

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 5, May 2019

www.ijellh.com

Sehba Khan

Research Scholar

Department of English,

D.S.B. Campus,

Kumaun University Nainital,

Uttarakhand, India.

Email: monskhan839@gmail.com

An Analysis of Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*: The Quilt and its adaptation *Fire*

Abstract

Fire (1996) is the first film of the element trilogy directed by Deepa Mehta and is based on the short story of the Urdu writer Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf*. Both works have portrayed female sexuality in an explicit way, these works also analyse the manner in which men dominate women through the control of female sexuality and how women protests and becomes strong, independent and emancipate their position. This research paper proposes to deal with the story *Lihaaf* and its adaptation into the movie *Fire*. It will discuss how Deepa Mehta has adapted the short story into a film of 108 minutes, studying it in the light of adaptation theories along with the contribution of Mehta and Chughtai to feminism.

Key Words: female desires adaptation feminism female sexuality

Adapting of novels, stories and dramas into a film have become a popular trend now days; movies based on literature have gathered immense popularity. A film adaptation can be defined as the transfer of a work or story in a whole or in part to a film. Autobiography, comic books, scriptures, plays, historical sources, novels and short stories are the various forms of work adapted into films. With the advent of film adaptation came back to back studies and discourses by many theorists, critics and audience debating how favourable and successful the transformation of literature into films are. Theorists like Linda Hutcheon, Andre Bazin, Bela Balaz and George Bluestones argued that whether the adapted film lived

up to the expectation of the followers of literature or the modifications made by the director in a film were genuine enough to capture the spirit and essence of the novels or short stories.

Linda Hutcheon in her work *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) discusses the issues of transformation of literature into films by arguing that the all media have basic solidarity in functioning of the process of adaptation where all the genres shows information that how the adaptation functions. This notion gives rise to her methodology to identify any text based subject covering almost all aspects of media, to search ways to study it through comparison of text and media and finally applying variety of theoretical implications from multiple textual examples. In the introduction of the book she claims, a book is not a series of case studies but it is a comparative analysis of adaptation which examines various categories such as literature, film, theatre, opera, television and video games. Her comprehensive perspective promotes fundamental approach to the complex concept of adaptation.

Hutcheon examines adaptation as a “ process” and as a “product”. As a product, adaptation never remains faithful to its original text because it gives rise to the issue of plagiarism, therefore, adaptation must differ from the original text while discussing the sources and fundamental ideas. She relate adaptation with the languages where translators can never be literal because they originates from the context of original language that is why, the primary sources (original text) are authentic and carry authority. Adaptation in a process of giving meaning to a text becomes appropriating and redeeming. Adaptations are inter textual and become part of the antiquity of a story. As a result all previous adaptation becomes part of our understanding of all later adaptations. She regards that there is a revolutionary power in adaptation by which cultural understandings of an individual can be changed by altering what an individual knows and expect. She concludes this book by comparing artistic adaptation to biological adaptation and evolution claiming that for a story to progress and be relevant one must adapt.

When literature go through adaptation, the nature of the original text, the reason for adapting the text, method ,medium and culture in which it is adopted dominates the procedure of adaptation. Large novels are compressed to fit into a two hours film and short stories are expanded. If an older text is adapted into films it requires lots of correction and changes especially when it contains topics like racial stereotypes or if it wish for a completely different setting for social or market purpose. Just like bio organisms some texts need to change their characteristics in order to survive in a new environment. However, medium of

the text may not change but factors like scene, locations, dialogue, story line and appearance of the character may change to meet the aesthetic influence of the audience of a required place.

Bela Bazin, film adaptation theorist, in his collection of essays *Theory of the film Character and Growth of a New Art* (1952) writes that literature work should be taken as the raw material to be transformed purposely by the writer of the screen play. The screenplay has the potential to meet the reality, themes and formal designs of the literary text and also depicts it with new aesthetic design and technology. The influential French critic Andre Bazin believes that reality is variable; the essential nature of adaptation is its spirit, its faithfulness is to its literary text. He conclude that cinema reinvent the important experience of the substance with its technical devices keeping in mind the aim of the creator and the spirit of the literary work. In his work *In defence of Mixed Cinema* (1952) he argues that fidelity as a virtue and adaptation should be regarded as the form of translation from one language to another, “a good adaptation is the essence of the letter and the spirit”(13). The film maker is considered as a craftsman, gathering all power and invention for creating new structure which can be different from the original but also parallel from it. For Bazin film is neither a product of translation or inspiration, it is the outcome of artistic dialectic. Bazin's work on the connection between the novel and the film also deals with the fidelity to the spirit of the text as a major aesthetic design of the adaptation. A successful film adaptation according to him is neither a reflection nor a substitute; it is re-experiencing in another form. Morris Beja in his work *Film and Literature* (1976) sees two main classifications: the first approach regards for complete faithfulness of the original work and the second approach is to adapt the original work freely, so to create it in a different medium, a new kind of work with its own integrity or fidelity. Geoffrey Wagner in his work *The Novel and the Cinema* (1975) write methods of cinematic adaptation: *transposition* is used to describe an attempt to make the cinematic adaptation of a literary text very close to the original if possible in the language of the film. This means that there will be no necessary additions, deletions, or changes to the original work. The second *commentary* allows for the raw materials of a narrative to be rearranged as the basis for a re-interpretation of the basic story line. Here, the sequence of events in a film will be given a different chronological arrangement, or its characters are given new description or incentive. *Analogy* the original work is used as the inspiration for a completely new creation which acts as an analogy or a metaphor of the original. In this case a

story might be transposed to a different historical period or a different cinematic genre. The original will still be recognised, but it is being used for a different purpose.

Dudley Andrew in *Concepts in Film Theory* (1984) identifies three types of adaptation from novel to screen : first is *Borrowing* in this case adapter do not reproduce the original work but wants to earn credit with the most cherished or known work among the audience. Second is *Intersection*: In this method there is refusal to adapt rather maintains the uniqueness of the original text. Last one is: *Fidelity or Transformation*: in this method, the aim is to reproduce something valuable about an original text by trying to keep the essence of the text and the film is a skeleton of the original, which tries to measure up to a literary work.

Film theorists George Bluestone consider that there is a vast difference between literature and cinema because of the difference to see the visual image and framing of the mental image, there is also the difference between in the way images are produced in literature and cinema and how they are received by spectators and readers. Discussion of adaptation is always occupied by the fidelity issue, fidelity of the issue rely on the idea of rendering up to the reader a single correct meaning which a filmmaker have stick to or fail to comply with.

Lester Asheim, another film theorist argues how the film distorts, exaggerates , romanticises and dramatizes the theme of the novel. He believes when there is transformation from novel to film which : -

“Essentially ... is a stylistic change which substitutes a pictorial style for the literary style of the novel. It alters the manner of storytelling but need not alter the matter.” (I5)

This work studies the adaptation of Ismat Chughtai’s short story *Lihaaf* or *The Quilt* into the movie *fire* by Deepa Mehta.

Ismat Chughtai (21 August 1915 – 24 October 1991) was an Indian Urdu writer. Chughtai wrote in the themes of female sexuality and femininity. Her works crossed all obstacles set up by patriarchy and brought forward the impeccable concerns of female desires and sexuality. The story *Lihaaf* or *The Quilt* was published in the year 1942 and is narrated from the point of view of a child narrator. This is a story about Begumjaan married to Nawab of “ripe years”, Begumjaan in spite of all material comforts and many servants lived a lonely life because her husband though being of virtuous nature remained engrossed in the company of young boys. She craved for her husband’s company, his love and his attention but being

always neglected by him she finds no solace anywhere. Rabbu her maidservant, retrieved her from this misery, finding tranquilization in Rabbu's arm Begumjaan regained the glow that she has lost in a while. When the narrator's mother went to Agra she was left at her mother's adopted sister's house Begumjaan. The child was enchanted by the beauty of Begumjaan because of which she could not tolerate the sight of Rabbu massaging her always. Her bed was placed adjacent to Begumjaan's and at night she would notice Begumjaan shaking vigorously as though an "elephant was struggling inside". Once Rabbu goes away in search of her son Begumjaan becomes frustrated, tormented and dejected because of which she replaced Rabbu with the child narrator who was forced by Begumjaan to rub her back. The strange night after Rabbu comes back, one more time the quilt "sways like an elephant", scared by this the child somehow summons up the courage to switch on the lights. As soon as the lights were switched on the quilt jiggled and collapsed, however, in doing so the side of the quilt was lifted, revealing which the child was not ready to see so she plunged back into her bed. This reveals the fact about the homosexual relationship between Rabbu and Begumjaan as Begumjaan's desires were not gratified by her husband so she looked for solace in Rabbu.

Fire directed, produced and written by Indo Canadian film director Deepa Mehta is a story of a family living a middle class lifestyle, the protagonist Radha played by Shabana Azmi has been married to Ashok for thirteen years and is unable to produce any children. She is the care taker of her house and Biji, her paralysed mother in law. Although being equipped with traditional values and customs, she also endures the grief of infertility. Dejected at his wife's infertility Ashok renounces his family life, adopting a spiritual path and giving only attention to his spiritual preacher who always instilled in him that desires are the cause of suffering and must be suppressed. Completely inspired by his teachings Ashok subdues all his desires. This film also contains the story of Sita married to Jatin, Ashok's younger brother. Sita spends her whole day in loneliness and depression as Jatin is always out with his girlfriend. On one hand, where Radha crushes herself in the weight of her inability to produce children and is pushed into silence and frustration, on the other hand, there is Sita, an example of modern Indian women who boldly refuses to accept her destiny and yearns to come out of this situation. One evening, shunned by their husbands both women of the house forms a deep emotional bond which evolves into an erotic relationship between them. They realised their love for each other and continue it in secret. The only witness of this relationship is Biji who being handicapped is unable to stop them. Soon Mundu, their servant discovers about this relationship and informs Ashok about it. The movie ends when these two

women decides to abandon their home. Though Sita slaps her husband and leaves her home forever but Radha decides to stay back to explain her husband about her unwillingness to stay with him any longer.

Amidst all this, by accident, Radha's saree catches fire in the kitchen, Ashok lifts Biji and runs away leaving Radha as if she deserved to be burnt. Ultimately, she escapes from the fire on her own and both women meet each other at a muslim shrine as planned earlier by them.

Though the common angle in the story *Lihaaf* and the movie *Fire* is the concept of "female sexuality". In spite of this they also portray helplessness of women trapped within social network, their suppression, their sheer loneliness and their proclamation of liberation by developing a forbidden relationship. For instance, through the female characters like Radha, Sita, and Begamjaan, Chughtai and Deepa Mehta very skilfully depicts the frustration and anguish of a wife refusing the domination of men, recreating oneself gradually through other woman, there was neither victory nor defeat, each one of them was both subject and object, liberal and slave that too in equal proportion. The patriarchal control over women's life and women's bodies subjugates their aspirations, such works like *Fire* and *Lihaaf* portraying female desires courageously and in a convincing way are not readily acceptable in hegemonic patriarchal society. Both the works invoked huge controversy, after the publication of *Lihaaf* Chughtai was summoned to court on the charges of obscenity, the case was dragged for two years in Lahore court and was solved with the argument that the short story was narrated from the point of view of a child and there was no obscene language used in the story. The movie *Fire* was released in India after two years of its release (1998) in other part of the world, although the winner of fourteen international awards this movie became the target of religious and political groups in India, the posters of the movie were burnt, there was immense protest on the date of release of the movie and the protestors even demanded the names of the protagonist to be changed because they believed that the movie encouraged collapse of marriage and is degrading Indian society. Apart from the similarity of female sexuality and its oppression, the other event found similar to the story in the movie is the discovery of the erotic relationship of Radha and Sita, Begumjaan and Rabbu by Biji and the child narrator who are unable to reveal about this to anyone. However, there was no other incident common between the movie and the short story.

In contrast to the short story, the movie has explicitly pictured female sexuality not in accordance with the patriarchal culture. Protagonists, Radha and Sita in the movie realise

love for each other and finds ways to continue this in private until exposed by Mundu, their servant. Unlike the characters Begumjaan and Raboo, they boldly decline their destiny to be controlled by rigid patriarchal structures and becomes voice for thousands of suppressed women and challenged societal norms. The title of the story *Lihaaf* serves as the metaphor for the quilts capability to hide and conceal things, also the ending of the story shows the way, protagonists continued their enlightening and self-fulfilment relationship in concealment and how their erotic relationship remains secret by the child narrator. The quilt becomes concealment for the activities of Begumjaan and Raboo, nothing is stated clearly here only with few hints, it leave things for the readers to decide. So many changes made by Deepa Mehta in the movie are apparent, the reason could be to expand the short story in a two hours film and to avoid the issue of plagiarism. This is what Linda Hutcheon talks about when she describes how adaptation as a “product” cannot never remains faithful to its original text because it gives rise to the issue of plagiarism, therefore, adaptation must differ from the original text while discussing the sources and fundamental ideas.

Thus, the movie *Fire* may not be as accurate and close to its original work *Fire*, it may be loosely based on the story *Lihaaf* but it shares the same agony, anguish and the worst position that women are placed in. Ismat Chughtai and Deepa Mehta with their path breaking works depict the hypocrisies of a male dominated society and describes how the identity of a modern women is constructed through the margins of gender and society.

Works cited

- Andrew, Dudley. *Concepts in Film Theory*. Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Asaduddin, M., translator. *Lihaaf (The Quilt)*. By Ismat Chughtai. *Archive*, 1996, <https://archive.org/stream/lihaaf/.djvu.txt>. Accessed 25 April 2018.
- Beja, Morris. *Film and Literature, an Introduction*. New York: Longman, 1979.
- Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 2011.
- Bluestone, George. *Novels into Film*. University of California Press, 1957. https://www.academia.edu/11117094/Bluestone_Novels_into_Film.
- Brokenshire, Mark. "Adaptation". *The Chicago School of Media Theory*, <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/adaptation/>.
- Burton, David F. "Fire, Water and The Goddess: The Films of Deepa Mehta and Satyajit Ray as Critique of Hindu Patriarchy." *Journal of Religion and Film*, Vol.17, no. 2, 2 October 2013. <http://digitalcommons.unmaha.edu/jrf/vil17/iss2/3>.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge . Taylor & Francis Group, 2006.
- Jaidika, Manju. *A Critical Study of Deepa Mehta's trilogy Fire, Earth and Water*. Readworthy Publications, 2011.
- Mc Farlane Brian. *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the theory of Adaptation*. Oxford Clarendon Press, 1996.
- Moorti, Sujata. "Inflamed Passions: Fire, The Women Question, and the Policing of Cultural Borders." *Genders*, 1 September 2000. www.csun.edu.
- Wagner, Geoffrey. *The Novel and the Cinema*. Fairleigh Dickinson University, 1975.
- Zaini, Ahmad. "Theories of Adaptation: Novel to Film". https://www.academia.edu/30568663/THEORIES_OF_ADAPTATION_NOVEL_TO_FILM. Accessed on 10th of April, 2019.