Adaptation as Transformative Reimagining: Analysing Shiv Kumar Batalvi's *Luna*

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Abstract: This paper analyses Shiv Kumar Batalvi's *Luna* as a transformative reimagining, drawing insights from Linda Hutcheon, who propounds the idea that "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication." It explores *Luna* as an 'announced' adaptation of the Punjabi folktale, i.e., *Qissa Bhagat Puran,* written by Qadaryar. The adapted text fuses the poetic legend with the dramatic framework of Western and Sanskrit drama and transforms it into a verse play. It offers a profound shift in narrative perspective and interrogates the stereotypes. The *qissa* tradition focuses on episodic structure and pays little attention to the art of characterization, whereas the genre of poetic drama grants freedom in exploring characters. The story is subverted to create space for Luna, who has otherwise been portrayed as the 'Other' in the source text. In this text, Luna courageously encounters questions relating to sexual restraint and gender identity. She views Puran as both a beacon of hope for fulfilling her physical needs and a means to uphold her elevated socio-economic standing, which she achieved through her marriage to Puran's father, King Salwan. Puran and King Salwan also contest with collective social consciousness and face questions relating to religion and morality. Thus, the text decomposes the cultural discourse and advances a process of 'cultural revision' and may turn out to be, in Homi K. Bhabha's terms, a 'third space' where cultural identity gets negotiated.

Keywords: Transformative Adaptations; *Qissa; Luna;* Genre; Characterisation; Third Space; Gender; Batalvi

Introduction

Meaning does not reside within texts as a stable or inherent property; instead, it is constituted through the dynamic interplay of language, textuality, and cultural discourses. In this context, Roland Barthes

famously asserts that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (146), thereby rejecting the notion of a singular, authorial meaning. Consequently, texts are best understood not in isolation; instead, they exist within a network of intertexts, shaped by their cultural, historical, and aesthetic contexts. Robert Stam builds on this poststructuralist idea by saying, "The literary text is not closed but an open structure (or, better, structuration, as the later Barthes would have it) to be reworked by a boundless context." The text feeds on and is fed into an indefinitely permutating intertext, which is seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (57). Within this framework, adaptations can be read as visible sites of intertextuality, highlighting the dialogic relationship between the source text, its adaptations, and a wider body of cultural narratives.

Theoretical Framework

Building upon the idea of textual openness, Linda Hutcheon's foundational work, *A Theory of Adaptation*, conceptualizes adaptation as "an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. This "transcoding" can involve a shift of medium (a poem or film) or genre (an epic to a novel), or a change of frame and therefore context: telling the same story from a different point of view, for instance, can create a manifestly different interpretation" (7-8). Such transformations—whether retelling a story from a different perspective or relocating it within a new cultural milieu—generate interpretations that are manifestly distinct from their source. Adaptation should also be seen as a process that brings together the creative choices made by the adapter and the ways that audiences receive the work (Hutcheon Adaptation 8). This process necessitates deliberate decisions regarding what to retain, modify, or omit, while simultaneously inviting an active and participatory mode of interpretation. As a consequence, adaptation emerges as a dynamic space of interaction between texts, creators, and readers, where meaning is continuously negotiated and reshaped in response to new contexts, ideological frameworks, and cultural imperatives.

Extending Hutcheon's argument, Suzy Woltmann further adds to the discussion by highlighting the transformative potential of adapted texts. These transformations often reflect contemporary values and societal shifts, thereby enriching the dialogue between past and present.

They serve as critical commentaries that can challenge existing narratives. Woltmann argues that adaptations are transformative when they "critically evaluate its source text(s), analyzing and problematizing its tropes and authority by writing them anew," thereby functioning as "a form of literary criticism" (1).

Adaptations are better considered transformative rather than autonomous textual spaces, since they derive much of their significance from an ongoing engagement with prior narratives. Linda Hutcheon illuminates the discursive nature of texts by saying, "The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced…it is incorporated and modified, given new and different life and meaning" ("The Politics of Postmodernism" 182). In this sense, literary adaptations expand the reach of the ur-story, enabling new audiences—particularly those unfamiliar with the original—to encounter and reassess it within altered formal and ideological contexts.

Furthermore, Woltmann highlights the political and ethical potential of transformative adaptations. These adaptations may have the capacity to recuperate marginalized voices that have historically been silenced or sidelined on the basis of gender, sexuality, race, or social status (2). They also serve to "interrogates stereotypes and problematize norms in source texts" (2). They critically reimagine canonical texts by addressing their gaps, silences, and oppressive assumptions. In doing so, they unsettle established hierarchies of authority and expand the literary canon (3). Hutcheon also points out that they "destabilizes both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations" (*Adaptation* 174). From this perspective, adaptations can be read, in Homi K. Bhabha's terms, as an "in-between space" where cultural difference gets articulated, negotiated, and re-signed rather than being fixed (1).

Qissa Tradition and Source Text

To begin with, *qissa* is primarily a genre of narrative that relies heavily upon episodic structure and archetypal characterisation. Rooted in oral and folkloric traditions, it typically reinforces normative values related to gender, duty, and social order. As defined in *Vishav Punjabi Kosh*, Vol. VII (Bhasha Vibhag, Punjab), *qissa* is "a narratological and objective poetic composition in which a long story is

told through word pictures in a very dramatic manner with the help of metaphors, similes, words, etc." (349). The entry further notes that this distinctive Punjabi poetic form bears affinities both to epic poetry and to English romances or ballads, while in Hindi such compositions are referred to as '*Akhyaan*' (349). Historically, *qissa* emerged in the medieval period and gained prominence between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. They were usually composed in verse and performed orally, often with musical accompaniment, functioning simultaneously as popular entertainment and moral instruction. By embedding local cultural values within legendary or semi-historical narratives, *qissa* had an important effect on the development of collective memory.

At the same time, the Punjabi *qissa* tradition itself may be understood as an adaptive form. Many *qisse* rework oral legends and folktales such as *Heer-Ranjha*, *Mirza-Sahiban*, and *Sohni-Mahiwal*. Predominantly love narratives, these texts often reflect strong Islamic or Persian cultural influences. However, the *qissa* of Bhagat Puran stands apart from this dominant pattern. Rather than centering on romantic love, it foregrounds an existential crisis and reinforces normative cultural values prevalent in mediaeval Punjab. As Akshaya Kumar observes, it is "the only kissa which does not have an overt Persian or Arabic connection," a distinction that points toward "its pre-mediaeval genealogy" (133). This particularity makes Bhagat Puran's narrative significant as a source text and further underscores the critical stakes of Batalvi's adaptive intervention.

Moreover, the *qissa* of Bhagat Puran has not become obscure; on the contrary, it enjoyed immense popularity in both secular and religious circles during the seventh decade of the twentieth century, the time period of Batalvi's active literary career. At that time, it was performed widely—sung by celebrated Punjabi artists such as Lal Chand Yamla Jatt and Kuldip Manak. Even *Kavishri Jatthas* sang it on religious stages. This widespread cultural acceptance, popularity and circulation make it a powerful prop to offer a critique of the mediaeval patriarchal value system and offer an alternative worldview, as Batalvi deeply realises that "No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation, is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets

and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead" (Eliot 49).

A renowned critic, H.S. Gill, analyses the legend of Bhagat Puran within an existential anthropological framework. He moves beyond the myth and explores questions relating to moral and psychological tensions. Though he considers it a universal meta-narrative of the human condition, he finds that "its contradictory strands lead to such compositions whose ends are always loose. They can be stretched in many directions. Several interpretations are possible, but each interpretation has serious consequences for our cultural development" (429).

While the historical, political and cultural aspects are ignored and a touch of universality prevails in Qadaryar's Bhagat Puran, Batalvi contextualizes it as an adaptation that "is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum" (Hutcheon, *Adaptation* 142). Akshaya Kumar investigates the cultural genealogy of the *qissa* and demonstrates that it is a cross-cultural adaptation of 'Oedipus Rex,' rewritten by incorporating local cultural elements. The patriarchy found in Punjabi culture reshapes the narrative, and the Greek narrative of incest is replaced with the narrative of renunciation (134). He finds that Batalvi further transforms the narrative into one that represents the subaltern, reflecting the cultural politics of his time (133).

Luna as Transformative Adaptation

One of the most significant ways in which this transformation is affected is through Batalvi's deliberate shift in genre—from *qissa* to verse play. This choice appears to be motivated by a nuanced understanding of form as inseparable from meaning, as T. S. Eliot suggests, "To create a form is not merely to invent a shape, a rhyme or a rhythm. It is also the realization of the whole appropriate content of this rhyme or rhythm" (57). In this light, the shift in genre signals not merely a stylistic alteration but a fundamental rethinking of narrative possibilities.

Batalvi compares the genre of *qissa* to the Western epic and observes that both traditions narrate the lives and experiences of common people. Drawing on T. S. Eliot's assertion that poetic drama is not designed merely for amusement but functions as a "drama of ideas" intended for a

discerning, educated audience (54), Batalvi's selection of the genre appears highly deliberate and ideologically informed. In *Luna,* the narrative assumes a philosophical and contemplative mode, foregrounding ethical dilemmas and interior conflicts. In the "Introduction" to *Luna*, Batalvi openly acknowledges his indebtedness to the earlier *qissa* tradition, stating that the storyline and principal characters are inherited from Qadaryar; the text differentiates itself through the ideological sensibilities of the present time (ix).

Batalvi, primarily a poet, found verse to resonate more deeply with him than prose. Sukhdev Singh Sirsa, too, opines that Batalvi's mode of representation, poetic language, and choice of symbols are the result of his critical understanding of the changes happening in the socio-historical situation and the resultant Punjabi lifestyle (27). The lengthy genre of poetic drama offers space for the representation of new thoughts and opens up the possibility of reinterpreting the myth in a modern context. He not only purposefully chooses the form but also modifies it to suit his thematic concerns.

Rather than retelling the entire *qissa*, Batalvi chooses to focus on its central crisis: the encounter between Prince Puran and Luna. His version retraces the circumstances that led Luna to desire the prince and the subsequent punishment she faced. In doing so, he presents what may be called an 'incomplete' version of the story, one that deliberately narrows its scope. This incompleteness, however, is not a weakness; instead, it allows Batalvi to foreground the tensions between collective consciousness, public morality, and individual crisis. Ultimately, he concludes the narrative in a manner that aligns with his larger aim—namely, to expose and interrogate the shifting ideological frameworks of his time.

He resonates with the postmodern critical stance when he says, "How can a modern poet follow that tradition blindly when there is no finality about any issue" (Batalvi x). He opines that there are multiple realities and alternative interpretations available for similar situations and believes that artists, like scientists, carry the tradition yet take a departure from it to choose their own one. He expands his argument by stating that the artist combines a traditional story and images into a new compound, inviting new interpretations (x).

This text boldly challenges and contests notions of fixed authorship. Even Batalvi does not position himself as the "owner" of the *qissa* but rather participates in an ongoing cultural dialogue, acknowledging the text as inherently intertextual and historically layered by stating that, "My story is primarily based on the version found in Qadaryar's *Puran Bhagat* and ends with the severing of the hands and feet of Puran" (Batalvi viii). His rewriting transforms the myth into what Barthes calls a "neutral, composite, oblique space" (142).

It fuses folklore, lyricism, and modernist anxieties. Against the writing of a fixed moral tale dictated by a singular authorial voice, the text engages with multiple voices—Luna's, Puran's, and society's—all of which clash, contest, and overlap. In this way, Batalvi enacts the ultimate postmodern gesture of relinquishing interpretive control and releasing the story into the domain of interpretation. He thus embodies Barthes' vision of the text as a space where "all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing" (142).

According to Robert Stam, adaptations alter the plot, characters, and perspectives of the original text, and Batalvi undertakes the task by reshaping the plot of the qissa. Following the conventions of Sanskrit drama, Batalvi opens the text with *Nati* and *Sutradhar*, who stand as a chorus in the poetic drama. Vinay Dharwadker observes in his translation of *Shakuntala* that the *sutradhara* functions as one who "'holds the thread' of continuity and coherence running through the work" (222–23). In Batalvi's adaptation, however, the *Nati* and *Sutradhar* depart from convention by appearing in an intimate scene of lovemaking. By doing so, they introduce the audience to the core issue of the story, : unrequited bodily desires, encapsulated in the line, "Verily, no water can quench/The thirst of roused passion" (Batalvi 3), as well as the longing of a young woman for her lover, "There is now a dirge of separation—the ardent lover is gone" (Batalvi 3). In their exchange, they sketch the flora and fauna and the mythic atmosphere before the main plot unfolds.

They create a kind of narrative distance between the writer and the audience, keeping the stage aware of its storytelling act, and hence serve a meta-theatrical role, similar to that of a chorus or prologue found in Greek drama. By blending the Sanskrit tradition of 'prastāvanā' with Western verse

drama, he successfully creates a hybrid and intercultural space that is at once rooted in indigenous literary heritage and modernist experimentation. This hybrid space foreshadows the adaptive strategies that structure the play as a whole.

Batalvi refers not only to the *qissa* of Bhagat Puran but also to the entirety of oppressive patriarchal authority throughout mythical times. He refers to "Raven's throne", which should be torn apart by women by striking like "lightning and thunder." Through the metaphor, he transforms Luna from a fallen woman into a mythic symbol of resistance. He exposes that myths have been manipulated to control female desires, and they can be rewritten to liberate them. Batalvi even further tries to carry the rule of probability over plausibility. He changes Puran's age from being twelve to eighteen or twenty years to make it probable that he could be sexually attractive.

Character Reconfiguration

As a postmodern transformative adaptation, it foregrounds marginalized voices and challenges the notion of universal human experience. The text expresses gendered subjectivities that disrupt dominant histories. Batalvi himself points out that "The story-line and other characters such as Salwan, Puran, Luna, Ichran and her father Chaudal (the king of Udainagar), have been borrowed from Kadaryar. The difference, if any, lies in the ideology prevalent today" (Batalvi ix). Without a doubt, the characters carry cultural memory, and we reinterpret their actions by discussing their motivations. Batalvi also admits in his "introduction" that he has created various imaginative characters to serve as props alongside historical figures, allowing him to explore the inner workings of his characters (ix).

Luna

In the folktale, Luna has been assigned a stereotypical role as being "the embodiment of lust, temptresses and the hand-maidens of the devil, designated to deceive and mislead" (Batalvi xi). She is represented as "the other" for the male hero. She is a jealous stepmother who tries to seduce her stepson, Puran. But he rejects her advances, reminding her of her role as a mother. Luna is enraged. She falsely accuses him of molesting her. Puran was punished, mutilated, and exiled. Thus, Luna

challenges such an image of a woman. In the adaptation, she is portrayed as a deeply human character, shaped by poverty, patriarchy and caste oppression. She articulates her identity in biological terms, stating, "I am passion-fire, O mate/I carry May-heat in one breast, and June-heat in the other" (Batalvi 39), and challenges her mythical construction. She jumps into the intellective pursuit where she confronts the individual crisis and collective consciousness.

Ira, Luna's friend, observes that, since mythical times, women have been denied the agency to speak for themselves, remarking that a "woman is a voiceless bird" (Batalvi 41) and that "if they speak out, they are condemned and abandoned by society" (Batalvi 42). In contrast, Luna challenges the societal norms governing gender roles. She critiques the objectification of women entrenched in patriarchal structures and envisions a utopian world where women can raise their voices "without fear". Her position aligns with Simone de Beauvoir's claim in *The Second Sex* that women have historically been regarded as the other—"She is determined and differentiated in relation to man, while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other" (26). She condemns "the vanity and pride of those who treat her as an object of carnal desire" (Batalvi 44). For Luna, challenging patriarchy begins with reclaiming one's agency. Responding to Ira, she invokes the mythical era of "Bloody Raven's throne" (Batalvi 43), an epoch marking the silencing of women, to emphasize the deep roots of this oppression. She calls for defying normative values and superstitions tied to 'modesty' and 'acceptance.' Mathri, Luna's friend, reminds her of the reward she received for marrying King Salwan—liberation from caste constraints—raising her from "a lowly untouchable/ To royal grandeur/ Making a shallow puddle/ A mighty Ganges" (Batalvi 47). Yet Luna rejects such material elevation, choosing instead bodily autonomy and emotional fulfilment, declaring, "I, an untouchable/ Want an untouchable groom" (Batalvi 47).

Luna deliberately chooses Puran to challenge King Salwan's authority. On one hand, Puran would fulfil his sexual desires; on the other hand, he would help Luna maintain the status quo she gained by marrying King Salwan, which freed her from her caste. Kunt, King Varman's wife, exposes

the hypocrisy of caste-based morality as she says, "Then if Luna marries my brother, how will she remain an untouchable?" (Batalvi 35), and Mathri, Luna's friend, also reminds Luna about getting purified after getting married to King Salwan. King Varman too exposes the feudal patriarchal system that stands intact behind Luna's marriage as he reveals the benefits for Luna and her family for getting married to King Salwan: Luna would acquire a world-famous man as her husband, and her father would be given unlimited rewards. Baru's last words to his departing daughter, Luna, also remind her about their poverty, comparing it to "Lion's incarnation" (Batalvi 54) and "the birth of a daughter to a poor man is a curse" (Batalvi 54), and he advises her to accept her fate. Thus, choosing an ordinary person could have thrown her out of the palace and brought punishment for both. Thus, Prince Puran is the right choice to challenge the authority of the king. Puran's acceptance of Luna's offer could have stood as a challenge to his father's authority. By enjoying the sexual win over Luna, Puran could have taken revenge on the King for putting him into the dungeon and depriving him of the joys of the palace and a comfortable and luxurious life. Thus, the King could have got punished for both Luna and Puran, who are both prey to his authority, as Luna points out, "I thought we would share each other's grief" (Batalvi 100). H. S. Gill points out that there is reason for Luna to cross the limits, as "Luna is literally a captive of the wealthy king…" Her human condition is miserable. She had probably been meditating on her destiny in the confinement of her palace. She is a wild bird in a cage (436)." By not accepting the advances, Puran invites Luna's wrath. Here she could be compared to a stepmother: "Kaikeyi, the step-mother of Rama had banished him from his kingdom" (Batalvi x), who takes stepchildren as her counters.

King Salwan

In Qadaryar's *Bhagat Puran*, the King Salwan functions as a conventional patriarch. People take his desire for a young wife for granted. By contrast, in the adaptation, he becomes a psychologically complex character. Batalvi even invented Salwan's confidant—King Varman of Chamba—as an explicitly imaginative device that externalizes his inner conflicts. King Varman forces him to confront his bodily desires and his ageing masculinity: "But yours is a case of infatuation. / Dream-snakes

poison in your blood circulation" (Batalvi 33). King Salwan confides in his companion that Ichran has failed to fulfil his physical cravings: "Colourless was Chaudal's oven, / Colourless its fire. Puran's mother, Ichran, / Did not wear beauty's attire" (Batalvi 24). He admits that he has enjoyed the sexual encounter with her, but she could never possess his heart. He struggles to appreciate their physical interactions fully. He still has "unrequited" desire: "My poisonous dream-snake,/ Like the tongue of a flame,/ Was dazzlingly bright" (Batalvi 24). He further describes that he had almost accepted his fate and had been moving ahead in his life when he got the good news about the birth of his son, Puran, whose birth seemed like "a ray of light" (Batalvi 26). Yet Puran was sent to the dungeon for the next eighteen years after consulting the astrologers. And he was completely broken. Prof. Gill believes that this lack of touch has proved to be exceedingly frustrating for the father. It is the one and most crucial reason for looking for another relationship, as a "psychic cure" (406-407). Yet Salwan is well aware of the consequences of unnatural relationships and the destructive force of unchecked desires: "The flame of the fictive snake abides. / Once stung, no man ever survives. / But the dream snake is only a dream, / An illusion of the mind" (Batalvi 29). Yet he is so carried away by his passions that he ignores Luna's low caste. However, Luna is too young to be his companion, and it frustrates him more.

Puran

Batalvi reimagines Puran less as a heroic figure and more as a subject, shaped by a series of dehumanizing circumstances. Although "the very name 'Pooran' is highly Sanskritic, and stands for the high Hindu ideal of 'wholeness' as the ultimate truth of life" (Akshaya 133), his predicament seems to contrary, as he himself admits, "Nobody is Puran" (Batalvi 99). His eighteen-year confinement in the dungeon condemns him to "lonely seclusion" (Batalvi 98). When he comes out, he feels ashamed of his father's act of second marriage, confessing, "The vipers of black deeds/ Of my father sting" (Batalvi 98), a line that signals inherited guilt rather than personal moral failure. His sense of displacement deepens when his mother leaves for her father's house, rendering him "a stranger in my home" (Batalvi 99). He reflects on his situation: "All efforts for happiness were met/

With pain and suffering,/ On this earth,/ From the first day of birth" (Batalvi 99). As H. S. Gill observes, such conditions harden him emotionally and turn him into "a little monster" (438). At the same time, Luna's threatened retaliation—"Luna will destroy the color/ of this house, this family" (Batalvi 105)—forces him to confront contestation between the individual consciousness and the collective one. Caught between these opposing forces, he likens himself to "a featherless bird" destined to fall before it can fully live (Batalvi 139). In this context, H.S. Gill observes, Puran, "who would perpetuate the House of Salwan, Puran whom Luna wants to possess, is sacrificed at the altar of passionate non-existence" (438-439), stands at the threshold. Thus, he emerges as a luminal figure who is compelled to bear the punishment and quit the world: "All my aspirations are now dead/ I would like to quit this world" (Batalvi 99).

Concluding Remarks

Batalvi's *Luna* may be understood as a modern reconfiguration of the Punjabi qissa, one that draws upon oral narrative traditions while remaining responsive to contemporary ethical and cultural concerns. The text appears to function as a space of cultural negotiation in which the cultural memory of Qadaryar's narrative coexists with Batalvi's ideological reframing. Instead of settling the conflict between tradition and critique, the text emphasizes their interaction, encouraging readers to navigate between two temporal-spatial contexts: the inherited moral framework of the source text and the humanist inquiry expressed in Batalvi's verse. In this sense, the adaptation aligns with Hutcheon's argument that "multiple versions of a story exist laterally, and not vertically" (*Adaptation* 169). The adaptation thus emerges as an "in-between" zone in which plural temporalities and moral logics coexist. Read through Homi K. Bhabha's notion of "Third Space"—"which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistorized and read anew" (39). In short, *Luna* can be considered as a critical spatial intervention that repositions the *qissa* tradition within modern Punjabi literary and cultural discourse.

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