossing linguistic, cultural, geographic and generic frontiers. It is an act of replacing text in the source language by an equivalent text in the target language (Catford 20). But Cowie and Shuttleworth go further to define translation as an “incredibly broad notion”, which not merely means “transfer of written texts”; it also includes “interpreting” the text (181). As translation involves “interpreting” the text, it gives scope for decontextualizing and recontextualizing the text. Laurence Venuti opines that adaptation decontextualizes a dramatic or musical text such as novel, play or opera in an “extensive and complex way” because of change in medium and use of artistic license by filmmaker. He further explains that the film adaptation also recontextualizes the text in a new multidimensional medium having its unique traditions and conditions of production (25-43).

On the other hand, Walter Benjamin introduces an interesting concept of ‘afterlife’. The German philosopher explains that the translation often enriches the original text by giving it ‘afterlife’, while taking the text to new readers of target language (75-83). Like varieties of texts, translation has various types, including literal, literary and adaptation. A notable categorization of translations comes from Peter Newmark, who distinguishes between eight methods of translation. Among those eight is adaptation, which he defines as the ‘freest form

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of translation'. It is predominantly used in translation of plays and poetry wherein plots, themes and characters are usually preserved (46-69).

Film Adaptation

Adaptation allows for 'free' transfer of subject of a literary work into another work such as Shakespeare's play Hamlet into a new entity *Haider*, which is a Bollywood movie. During the rendering process, the filmmaker exercises the liberty to retain or omit any part of the original work, or modify its content as required for the new form. An important component of a film is its script or screenplay. Bela Balazs calls film script a new literary form, and treats novel or story as a potential raw material for a film (247). The filmmaker could transform its content at will for the screenplay. A short story with less number of characters and details, and shorter length of narrative and events becomes a suitable choice for filmmakers and gives enough scope to take the story forward and enhance its cinematic adaptation.

Three Strategies of Adaptation

There are some strategies of adaptation, which Desmond and Hawkes discuss in their book on adaptation. A literary work being adapted for film undergoes change. They consider a film as "close interpretation" of the source rather than intermediate or a loose one. They explain three strategies for the adaptation: concentration, interweaving and point of departure (128-137). They argue that the filmmakers who follow the concentration strategy adapt the source story almost as it is, prior to moving in a completely new direction for the rest of the film's length; those who adopt the interweaving strategy keep important elements of the story while

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dispersing the same throughout the movie through interweaving them with new elements or expanding the existing ones; and those who follow the point of departure strategy cut down most of the narrative elements and produce a fresh story based on remaining elements. They argue that some filmmakers incorporate elements from two short stories as well in films.

Manto to Mantostaan

Saadat Hasan Manto is the sub-continent's greatest master craftsman of short stories in Urdu language. He continues to capture the imagination of generation after generation, bringing to life mundane subjects and refreshing memories of life-changing events that continue to affect millions of people. Born in Punjab, he lived most of his life in Bombay and Lahore where he composed the best of his works. Manto was a prolific writer who penned down 22 collections of short stories, including his best narratives 'Toba Tek Singh', 'Titwal Ka Kutta', 'Thanda Gosht', etc.

He brings our attention to insignificant moments in our life, and makes them significant. He writes about ordinary subjects such as a dog in no man's land, lunatics in an asylum etc. In his introduction to *Mottled Dawn: Fifty Sketches and Stories of Partition*, Daniyal Mueenuddin argues that Manto's stories enable us to transcend our political biases; he also mentions that Manto uses a technique of 'artlessness, effortlessness' in writing his stories, which offer bare minimum description of landscapes, and almost no reflection and editorialization upon events (xii-xiii).

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Manto's stories are quite short, sharp, and soul stirring. Film director Rahat Kazmi chose 'Thanda Gosht', 'Khol Do', 'Assignment', and 'Aakhiri Salute' to make the film *Mantostaan* in 2017. These four stories are full of pain and pathos, and revolve around the theme of Partition.

Partition: A Central Theme

Writing before and immediately after Partition, Manto's greatest stories bring to life those horrific events that became part of the shared history of people of the subcontinent. As Khalid Hasan, who translated Manto's short stories, points out that Manto draws our attention to millions of small tragedies, which together make up a larger tragedy called Partition—a central theme of his popular works (xv-xxvi). He uses irony and satire to target rapists, killers, rioters and others in his stories. He does not seem to spare anyone, while giving readers a mild taste of heroism among those commoners who practice humanity in difficult times. As a writer, he makes us care about and empathize with victims, killers and the killed. For him, nothing could justify inhumanity and taking someone's life.

Stories of Pain and Pathos

Each of the four stories adapted as the film is an episode of pain and pathos linked with Partition. 'Thanda Gosht' is about a Sikh named Ishar Singh, who abducts a beautiful Muslim girl during riots and rapes her without realizing that she was already dead. It makes Ishar impotent, and his wife Kalwant Kaur kills him for infidelity.

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In ‘Khol Do’, a father loses his daughter during communal clashes. The young girl, who is brought back to Lahore by a group of Muslim men, remains comatose on a hospital bed. When the doctor asks the window to be opened saying “khol do”, the girl unties her pants. When her distraught father sees her responding, he screams with joy not realizing she has been a victim of brutal rapes.

The ‘Assignment’ is about a Muslim judge who lives with his teenage daughter and a son in Amritsar in 1947. He favors a Sikh in a case during his service. The Sikh builds a tradition of offering sweets to the judge as a gift on the festival of *Eid*. As a last wish, the Sikh instructs his son to continue the tradition. After passing away of the Sikh, his son visits the house of the Muslim judge. But the city remains tense due to communal violence, and a group of men gather to burn the house of the Muslim judge. The son requests them to complete his task of handing over the gift. Once he finishes his assignment, he asks them to finish theirs.

‘Aakhiri Salute’ is about a war in Kashmir after Partition happened. Two best friends Rab Nawaz and Ram Singh were brought up in the same village, joined armed forces, and once worked in the same Army unit. They face each other as enemies representing two independent nations after Partition. When confronted at the dividing line, they exchange jokes and become nostalgic. But the short exchange ends in a tragedy after Rab Nawaz unknowingly fires across the line and it hits his friend Ram Singh. While taking his last breath, Ram Singh salutes the Pakistani captain who was once his supervisor.

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Mantostaan

Translating Manto's stories or adapting it into another medium is quite a challenge for anyone who dares such an attempt. Rahat Kazmi attempted a thematic adaptation of these four stories. He seems to have adopted interweaving strategy as he keeps setting, characters and some important events from the source stories while dispersing these elements throughout the length of the film and adds some new elements too.

The film begins with scenes of horror from each story: The young girl is running away in terror, apparently from people who are chasing to rape her; and an Army man running down the hill in agony after his bullet hits his friend Ram Singh; the father upon finding a mob with swords shouting "*pakdo, maro...*" and killing people during 1947 in Amritsar, turns in panic calling "*Sakina...Fatima*" to run; the judge resting with a wall in deep thought and pain as smoke emerges from his house set ablaze; and the Sikh man walks on the street affected by communal violence and enters a house to kill its residents.

Set mostly in night, the movie recreates the scenes of mass killings, rapes, loot, violence and suffering. It contains Jawaharlal Nehru's popular speech 'Freedom at Midnight' played in background, giving further evidence of its timing being Partition: "Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny and now, the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge... At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps India will awake to life and freedom".

The speech of Nehru is not found in Manto's stories, but Rahat Kazmi added it perhaps to indicate to viewers that the film is set during the Partition. The freedom for both the countries came with a huge cost in the form of a tragedy called Partition. About this freedom, another

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writer and contemporary of Manto, Faiz Ahmed Faiz writes: “This mottled dawn / This night-bitten morning / No, this is not the morning / We had set out in search of”

As the movie progresses, the intensity gradually increases and the juxtaposition of events from each story continue. The film contains scenes of violence and destruction dispersed throughout its length. It also plays a part of Mahatma Gandhi’s radio broadcast in 1947 in which he addressed refugees stationed in Haryana, indicating the suffering on another side of the border as an additional element in the movie.

Also, the movie has a quote of Manto related to the charge against him for promoting obscenity, particularly through ‘Khol Do’ and ‘Thanda Gosht’. His response was: “If you cannot bear these stories then the society is unbearable. Who am I to remove the clothes of this society, which itself is naked. I don’t even try to cover it, because it is not my job, that’s the job of dressmakers”.

Not only this important statement, the two stories are also adapted by Nandita Das in her biopic on Manto. But she shows only the two important events from the stories. They run in the mind of Nawazuddin Siddiqui, who plays the role of Manto in the film. Das seems to have used the dramatic technique of ‘play within a play’, which was famously used by Shakespeare in Hamlet. The technique helps her from falling into legal traps or censorship as the original stories became controversial and met with legal challenges in India and Pakistan during the lifetime of the author.

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Though the filmmakers tried to remain close to the source, film critics have criticized *Mantostaan* for failing to adequately show Manto's stories. Apart from the criticism on technical aspects, the critics almost unanimously downrated the movie in their reviews by saying that the stories were "lost in translation" (Gupta), "lost in adaptation" critics (Joshi), "not accomplished enough" (Thomas), and "get tacky treatment" (Ramnath).

When viewed as an independent work of art, the film appears a successful thematic adaptation which uses the interweaving strategy and intermixing technique to build its narrative on partition with pain and pathos at its core.

Conclusion

The adaptation of Manto's four short stories as *Mantostaan* if viewed in comparison with the source gives critics and viewers alike the feeling of being robbed or not accomplished enough. On the other hand, viewing the film as an independent work gives enough scope to appreciate it as a satire set mostly in the dark with somber characters and events that gradually intensify as the movie progress. The screenplay reflects the inhuman side of humanity unleashed during Partition, augmented by the quote of Manto on society's nakedness, the speech of Nehru after Independence and the broadcast by Gandhi to address refugees stationed in Haryana. The stories written by Manto about 70 years ago get an "afterlife" when adapted as films. Also, *Manto* (2018) and *Mantostaan* (2017) make it clear that a story transferred to another genre could be expressed differently in the same medium.

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