Keynote Address
Dependence, Liberation and Creativity: Reimagining the Power of Adaptation

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The Adaptation Question

I want to begin by examining the question of adaptation not in the strict sense of a relation between a prior text and a secondary text but with the deeper question of adaptation and its interrelationship with authorship and originality. The concept of 'originality' is a perplexing academic debate with proponents and detractors forcefully claiming either legitimacy or the impossibility of the idea. While this is not a key concern of this paper, it might provide a useful framework for understanding the practice of adaptation as we understand it today.

Tied up with the question of originality is authorship and modern debates destabilize the idea of the author as a fixed, sovereign creator of the text and posit authorship as an indeterminate and fluid category. Rejecting the individual-as-origin of the text, theorists like Harold Bloom, T S Eliot, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault have questioned the centrality of the author by positing oppositional formulations. So, we have an Oedipal struggle with the parent author, an allegiance to tradition, the idea of relationality of texts, and of course as some kind of definitive blow, the death of the author. What these postulations also share is the foregrounding of language and its primacy in creating literary texts, a kind of emptying out of any subjective element in the authorial personality. It is language that speaks, and writing is the circulation of language itself. One important implication of declaring the author as dispensable is the corresponding entry of the reader into the creation of textual meaning. We are reminded that readers, instead of being passive receivers of texts are conscious agents of interpretation, textual meaning is dynamic, temporal and transactional rather than static and spatial.

However enticing the postulation of a depersonalized author may sound, there will always be scope for the individual dimension, what Jonathan Bates identified as 'the irreducible subjective core." Despite being already constructed and created by linguistic and ideological structures and metamorphosing into a scriptor, a subject, the author can be claimed as a living and breathing entity, and one can here posit the idea of human singularity. In literary theory, human singularity is the unique, unrepeatable quality of a literary work, and its simultaneous participation in generic codes and norms. The reader's encounter with the singularity of the work is a recognition of the otherness that compels a change in his or her frameworks of understanding and feeling, every reading therefore is singular in that the reader and context of reading will always be different. Derek Attridge in *The Singularity of Literature* points to a literary text as an event and much like Barthes, stresses that literature involves the text and its reader in a complicated and creative cultural, historical and temporal relating. Basing his argument on the ideas of invention, alterity and singularity, he establishes how this trinity lies at the heart of art as a practice and as an institution.

Determining exactly how unique something should be to be considered "original" is a concept that can be wrestled with incessantly. However, modern scholarship has also demonstrated that borrowing and originality can be compatible. If literature is a matrix built on a networking of many factors like cultural memory, linguistic structures, universal archetypes, borrowing is not only universal but inevitable. And therefore, there is no right or specific way to determine how much borrowing constitutes a dearth of originality.

In contemporary times, with the inevitable decrease of the realm of traditional originality, the idea of what it means to be an author has changed considerably. John Barth's influential essay on narrative fiction, "The Literature of Exhaustion" drew attention to the proliferation of literary forms and conventions resulting in a state of saturation or used up-ness of literary forms (Barth, *Literature of Exhaustion*.) In a companion essay "Literature of Replenishment" he offers a counter, by arguing that through a process of synthesis and transformation, "Artistic conventions . . . [can be] deployed against themselves to generate new and lively work" (Barth, *Literature of Replenishment*.) One can

perhaps conclude that in artistic production, exhaustion and replenishment are complementary rather than oppositional categories. In today's digitally controlled culture, where endless repetitions, remakes, sequels, mashups and remixes are far more dominant than the 'original', the idea of originality and authorship gets increasingly complicated and challenging.

Adaptation Studies: Shift from Fidelity

After this brief prelude about the slippery terrain of authorship and originality, I now come to the theme of the seminar which is adaptation. There are two broad ways of approaching the term— one, that adaptation is as old as literary production (the idea that stories beget stories or texts beget texts) and the second is our current understanding of adaptation as an overt attempt at re-working or retelling a source text and transferring it via another medium and thereby creating a new or target text. As a cultural practice, adaptation signals a dialogue and movement between texts and has immense potential for expanding the debates around intertextuality, authorship, originality and canon-making. Adaptation is also a context-dependent process which draws its meaning from the readings (and / or viewings) offered or enabled in a given socio-temporal and cultural context.

As an academic discipline, Adaptation Studies is highly multidisciplinary and traverses literature, film studies, and digital media. Characterized by a dynamic and ever evolving aesthetic paradigm, it is one of the most hard-to-describe theoretical fields. However, one can identify points of origin, development and evolution. Once fixated on the literature vs film equation, adaptation studies have diversified and produced a rigorous body of scholarship and given the staggering diversity of adaptation today, especially in the post-digital era, a standardized idea of adaptation is not only impossible but undesirable.

The point worth making is that it is precisely because adaptation will never be bound by a single standard since the impulse and aim of adaptation will always vary that adaptation studies continue to throw up heterogenous models even as we speak. Another important implication for the scope of adaptation studies is its immense cross genre focus, making it particularly relevant in today's cultural climate of media convergence or the media continuum.

The earliest attempts at adaptation in a cross-genre sense are from literature into film and it is primarily these two aesthetic categories that have formed the staple of adaptation studies in the early decades of the 20ᵗʰ century. Identified as the prehistory of adaptation studies, this phase is indecisive and inconclusive for its generalized observations about fiction and film rather than a focus on adaptation per se. As a clue, we can go to Virginia Woolf's 1927 short but revealing essay "The Cinema" which she wrote as a response to a screening of a silent German expressionistic horror film (Woolf). Writing from the standpoint of a virtuoso modernist, Woolf is trying to come to terms with this new artistic medium, is receptive to the psychic undercurrents that the visual medium can represent, and its then-current limitations such as an over-reliance on literary material: "The alliance is unnatural," declares Woolf about the adaptation of novels into movies. "Eye and brain are torn asunder ruthlessly as they try vainly to work in couples. The eye says, "Here is Anna Karenina." A voluptuous lady in black velvet wearing pearls comes before us. But the brain says, 'That is no more Anna Karenina than it is Queen Victoria" (Woolf). She complains "that moviemakers, instead of relying on the inherent properties of cinema, harness the making of images to storytelling by way of literature," presumably failing to understand that "the cinema's distinctive power involves creating a new kind of visual experience" (Woolf). Woolf's own fiction is highly cinematic and would later be transformed into very successful film adaptations but here the essay provides an entry point into the nascent phase of adaptation. With time, a rigorous disciplinary road map begins to appear.

The early phase of adaptation studies is characterized by its dependence on the novel-film equation and what is famously called the fidelity factor. While the burden of fidelity still haunts many approaches to adaptation, it is now viewed as a futile approach and vehemently rejected as the sole condition of a successful adaptation. However, its persistence still hovers, and fidelity has also been called the 'undead spirit' in adaptation studies

The preoccupation with literature and film continues in what Thomas Leitch calls the 1.0 phase of adaptation studies, although the methodological and disciplinary boundaries also begin to emerge around this time. A foundational work is George Bluestone's *Novels into Film* (1957) which

addresses the question of adaptation by referring to the 'mysterious alchemy' by which books become films and goes on to establish the two as distinct aesthetic genres although the work has been critiqued for its shortsightedness regarding the potential of cinema. He points out: "Changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium." Perhaps the first theorist to bring to light the notion of medium specificity, Bluestone takes away attention not only from fidelity but is in line with Linda Hutcheon's classic work *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006, 2012) which makes a case for understanding adaptation not as product but as process. Brian McFarlane's *Novel to Film* (1996) similarly deplores the fidelity approach by arguing: "The insistence on fidelity has led to a suppression of potentially more rewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation, it tends to ignore the idea of adaptation as an example of convergence among the arts, and it marginalizes those production determinants which have nothing to do with the novel but may be powerfully influential in film." The work provides rich insights into adaptation but like Bluestone's is heavily reliant on film and text and follows the case study model by examining film adaptations of some major Euro-American novels.

By the 1990s the field has expanded exponentially. However, it is with Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* that the turn from fidelity and adaptation's moment of legitimacy arrives. Hutcheon provided a redirection for adaptation studies and subsequent theorists have particularly relied upon and expanded on her formulation of adaptation not as product but as process. Hutcheon rejects fidelity criticism and its obsession with fidelity and alludes to an inbuilt hierarchy between text and film as stemming from 'iconophobia' and 'logophilia' (Hutcheon 18). Interestingly, this binary between a primacy accorded to the written word or literature and aversion to the visual has been reversed in contemporary culture where it is the visual that has now completely overtaken the written. One could well argue that quick adaptation has become the default practice of our culture where the interface between different screens, the instant transfer of 'content' between gadgets has added impetus to the act of adaptation.

Going back to fidelity, the fidelity factor is based on the premise of a hierarchical recognition of literature as a primary and somewhat superior form where the sole purpose of an adapted text is to conform to the 'original 'and any blatant departure or deviance is viewed as 'tampering,' 'interference,' 'violation,' even 'desecration'. This points to two things: one a presumed hierarchy between distinct mediums which need to be examined on their own aesthetic terms and not by recourse to conflating the demands of both. Second, that adaptations should only work backwards- and be always subservient to some imagined obligation to a prior text. While a default relationship always exists with the original work, Adaptation Studies has benefitted greatly from looking ahead. In more academic terms, these are identified as the archival and teleological approach. Conventionally, adaptation had most often been theorized in archival terms: that is-adaptations were defined primarily with reference to their source texts as if the adaption had a responsibility towards the source text-one of them being to recreate the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the original text. On further scrutiny, the essence or spirit of a work is seen as a highly subjective and often partisan approach to a text. It sees the text as a closed entity frozen in time and space whereas as was argued in the beginning of this paper, there is endless potential for re-interpretation and re-configuration. Modern readings for example have been more alert to racism, misogyny, sexism and other ideological biases in source texts. What has fortunately gained momentum is the teleological approach- a looking forward which is more descriptive and analytical, free from any anxiety or judgement. This descriptive model has opened the field immensely as it poses questions directly related to the demands of the adaptive process- the fascinating exchange of media, the creation of new and even novel texts, in other words the approach that views the source-target relationship as dialectical rather than one of dependence. What fidelity criticism missed is that the transference of a story from one medium to another involves a creative rewriting of the codes of one medium into a completely different one. The idea of medium specificity which dominated adaptation studies for long needs to be examined in some detail.

One of the most evident gaps in fidelity criticism is the lack of attention to medium specificity. Adaptation involves not replication but transference from one genre or medium to another and since each art form has its own communicational strategies and aesthetic demands, adaptation involves a cross-genre enrichment that goes beyond the pursuit of fidelity. Therefore, adaptations can not only transform but perhaps even amplify the meaning and scope of a source text. And this is nowhere exemplified better than in film and theatre and musical adaptations of literary texts not to speak of graphic and digital narratives. Because the book gets transferred into a film or a play or even a comic or graphic text, there are new and compelling ways in which the primary text is reimagined.

One recalls many powerful adaptations that have not only 'brought to life' but enhanced the source text. Cinematization, unlike literature, is a multitrack medium and has various expressive modes. Particularly, sound, image and performance all blend into a narrative that can at times 'better' the original. One can recall powerhouse performances that have reimagined and resurrected our favourite literary characters. Hamlet has been played by as diverse a range of actors as Sohrab Modi, Laurence Olivier, Mel Gibson and Shahid Kapoor and each actor plays Hamlet in the same-yet-different manner, as if there is an ongoing interplay between various Hamlets - enriching and transforming the prototype along the way. An Ajay Devgan re-enacting an Othello infuses a rural Indian avatar thereby multiplying the trajectory of the Shakespearean hero (Bhardwaj, *Omkara*). The music of both *Haider* and *Omkara* by Vishal Bhardwaj attests to the amplifying nature of an adaptation - whether it is the opening song of *Omkara* with its ominous overtones of "*sabse baday ladayya rai Omkara*" or the chilling lyricism of the same song "*Jab parnalun say khoon bahay*". The song functions not only as a parallel to the introduction of Othello in Act 1 but is a peculiar, culturally located and creative intervention in the reimagining of Othello's power and vulnerability (Bhardwaj, *Omkara*). In the same film, the song "*naina thag lengey*" becomes a musical representation of the theme of visual mistrust that surrounds the Shakespearean tragedy. Similarly, the Bismil song in *Haider* is both a counterpart to 'the play within a play' and a spectacular Bollywood style dance and

song intervention that is beautifully choreographed to enact the theme of betrayal (Bhardwaj, *Omkara*).

Going back to the phases of adaptation studies, it is in adaptation studies 2.0 wherein the intertextual approach is adopted by becoming attentive to all forms of adaptation. The novel-film equation is now not the sole domain of adaptation studies and popular culture is equally used in addition to the literary canon, adaptations can now include transformations from not only text to film but film to text called novelization, film to comic book, comic book to film and even video games.

In *Adaptation Revisited- Television and the Classic Novel* Sarah Caudwell incorporated TV adaptations of canonical novels which lead to further expansion of the canon of adaptation. Kamilla Elliot in *Revisiting the Novel / Film Debate* is skeptical about the absolute demarcation between film and literature. Instead of media specific dualities or binaries, she posited a reciprocal or analogous model in which both adapted and adapting texts were already deeply implicated in signifying systems and therefore did not run counter to each other but converged on many points. As we all know, a film is always already a script, cinema possesses literary qualities and literature can be cinematic. Robert Stam in *Literature through Film* and *A Companion to Literature and Film* reoriented Adaptation Studies by establishing adaptation as an intertextual impulse that is at the heart of every text that springs from and in turn generates other texts. Drawing on Gerard Genette, Julia Kristeva, etc., Stam proposes adaptation be viewed as intertextual dialogism and foregrounds Genet's terminology especially the coinages, hypo text and the hypertext. So, a hypo text is a base text from which a series of hypertexts emerge, and because the dynamic is non-linear, the scope for hypertexts is limitless. Stam also stresses on adaptation as a form of translation whereby a model of inter-semiotic transposition becomes possible.

Purposive Adaptation

Adaptations also need to be viewed as purposive, which is referred to as 'transformative reimagining'. No text is ever created out of a cultural vacuum and is always susceptible to ideological scrutiny– adaptation has productively contested dominant discourses providing alternative viewpoints and it is

here that adaptation has proved immensely beneficial in examining the canon and the unilateral flow and reception of ideas. One can recall powerful adaptations of English canonical texts that foreground a previously mute or marginal perspective—*Robinson Crusoe*, *Tempest,* and *Jane Eyre*, have been rewritten to unveil the politics of race and gender hierarchies implicit but not acknowledged in the original text. The term transformative therefore points towards the act of alteration that creates unlimited potentialities.

Transformative reimagining retroactively impacts the foundations of their source texts; and in doing so, they unsettle the literary canon, which as we all know is far from neutral or apolitical. By opening the canon to interrogation, these adaptations inject new dialogical life into known narratives. Adaptations from non-western cultures and the global south have proved remarkably successful in producing a counter-canon to the western literary canon which is being increasingly viewed as incompatible with the needs of the present world. Since a transformative reimagining critically evaluates its source text(s), analyzing and problematizing its tropes and authority by writing them anew, it becomes an act of literary criticism itself. Adaptation-as-process (and therefore writing-as-process and reading-as-process) interrogates stereotypes and problematizes norms in source texts and encourages readers to engage in a similar process. Discovering new possibilities for a known narrative allows readers to reconceptualize and destabilize their own notions of individual truth. For example, reading a fairy tale adaptation with a colored protagonist, watching a woman superhero save the world, has immense potential for reader empowerment. As an instance of the fraught ideological complexities of postcolonial adaptations, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* both undercuts Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and plays with the trope of the exotic moor as depicted in *Othello* (Salih 45). Tayeb Salih's assertion "Othello there is no Othello, Othello is a lie" is a rejection of Othello's tragic nobility and an instance of disidentification, colonial critique and authentic self-fashioning (Salih 46).

While canon expansion is certainly an outcome of purposive adaptation, studies also point out that adaptation, particularly of canonical English writers like Austen and Dickens (serializations etc.)

has ensured that they enjoy a permanent afterlife in literary culture. Arguing that adaptations tacitly bestow longevity and canonicity to select works, this approach posits that since certain texts get regularly adapted and appropriated their staying power or cultural longevity gets solidified via adaptation (Barth, *The Literature of Replenishment*).

Moving on to some examples of adaptations, let me begin with the English canon. In adaptation studies the Shakespearean canon has perhaps the longest afterlife as his work has been adapted from nearly every possible corner of the world making him our greatest contemporary.

How does one view a Shakespearean adaptation? Taking a reverential, essentialist view of the universal genius of Shakespeare would have meagre significance in the adaptation process and would insist on his position as the fixed unshakeable voice of a single culture. However, things are not that simple - Shakespeare was a master at adaptation and most of his plays are based on earlier sources (Barth, *The Literature of Replenishment*). Taking a cue from this, the Shakespearean text - already an intertext, adapted into something new and far removed from the source, is then just a first in a series of adaptations which adaptation studies today calls the hypertext continuum. Rather than view the modern adaptations of Shakespearean through the prism of error and infidelity, any Shakespearean adaptation is an act of what adaptation studies calls creative infidelity, the hermeneutic motion present in adaptation by opening up a prior, classic text and transforming it into a contemporary narrative these adaptations are reflective of their authors and times more than Shakespeare (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*). Because Shakespeare has been appropriated, adapted in India more than in any other non-western culture, it is worthwhile to briefly talk about the Indianization of Shakespeare, which begins in the colonial era and has continued well into the present. From theatre to folk performances to mainstream Bollywood cinema, vernacular and regional transmutations, Shakespeare has undergone a range of cultural and temporal relocations. The implications are many: indigenization, transculturation, and revisioning. The desi Shakespeare offers a feast of adaptations, ranging from the faithful to the more radical. Vishal Bharadwaj's film adaptations have rightly earned critical acclaim for their dexterous use of Shakespeare to present a localized tale as well as run counter to the original

to further his individual artistic vision. Similarly, other canonical English writers have been reopened, now with a critical eye to redress the colonial equation and ideological premises of English cultural complacency. Tanika Gupta has been successful in transcultural adaptations or what has been termed cultural boomeranging whereby her alterations of Dickens and Ibsen have immense political value as interventionist theatre.

Adaptation as a "cultural practice" in Today's Digital Culture

Going along with Thomas Leitch's chronology, we are going through phase 3.0 or even post 3.0 phase of adaptation studies. The major redirection in this phase is of course towards an embrace of digital culture, which offers what is called read / write literacy as opposed to read / only literacy of print culture (Leitch, *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*). There is incessant global movement and transfer of texts leading to a new kind of digital creativity. Also, digital media allows audience immersion thereby pointing to a new-found agential role for the erstwhile reader /audience (Leitch; Jenkins). One of the reasons why adaptation studies needs special attention is because we are surrounded by new and at times whacky forms of adaptation and our scroll time attests to this, remakes of songs, remakes of remakes, tik tok, memes etc. Blurring the boundaries between audience and creator, this new media landscape has newer implications for the state of adaptation studies (Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation)*.

Situated in this state of media convergence or media continuum, adaptation studies today is comfortably placed within the fluid boundaries of culture studies. Here, it is viewed as a cultural practice that embraces pluralism, is inclusivist, transgresses media and cultural hierarchies, is willfully cross-cultural, more web-like than straightforwardly linear in its creative dynamic. A kind of present-day practice totally attentive to new interchanges and shifting models of adaptation (Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*). However, conversely, the instant and ephemeral nature of today's digital adaptations can prove counterproductive, making adaptation studies a catch-all phrase to include everything. It is here that one can posit the role of media literacy which promotes discernment and critique of the flood of content that assails us minute by minute. Similarly, as far as the pedagogy

of adaptation studies is concerned, there are innumerable challenges. How can adaptation studies be effective at a time when we speak of a crisis in the Humanities, a crisis bordering on apathy and dysfunctional imaginations? The humanities student no longer reads, let alone grapple with a text, Cinema-if at all it grips their attention, is entertainment. How can we restore critical acumen? In today's classroom, and I speak from experience, reading texts and corelating them with films is frustrating. In such an impasse, one can only speculate about the efficacy of teaching adaptation studies. Or can a remix, a tik-tok, or a mash up give us an entry point into teaching adaptation effectively to today's generation. Can adaptation atudies revive both forgotten pursuits - reading and film? I leave that open for all of us to ponder.

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