

## **Translating from Page to Screen: A Study of the Adaptations of Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and Anita Desai's *In Custody***

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Cinema is a new form of literary expression that started as an experiment with visual, and then audio-visual experience. It remains a technical-commercial activity. However an urge to tell a story and propagate ideas has guided it to the present form. Traditionally, the criticism of an adaptation film is primarily focussed on how closely the film looked like its source literary text. Traditional analysis talked about in what manner the movie differs or is faithful to the basic story, theme, aesthetics and structure of the source. If the 'gap' is far wide, the film is pronounced as a failure – it is judged to have violated and betrayed the source. Robert Stem in this regard says that the idea of fidelity refers to some adaptations failing to realise the main points of the source text, or an adaptation couldn't adapt the source text as some other adaptations did. But the question is – Is loyalty the whole idea behind an adaptation? as stem states:

Indeed, it is questionable whether strict fidelity is even possible. An adaptation is automatically different and original due to the change of medium. The shift from a single-track verbal medium such as the novel to a multitrack medium like film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken) but also with music, sound effects and moving photographic images, explains the unlikelihood, and I would suggest even the undesirability, of literal fidelity. (3-4)

Often a critic seems to be taking sides with the book. It is important to understand that a written text is a verbal medium which lets you conceive the narrative, the voices, the images and the action in your mind; whereas a film tells you the story using verbal, non-verbal and technology. A written text is read any number of times, and every reading is different as every reader is different. Similarly, a film adaptation is a reading of the film

maker. Hence, every adaptation is different. While adapting a literary text the film maker borrows from the existing text, and appropriates the narrative, theme, situation etc.; and transforms it in the medium of cinema making use of its methods, technology and material available at his disposal. Corrigan suggests:

The words of a novel, as countless commentators have pointed out, have a virtual, symbolic meaning; we as readers, or as directors have to fill in their paradigmatic indeterminacies. A novelist's portrayal of a character as "beautiful" induces us to imagine the person's features in our minds. Flaubert never ever tells us the exact color of Emma Bovary's eyes, but we color them nonetheless. A film, by contrast, must choose a specific performer. Instead of a virtual, verbally constructed Madame Bovary open to our imaginative reconstruction, we are faced with a specific actress, encumbered with nationality and accent, a Jennifer Jones or an Isabelle Huppert. (75)

Since the very beginning when cinema emerged as narrative tool it has been looking through the popular literary texts, especially novels, as source. This urge to acquire an established literary text does not necessarily result into a mindless copy – in terms of content, imagery, words, structure etc. Brian McFarlane cites Morris Beja's observation in *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* that "since the inception of the Academy Awards in 1927-8, more than three fourths of the awards for "best picture" have gone to adaptations ... [and that] the all-time box-office successes favour novels even more" (8). Written texts such as novels or plays have long been adapted for film screen either for their literary merit or for their commercial appeal by rewriting it as screenplay. The screen adaptation is bound to have some differences because of the differences in codes governing the two texts; one medium is highly visual and the other is purely descriptive. In other words, film adaptation is translating a written image into audio-visual image.

A film is play of colours, light, shade, and sound. As a written text employs extra-linguistic codes, a film employs non-verbal elements like costumes, make-up, looks etc. However a film as medium has its own

limits as far as visualisation and communication of written details is concerned. Indian cinema is no exception. Sangita Gopal observes in her essay “Coming to a Multiplex Near You: Indian Fiction in English and New Bollywood Cinema” that:

When filmmakers have turned to literature, they have done so because a cinematic adaptation of the literary work already exists (as in case of the serial adaptations of Sharatchandra Chatterjee’s *Devdas*) or in order to self-consciously break the mold of the formulaic Hindi film by drawing on the novelty and cultural capital offered by a literary work. (362)

This paper attempts to evaluate *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988), directed by Philip Kaufman, screenplay by Jean-Claude Carrière and Philip Kaufman, from the novel by Milan Kundera and National Award winning film *Muhafiz* (1993) as adaptation of Anita Desai’s Booker prize nominated novel *In Custody* (1984).

*The Unbearable lightness of Being* as screen adaptation of the English novel by the same name which is a translation of the novel of ideas translated by Michael Henry Heim from *Nesmesitna lehkost byti* written in Czech by Milan Kundera. The novel is highly difficult to ‘film’ given the complexity of psychological rendering of life, love, flirtation and, of course, Beethoven. Conveying the complex idea of lightness and weight on screen poses a positive challenge as Kundera is more verbal than visual. The novel appears more a philosophical essay, a discursive entity.

Political oppression, emigration, censorship, and human nature are the perpetual themes in Milan Kundera’s novels who himself suffered communist regime; he loads his novels with his psycho-philosophical reflections. Kundera raises the issues of political high handedness in his novels without losing the focus of the issue of existence or that of ‘being’. He was born on April 1, 1929 in Brno, Czechoslovakia. He had a close bonding with music as his father was a pianist and musicologist, and he studied at the Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. He was a member of film faculty from 1958 till 1969. Persecution, oppression, censorship and emigration that followed the Prague Spring in 1968 and Soviet occupation appear as background score integrated with the main narratives of his

novels. The sections are not evenly arranged – sections and chapters seem to have been set so as to satisfy his sense of music and rhythm. Along with the main story and his constant theme of loss and persecution, Kundera cuts-in several issues relating with ‘being’ – life, death, happiness, sadness, lightness, weight, sex, Kitsch, Expressionism and what not. He seems not to bother about relevance when he decides to discuss his philosophical bits. Kundera’s novels can be rightfully called Philosophical-fictions.

Kundera as omnipresent and an all knowing voice opens the novel with brainstorming over Nietzsche’s idea of ‘eternal return’ – “... to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum!” (3) He rephrases the idea as “ ... a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty means nothing” (3). It means if it does not return its very essential qualities lose significance. It becomes weightless and attracts no more notice of ours than a war between two African kingdoms in 14<sup>th</sup> that altered nothing in the destiny of the world even when a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment. Similarly Kundera cites the example of French Revolution. As “the bloody years” of French Revolution have become distant and would not return, it will lose its weight, will be visible mere in words, and will cease to frighten.

When a screenplay is adapted from a source like a popular or commercially successful novel, short story, play or a biography, it attract a great amount of theoretical discussion involving the comparison between the two texts i.e. how similar or different these texts are owing to the different storytelling media. It is interesting to note how much a filmic text has gained or lost considering “the novel’s opportunities for expression through descriptive prose and the literary trope metaphors and similies” (Frank Eugene Beaver). The screen adaptation of a literary source has to be different; however “many of the essential elements of characterisation and plot in a film emerge through non verbal communication: costumes, makeup, physique, and action.”

The film version of a novel is its translation from written text to screen language; and in the process of translation much has been omitted due to the limitation of the medium and time of narration. For example in *The Joke* much

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has been omitted during its first translation from Czech to English – sentences, paragraph, and an entire chapter. It was the translator's choice. In case of film adaptation of the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* it is the translator (the director along with the screen writer) who chose to omit certain parts in order to keep it 'light' and 'bearable' – the reflective content are simply removed. Richness of details in the novel would prove to be a distraction in the film. The film reduces the novel to a linear story which is eroticized adding explicit lovemaking sessions as entertainment *masala* in Bollywood movies. The psycho philosophical content of the novel proves inadaptable. The idea of Kitsch that Kundera develops over a considerable space in pages, is given only a few seconds space in the film. Beaver observes that:

The screenwriter aims for a swift economical development of character and plot. Often secondary characters and subplots from a novel are used minimally in a film because they clutter and interrupt the steady development of dramatic crises that are essential to the success of a motion picture. For this same reason screenwriters in adapting a novel will most often select the active parts of the plot and ignore the elements that do not directly relate to it. A memorable minor character in a book may be only a background extra in a film, and an idea that an author may develop poetically and metaphorically in a novel may be reduced to a passing line of dialogue or an image on the screen. (5)

Tereza was victim of her ambition to attain something higher, to escape her excruciating past, to have an identity, and to be herself. Her consciousness of her imprudent low life had settled into the interstices of her psyche like molten matter from the volcano of her inner self. Sometimes she felt tempted to go down below which was Tereza's 'vertigo. Kundera explains his own meaning of 'vertigo' which is different from the popular meaning of the term: from 'fear to fall' to 'desire to fall':

Anyone whose goal is 'something higher' must expect some day to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? Then why do we feel it even when the observation tower comes equipped with a sturdy handrail? No, vertigo is something other

than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.

The naked women marching around ... These were her vertigo: she heard a sweet (almost joyous summons to renounce her fate and soul. The solidarity of the soulless calling her. ... (*The Unbearable*, 20)

Tomas's personality is impelled by his inner drive to know the subtle differences that separate one individual from the other. As a surgeon he "knew that there was nothing more difficult to capture than the human 'I'. There are many more resemblances between Hitler and Einstein or Brezhnev and Solzhenitsyn than there are differences. Using numbers, we might say that there is one-millionth part dissimilarity to nine hundred ninety-nine thousand nine hundred ninety-nine millionths parts similarity" (193). In his 'erotic friendship' relations he merely does not engage in eternal repetition of the sexual behaviour. The narratige further reads:

When he saw a woman in clothes, he could naturally imagine more or less what she would look like naked (his experience as a doctor supplementing his experience as a lover), but between the approximation of the idea and the precision of reality there was a small gap of the unimaginable, and it was this hiatus that gave him no rest. And then, the pursuit of the unimaginable does not stop with the revelations of nudity; it goes much further: How would she behave while undressing? What would she say when he made love to her? How would her sighs sound? How would her face distort at the moment of orgasm? (193)

In the film this idea was spoken by Sabina as a comment on Tomas's behaviour. The impact would not be the same if Tomas himself spoke these words. It is at such places that the film maker uses his imagination and decides the cinematic-code for communicating the idea to the audience. A lot has been left out, kept unsaid and unrepresented. e.g. Tereza's mother and exploits have been completely ignored. But I believe the character of Tereza has been reimagined, and the subplot dealing with her mother's life (and Tereza's early life) is not considered necessary in order to bring out Tereza's character. Similarly early

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life of Tomas (his wife, his parents, and his son) too has been omitted by the film maker. Tomas believes “If we only have one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all,” and specifically (with respect to commitment) “There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison.”

With several omissions and minimal digressions, the film adaptation has maintained the spirit and storyline of the source text. In the end of the novel as well as of the film, the ambition of Tereza and passion of Tomas to explore “that one-millionth part of dissimilarity” in women too end with the death of Tomas and Tereza (193). They lose weight and become light as they would not return. Sabina is already light as she has not accumulated any weight of what so ever around her. So far as unbearability of the Lightness is concerned, Kundera seems to have left the meaning free. The film maker in his adaptation too has kept the narration open-ended for the viewers to have their own final perception of lightness and weight.

### ***In Custody* (Novel)**

Desai’s *In Custody* (1984) balanced in form and design can be placed among the “pure novels like those of Jane Austen, in which all the parts are harmoniously subordinated to the design and perfection of form.” (Tripathi: 204) It has attracted a strong corpus of critical interpretations that range from feminist issues, language politics, identity crisis, to self realisation, even beyond. *In Custody* talks about relations – relation between individuals, between ideas and ideologies and, above all, relation with one’s own self. The main action of the novel is Deven’s attempt to conduct an interview with Nur. It is very difficult to decide who is the main hero of the story – Deven or Nur! Deven who carries ‘the action’ of the story is a lacklustre middle class, middle aged man. As a professor he is a junior (temporary lecturer in Lala Ram Lal College at Mirpore), powerless and lacks assertiveness. Moreover he has to choose Hindi as his teaching subject despite the fact that he has Urdu as his first love. He feels quite weak while introducing himself to Nur – “Deven shrank back in apology. ‘No, sir, I teach in – in the Hindi department. I took my degree in Hindi because –’” (39) As a poet he is not well received so he aspires to be associated with the phenomenal poet (Nur).

***In Custody/Muhafiz (Film)***

A Merchant Ivory Production *In Custody/Muhafiz* adapts Desai's novel *In Custody* with the main plot as interaction between a distinguished poet and his academician fan who wants to conduct the poet's interview and subsequently write a book on the legendary poet. It was directed by Ismail Merchant, and the screenplay was written jointly by Shahrukh Hussain and Anita Desai herself. The film obviously depicts the image of Urdu poetry and state of Urdu language. Keeping with the popular narrative of language politics and Hindi-Urdu rivalry, the film adaptation seems to have toned down the antagonism to an extent. In addition to this, it raises the issue of self and identity. The film image of 'Nur Sahab' is quite different from the looks suggested by the novelist in order to suit the actor. Even the place of Nur's residence is changed from Delhi to Bhopal. For Urdu poetry the poems of Faiz Ahmad Faiz are used. The intolerance for other language exhibited by the poet Nur brings out his frustration, decreasing physical strength, obesity, dying reputation jealousy for his own wife's rising poetic stature. His rant against Hindi is in fact transference. Hindi is made the punching bag. Whenever there are any demographic or political shifts, shifts in linguistic focus are quite common – worse cases of language politics are seen in Pakistan and Bangladesh. It reminds me the take of a contemporary poet Munawwar Rana in this regard:

*“Lipat jata hun maa se aur mousi muskurati hai  
mai urdu mai ghazal kahta hu hindi muskurati hai”*

In film the focus shifts on Deven who is making desperate efforts to achieve something higher in his otherwise uneventful life. Unable achieve anything worthwhile he wants to be associated with the legendry poet and make efforts to serve the world of poetry, which would provide him with feelings of worth. Nur too has lost his glory and admirers. He is always complaining, accusing, lamenting, as if in eternal search of someone who could be blamed and punished for his fall. The novel amply describes the situation:

‘Cowards – babies,’ he was taunting ... ‘You recite verses as if they were nursery rhymes your mother had composed. ... We need the roar of lions, or the boom of cannon, so that we can march upon these Hindiwallahs and make them run. Let them see the power of Urdu,’ he thundered. ‘They think it is chained and tamed in the dusty

yards of those cemeteries that they call universities, but can't we show them that it can still let out a roar or a boom?' (51-52)

In an interview with Magda Costa, Desai is not happy with the cinematic version of the novel. She says that she was:

very shocked because in my imagination it was all very grey, very dark and dirty, and I just couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it in gorgeous Technicolor, and everyone beautifully dressed looking handsome... That's the world of Ismail Merchant; he makes everything look so beautiful, gorgeous. I had to distance myself from it; I had to detach myself and accept that fact that it is his version of the book. He is very happy with it. It is not my vision: I would have preferred it in black and white more in the school of New Realism.

The film ends with the visuals of demolition of an old structure, and funeral procession of the old poet. "Nur Sahab ne apna kalaam meri hifazat main chhor deya hai. Ab main uska muhafiz hun." Deven's words have no effect on the world and worldly people like Siddiqi.

*"Jo ruke toh koh-e-garaan the hum, jo chale toh jaan se guzar gae  
Rah-e-yaar hamne kadam kadam tujhe yaadgaar banaa diya."*

Who is the muhafiz, and whose muhafiz? The questions remain not fully answered. Certainly the film-maker/director is in control of his text. An adapted film provides a common platform for the reader of a literary work to see how it may look like, and for the audience to closely know the source text in order to be familiar with the basic idea behind the film.

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