



Translating Word to Image: Retelling of *A Passage to India*

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Abstract

In this research paper I investigate David Lean, an English film director's, attempt of adapting E. M. Forster's English novel *A passage to India* into the film. This adaptation seems to be compelling, trying to be 'faithful' to the original. If the words in the novel make the reader imagine various aspects of the encounter between the 'native' and the 'coloniser', the images in the film propel the audience not just to see but interpret these encounters. Adela's bicycle ride, although, is not in the novel, its inclusion in the film conveys what was left to be interpreted or the act of 'reading between the text' for the reader of the novel. Each film adaptation is a separate event and does not have to follow a particular theory; neither in terms of film making and nor for description, interpretation, or analysis. However, in academia, where participants in the literary/cinematic discourses are expected to have read the original works of art (plays, novels, and short stories), adaptations intentionally or unintentionally face the fate of being compared to the original. *A Passage to India* appears to be an example of how concepts, 'mimicry' and 'hybridisation' from post-colonial theory help to see the adaptation in new light.

Keywords: *A Passage to India*, Adaptation, Mimicry, Hybridisation, Post-colonial Theory.

Introduction

In this paper, I attempt to illustrate that an 'adaptation' of a literary text into a film can be a curious example of translation. David Lean's film *A Passage to India* (1984) based on the stage play written by Indian-American playwright Santha Rama Rau in 1960 based on E.M. Forster's 1924 novel of the same title. The playwright had written the script for the play and then the filmmaker rewritten it in his screenplay. The playwright had kept many scenes suitable for indoors and the filmmaker kept it outdoors. On the one hand it seems that Forster wanted to achieve balance between both Indians and the English, on the other hands, the filmmaker claims that Forster hated the English. What David Lean achieved through this new cinematic text is that he opened up new possibilities of meanings and enriched the novel. He translated the novel and the play into his screenplay and came up with a new text. The notions of 'retelling' and 'rewriting' are relevant here.

1. Translation and Adaptation

To begin with I would like to draw your attention to the two notions 'translation' and 'adaptation'. Both these notions have been used interchangeably, to a large extent, in the discipline of Translation Studies. In Translation Studies, the scholars, especially who insist on and demand the translations to be faithful to the original, argue that unfaithful translations are the adaptations and faithful ones are the translations. Please note, by original I mean the text

that stands first in the chronology of the texts followed by. However, if we compare the origin of both the notions it leads us to a meaning: ‘modification of a thing to suit new conditions’. In addition to this, the notion of ‘translation’ has been, mostly, confined to literary translations, while adaptations to films. It seems to me that limiting meanings of these notions to certain disciplines is counter-productive. I suggest the use of these notions as metaphors which yields more productive results. An adaptation is basically an attempt of translation where the original is carried across and relocated in a new realm. This process is analogous to that of transplantation. This transplantation needs to be celebrated for gains rather than mourned for the loss caused in the process. This transplantation has been named by a couple of names by the scholars of Translation and Adaptation Studies. Translation Studies scholars named it as ‘rewriting’ and the Adaptation Studies scholars named it as ‘retelling’ of the original text/texts as literature has to do something with letters and cinema has to do something with telling. This retelling which is done through a different medium (cinematic medium) makes certain things visible which are otherwise invisible to the readers.

Literature as well as cinema, both, have been considered as modes of expression. The relationship between these two has been focus of the adaptation studies and numerous analyses which unlocks various possibilities of translating and interpreting words into images. Although it is a mass communication medium cinema also has been considered as an art form and therefore, it is unavoidable not to make it as an object of enquiry. The adaptations become reappearance rather than re-reading or re-writing. As Francesco Casetti in his essay “Adaptations and Mis-adaptations, Film, Literature and Social Discourses” elucidates:

Adaptation is no longer seen as a work repeating another work, nor as an expressive intention that juxtaposes itself to another expressive intention. We are no longer confronted with a re-reading or a re-writing: rather, what we are dealing with is the *reappearance, in another discursive field, of an element (a plot, a theme, a character, etc.) that has previously appeared elsewhere.* (2004, p. 82)

By reappearance Casetti seems to contend that the work of art comes into existence again which is not just a repetition of the original but it rather comes up with an interpretive risk. An adaptation translates the words into images by interpreting the words through the images. The text gets new life with cinematic interpretation. As he reasons further:

A reappearance is a new discursive event that locates itself in a certain time and space in society, one that, at the same time, carries within itself the memory of an earlier discursive event. Within this reappearance, what matters is the development of a new communicative situation, more than simply the similarity or dissimilarity between the later and earlier events. Otherwise said, what matters is the new role and place that the later event takes on within the discursive field, more than the abstract faithfulness that it can claim with respect to the source text. In fact, the text’s identity is defined more by this role and this place than by a series of formal elements. (Casetti, 2004, p. 82)

The reappearance is more than being faithful to the original text. It is more than similarities and dissimilarities found in the adaptation. Analysis of adaptations, very often, is based on the additions and exclusions made by the filmmaker while adapting the text into cinema. It meets with the fate of the translations which are compared with their originals just to see what additions and exclusions made by the translators. However, the analysis of adaptations is not as simple as this. Something deeper goes inside while adapting the text into cinema. It is not an easy task and consequently, the adaptation occupies entirely different place in the world of art and history. Thus, while studying the text and its adaptation it seems necessary to focus on the dialogue between the text and an adaptation along with the form and content of the text.

Each film adaptation is a separate event and does not have to follow a particular theory; neither in terms of film making and nor for description, interpretation, or analysis. However, in academia, where participants in the literary/cinematic discourses are expected to have read the original works of art (plays, novels, short stories and so on), adaptations intentionally or unintentionally face the fate of being compared to the original. However, they do not remain a piece of art repeating another work or sheer material production of the original and rather become the retelling. The film adaptation, a translation of word to image, of the novel *A Passage to India* is a curious example of retelling of the original. This research paper investigates David Lean's attempt of adapting *A passage to India* into the film of the same title. David Lean's adaptation appears to be compelling trying to be 'faithful' to the original. If the words in the novel make the reader imagine various aspects of the encounter between the 'native' and the 'coloniser', the images in the film propel the audience not just to see but interpret these encounters. Adela's bicycle ride though is not in the novel, its inclusion in the film conveys what was left to be interpreted or the act of 'reading between the text' for the reader of the novel. *A Passage to India* appears to be a good example of how concepts, 'mimicry' and 'hybridisation' from post-colonial theory help to see the adaptation in new light.

2. *A Passage to India* – A Novel

In the novel *A Passage to India*, the major theme is to protest the evils of a colonial society. The city of Chandrapore is a typical example of a colonial society in which the Englishmen are living like 'little gods'. Forster aims at pinpointing the ignorance and arrogance of these people who consider themselves superior to all Indians. Aziz is kind-hearted and responds to affection. He is not afraid of making connections with the English. He believes in personal relationships and would, given the chance, be an Englishman's friend. He is flamboyant, sensitive but also sensual and sentimental. However, he is not exactly sensible and is often impractical. An example to show his impracticability is the way he takes every precaution against unpunctuality. Before his expedition to the Marabar Caves, "he spent the previous night at the station. The servants were huddled on the platform enjoined not to stray." (E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, 1979, p. 134) And he would go out of his way to prepare food for his guests. The fact that he became hardened and disillusioned at the end of the story suggests the difficulty of connection between two unequal parties.

Forster submits that human relationship cannot be established on unequal bases. The English are officials and the Indians are the dominated. Such a relationship causes uneasiness and self-consciousness on Aziz's part. He becomes awkward and unnatural when he is among the English people. Language is another issue, which forbids effective connection between the colonizer and the colonized. The arrogance of some of the colonisers forbids them to learn to speak accurately the language of the Indians. Mrs. Turton, who had learnt the lingo, but only to speak to her servants, knew no polite terms but just enough language to command. In her, Forster illustrates how a sense of superiority can obstruct communication and understanding between 'us' and 'them'. Even her bridge party fails to bring the two sides together. It only reveals fissures in Indian society. (Hilda d. Spear, *Macmillan Master Guides-A Passage to India*, 1986. p. 53).

3. Mimicry, Ambivalence, and Hybridity

Homi Bhabha, in his book, *The Location of Culture*, proposes a cluster of the concepts like imitation, hybridity and mimicry which enables an analysis of Indian culture. This approach helps to find the complex nature of cultural formations in colonial India. Bhabha's analysis of these concepts is basically based on the Lacan's conceptualization of mimicry as disguise. In Bhabha mimicry focuses on colonial conflictual discourse. As he argues:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is *almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must

continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. (1994, p. 86)

The colonisers expect the colonised to be English in taste and morals in spite of the fact that they are Indians in blood. The colonised seems almost the same but not quite. By mimicking the coloniser, the colonised does not re-presents the earlier but rather re-creates the coloniser. Bhabha seems to argue that the coloniser wants to improve the Other and to make him like himself, but in a way that he still maintains a clear sense of difference. In that case the Other becomes “almost the same” as the coloniser, but never becomes the one. He further argues that colonial mimicry has to continue to express difference if it has to work. This expressing difference in Bhabha’s view is ‘ambivalence’. Since, mimicry requires this “slippage” to function, it accords power to the coloniser and becomes the subversive tool of the colonised. As he continues:

Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which ‘appropriates’ the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an immanent threat to both ‘normalized’ knowledges and disciplinary powers. (Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 86)

By ambivalence Bhabha seems to suggest that the civilizing mission of the coloniser fails since it only allows for Anglicization, not the complete transformation of ‘natives’ into Englishmen. In a novel *A Passage to India*, one of the major characters, Dr. Aziz, mimics the colonisers. In the film, through visuals the audience is able to interpret his mimicry of colonial masters. He looks submissive while speaking to his colonial masters in various scenes and frames. His shoulders are bent while speaking to the colonisers. He appears to be excited while speaking to them. It can be called behaviour below one’s dignity. On the other hand, while speaking to his Indian subordinates, for example, while speaking to his servants he holds power and treats them as his inferiors. I find Dr. Aziz’s character interestingly portrayed, focused upon and represented in the adaptation since he seems to be a perfect example of colonial mimicry.

4. Translating Word to Image

Dr. Aziz is always seen wearing an English attire that is a blazer and trousers when he is out for work. He wears same attire on his visit to Marabar caves. He seems to believe that his links with white officers can make him a complete man. He rides a bicycle and wears English attire. One day he asks his lawyer friend that why they (Indians) always speak of English men. The friend answers that because they (Indians) admire them and to this Aziz replies saying that is the trouble. However, he speaks English with English accent and imitates his colonial masters in speech, clothes, manners, morals, and tastes. It is seen through various visuals and images from the different scenes from the film.

Aziz gets arrested for raping Miss. Adela Quested. After relieving from an alleged rape attempt, he is shown wearing a *kurta* and *payjama*, an Indian culture specific dress. Although he wears English costume, he is always shown in beard, he never shaves off his beard, therefore, it looks odd. The English men shown in the film having always shaved off their beards whereas Aziz, an Indian Muslim, never shaves his beard off. He also applies Surma (black medicated eye make-up) to his eyes which is something common among traditional Muslim men. Here lies the crux of Bhabha’s argument that “almost the same but not quite”. This is to say that complete transformation of the natives is impossible and also, not expected by the colonisers.

The film clearly displays the contrast between Indian market places, houses and the

Translating Word to Image: Retelling of *A Passage to India*

houses built especially for British officers. The houses have gardens, neat and clean roads, well maintained. The hygiene and cleanliness are shown taken care of in the houses on the one hand and Aziz's unclean and untidy house is shown on the other hand. All the Indians including the educated ones are also described as submissive in their behaviours just to please their British masters. Although Dr. Aziz tries hard to impress his colonial masters by mimicking and imitating them, he is not accepted by the English masters. He rather looks funny in his behaviour and attitude towards the colonisers in various scenes of the film. The British men seem to hate the Indians especially with modern ideas.

Dr. Aziz's house is unclean and untidy, which he regards as a shanty. It is infested with black flies. He has assimilated the Western culture in his looks and behaviour but his way of living remains Indian. It is clearly seen through the images and scenes where his house is shot from inside. At some places Aziz seems excited especially when he is with English people and his excitement is revealed through his behaviour, facial expressions, and body language. For example, in the film, on the way to Marabar caves, he stands outside the running train holding one of the windows and speaks to Miss. Quested who is looking outside the window. He seems to be a constructed man who has assimilated the Western culture and developed an Orientalist vision, leading to self-pity and self-hatred. The other example of his excitement is that he invites Miss. Quested and Mrs. Moor at the Marabar caves without having ever seen or visited himself that place beforehand. Ronny Heaslop, an English character, calls Dr. Aziz as the spoilt westernized type.

The character Godbole, well-versed in Hindu mythology and philosophy is not free from the influence of imperial culture and the resultant mimicry. He too speaks English language with a particular accent and plans to name his school after King Emperor George the Fifth. The music played at the Hindu temple and religious festivals is a combination of Europeanised bands which play Nights of Gladness while the Hindu choir of Godbole repeats Takram, Takram. Even in the midst of his meditation the image of Mrs. Moor appears in Godbole's mind and never leaves him. This is the portrayal of the impact of imperial culture and the resultant hybridity. There is a clear link between culture and imperialism presented throughout the film. The Indians are shown to have assimilated the culture of their masters. They are portrayed as ashamed of themselves, of their culture, and of their identity. Throughout the novel and the film, the Indians are presented as lesser people, who cannot manage their affairs like responsible individuals.

Towards the end of chapter two the owners of the club do not allow even the educated Indians into Chandrapore club inspite of their mimicry of the colonial masters and their complete assimilation of Imperial culture and submissiveness. The city magistrate Ronny criticises mimicry among the Indians and their desire to dress, look, and behave like the colonisers. The Indians are seen to mimic the manners, the life style, and the dress code to the extent that they look more English than the English. They flash their pince-nez, European shoes, and costumes. It is seen in film scenes too. Mrs. Turton does not like Indians being permitted into the club. Mrs. Turton considers Urdu as a lingo, the language of colonised other. During the formality of introduction, Mrs. Turton describes the Indian women as if they were commodities. She calls one of the Indian ladies present at the party as a "shorter lady" and the other one is called the "taller lady". She does not seem to treat them like living individuals, with their respective personalities and identities. It is only a stereotype portrayal, meant to reinforce the imperial ideology of superiority and to contain India and Indians. The Indian ladies are seen wearing six-yard saris at the bridge parties and tea parties and also seen covering their heads with their *pallus*. They accompany their husbands who seem to imitate their masters in case of taste and morals.

5. Retelling of *A Passage to India*

Antony Easthope in his essay, "Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity or Derrida Versus Lacan", reasons:

Bhabha claims there is a space "in-between the designations of identity" and that "this interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Location 4). Hybridity can have at least three meanings - In terms of biology, ethnicity, and culture. In its etymology it meant the offspring of a tame sow and a wild boar, *hybrida*, and this genetic component provides the first meaning. A second definition of hybridity might be understood to mean an individual "having access to two or more ethnic identities." In fact, Bhabha develops his notion of hybridity from Mikhail Bakhtin, who uses it to discriminate texts with a "single voice" (lyrical poems) from those with a "double voice" (such as novels, whose narrator cites characters speaking in their own voice - these texts are hybridic.) (*Homi Bhabha, Hybridity and Identity or Derrida Versus Lacan*, n.p., n.d.)

Bhabha illuminates that colonial power cautiously established highly-sophisticated strategies of control and supremacy; that is, while it is aware of its ephemerality, it is also concerned to create the means that guarantee its economic, political, and cultural endurance. They seem to produce a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinions, morals, and intellect. Thus, the process of colonial mimicry is both a product of and produces ambivalence and hybridity.

David Lean has made many vital additions in the film. It can be possibly argued here that he interprets the novel and explains what is left or untold through visuals. In other words, he fills up the blank spaces left by the novelist. Adela's bicycle ride is one of the symbolic additions. It is not there in the novel. It is a five-minute sequence highlighting Adela's gradual sexual excitement prior to her visit to the Marabar caves. This sequence comes right after Mrs. Moore discusses her negative views on marriage at the dinner table. Mrs. Moore's utterance is followed by cut to Adela on her bike. It is significant to note that when Adela looks over the erotic carvings, she has the same expression that she had at P&O office at the film's start looking at the picture of the Caves, and also when she first gazes at the Caves from Ronny's bungalow. Then the camera closes in on her face, which deepens her curiosity. There are close-ups of Adela then the monkeys appear noisily, threatening Adela, and their actions are accompanied by percussion on the track; she runs away. The monkeys reappear just before Aziz's trial as one of the Indians protesting the trial shows up in monkey costumes to frighten Adela on her way to court. This added scene reflects Adela's sexual excitement and can be associated with the car accident that she and Ronny have in the novel which causes a kind of excitement between the two and leads Adela to change her mind about marriage.

It can be maintained that this scene is included by Lean to provide background to Adela's visit to Marabar caves. This scene prefigures the film's conflict more powerful. Moreover, it helps Adela's character development. The crossroads sign seems to signify Adela's English upbringing. Her decision to peddle away from that cross indicates her strong curiosity and widening distance from that upbringing. From this scene it is clear to the audience that Adela is sexually inexperienced, confused, and dreadful, yet captivated. Also, this scene supports Lean build tension, and, with hindsight, makes Adela's experience in the Marabar Cave more comprehensible to audiences. It is to be noted here that the filmmaker added what was left to be explained in the novel by taking an interpretive risk.

Lean has not only made additions but has also made exclusions. One of those significant exclusions revolve around Aziz. For example, in the novel, when Aziz cannot find Adela at the Marabar Caves, he hits an Indian guide who is with the party. Aziz seems to be short tempered

in the novel but not in the film. Additionally, at an earlier point in the novel, when Aziz happens to meet Mrs. Moore sitting in a sacred mosque, he yells at her angrily assuming her ignorance to his culture by entering a sacred mosque with her shoes on. Aziz does not realize Mrs. Moore is well-versed in the culture and has removed her shoes before entering. On the contrary, in the film, Aziz never shouts at Mrs. Moore, and their conversation in the mosque is romanticized through soft lighting

Conclusion

Thus, it can be said that to adapt is translate, rewrite, recreate, and retell the original and to move from one interpretation towards another which involves several things, most significantly, to re-shape the reception of a story, a theme, or a character, and so on. Adaptation becomes the part of a text's afterlife, or the continued life, coincides with a second life of reception. Any kind of rewriting and retelling unbolts the various potentials of creation of meanings. Since no text has a stable origin, no text has a stable interpretation. Therefore, it seems to me that everything is a translation of translation of translation.

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Bio-note

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