



Journey of Jhumpa Lahiri's Novel “The Namesake” from Fiction to Film: A Study on Intersemiotic Translation

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ABSTRACT

Translation studies mostly address the **inter-lingual** and **intra-lingual** aspects of translation, but few have explored the **inter-semiotic** aspect, one out of the tripartite division of translation propounded by the Russian-American linguist and literary theorist Roman Jakobson in his 1959 essay “**On linguistic aspects of translation**”. He introduced the term as “interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (1959) and explains that “intersemiotic translation’ is transference from “one system of signs into another, e.g., from verbal art into music, dance, cinema, or painting” (1959). While in literary translation the role of the translator is important to convey the sense of the source text, intersemiotic translation involves the creative aspect of the translator (artist or performer, filmmaker etc.) which offers its embodiment in a different medium. The three disciplines of translation studies, semiotics and adaptation studies share a common interest as their research seems to focus on non- linguistic semiotic systems. Because in the process of filming a fiction there is transference of mediums (sign systems) and

adaptation. **Film adaptation** in particular is usually framed to as translation. Roman Jakobson's third categorisation of translation i.e. - Intersemiotic translation attains relevance in adaptation and can be interpreted using the semiotic theory of language. Film adaptation as a mode of Intersemiotic translation has been central to the process of filmmaking since almost beginning. Film adaptations are in fact the most used examples in all the researches centred on Intersemiotic translation, mostly because in films the transmutation of the verbal sign is trusted to a broad range of non-verbal codes. Seen from the perspective of Jakobson's translation theory, the scriptwriter along with the filmmaker or director is the 'translators' who convey the ideas expressed by the writer.

The aim of this study is to approach translation from intersemiotic perspective. Through examining adaptation within the context of translation, it is intended to be emphasized that translation is not just a means of transfer between two natural languages but also a channel of communication between linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems. Taking Roman Jakobson's "Intersemiotic Translation" as the frame of reference here, this paper aims at a comparative analysis of Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake" and Mira Nair's 2006 film based on the same, to discover the differences or changes observed resulting from adaptation from fiction to film.

It looks at two aspects of film language---**the verbal** and **the iconic** (non-verbal symbols, signs, expressions, the Mise-en-scene) and how they influence the process of film adaptation. Questions of equivalence, fidelity and differences to the original, intersemiotic translation and its social dimensions, culture, transmutation and its ethics are raised here. The process of adaptation entails some additions, omissions, abridgements or simplifications in the source resulting in the change or loss of the meaning that the source intended within the period and cultural environment it was written. Here the translator focuses on the information to be delivered, rather than the verbal signs. It is recreation of the meaning in another sign system by a different means of narration. With Jakobson's definition the context of translation is broadened and the methodology of translation began to change.

Like novels, films also tell a story, including some genres as romantic, historical, detective, horror, Gothic, adventure, thriller, science fiction. Like fiction, film also include sub-groups such as plot, setting, characterisation, structure and theme which make up the screenplay, there are many different film techniques used to tell the story narrative. However film has another audio-visual dimension and so,

attention is paid to sound, music, lighting, camera angles and editing. What is important is to focus on how the elements are used together in making a good film.

The tendency to overemphasise the literary source over their films has dominated the debate on cinematic adaptations of fictions. Analysing adaptation from the perspective of fidelity is too limiting. Filmmakers are more concerned with the visual effect on the audience. Thus adaptations are now being analysed as products of artistic creativity as they undergo an endless process of recycling, transformation and transmutation. Filmmakers too know perfectly well that their films are going to be compared with and criticised for any sign of infidelity to the source. Yet they accept both favourable and unfavourable judgements from the critics and audiences. The Spectators (audiences) on their part have so much expectations from the film because they are going to visualise something they have read and if that happens to be one's favourite book then it possess the ability to plunge us into a magic realm, into an atmosphere that embraces all our senses. Our wish to revisit the beloved world of the book through film is quite dilemmatic. Any form of infidelity to the book will obviously betray the wish questioning the filmmaker's abilities. Despite all constraints, filmmakers try to present their best on screen by sticking to the source, leaving except some creative freedom assigned to them as a right.

(Keywords: Intersemiotic Translation, Semiotics, Adaptation, Fidelity, Transmutation and Transference)

Mira Nair's 2006 adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's novel *The Namesake*, was released four years after Lahiri's novel starring Indian superstars Irrfan Khan² and Tabu as Ashoke and Ashima, respectively, and Indian-American Kal Penn as Gogol, whose identities—Indian heritage, American nationality—exist concurrently in an uneasy, ever-shifting balance. The screenplay was written by Sooni Taraporevala. In the film, Gogol is presented first as a sulky, standoffish high school outcast, resentful of his peers mocking but simultaneously disinterested in their acceptance. Penn is lanky and gangly, peering out from behind a curtain of frizzy hair, eschewing a lot of the goofy silliness he portrayed in his breakout *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*.

The story of the narrative centres on the two generations the Ganguli family, who shuttle between New York and Calcutta between a foreign, unfamiliar land and Home; where home is forever lost and always beckoning. This dilemma prevails in the minds of Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli. Ashima writes home the comforts of the new land i.e. - hot water and gas twenty-four hours a day but her dullness recovers a little

by all this. The humble Calcutta snacks—a mix of puffed rice/rice Krispies and chilli powder somehow links herself to her roots, her Home.

The movie *The Namesake* truly begins with a name— “A Ganguli”, visible on a trunk carried by a coolie at Howrah station, before Ashoke is to board the ill-fated train to Jamshedpur. The other name on which the narrative pivots on is “Gogol”—the one the film’s title refers to especially after the birth of Ashoke’s son, Gogol.

After Jhumpa Lahiri, director Mira Nair shows “Home”, both as a source of comfort, love, care as well as terror (Ashoke’s reminder of an old life-threatening train accident). The couple arrive as strangers to New York later trying to understand each other in an alien land. Little did they knew each other before their wedding and Ashima’s only contact with him was when she stealthily slips her feet in Ashoke’s “made in USA” shoes, a lovely scene in the film.

Ashima’s experiences of childbirth in an American hospital without her extended family, her mixed feelings, perplexing emotions are deftly highlighted by Nair by crosscutting between convivial shots of Calcutta, awaiting a child’s arrival and drab shots of New York hospital where Ashima is timing her contractions. When the baby arrives, the Gangulis confront another difficulty that they cannot leave the hospital without naming their baby. Unable to convince the hospital authorities that their Bengali tradition requires the elderly grandmother to choose the baby’s name and they have to wait for the letter containing the name, Ashoke instinctively chooses the name “Gogol” for his son. This name later disturbs the boy emotionally and culturally. After much depression, a love-hate relationship with his name, he changed it to “Nikhil”. Nair uses this name to convey how not only two generations but also each immigrant perceives the challenges of living between two lands, two homes.

In the next scene Nair gives a visual reminder of Calcutta’s Howrah Bridge where Ashima and Ashoke are photographed along with the baby. They send this photo to their family in India. Their homecoming, the first visit to Calcutta is not filmed by Nair only except the Airport scene where we see Ashima’s hesitations of facing home again- of now being a foreigner (an American) in her homeland. In a sign that foreshadows diverging generational responses, Gogol identifies with this place, Calcutta.

Gogol’s name is the meeting point of two generations, their conflicts and the differences between them which is difficult to bridge. Gogol is variously called as gogolo, goggles, and even googly. In India googly

means the “wrong one” and this is specifically true in Gogol’s case as his name is a wrong one- separating American peers, marking his outsider status.

One important turning point in the film occurs when in a literature class Gogol discovers the real Nikolai Gogol to be a recluse and a hypochondriac who starved himself to death and termed as an “eccentric genius”. But Gogol is not impressed by all these associations but is frustrated as he is not yet aware of the relevance of Nikolai Gogol in his father’s life. He thus, angrily retorts his parents as: “Did you guys know all of this stuff about him when you decided to name me after him?”

But his mother Ashima didn’t explain it, rather being irritated over her son’s behaviour, she said “Don’t call us ‘guys’, she says, “Sometimes when I close my eyes, I feel like I have given birth to strangers”.

Even when Ashoke gifts a special edition of Nicolai Gogol’s collected works to Gogol after his graduation from High school; he fails to feel the sentiments, the obsession of his father for it. Ashoke states the reason for his emotional attachment with the Ukrainian-born Russian writer-someone “who spent most of his adult life outside his homeland.....like me.” But for Gogol, exile is an unfamiliar condition even though he has not yet wholly fit into America and Calcutta, a faraway exotic city where his parents keep visiting.

The trauma and anxiety of the diaspora family is well represented in Mira Nair’S film by the scenes demonstrating the Ganguli’s homecoming in summer by showing Sonia’s tantrums who wishes to return to America as soon as they arrived and through the content of Ashima seeing Yogis singing in the streets and sarees hanging from the balconies to dry. The scene where Gogol declines to ride a hand-pulled rickshaw calling it “feudal” and “exploitative” matches with his parents’ initial responses to New York. He is both repulsed and awestruck. In the next scene the family is awed by the imposing beauty of the Taj Mahal. Here the camera follows his (Gogol’s) gaze, analysing the aesthetics, the architectural marvel of India, its columns, the ceiling and everything. Immediately after Gogol decides to pursue Architecture and back in America, he in fact enrolls in one.

The remaining part of the film revolves round Gogol’s dual thoughts shuttling between the past and the present, tradition and modernity, history and contemporaneity. In the end he identifies with neither one nor the other. True to his Namesakes, his dual names- a good name Nikhil (Nick) and a nickname “Gogol”, he

is delineated by two love affairs, with a Manhattanite and fellow Yale student, Maxine (Jacinda Barrett) and the transnational cosmopolitan and fellow Bengali, Moushumi (Zuleika Robinson).

While with Maxine, he is Nikhil Ganguli (easily shortened to American Nick). After making love to her Gogol asserts “This is what I want” and proudly declares that he does not care that his parents want him to marry a Bengali girl. But later we found it was just an illusion of Gogol as when he brings home Maxine to meet his parents, he feels awkward by her public display of affection for him contrary to his own parents’ understated expression of love for each other.

After their lunch, the father-son duo went for an ice-cream drive where Gogol learns from Ashoke the import of his name. Here the title of the film is finally revealed (justified). “This is how I came to America and you got your name” Ashoke concludes, as the scene returns to the present. Nair portrays them as tight over-the-shoulder reaction shots, such that during this conversation, their location becomes irrelevant. Gogol, now being thoughtful, asks his father if he is reminded of that unfortunate night in Bengal when he looks at his son. Ashoke gently replies “You remind me of everything that followed, every day since then has been a gift” (**chapter-5, page-124, Lahiri, Jhumpa. The Namesake**). A series of flashbacks captures that past fateful night of train derailment, Ashoke’s holding onto a single page from Nikolai Gogol’s “The Collected Tales and Plays” and someone noticed the fluttering page and found him immobilized.

The film’s initial scene is retold many times and in actuality, through these retellings, Nair emphasizes the traumatic and liberating experiences of exile. Longing for roots, homes, belongingness as well as the wish to deterritorialize the self are the two contrasts of exile. Nair’s film goes beyond the happy ending of reconciliation. Ashoke dies at a moment when his son realises his parents’ state in exile. Gogol drives to Ohio (where his father was teaching for a semester) to identify his father’s body. The next scene has conflicting visual implications where Gogol is shaving his head sitting on a barber’s chair with Mier & rap song on the soundtrack. By his shaved head he is paying respect to his dead father as per Hindu tradition. Ashima tells him he did not need to follow these traditions in reverence to his father. Gogol’s heartfelt realisation is expressed by his emotional lines to his mother in Bengali language for the first time as “**I wanted to Maa**”

His shaved head not only symbolises his acceptance of Bengali culture and tradition but also a conscious awareness of his hybrid status as he no longer sees himself to be neither fully American nor wholly

Bengali. This is the point where his hybridity could not be made out by Maxine, who contrary to all wearing white attends Ashoke's funeral in dark mourning clothes. Shortly afterwards they break up. Another affair follows with Moushumi, a fellow Bengali, a hybrid American Desi like Gogol. At the behest of their mothers they get together for drinks, sparks fly and after a brief courtship, they got married in a traditional Bengali ceremony. The Bollywood track "ye mera diwana pan" accompanied the sensuous wedding night scene of the film. But all this celebration didn't last long as they ended up in divorce. Here Nair shows that being born and brought up as Bengali doesn't guarantee one's attachment to one's culture, heritage and traditions. Moushumi too is not an exception to be swayed by things American, no matter though she is a Bengali.

The film ends by giving multiple meanings of "Home". When after her husband's demise, Ashima decides to return India selling the house. She feels a sense of loss, melancholic of this once foreign land, America. Nair conveys that the house she is leaving behind becomes her home now. On his final visits, Gogol checks his old belongings and stops by his father's gift to him when he graduated from high school. There he finds his father's inscriptions as **"The man who gave you his name, from the man who gave you your name"**. (page-288, chapter-12, Lahiri, Jhumpa, Namesake)

The film's last scene emphasizes that howsoever fragile may be the parent-children relationship, it soothes the difficult immigrant journey abroad. The last scene is presented with Mr. Ghosh's advice to **"see the world-you will never regret it"** in voiceover. We see Gogol looks up from his book while he is reading on a train and now Nair cuts to Ashoke, also reading on the train. Though their timelines never match but their eyelines do. The scene implies that despite generational differences what they have in common is this sense of always being in between places. This is the message the film leads up to, i.e. - what is significant about the immigrant experience is the journey itself. This exact sense is captured in the preceding scene, an enigmatic flashback, Gogol recalling a childhood experience at the beach where he along with his father walks to the edge of the backwater. Reaching the end, Ashoke realises that he has forgotten the camera. But instead of returning for it, he asks Gogol to commit the scene to memory. **"Remember that you and I made this journey, that we went together to a place where there was nowhere left to go"**. (Chapter-7, page-187, Lahiri, Jhumpa, The Namesake)

While his words point to a closure, the scene doesn't. This is where & how Mira Nair succeeds on meditating on expatriation and proving that home lies ahead as well as behind, exile is ruining, devastating and liberating, exhilarating.

We can thus see that many modifications are made in this film adaptation of the book. The movie *The Namesake* does not open or close exactly as the book does. Both the novel and the film are set in modern India and America. The story in the novel begins in the 1960s whereas the movie begins in 1970s, ten years later than the book. In the novel, the family visits The Taj Mahal before Gogol's junior years of High school, while in the film, the trip takes place after Gogol's graduation. Lahiri pens Gogol, now Nikhil, as an undergraduate studying architecture at Yale University, where he dates a young White woman named Ruth, who later goes abroad for a year and comes back disinterested in continuing the relationship. Lahiri writes, "He longs for her as his parents have longed, all these years, for the people they love in India- for the first time in his life, he knows this feeling." But in the film Ruth is entirely absent. Instead, we jump forward to Nikhil's adult life.

In the ending of the novel, Gogol begins reading the first chapter of "The Overcoat" in his room whereas the movie has some changes as we see Gogol returning to his city and reading the book in train instead of his room. Here echoes the voice of Mr Ghosh who once shared a train compartment with Ashoke **"Pack a pillow and a blanket and see as much of the world as you can. You will not regret it. One day it will be too late."** (Chapter-1, page-16, *The Namesake*). Back in India Ashima is seen taking singing classes and she is very happy.

Many of the sub-plots of the novel have been eliminated from the movie to stick to time constraints. Scenes such as Ashima being taken to the hospital, the homecoming of the baby, the guests coming to see it, the rice ceremony, Ashima forgetting the gift stroller at the railway station and again getting it back, purchasing the house at 67, Pemberton, Ashima's second pregnancy, Death of respective parents, Gogol in school, his visit to cemetery, his 14th birthday celebration, Gogol's changing of name to 'Nikhil' at Probate court are omitted. Nair also left Gogol's dating with Ruth for one year, Gogol's delayed train arrival that makes Ashoke nervous and thereby his revelation of that fateful night of his train accident and how miraculously he was saved by Nicolai Gogol's "The Overcoat". Other omissions are, the second meeting with Moushumi, their shopping together, married life, visit to Paris, meeting t with Astrid and Donald.

Their first anniversary celebration in 1999 in a restaurant. Moushumi's teaching career at NYU and finding her ex-boyfriend Dimitri Desjardin's address and their subsequent affair. Gogol suspects all is not well and decides to go to Italy on Christmas with Moushumi.

Also, many of the sub-plots have been expanded by the director to appeal to the audience. The scene of Ashoke's interaction with a fellow Bengali passenger in train Mr. Ghosh who advises him to go abroad and see life there. Ashima as an aspiring singer, Ashima slipping her feet in Ashoke's shoes when he had come to see her for marriage, Ashima's ignorance about how sweaters shrink when washed in washing machine, Ashoke's dream of the past train accident, sudden rise and Ashima's consolations. Ashoke and Gogol's visits to the seashore, The meeting of the two families of Moushumi and Gogol. Their India visits during holidays and Gogol's decision to become an architect after viewing the Taj Mahal. And a very beautiful scene of Ashoke and Ashima in a park in India where Ashima humorously asks Ashoke if he wants her to tell him "I Love You" the way Americans do and they laugh together. Ashima learning to drive, working as a librarian and sharing her feeling with a co-worker, Gogol's shaving of head after his father's demise, his break-up with Maxine on the condolence day

CONCLUSION

Intersemiotic translation is a very complex procedure where the verbal medium is transferred to the audio-visual. Here the meta-text is not just the source text but the culture. In intersemiotic translation, there are many losses which are supplemented by the creativeness of the film's crew behind the making of the film. It's the combined efforts of the filmmaker, the screenplay writer, Lyricist, Music director, cameraman, make-up artists and the list is long. On the basis of the above intersemiotic study of the film "The Namesake", it can be called as a straight, literal or faithful adaptation in terms of its plot, the characters, themes, motifs, symbols and style. The only difference is, the film takes a straight narration and ends where Gogol starts reading the book gifted by his father. The novel is narrated in back and forth sequence. The voice of the novelist and the eye of the filmmaker are in perfect synergy. Facial expressions, gestures and postures, even pieces of furniture- all capture the ineffable. Mira Nair's directorial uniqueness lies in her ability to balance art, creativity and populism as she guarantees both box-office success and great reviews. The Namesake is one rare case in which the book and the film are equally strong and their differences actually complement each other.

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