

Question of Fidelity in Adaptation of ‘Samskara’

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Writing novels is a diligent craft. There is no one formula for writing fiction. A novelist prepares a flow chart or a map, mentally, strategically. Joseph Conrad had remarked thus:

My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the powers of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel—it is, before all, to make to see. (Conrad 5)

Samskara, the Kannad novel, written by U.N. Anandamurthy has achieved the status of a classic novel. A significant narrative of post-independence era, it studies the metaphysical and social aspects of Hinduism. The author makes the readers see how individuals blindly perform rituals laid down by ancient texts in order to attain salvation. A religious novel, *Samskara* is an allegorical narrative replete ancient Hindu themes and myths. A death in the ‘agrahara’ is the central event of the novel. Plague and many more deaths follow. Several questions pertaining to righteousness arise. Moral chaos follows and leads to the rebirth of the protagonist, Pranesacharya.

The novel was translated into English by Professor A.K. Ramanujan of Chicago and published by Oxford University Press. Ramanujan shared:

I have tried to make the translation self-contained, faithful yet readable, but the best in this kind are but shadows; and the worst are no worse, if imagination amends them. A translator hopes not only to translate a text, but hopes to translate a non-native reader into a native one (Ramanujan 139)

The novel, soon after its publication became the epicentre of controversy for hurling accusations at the upper caste agrahara situated in a tiny hamlet called Durvaspur in Western Ghats of south India. Ananthamurthy was labelled as anti-brahminical and was condemned for attacking the superstitions and hypocrisies of his own orthodox community in which he had grown up. The novel was based on Hindu philosophy replete with mythic symbolism with numerous sanskritised words. Ramanujan attempted rectify and appease. He tried to provide the right perspective and approach to the novel. He called it an allegory rich in realistic detail. He elaborated in the Afterword of the novel:

As in an early Bergman film, the characters are frankly allegorical, but the setting is realistic. An abstract human theme is reincarnated in just enough particular of a space, a time, a society. (Ramanujan 144-45)

It is significant that despite cultural translation hindrances, the translation of *Samskara* was successful in capturing the attention of western readers. The credit goes to A.K. Ramanujan.

The novel ‘*Samskara*’ was directed in 1970, by Pattabhi Rama Reddy, a well known poet and producer of Telugu films. His films were a complete departure from the highly sentimental movies characteristic of south Indian films. It was more in tradition with the creations of Satyajit Ray. The film was shot entirely in Mysore with a cast of unknown players. The film won the National Award for Best Feature film in 1970 and the Bronze Leopard at Locarno International film festival in 1972.

The novel and the film *Samskara* have been studied within varied frameworks of religious, cultural and individual identity, central principle of Brahmanism and the issues of caste and gender as well as the idea of the self and personal hankerings. No doubt *Samskara* became the epicentre of a furore as soon as it was adapted into a film in 1970 by Pattabhi Rama Reddy.

Film directors work with the cinematic mission of making the viewers see as they themselves perceive a text. The major difference in the method adopted by writers and film makers lies in the incongruity between the concept of visual images of a film and the mental image triggered by a novel. Adaptation may thus be seen as:

...an interpretation, involving at least one person’s reading of a text, choices about what elements to transfer, and decisions about how to actualize these elements in a medium of image and sound” (Hawkes 2).

When film makers discovered cinema to be a narrative entertainment, the idea of scouring the novel--that already established treasury of narrative fiction--for source material began, and the process survives till date. Film-makers' excuse for carrying on the tradition is its popularity among the viewers and adulation of intellectuals for literary works. Film-makers lay their hands on an established, popular title with the expectation that acclamation and acceptance in one medium might attract similar response in another. The idea of a potentially profitable project has motivated the filming of novels. Some film-makers, who believe in originality and creativity, denounce such acts. They believe in developing original subjects. But those who indulge in adaptation of fiction into films declare:

Adapting literary works to film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood. The adaptor should see himself as owing allegiance to the source work. (Bodeen 349)

The audience might complain about digressions and violations in adaptations, they enjoy seeing what their favourite books look like on cinematic screens. While reading, the readers conjure up their own mental images of a novel and its characters—they are keen to compare their own invoked images with those generated by the film-maker. Some readers are disappointed while some are gratified. Christian Metz explained:

The reader will not always find his film, since what he has before him in the actual film is now somebody else's phantasy' (Metz 12)

A point worth being pondered upon is that a writer's narration is actually only one way of presenting or laying down a tale and it can easily be rendered in another form. Anthony Burgess opined:

Every best-selling novel has to be turned into a film, the assumption being that the book itself whets an appetite for the true fulfilment—the verbal shadow turned into light. The word made flesh. (Burgess 15)

Three-fourths of the awards for 'best film' have gone to adaptations and hence the film-makers are inspired to base their projects on acclaimed fiction. They lay hands on pre-tested stories and characters in the hope of getting identical acceptance and popularity.

Whenever the discussion of adaptation comes up, questions pertaining to the fidelity issue are hurled in. It happens partly because the novel was born first and partly because of the greater respectability of fiction among traditional critics. Filmgoers expect a faithful adaptation of their cherished novel while film makers insist that cinema makes its own art and they do not bother much about allegiance or fidelity.

The notion of fidelity is concerned with the idea of whether the film maker has adhered to or tampered with the essence of the text. This again is problematic. A film-maker films a work of fiction, thereby reproducing in accordance with his own comprehension and intellect. Comprehension of varied readers is rarely homogenous. Hence the uproar.

Michael Klein and Gillian Parker summarised that an adaptation should be reviewed on the basis of fidelity to the main thrust of the narrative, retention of the core structure of the narrative and taking the source as raw material for a work of art.

A film maker or a screen writer might introduce a few changes demanded by a new medium. Sometimes diversions are introduced to highlight new themes, emphasise different traits in a character or even to sort out a loophole in the original work.

Adaptation of a novel into a film is akin to marriage of media. It must be acknowledged however that each literature to film adaptation is unique. Some adaptations are more controversial and confrontational of each other than indicative of a peaceful marriage. Most common terms to describe adaptation are fidelity and infidelity, faithfulness and unfaithfulness, betrayal, violation, even desecration.

A.K. Ramanujan, who translated *Samskara* into English, concludes that the film is an allegory rich in realistic detail. The director, Patabhi arama Reddy, analysed the novel several times before adapting the film *Samskara* for the screen. The story dwells on the impossibility of leading a righteous life, the relevance of customs and the significance of Brahminism in a modern world. The narrative opens with the death of Narnappa—a Brahmin who did not adhere to the established customs. He openly

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rebelled and indulged in all pleasures forbidden for Brahmins of the *Argahara*. After his death, the Brahmin community is afraid of performing his last rites as they are afraid of disgracing their caste. The Brahmin community of Agrahara turn to Praneshacharya for help.

Praneshacharya was a respectable man of the community. He scoured through the scriptures but could not find a solution. He retired to the maruti temple for prolonged meditation, yet could find no answers. As he stepped out of the temple, his eyes fell on Chandri, the low caste mistress of Narnappa, and he succumbs to her charms. Subsequently, Praneshacharya's wife dies in the plague that breaks out in the village. He cremates her and leaves the village, unable to confront the people who had respected as a learned teacher.

Samskara attempts to delve deep into the multiple themes such as rites of passage, ritual, preparation and transformation. The focus of the novel, in the course of time, shifts from the issue of last rites of a dead man to the transformations that dawn upon Praneshacharya. He wanders aimlessly through a forest where he meets Putta, a villager, who takes him to a fair. Amidst the bustle of the fair, Praneshacharya ruminates:

Yoga is the stilling of waves of mind....May one's life be like that of a sunshine. A mere awareness, a sheer astonishment, still floating still and self-content, like the sacred brahmani-kite in the sky. Legs walk, eyes see, ears hear .O to be without desire. Then one's life becomes receptive. Or else in desire it dries to a shell, it withers, becomes a set of multiplication tables learned by rote. That *Kanake*, illiterate saint, his mind was just one awareness, one wonder, that's why he came to his master and asked: 'You want me to eat the plantain where there's no one. Where can I go, where can I do that? God is everywhere, what shall I do? God has become to me a set of tables, learned by rote. Not an awareness, a wonder as he was to Kanaka-so no more god for me.'(Ananthmurthy 91)

The readers realise that the author has chosen the gay festive environs to drive home the essence of the narrative. The novel comes very close to Herman Hesse's 'Narcissus and Goldmund', the story of a young man who wanders around aimlessly throughout Medieval Germany after leaving a Catholic monastery school in search the true meaning of life.

The Black-and-White texture of the film immediately accomplishes the task of shifting the present day viewers into a past when India was learning to breathe in the air of freedom, to learn, experiment and change. Hence Reddy's initiative of a realistic presentation was fitting.

Moreover, the script of the English translation of *Samskara* by A.K. Ramanujan was used for subtitles in the Kannada film and helped to make it a close motion-picture clone of the novel to the non-Kannada viewers. The motion-pictographic representation lucratively and earnestly created a graphic atmosphere of Durvasapura, the Brahmin 'agrahara' and surrounding areas along with the typical landscape and habitat of the rural South India of the times.

The looming plague symbolized by the vultures hovering over the agrahara sky or perching on the rooftops of the houses, the dying rats followed by the subsequent deaths of the brahmins as well as the non-brahmins evolve into poignant metaphors of a decaying community. The greed, avarice and complex mindsets of the inhabitants of Durvasapura are presented as normal human traits which call for introspection on our own part.

In both versions, *Samskara* is the portrayal of the personal angst of Praneshacharya, the community leader, the man with ultimate knowledge and epitome of righteous behavior, after his sexual experience with Chandri, a low caste woman who lived with Naranappa in the dark of the forest. Naranappa had rejected all Brahmin ways and lived an incontinent life. Now Naranappa was dead and Praneshacharya was faced with a crisis. He could not fathom if Naranappa deserved the last rites due to a Brahmin. He fails to find any answers to the problems in the scriptures. He goes to the Maruti temple across the river to elicit an answer from god. It is while Praneshacharya is returning home after his utter failure to find a solution to the predicament about Naranappa that the Acharaya finds himself succumbing to sexual pleasure, something he had always condemned Naranappa for.

He was plunged with grief and sorrow. But at the same time, he was determined to face the consequences:

Chandri, get up. Let's go. Tomorrow morning when the Brahmins gather, we'll say this happened. You tell them yourself. As for my authority to decide for the agrahara, I have...Not knowing what

to say, Praneshacharya stood there in confusion... 'I've lost it. If I don't have the courage to speak tomorrow you must speak out. I'm ready to do the funeral rites myself. I've no authority to tell any other Brahmin to do them, that's all'. Having said the words Praneshacharya felt all his fatigue drop from him. (Ananthmurthy 68)

The feeling and desires that had taken hold of him that night lingered on. He tried to justify his actions and even calculated indulging in worldly pleasures. The episode that follows is more heart rending when read. The film shows Praneshacharya revelling in the lap of nature, satiating his senses in its midst. On reading the narrative, the readers are able to gauge the depth of his feelings, when the saintly man is driven to the spot where he had let down all facades and had allowed sensual pleasure to take the reins:

Like an animal with his snout to the ground, he entered the woods where he had made love to Chandri. Even in broad daylight, it was shady and dusky there. In the bushes, it was quite dark, a humming dark. He stood at the place where his life had turned over. The weight and shape of their bodies still visible on the green grass. He sat down. Like an idiot, he pulled out blades of grass and smelled them. He had come from the death-stench in the agrahara; the smell of grass roots smeared with wet earth held him in its power like an addiction. Like a hen pecking at and raking the ground, he pulled at everything that came to his hand and smelled it. Just sitting coolly under a tree had become a fulfilment, a value. To be, just to be. To be; keen, in the heat, the cool, to the grass, the green, the flower, the pang, the heat, the shade. Putting aside both desire and value. Not leaping, when the invisible says 'Here!' To receive it gratefully. Not climbing, not reaching out, not scrambling. A small sprout of sarsaparilla touched his hand. He pulled at it. The sarsaparilla was firmly rooted, long creeper, and it did not yield to him. Unlike the grass, it had sunk roots into the hard ground beneath the soft topsoil. He sat up and tugged with both hands. He severed half the length of the mother root, and the sarsaparilla creeper came to his hand. He smelled it. The root had earned a fragrance, existing there, a kin knotted into the heat and the shade, sod of the earth and the space above it. The smell of it reached into him, sinking into his fivefold breath of life. He sat there, smelling it like a greedy man. The smell of it reached into him, sinking into his fivefold breath of life. The smell settled in the nostril, the sweetness entered his blood; soon the experience of fragrance passed, and he was left unsatisfied. He put aside the root and smelled the forest smells, and returned to the sarsaparilla, its smell made new. He came out of the forest and stood looking at the vishnukranti flowers, now become as sapphires dotting the shade-looking at them as if mere looking was wealth. Got into the stream once again and swam around. Stood in the deeper part where the water came to his chin. Fishes mobbed him, pricked at his ticklish toe-spaces, armpits and ribs. Like a ticklish boy, Praneshacharya exclaimed, 'Aha!', and fell then swimming into the water, climbed onto the bank and stood in the sun till he was dry. (Ananthmurthy 83-84)

Praneshacharya feels a sense of elation, even liberation. His sudden awareness, not only about the beauty and pleasures of the human body, but the world of nature around him to which he had been unaware of for so long, described by Anantha Murthy in a graphic manner, finds its objective correlative in the enactment of sheer joy and contentment by Girish Karnad aka Praneshacharya in the film. The filmic version successfully establishes this moment as a turning point for the Acharya as he wakes up in the morning to take a deep look at the sky, plucks the flowers, pulls out the grass and smells these till they fill up his being.

In scenes such as these, where the interior landscape of the characters is highlighted, where feelings and emotions are being expressed, the written word is undoubtedly more effective than the adapted version. Adaptations begin to appear minor, subsidiary or secondary product. Films fail to preserve the deeper meaning of a text. Films fail to reflect the deep, subconscious psychological and emotional dynamics which exists between characters. Beautiful passages, the cornerstones of an artist's greatness cannot be filmed.

The portrayal of guilt and shame which the Acharya experiences once he remembers his ailing wife, the Brahmin community awaiting his return with an answer to the crisis looming large over the agrahara leaves him dizzy and lost. His loss of authority to judge Naranappa after his cohabitation with Chandri in the forest, are acted out by Karnad with depth and zeal.

The film version of Samskara effectively portrays the two faces of Praneshcharya—one is a pious Brahmin, a respected community leader and the other is a man succumbing to his sexual impulses.

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Pranesacharya attempts to escape from the anguish and conflict tormenting him by becoming a recluse. But this journey of his becomes a ramble into the satanic garden where passion, greed, desire, cockfights, prostitution, cockfights perturb him all the more. In the film, *Samskara*, these scenes are artistically filmed with the interplay of light and dark which signify the protagonist's pristine past and the blemished present. Embittered with guilt and grief, Paneshacharya aka Girish Karnad realizes that there was no place he could run away to. The omnipresent and the omniscient knew it all. There was no place in the entire world that could hide him from the eyes of the Supreme Being.

Selection of a realistic mode does not allow the film to go off a tangent. The limitations of cinematography at the time of this film's production gave rise to a few limitations in bringing the psychological and existential aspects of the narrative to the fore. The film, however, has made two major deviations from the textual context.

First is the case of Putta, whom Pranesacharya meets in the course of his wanderings and who clings to the acharya like a shadow. Putta, who is capable of natural and spontaneous behavior, acts as a reality instructor for Pranesacharya and leads him across the fair at Meliege with coffee and bangle shops, the circus and the feast at the temple to the house of Padmavati, a prostitute. In the film, when Putta learns about the demeanours of Pranesacharya, he feels somewhat repelled by the acharya, which was not so in the delineation of his character in the text. In the novel, Pranesacharya decides to confess his sins to Putta:

...Shall I tell him my true dilemma? But he didn't want to raise a big storm in that simple heart. In case he really decides to come along, it would be impossible not to tell him. Then it suddenly seemed a good thing to have Putta for company'. 'How could I face all those Brahmins a line? First, let me try it all on Putta, bosom friend of the present. Let's see how I look in his eyes—that may be a good way of doing it.' Now the sky had become cloudless, bare. From the temple issued noises of the gongs beaten, conches blown for worship. Must go now. 'Let's go then', he said. (Ananthmurthy 137)

The story concludes abruptly, Pranesacharya jittery and distraught, progresses towards his native village. He knew he had sinned and was not aware of the rules of atonement. His transition from a pious man to a being controlled by unbridled passion was unfortunate from an unorthodox point of view. But the readers get acquainted with a character who was humane. The film *Samskara* goes a step ahead in the portrayal of the protagonist. The author of the narrative had left the tale open ended. But in the film, Pranesacharya accepts Chandri. This adds depth and breadth to the moral vision of the tormented man. Like Dimmesdale of *The Scarlet Letter*, Pranesacharya rose in stature. His sins help him rise to a higher pedestal.

Anandamurthy had left it to the discretion of the readers to decide whether Pranesacharya had confessed his sins to Putta. Mention of 'cloudless', 'bare' sky indicates that the acharya had confided and the positive reaction of Putta urged him to travel back to his native village.

U.N. Ananthamurthy observed that literature and cinema have an important role to play. Citing the example of Satyajit Ray's acclaimed film, *Pather Panchali*, he explained:

When *Pather Panchali* was screened in America, most people were of the view that the novel was much superior and richer to the film. But does that diminish the glory of the film? No. Because ultimately, what Ray does is to bring you a great literary work and make it accessible to the larger audience. This is both the strength and inadequacy of cinema...I remember being very unhappy (during the adaptation of *Samskara*). Many ideas were lost. Girish wanted to delay the death of one of the characters, thereby keeping the suspense alive but I thought that was taking away the essence of my story—I didn't want my ideas to be tampered with. I understood his compulsions but I remember telling Karnad how 'I could not spoil the texture to enhance the structure'. (Web)

This ego tussle between a writer and a filmmaker is perennial. But it can safely be concluded that 'Samskara' is a faithful reproduction of the concerns of the original texts. Apart from two major diversions, the film is a visual twin of the novel. A scholar comparing a text with its movie version hurriedly concludes that the text is superior. Novels by their very nature are generally more substantial than films. It is only practical that a two hour film, when weighed with the full depth of a writer's ideas expounded in over hundreds of pages, the text version comes out with flying colours.

Stam, however, lays down:

Adaptation derives hostility from the dichotomous thinking that presumes a bitter rivalry between film and literature. The writer and the film maker, according to an old anecdote, are travelling on the same boat but they both harbour a secret desire to throw the other overboard. The inter-art relation is seen as a Darwinian struggle to the death rather than a dialogue offering mutual benefit and cross fertilization. Adaptation become a zero sum game where film is perceived as the upstart enemy storming the ramparts of literature. This is not to suggest that there was no institutional rivalry between the two media...filmic embodiment is seen as making literature obsolescent, retroactively revealing mere words as somehow weak and spectral and insubstantial. (Stam 4)

Novelists have an advantage over film makers. They can easily dwell upon and elaborate on the deepest thoughts and thinking pattern of their characters. They enjoy immense freedom in the portrayal of the world of their making. A film maker's freedom is restricted. They often resort to the contrivance of 'voice over' in an attempt to overcome these limitations.

Malgprzata Marciniak safely concludes:

An adaptation as interpretation does not have to capture all the nuances of the book's complexity, but it has to remain a work of art, an independent, coherent and convincing creation with its own subtleties of meanings. In other words, it has to remain faithful to the internal logic created by the new vision of the adapted work. Even if the filmmakers' reading of a given literary text clashes with our reading, we are willing to forgive all the alterations when they spring from a well thought-out scheme and can lend a persuasive new sense to the text.(Web)

As common readers and film viewers, it is always advisable to see the film first. It enables the viewers from getting prejudiced. They enjoy the art better, waiting avidly for the next move. The film is then be judged on its own merits, regardless of its adherence or non-adherence to the source text. Reading the book at a later stage would be like comprehending the source text better and filling in all the gaps and deleting out the digressions. This will enable us to appreciate the two texts separately. Variants and versions of a single tale will then come to the fore. Scholars and researchers will be able to gauge how each medium makes use of its subtleties and means of expression in order to attract the audience.

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