

# From Text to Screen: A Reading of the Cinematic Representation of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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## Abstract

Adaptations have played a significant role in the proliferation of the cultural industry from time immemorial. Literature has acted as a perfect source for adaptations to the silver screen from the era of silent films itself. Though it remains one of the most favourite practices of filmmakers, adaptation is essentially a complex process involving the integration of the aspects and elements of one medium with those of another. The present paper attempts a comparative reading of the literary and the cinematic representations of the 2008 Man Booker Prize-winning novel of Aravind Adiga, *The White Tiger*, adapted for the big screen by Ramin Bahrani. Both the primary sources are analysed to examine the extent of their similarities and the distinctiveness of the respective mediums.

**Keywords:** Adaptation; Deviation; Recreation; Representation; Transmedia Model.

Since the beginning of the era of the motion picture, adaptations have exerted a steady influence on the creative industry. As John Harrington rightly points out in his book *Film And/Is Art*, a third of all movies at any point in the history of film making have been adapted and appropriated from literature, particularly from novels (Adaptation). Deborah Cartmell in her essay, "100+ Years of Adaptations, or, Adaptation as the Art Form of Democracy," analyses the reasons for the popularity of the technique of adaption, especially among the directors of "the silent period" (Cartmell 2). She identifies that films like *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp*, which were popular in the 1900s owe much of their fame to the fact that these "stories were well known and were not dependent on dialogue to explain them" (Cartmell 2). Though these adaptations were ap-

preciated by the masses, the “serious film enthusiasts” of the day considered them as inferior, second-rate products. Cartmell points out a famous remark made by Virginia Woolf in the essay, “The Cinema”, where “she laments how *Anna Karenina* translated to screen is barely recognizable... (and that the) film’s attempt to re-create literature... is not only a disservice to literature but also to film” (Cartmell 2). Despite their success in the box office, most of these films stayed away from the academic circle until recently. It was only in the twenty-first century that the field of Film Studies expanded expansively to accommodate adaptations and related aspects such as novelization, and other limitless varieties from popular fiction, to video games or musical pieces.

Transforming a novel into a screenplay, however, is not simply a matter of transferring what is written on the page to the screen. It is a complex process involving the juxtaposition of various literary and cinematic techniques. Adaptation, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, has multiple layers of meanings. In the context of Media and Film Studies, an appropriate definition would be “an altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source(s)” (Oxford). The significant difference between aliterary work and its filmic recreation is that while visual images invigorate our perceptions directly, the written words do this by implication. For instance, the reading of the word ‘table’ requires a mental interpretation of the object, unlike in the case of the projected visual depiction of the table.

Thus, “film is a more direct sensory experience than reading, where besides verbal language, there is also colour, movement, and sound. Yet the film is also limited: for one thing, there are no time constraints on a novel, while a film usually must compress events into two hours or so” (Adaptation). Again, the direction and signification of a novel are oriented by just a single individual, the author, while in a film, it is the outcome of a collaborative exertion by numerous individuals. The film, as opposed to a novel, neither does permit its spectators to interact with the plot and characters nor to envision these in their imagination. George Bluestone, one of the earliest critics to contemplate on film adaptations of literature, perceived the filmmaker as an independent artist, or, in other words, “a new author in his own right” (Costanzo). This is rather true as both film and literature have their own devices for controlling story structure and maintaining the complex narrative coherence. In short, “adapting a book for screen is a *mélange* of tension: between the author and auteur, the reader and viewer, between imagining and observing” (Thakur).

As the proponents of the Chicago School of Media Theory points out, 'recent trends in adaptation theory have moved away from the dichotomy of film and literature' and shifted their focus towards the "multidirectional flow across a transmedia model, concentrating less on what has been lost by a text during the process of adaptation, and more on what the text has gained by taking on a new form or variation" (Chicago). Many postmodern theories have also become the focal point of adaptation theory, as the adapted text was interpreted not only against its original, but also other similar, yet different transformations in a continuous dialogical measure. The media world has entered an era of 'post-literary adaptation,' as Thomas Leitch puts it (Griffin), where even non-narrative sources like video games found a place.

The Indian entertainment industry, however, unlike the Western world, had wholeheartedly embraced the technique of adaptation from its early stage of development, particularly with adaptations of mythology and mythical characters. In this regard, the effect of literature on Indian movies is nearly just about as old as filmmaking itself. Indeed, the first-ever full-length silent feature film that India made was an adaptation from the legendary character Raja Harishchandra (Kapoor). From then, Indian producers have steadily taken their references from different mythological and social stories. Aside from folklores and legends, Indian film has adapted some classics of prominent writers like Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

A considerable lot of Satyajit Ray's movies including *Pather Panchali*, *Apur Sansar*, and *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* were inspired by the then-contemporary Bengali and Hindi literature. Later in the 1960s and 70s, the books of Gulshan Nanda became a motivation and source for some of the hit films of the day like *Kati Patang*, *Neel Kamal*, *Khilona*, and *Sharmilee* (Kapoor). Even today this trend continues with a tremendous influence on the box office. For instance, India's bestselling writer Chetan Bhagat now has three books to his credit that have been effectively transcribed into big-screen. His first movie adaptation was the Salman Khan starrer *Hello*, based on his second novel *One Night at the Call Center*. Then came *Three Idiots*, a blockbuster hit that was roughly appropriated from Chetan's debut novel *Five Point Someone*. And recently, Chetan's third book *Three Mistakes of My Life* became feed for Abhishek Kapoor's directorial endeavour *Kai Po Che* that also proceeded to turn into an enormous box office smash.

Another significant name among Indian cinematic representations of literature is the Oscar-winning *Slumdog Millionaire* based on Vikas Swarup's

work of fiction *Q and A*. Despite the fact that the scriptwriter had changed the story to a gigantic degree, the entire idea of the film remained inclined to that of the novel. A similar commercial success was that of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Saawariya*, "a visual experience entirely dependent" (Kapoor) on a Russian short story named "White Nights," by the master craftsman Fyodor Dostoevsky. In this long list, a recent addition has been made with the 2021 movie *The White Tiger* directed by Ramin Bahrani, an adaptation of Aravid Adiga's Booker Prize-winning novel of the same title. The film "starring Adarsh Gourav along with Priyanka Chopra and Rajkummar Rao, has also been nominated at the Oscars in the Best Adapted Screenplay category this year" (NEWS 18). Though some aspects of the film are different from the novel, the overall effect of the film is extremely powerful, thus reiterating the idea that "a successful adaptation of a novel should not be the book. Nor should it be a substitute for the book. If it is truly successful, it should be a work of art in its own right which excites the reader to go re-experience that work in another medium" (Linden 169). Indeed, a couple of simplifications occurs at the structural level of the source text. This is because adapting a novel to the screen not only deals "with the topographic and narrative structure, but also with the of necessity condensing the novel's plotline into the screenplay of a film whose screen duration cannot exceed two hours" (Evain3).

It is quite interesting that the project undertaken by Ramin Bahrani, of transporting *The White Tiger* to the screen is a personal one as the book is originally dedicated to him by Adiga. Adiga himself revealed in an interview given to the *Vulture* that the novel was a direct result of his long-standing friendship with Bahrani, which began in their days as undergraduates at the University of Columbia. *The White Tiger* is an intriguing story of poverty and corruption in contemporary Indian society, following a penurious Indian boy who climbs the social ladder from the son of a poor 'rickshaw puller' to a successful business entrepreneur. The book inspects how the poor in India adapt to or, at least attempt to escape destitution, casteism, globalization, and several other social systems that ensnare them, collectively referred to as the "Rooster Coop" (175) by the protagonist. The novel is arranged as eight lengthy (letters) written over the course of a week by the protagonist, Balram Halwai, to then-Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao. The catalyzing event is an All-India Radio announcement of Wen's upcoming trip to the Indian city of Bangalore – essentially the subcontinent's Silicon Valley – to meet with local entrepreneurs. Balram, the founder and, CEO of White Tiger Technology Drivers, is excited at the prospect and expresses the desire to meet with Wen and tell him his rags-to-riches story. (Pahwa)

The film also utilizes this epistolary narrative frame, though the email addressed to the Premier is not separated into eight parts as the book does. Though the book doesn't date its occasions, the film opens in Delhi 2007, showing a critical plot point, that "doesn't happen until much later" (Hornik) in the novel, before glimmering forward to the present day, where Balram played by Adarsh Gourav is an established businessman. The film likewise makes Wen's visit a significantly less ambiguous occasion, showing news clips of Wen in India and meeting with the then-Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh. Also, towards the end of the film, Balram is seen waiting to meet the Chinese Premier (played by Aaron Wan) and shaking hands with him, though the latter scarcely recognizes him (Kapoor). The book rather evades this meeting by making no attempt to refer to whether Wen and Balram at any point meet.

The film does not try to alter much of Balram's story. In both the novel and the film, young Balram (played by Harshit Mahawar in the film) hails from a quiet town in the province of Bihar called Laxmangarh, which the residents dub as "the Darkness" (14) and belongs to the caste of sweet-makers. Balram's family consists of his grandmother, Kusum (Kamlesh Gill), who yields the authority as "the dictator of the house" (20), his father, a cart puller named Vikram (Satish Kumar); and his sibling, Kishan (played as a youngster by Sandeep Singh and later by SanjayShanware). In the novel, Balram appears as a boy whose parents have not even bothered to name him and, thereby addressed simply as Munna, a word signifying 'boy or kid,' until a teacher in his school gave him the name Balram. This detail is discarded from the film. Balram is a gifted kid who has a thirst for knowledge. He excels at school and attains the attention of the education inspector (Mahesh Pillai), who compares Balram to the most extraordinary of creatures - "the creature that comes along only once in a generation," (35) the white tiger, thus, instilling in him a sense of identity for the first time.

Even though in the book, many refer to him as 'the white tiger,' in the film, the individual who calls Balram 'the white tiger' the most is Balram himself (Pahwa). Despite his intelligence, his father's debts force Balram to discontinue his studies and work in a tea shop in Dhanbad, where his elder brother also works. Later upon learning the demand for good chauffeurs in India, he goes on to become one and ends up at the house of Stork (Mahesh Manjrekar), a cruel landlord of Laxmangarh. He becomes the driver to Stork's son Ashok (Rajkumar Rao) and his wife Pinky Madam (Priyanka Chopra), who have just returned from the U.S., and accompanies them to Delhi. In the city, he remains in shabby workers' quarters in

the cellar alongside other drivers who continually taunt him. The quarters portrayed in the film are substantially richer than those in the book, with the film rendition highlighting a sanctum of joys apparently absent in the book. However, in the film, Balram later moves to a significantly more incapacitated, cockroach-infested apartment inside the quarters. Thus, much of the Delhi expedition in the movie also resembles that in the novel (Pahwa).

The significant deviation in the movie occurs with the portrayal of the relationship that exists between Balram, and Ashok. Unlike in the book, the movie shows them as something akin to buddies, occasionally seen together playing video games and jamming to 'Feel Good Inc.' in the car. A climactic event occurs at this point when the car driven by a drunken Pinky Madam hits and kills a small child. In the movie, the death is explicitly portrayed, while the book uses a piece of the child's cloth stuck on the car's exterior to imply the case. The immediate effect of this death is more or less similar in the novel and the film. Alluding to this Nitish Pahwa writes:

After all this, in both novel and film, Pinky walks out on Ashok and has Balram drive her to the airport. Ashok becomes extremely upset, falling into an alcoholic stupor, while Balram takes care of him. The overall nature of their post-Pinky relationship develops differently on page and screen: In the movie, Balram takes Ashok to a nice restaurant and lies to him, claiming that Pinky cried when he drove her to the airport and said Ashok would do great things....In the novel, Ashok is implored to remarry Ms. Uma, a former lover whom Ashok reconnects with after his separation from Pinky, who appears to suggest that Balram be replaced. Ms. Uma is nowhere in the movie. (Pahwa)

In the movie, Balram grows paranoid after this and starts having hallucinations where his father urges him to steal his master's money. At this juncture, both in the novel and the movie, Balram also runs into a boy named Dharam, who claimsto be a distant family member and bears a letter from Kusum. Balram chooses to succumb to his illusions and decides to kill Ashok, take the money, and start his life afresh. This murder structures *The White Tiger's* climatic peak; though the timeline varies in the adaptationand the original story. BalramstabsAshok and cuts his throat and drives away shouting and giggling maniacally.He then takes Dharam with him and both settle in Bangalore. Curiously, the film does not investigate Balram and Dharam's relationship as profoundly as the book

does, which may settle the spectators' confusion on Balram's choice to take Dharam along with. The endings of both the film and novel are much similar. Balram and Dharam make it to Bangalore, where they hide for a few weeks before re-establishing their lives in the busy city. Balram chooses to get into outsourcing and transportation services. Balram utilizes the cash from Ashok to bribe authority and open up the market for himself and his new pursuit, 'White Tiger Technology Drivers'.

The film makes use of the technique of voice-over to project the first-person narrative structure of the novel. In Bahrani's own words, "Balram's voiceover helped tell the sprawling tale, spanning his childhood, his life as a servant, and his rise to successful entrepreneur. His sarcastic social observations also helped provide specific cultural context and detail" (Jones). While the novel assumes a diegetic amalgamation of memories over different periods of time, switching to and fro between various past events the film, except for its first shot, follows more or less a linear pattern. The opening scene of the film itself is a severely candid prosecution of India's socio-economic chasms, the insensitive treatment and the misery of the poor at the hands of the rich, and the centuries of social moulding that leaves these enormous segments of the social structure unequipped for revolting. Bahrani's

*The White Tiger* opens on a shot of one of India's most famous Mahatma Gandhi sculptures and a giggly night-time joyride through what is popularly known as Lutyens' Delhi. In quick succession the camera captures the giant Gandhi statue at the intersection of Mother Teresa Crescent and Sardar Patel Marg, a car hurtling down the wrong side of the road, a cow in the middle of the street and a poor family on a footpath. (Vetticad)

This scene efficiently sketches the sardonic wit and dark humour Adiga employs throughout the book. Though Bahrani accepts the book's upper-class interpretation of caste, it wipes out a few searing remarks by Adiga that uncover Balram's scorn for Hinduism. Like the novel, the film also subscribes to the misconception that individuals may ascend the social ladder not by sheer hard work and enthusiasm, but by corruption and crime. The idea runs parallel to a myth propagated by the upper caste, overlooking the truth that in spite of the fact that there have been several significant socio-political changes since Independence, this is as yet a country where poor Dalits are assaulted and lynched, where inter caste marriages are still a taboo, and where honour killing still prevails (Vetticad). The film, with a burning sincerity silhouettes the novel's scalding

criticism of the caste system in India. Bahrani's screenplay, however, also takes time to develop Pinky's cursory characterisation and brief presence in the novel, transforms her into one of the story's essential characters, changes her from the unsparing entity in the book to the most delicate individual in Ashok's family, and underlines her importance by projecting a significant star in the cast. Unlike Adiga's, Bahrani's Pinky Madam impeccably depicts the inward contentions of a vivacious lady who is alarmed by the regressive attitude she sees all around her and is embarrassed by her own part in the abuse of Balram.

Bahrani himself admits that the toughest part of transcribing the novel to the screen was deciding the sequences and details that are to be eliminated and included. In an interview with the Radio Times, Bahrani explained:

The hardest part was cutting things that I liked because I like everything in Aravind's brilliant novel.... That was very tough. You're trying to capture a tone, that was a constant thought in my head - what is the tone of the film? .... the novel was very fun: it's very fast, it's quirky, it's funny, it's satirical but then in the middle of the film, right dead set in the centre of the book and in the film, something happens and from there moving forward it shifts to something a little bit darker and weirder.... It still has the humour but it's darker and we constantly had our eye on that while writing the script and making the film. (Cremona)

However, Adiga is of the opinion that "witty, provocative, and moving, the film he has made not only brings my book to life, but transcends it," (Jones). Thus, it can be rightly concluded that Bahrani faithfully extracts the quintessence of the book and makes it a language of its own. The film clearly adores the novel to such an extent that it regularly battles to look past it. Even while focussing on retaining the spirit of the novel, Bahrani does not forget to include some of the most poignant statements made by Adiga. The excellent cast and the attention of detailing adds the charm and makes it an impressive piece of adaptation that helps to disseminate Adiga's perspective not only among the masses, but also in the academic circles providing for a reciprocal reading of the literary and cinematic versions.

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