

# Film Studies



**CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION**

**Combined Volumes (3:2 & 4: 1)**

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## ***Films in Adaptation: Bioscopewala and Lootera***

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### **Abstract**

In the field of arts, it is a common notion that stories are born of stories. Yet, the stigma attached with translation is that it thrives in the reflected glory of the original work. Cinema is one of the latest media that takes the written text to screen, converting the process of telling to showing if not interacting. The shift in focus and changes are inevitable with the change in media but the story remains recognisably the same. Of the vast number of Indian films produced each year, there are a very few films that are adaptations of Indian or foreign literary works. This paper aims to analyse Linda Hutcheon's idea, in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006), that adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, by studying the Hindi film adaptations of two short stories – Rabindranath Tagore's 'Cabuliwallah' (1892, 1908) as *Bioscopewala* (2018) and O. Henry's 'The Last Leaf' (1907) as *Lootera* (2013). Such translation of short stories into films provides the makers with the space to expand the story rather than compress it as in the case of novels. This paper unfolds the idea of the films as palimpsest and concludes that even though adaptations are derivations, they are autonomous aesthetic entities that need to achieve a certain degree of equivalence with the original work.

**Keywords: Translation, Adaptation, Film, Short Stories**

### **I**

In "Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory", Thomas Leitch states, "Fidelity to its source text—whether it is conceived as success in re-creating specific textual details or

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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 trivial sense” (161). In Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* (1981), Dr Aziz treats his patient through a hole in a white sheet. When he examines one body part after another, he begins to form a badly fitted collage in his mind of the woman behind the sheet. Later, he comes to the realization that Naseem Ghani is an entirely different person as a whole as compared to the collage he was smitten with. A reader turned viewer shares a similar fate as that of Dr Aziz when it comes to film adaptations of texts. A chain of conceptual images is formed in the reader’s mind as a response to the written word. Therefore, the reader’s reaction to adaptations is not merely a question of fidelity to the source text. It is also a question of fidelity to the reader’s response to the text. Brian McFarlane in “Reading Film and Literature”, on the impossible venture of a film’s fidelity to text, states that “every reading of a literary text is a highly individual act of cognition and interpretation; that every such response [reader’s vision of literary text] involves a kind of personal adaptation on the screen on one’s own imaginative faculty as one reads” (26).

Linda Hutcheon, in her book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) conveys that art is derived from other art and stories are born of other stories. Adaptation is often seen as a derivative of its literary text and is assumed to be ‘lower’ in an imagined hierarchy of medium or genre. Hence, the response to it is negative even among modern critics. The criticism around fidelity is based on the assumption that adaptors reproduce the text. However, Hutcheon defines adaptation as “a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without

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conscious updating or alteration of setting” (xvi). She further adds that adaptation is a derivation that’s not a derivative. In her attempts to show adaptation as both a process and product, she discusses the expansion and contraction of the texts. Story is the only common denominator to both the text and its film; it is the core of transposition across media and genre. In this transposition, equivalence is often sought in the themes, events, characters, points of view, contexts, symbols etc. The thematic transposition is easier as compared to the portrayal of characters along with their psychological conflicts and development. While telling a story, a narrator has a point of view and can leap through time and space with the power of venturing into the minds of characters, at times. While showing a story, the audiovisual performance occurs in real time, that is, it is always happening.

Unlike prose fiction, filmmaking is a collaborative process. Therefore in adaptations, the source text is one part of the film. Further, the adaptor can choose to make a shift in focus which might affect the plot ordering of text to screen tremendously. From an adaptor’s perspective, “adaptation is an act of appropriating or salvaging, and this is always a double process of interpreting and then creating something new” (Hutcheon 20). This process of appropriating, of filtering and taking possession of another’s story through one’s own sensibility, makes an adaptation an independent art.

Hutcheon calls adapting long novels as a surgical act. The adaptors subtract or contract the text considerably. Novels bear rich narratives, characters, subplots, settings etc. This vast amount of information sets the groundwork for the adaptors to contract the events in a novel

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to create a coherent film, thematically or chronologically. The adaptation of short stories varies from that of novels because here the creators have to work on the gaps available in the story to expand it. A short story usually focuses on one event or incident or character while having a few or no supporting characters. In exercising the freedom to build a story around this limited information, the film can be considerably different from the source text. This paper will focus on the adaptation of short stories in terms of expansion of the text while also stating that adaptations are autonomous aesthetic entities irrespective of their fidelity to the text. In studying Rabindranath Tagore's "Cabuliwala" as Deb Medhkar's *Bioscopewala* (2017), and O Henry's "The Last Leaf" as Vikramaditya Motwane's *Lootera* (2013), this paper will also focus on how the adaptations become palimpsest of their texts, irrespective of the various cultural and temporal changes, as they capture the essence or spirit of these short stories.

## II

Rabindranatha Tagore's "Cabuliwala" was originally published in Bengali in 1892. It has been translated notoriously into English. It is a story about a Pashtun trader's friendship with a five-year-old Bengali girl, Minnie, in Calcutta. The short story is narrated by Minnie's father who witnesses the blooming relationship between Rahmun, the Pashtun trader from Afghanistan and Minnie. The conflict in the story is that Rahmun is allegedly charged with murderous assault and is imprisoned for eight years. The day he completes his sentence, he goes to meet Minnie who is about to get married. Rahmun shows the narrator a paper bearing ink-smeared impressions of the palms of his daughter whom he used to visit yearly in Afghanistan before his imprisonment. The narrator who had earlier considered Rahmun's

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arrival on Minnie's wedding day as a bad omen, finally understood Rahmun's affection for Minnie. When Minnie, clad in her bridal attire meets her Cabuliwala, she is unable to recognize him. Both the fathers are hit with a sinking realization that Rahmun's daughter might not be able to recognize him either after all these years of separation. The story ends at this note when the narrator provides Rahmun with some money to return home to his daughter.

*Bioscopewala* is the first feature film directed by Deb Medhekar. The Geetanjali Thapa and Danny Denzongpa starrer film was released in Tokyo Film Festival in 2017 and in India in 2018. Medhekar focused on not only recreating Tagore's "Cabuliwala" but also, making it relevant to the present day audience, as he mentions in his interview in *The Hindu*. *Bioscopewala* is the story of an Afghan expatriate, Rehmat Khan, who finds himself in Kolkata as the terror of Taliban begins to regulate the turn of events in his life. Rehmat Khan is a respected-elite in Afghanistan who is passionate about Hindi cinema. When Taliban declares cinema as *haraam*, Khan begins to see cinema as a way of broadening and revolutionizing minds. With the destruction of his cinema hall, he becomes a man with mobile dreams showing films through his bioscope. When the Taliban threatens to kill his daughter for his 'crimes', Khan decides to move away from his family. He finds himself in Kolkata where he meets and befriends a five-year-old local girl, Minnie. He is falsely accused of murder and is sentenced for life imprisonment. Minnie, inspired by her bioscopewala, grows up to become a documentary filmmaker in France. She returns to Kolkata upon her father's demise in a flight to Kabul. She is given the custody of Khan because her father,

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Robi Basu, had petitioned for his early release and custody. When she recognizes Khan as her bioscopewala, she begins to connect the dots of her father's demise to Rehmat Khan, realising that Robi had been trying to reunite Khan with his daughter. She takes on her father's quest only to be dejected by the information about the demise of Khan's daughter. The film ends on an emotionally stirring note where Minnie returns an Alzheimer's' afflicted Khan, his art of storytelling through moving images.

The adaptation is inspired by the characters in Tagore's short story. An entire lifetime is assigned to these characters in the film, as opposed to their brief episodic glimpses in the text. The narrator becomes a fashion photographer named Robi Basu, Minnie grows up to become a documentary film maker and Rahmun's character as Rehmat Khan is given a backdrop that's temporally believable. 'Cabuliwala' is set in the late nineteenth century Calcutta. In order to make the story relevant to the present day viewers, the setting is shifted to the present day Kolkata. Rehmat is no longer a poor trader from Afghanistan but he is a well-respected elite who has been exiled from his village due to the terror of Taliban during 1980-90s. Minnie grows up to become a fiercely independent woman with a quest for solving mysteries, putting together the pieces of puzzles to build comprehending stories, unlike the child-bride in Tagore's story. The short story is narrated from the point of view of Minnie's father. In the film, many characters are added to the story in order to show the story of Rehmat Khan using their memory as a tool.

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In the short story, the narrator was bothered about her daughter's former undivided attention for him being shared with the Cabuliwala. In the film the father-daughter dynamics take an unfamiliar turn. Robi Basu maintains his distance from his daughter. During his funeral, Minnie sheds light on her relationship with her father by saying that she cannot recall her father's complete face because half of it was always hidden behind a camera. The film, like the short story, doesn't get into the dynamics between Rehmat Khan and his daughter. However, Khan meets Minnie when Robi invites him to meet him if he ever visits their locality. The relationship that Minnie shares with Khan results from her father's negligence towards her and Khan's longing for his daughter. During the course of the movie, Minnie gets to know the person behind the camera but Khan is unable to see his daughter again. In the end, when visuals from a projector are juxtaposed against the bioscope, a montage symbolically establishes the affectionate bond between Rehmat Khan and Minnie, compensating for their respective loss.

Cabuliwala is memorably described: "... [Rahmun] brought out a small and dirty piece of paper. With great care he unfolded this, and smoothed it out with both hands on my table. It bore the impression of a little hand. Not a photograph. Not a drawing. The impression of an ink-smearred hand laid flat on the paper. This touch of his own little daughter had been always on his heart ..." (Tagore 17)

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This iconic description from ‘Cabuliwala’ that sets the tone of the entire text is beautifully adapted in the film. Along with the faded brown impressions of Rehmat Khan’s daughter, there is another set of coloured impression belonging to Minnie. The faded colours portray the loss of home in Afghanistan, and the bright colors, as the acceptance of life away from home in Kolkata. It sets the tone for the climax where the Rabiya and Minnie become a single person symbolically.

The film that focuses on cinema as the mode of storytelling uses many metaphors to leave hauntingly beautiful images with the audience – like a digital camera capturing the footage of burnt reels or a digital projector being juxtaposed against a discarded bioscope. The film uses powerful montage to show Rehmat Khan’s escape from Afghanistan, the barter system at frontiers, and his fight against it. *Bioscopewala* becomes a palimpsest of “Cabuliwala” as it portrays the story as a part of a bigger story that revolves around cinema as an art form. Rehmat Khan sees cinema as a revolution in the reign of Taliban. Minnie grows up to become a documentary film maker. It doesn’t lead her into a path of external validation, but sets her on a path of internal transformation. The film is able to emotionally stir the audience by making cinema the foundation and outcome of the Minnie and Rehmat Khan’s relationship. Minnie was inspired to pursue filmmaking because Khan had shown her the art of storytelling by moving images. Later as Khan suffers from Alzheimer’s, in one of his lucid moments in the beginning of the film, he picks up two lenses and tries to create the reflection of a reel on the wall. In the end however, when Minnie shows him her documentary while talking of Rabiya, he recognizes her as his ‘Baby-jan’ and moves towards his discarded

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bioscope to show her films, like old days. The film becomes a complete circle of loss and find, while successfully capturing the episodes of Tagore’s “Cabuliwala”.

### III

Vikramaditya Motwane’s *Lootera* (2013) is a story about love, loss, betrayal and redemption. It is a period romance set in 1952 West Bengal and 1954 Dalhousie. The story is about the daughter of a zamindar, Pakhi RoyChaudhuri and a conman disguised as an archeologist, Varun Srivastava. Varun, along with his partners, loots the RoyChaudhuri-dharohar when the Indian government passes the Zamindari Abolition Act. During his stay, however, he falls for Pakhi but is forced to flee as love is not a luxury that is allowed in his profession. Pakhi loses her father to the shock of the con and moves to Dalhousie. The police, by then, hunting for Varun come to Pakhi for help. Coincidentally Varun finds accommodation in Pakhi’s guest house. Wounded by an encounter with police and coming across Pakhi’s medical report of end stage Tuberculosis, Varun sees his stay as an opportunity for redemption of his former misdeeds. When he reads that Pakhi has attached her impending death with the falling leaves of the tree outside her window, Varun attaches a painted leaf to the tree when the last leaf falls. As Pakhi recovers, Varun leaves only to be shot by the police. Later, Pakhi discovers that the last leaf hanging is a painting and realizes that Varun finally painted the masterpiece he dreamt of, from the time before he learnt painting from her.

“The Last leaf”, written by O Henry, was published in 1907. The story is set during an outbreak of pneumonia epidemic in the painters’ community in Greenwich, Washington. A

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young girl, suffering from pneumonia, with no desire to live decides that she'll breathe her last when the last leaf falls from the Ivy tree in the neighbouring wall. Hearing such a nonsensical idea, the failed painter turned model who always wanted to paint a masterpiece, the 60-year-old Mr Bernham paints a leaf on the wall the night the last leaf falls. Ironically, Johnsy recovers looking at the last leaf but Mr Bernham dies within two days of suffering from pneumonia. It is Johnsy's friend Sue who discovers the cause behind his death and exclaims that he finally painted the masterpiece he spoke of.

The director of *Lootera*, Vikramaditya Motwane, expressed in his interviews with *Reuters*, that it was this presence of the "human element", the selfless act of giving one the reason to live while dying himself, is what attracted him the most about the story. He wanted to capture this tragic story that leaves a bittersweet smile in the end. Motwane also said that 'The Last Leaf' bears "a strange love story, if one could call it a love story at all". He wanted to create a story of love and loss around it. In his interview, he stated that, "I tried to do a modern-day adaptation but it didn't work. You are talking of two people who come together and are then forced apart and in today's day and age with cellphones and Facebook, how far apart can you actually be?" This resulted in a setting that was long before the age of telecommunication and internet. In fact, there is a scene in the beginning of the film that mentions the introduction of electricity in Manikpur, West Bengal. Setting the film in a time that is not relevant to the modern Indian audience, Motwane and writer, Bhavani Iyer, decided to settle for a Bengal-based story. It was also a very personal choice, as Iyer mentions that Motwane and she are fascinated by the Bangla culture because of their family connections.

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While building the subtle story of *Lootera* with a profound message for humanity, they enrich the characters from O Henry's American short story. However, the basic traits remain intact. The female protagonist suffers from a disease that remains undiagnosed till she loses the will to live and the male protagonist desires to paint a masterpiece irrespective of his lack of painting skills. It is interesting to notice that the first half of the film has many supporting characters, dialogues and action. In the second half, as the transposition of 'The Last leaf' begins, the screen is occupied only by the protagonists, which is similar to the limited characters in the literary work.

The point of view of the short story is that of third person narrator. The film captures the story from the point of view of the camera instead of the point of view of characters. The songs in the film provide a peek into the characters' mind. The difference in the titles of both the text and film shows a shift in focus of the narrative. The title of the short story symbolizes the importance of the last leaf to the characters. The title of the film *Lootera*, however, focuses on the life of the anti hero, Varun Srivastava, without projecting the story from his point of view. The glorification of the conman in the film is similar to that of the failed painter in the short story.

The theme and the humane spirit of the story as Motwane puts it – “the sense of doing something selfless for somebody who doesn't even know about it” – is captured in the film irrespective of the story built around it. The characters in the film are bonded by love where

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as Mr Bernham makes himself the self proclaimed caretaker of the two girls living above his flat. The selflessness of the act is dependent on the responsibility they chose. The spirit of the story remains intact, as with the semi-tragic ending where Varun is shot to death, the audience smiles with Pakhi who discovers the truth about the last leaf hanging.

The Bheel Raja story, as told in the beginning of the film, and “The Last leaf” unfold to form the plotline, metaphorically in the former case. It is this power of carrying stories within stories while unfolding at the same that makes film as powerful a storytelling medium as its prose fiction. An aware audience might foresee signs of familiarity in the story at the first mention of painting a masterpiece. An unaware and interested audience might go back to the source as the credits begin to roll.

## IV

Hindi cinema is known worldwide for its ‘colourful dance numbers’. Very few of these films adapt their scripts from literary works. Between the adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays that suit the intellectuals and that of Chetan Bhagat’s popular fictions that please the youth, there is an underlying belt of short story adaptations that remain underrated. For example, in the recent decades there have been some adaptations like Bhansali’s *Saawariya* (2007) adapted from Dostoevsky’s “White Nights”, Bharadwaj’s *7 Khoon Maaf* (2011) adapted from Ruskin Bond’s “Suzaanna’s Seven Husbands”, Ghosh’s *Raincoat* (2004) from O Henry’s “The Gift of Magi”. These films that were critically acclaimed failed to create a place in Box Office. In the times where a film’s success is judged by its first weekend to create a 100-crore-mark, it has become impossible for many films to survive in theatres. The atmosphere of the film-goers is

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changing with the millenials continuously using the online social media platforms to talk about films beyond ‘entertainment’. This audience is constantly seeking a well-materialized story with the focus on acting skills. However, for most of the audience it is still about entertainment.

According to Bazin, “People in general do not give much thought to the cinema. For them it means vast décor, exteriors, and plenty of action. If they are not given at least a minimum of what they call cinema, they feel cheated. The cinema must be more lavish than the theater. Every actor must be a somebody and any hint of poverty or meanness in the everyday surrounding contributes, so they say, to a flop. Obviously then, a director or a producer who is willing to challenge the public prejudice in these matters need courage” (86-87). Motwane while speaking of audience reception states that, “You cannot make an obtuse film that only appeals to a small niche section of the audience. You have to be honest about what kind of films you want to make. If it is in your blood to make those kind of films, go ahead and make them. If it is not ... and I have seen a lot of filmmakers do that, they make films that they don’t believe in and it doesn’t work.”

According to Linda Hutcheon, “By their very existence, adaptations remind us there is no such thing as autonomous text or an original genius that can transcend history, either public or private. They also affirm, however, that this fact is not to be lamented” (Hutcheon 111). She also states that for an adaptation to be successful in its true sense, it must be so for both knowing and unknowing audiences. When I saw the trailer of *Bioscopewala* earlier this year,

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I was looking forward to watch the film knowing it is an adaptation of Tagore's short story which is perhaps more famous for its earlier adaptation in 1961. However, when I watched *Lootera*, I returned home to read "The Last Leaf" on the internet. The discussion around adaptation is often about the loss in fidelity. However, adaptations, on many occasion, help in the reproduction of texts. Bazin in "In Defence of Mixed Cinema", states that, "As for those who are unacquainted with the original, one of the two things may happen; either they will be satisfied with the film which is as good as most, or they will want to know the original, with the resulting gain for literature. This argument is supported by publishers' statistics that show a rise in sale of literary works after they have been adapted to screen" (65). *Bioscopewala* and *Lootera* rejuvenate the forgotten short stories that were published more than a century ago. The cultural-temporal shift, albeit brings about many changes but successfully captures the essence of the stories.

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