

# Satyajit Ray on Screens: A Critical Study of Select Indian English Adaptations

Meeraba Jadeja & Chetan N Trivedi

## Abstract

This research paper aims to study OTT platform adaptation of selected Indian English short-stories to critically analyze the strategies and complexities involved in the process of adapting short-stories as OTT web series. An OTT platform can be defined as “an online service that can be regarded as potentially substituting for traditional telecommunications and audio-visual services such as voice telephony, SMS, video on demand and television” (“ITU” 4). Film adaptations of literary texts have a long and rich history. In an adaptation, a literary work such as a novel, a play, a short-story or a poem is transferred into a new medium, such as a painting, a movie, etc. It is a kind of a translation of a literary work. The recreation of any work has the same idea but presented differently in another form. i.e. media. Film adaptation theory is the study of how works of literature and other forms of storytelling are translated into film. The process of adapting a story from one medium to another is complex and can involve many changes to the original source material. Similarly, these adaptations of short-stories rework the stories and the narratives of selected Indian English fiction. Thus, this research paper examines the paradoxical relationship between an adaptation and its source material.

**Keywords:** Adaptation; Indian English Fiction; OTT Platform; Satyajit Ray.

## Introduction

Satyajit Ray (1921-1992) was an Indian filmmaker, author, essayist, magazine editor and composer. He was born in Calcutta into a Bengali family with the background of arts and literature. He has directed 36 films, including feature films, documentaries and shorts. He authored several short-stories and novels for children and adolescents. His films, *Pather-*

*Panchali*(1955), *Aparajito*(1956) and *ApurSansar*(1959) from *The Apu Trilogy* won him eleven international prizes and is “regarded as one of the greatest auteurs of world cinema” (“Satyajit Ray”). He is famous for *The Apu Trilogy*, *The Music Room*, *The Big City* and *Charulata* and the *Goopy- Bagha trilogy*(Malcolm).

*RAY*, an adaptation of four short-stories by Ray, is a web series streaming on OTT platform Netflix. The web series is directed by Srijit Mukherji, Vasan Bala and Abhishek Chaubey. The series was released on 25 June 2021 on Netflix. The series features four episodes based on four short-stories by Ray. The researcher has selected two stories for theorising her arguments in this paper, namely *Forget Me Not* by Srijit Mukherji based on Bipin Chowdhury’s *Smritibhrom* (*Bipin Chowdhury’s Memory Loss*) and *Hungama Hai Kyon Barpa* by Abhishek Chaubey based on *Barin Bhowmick-er Byaram* (*Barin Bhowmick’s Ailment*). Srijit Mukherji is an Indian film director and screenwriter who predominantly works in Bengali cinema. His first feature film *Autograph* (2010), was his first commercial success. His film, *Rajkahini* has been adapted into a Hindi film titled, *Begum Jaan* in 2017. He has written, directed and acted in the English play *Checkmate*, a non-canonical reinterpretation of Byomkesh Bakshi, Saradindu Bandopadhyay’s sleuth (“Play Preview”). Abhishek Chaubey began his career as an associate director and co-writer to Vishal Bhardwaj for his debut *Makdee* in 2002. He has also worked for *Omkara* (2006), *Kaminey* (2009), the dark comedy *Ishqiya* (2010) and its sequel *Dedh Ishqiya* (2014) and *Udta Punjab* (2016) (“Abhishek Chaubey”)

The researcher has used exploratory and quantitative methods and employs close comparative textual analysis of the verbal and visual texts. This research paper will use the broader eclectic framework of comparative literary studies, adaptation studies and its specific methodological focus will be on recent theorization in screen adaptations with Shafer’s seven categories. Moreover, these strategies can be used as a methodology for research on short-stories adapted into web-series on OTT platforms.

## Objectives

- To examine the ways in which the source material of selected Indian English short-stories of Satyajit Ray was translated into the medium of web series.
- To theorise the creative decisions made by the adapters, such as the screenwriters and directors, during the adaptation process

and the factors that influenced those decisions.

- To examine how the cultural, historical and political context of India and the source material's origin country shapes the way the story is presented on OTT platform.
- To compare the differences and similarities between the adapted texts in terms of their adaptation strategies and how that affects the audiences' reception and understanding of the stories.

### **Film Adaptation**

Film adaptation as a field of study has become a large area of study in the last few years. With studies from various cultures (and languages) of adaptation being conducted, the field has become very dynamic. Indian film adaptations have a history as long as films themselves. Adaptations of national and regional classics, and of popular fiction seems to be a frequent phenomenon. Arrival of OTT platforms has added a new dimension into it.

The task of the director is to carefully adapt the piece of literature to another medium with markers of the source text, often referred as the 'spirit' of a text. Virginia Woolf called the visual medium a 'Parasite' and literature its 'Victim' (Hutcheon 109). Geoffrey Wagner proposed three categories for adaptations: transposition, commentary and analogy (Wagner). Transposition is the direct translation from novel to film with minimal interference, analogous to a direct copy. Commentary describes an adaptation that follows the original work but with purposely altered elements from the novel. Lastly, analogy is further deviation from the original work to the point where the film can be seen as a separate work of art (Grobstein). It means the director is not intervening in the source text in transposition. The second category commentary is about adding his/her own interpretations and views and analogy is about changing the whole idea of the source text.

Studies of film adaptations have often produced heavily fidelity-based and personal readings of films based on literary texts. The seven adaptation strategies/procedures/categories developed by Shafer will be put to use in this study as a methodological tool and model consisting of a descriptive, interpretive, and comparative component. Adaptation Studies can benefit from Shafer's seven adaptation practices, analyzing how the two different mediums of short-story and the episodes of web series

treat elements like plot, characters, cultural and social themes, as the form of expression will be changed and how the cinematic adaptations can be seen as independent texts.

### **OTT in India**

Nowadays, OTT platforms have become one of the major mediums of entertainment for people. People are fond of watching contents on OTT platforms for entertainment which run on monthly or annual subscriptions. The Pandemic time proved to be one of the fertile periods for this binge watching. OTT being a new form of media, it demands a study. An OTT platform can be defined as “an online service that can be regarded as potentially substituting for traditional telecommunications and audio-visual services such as voice telephony, SMS, video on demand and television” (“ITU” 4). OTT stands for Over-the-top media services. It is a kind of platform or service, which is more than television and less than theatre. There are lots of OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Disney+, Hulu, Peacock, and Sling TV. All the OTT streaming services have one common characteristic, that they all use the internet to deliver video content. Indeed, OTT platforms have become a part of audience’s daily life since the pandemic in India.

Netflix is one of the popular OTT platforms nowadays in India, which originated in America on August 29, 1997, by Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings in Scotts Valley, California. American streaming service Netflix entered India in January 2016. Netflix has started its original production from 2018 as ‘Netflix Original’. In 2018 The Netflix company came up with its first original series in India titled *Sacred Games* and continued with shows like *Ghoul* (2018), *Leila* (2019), and finally *A Suitable Boy* (2020). *Leila* was the novel written by Prayaag Akbar in 2017, originally adapted on international medium Netflix, directed by Deepa Mehta. *A Suitable Boy* was a novel written by Vikram Seth published in 1993, directed by Mira Nair in 2019. Besides this there are lots of other adaptations on OTT (Wilbert).

So, in this modern era people are more attached towards the OTT platform than TV. They prefer to watch movies on OTT platforms rather than in theatres. The rise of OTT platforms for Indian viewers has also become faster. The number of users of OTT platforms increases day by day.

### **Adaptations of Satyajit Ray’s Stories on Netflix: RAY**

There exists a multitude of cinematic adaptations based on the works of

renowned filmmaker Satyajit Ray, albeit with a limited presence on OTT platforms. However, in 2021, Netflix introduced a web series named "RAY," wherein four stories by Satyajit Ray were adapted for their OTT platform. In this study, the researcher aims to critically examine and analyze two selected stories by Satyajit Ray, along with their adapted versions, utilizing Philip M. Shafer's seven strategies for adaptation.

Noteworthy differentiations are observed in the presentation of characters, language, culture, politics, and religion within these adaptations. This indicates a transformative shift, not only in the textual aspects but also in their production. Varun Grover, while discussing Netflix's approach, remarked: "Even when it came to very minor characters they had very specific things to say about them, and questions and clarifications" (qtd. in Vadukut).

These episodes are grounded in Satyajit Ray's stories, showcasing his unique perspective on life. It is noteworthy that the series adopts the author's name, emphasizing its connection to his creative vision, titled RAY. This web series incorporates four stories, namely, *BarinBhowmick's Ailment*, *Bipin Chowdhury's Memory Loss*, *Spotlight*, and *Chameleon*. (Alok) For this study, the researcher has specifically chosen two short stories, namely, *BarinBhowmikerByaram* or *BarinBhowmick's Ailment* and *Bipin-Chowdhury'rSmritibhrom* or *Bipin Chowdhury's Memory Loss*.

### **Analytical Study of Satyajit Ray's Selected Stories and RAY**

The researcher delves into the analysis of source texts and target texts using Shafer's seven practices, exploring how these practices are applicable in the Indian context and how this Indian context is portrayed in the international media based on these practices (Shafer).

Shafer's thesis addresses major concerns in adaptation studies, including objective methodology, the fallacy of fidelity, properties of medium specificity, equality of artistic forms, and narrative translation. To address these issues, Shafer develops a formalist topology of seven major adaptation practice categories: Inclusion, Exclusion, Compression, Extension, Substitution, Re-sequencing, and Invention. These categories represent significant procedures of literary adaptation that manifest consistently across all eight films of the Harry Potter series, as they transform J.K. Rowling's novels into the medium of film (Shafer). He examines how the first two directors of the Harry Potter films, Christopher Columbus and Alfonso Cuarón, employ these seven adaptation strategies in both simi-

lar and distinct ways, as they concurrently present and retell Rowling's initial three novels in the series (Shafer). These adaptation practices are observed in the screen adaptations of Indian texts on over-the-top (OTT) media platforms, highlighting their relevance and manifestation within the Indian context.

### **Bipin Chaudhary's Lapse of Memory**

The narrative revolves around the interactions between the main character, Bipin, and the other characters, highlighting their attitudes towards him and his behavior. In the original text, Bipin is depicted as mentally sound, devoid of any memory loss. However, the other individuals attempt to convince him that he cannot recollect past events. On his weekly visits to Kalicharan's New Market, Bipin senses that someone is closely observing him. This individual approaches Bipin with familiarity, engaging in conversation and wearing a smile. Puzzled and unable to recognize him, Bipin remains oblivious to their shared history.

The stranger mentions their time spent together during a trip to Hudroo Falls in Ranchi in 1958. When Bipin denies any recollection, the stranger expresses surprise, stating, "We met every day for a whole week. I arranged for a car to take you to Hudroo falls. In 1958. In Ranchi. My name is ParimalGhose" (Ray 106). As ParimalGhose elucidates the details of their past, including the Ranchi trip and a scar on his knee, Bipin experiences confusion, questioning the veracity of these events. Seeking clarity, he consults his doctor and discusses the matter. The doctor advises Bipin to revisit Ranchi, suggesting that it may aid in recollecting the memories. Consequently, Bipin embarks on the journey and later returns. However, it becomes apparent to Bipin, through a letter, that this entire ordeal was a ruse, exploiting his supposed memory lapse. He realizes that he had never been to Ranchi and that he is, in fact, in good health.

However, in the target text, the director shows that the main character becomes insane at the end of the story, and a woman with whom he had relations before his marriage, explains everything to him at the end. In the target text, the main character, Ipsit Rama Nair, is an entrepreneur with a sharp memory. When Rhea Saran, the girl who says everything happened in the past with Ipsit, says, "The man with the memory of computer doesn't remember Rhea Saran" ("Forget Me Not" 00:03:53). She also proved that Ipsit has saved her number as 'cave girl'. The reader of the original text belongs to a different time period and the viewers of the adaptation on OTT Netflix belong to a different time period. So, there is a

description of the same concept, theme, and plot but with a different character in adaptation.

The narrative also delves into the portrayal of the protagonist's friend, Anil Chander (referred to as Patchy), who is in search of employment after relocating from Bangalore to Mumbai. Initially working as a lift operator, Anil Chander is offered the position of a peon in Ipsit's company. In both the original and adapted texts, the director maintains the same thematic and behavioral patterns exhibited by the protagonist. However, a notable alteration is made in the target text, wherein the director replaces the character of Chunilal from the original text with Meggie, the secretary of Ipsit's company. This substitution aims to sustain the visual appeal of the OTT platform, while still providing a reason for the protagonist's behavioral patterns, as previously elucidated by Chunilal in the original text. It is worth noting that the adaptation retains the presence of the character Anil Chander (Patchy), who is the protagonist's school friend.

In the original text, Bipinbabu's friend Chunilal laid a trap for him as Bipin had refused to give him a job when he needed it. In the adaptation, on the other hand, it is Ipsit's secretary who lays a trap for him as he had sexual relations with Meggie that had left her pregnant with Ipsit asking her to abort her child. The idea of revenge emerged in the mind of Meggie, when Ipsit took her shopping in the mall, for his new born baby girl from his wife. The dialogue of Meggie says everything in the end: "Who goes shopping for baby clothes with the woman he forced to have an abortion?" ("Forget Me Not" 53:21). "You took part of my body, Ipsit. I wanted to take part of yours, too. The part of yours that you were the most proud of. But I couldn't do it by myself" ("Forget Me Not" 53:48). It describes everything in the end that she has taken revenge with Ipsit and that 'cave girl'. Anil, Ipsit's school friend, Gary, Raju the watchman, and Rahul, Ipsit's partner in the company, were all involved in this trap since each had a reason to seek revenge against Ipsit. The trap works so effectively that Ipsit goes insane at the end. In the adapted version, the character Bipin is portrayed as being admitted to a mental hospital. However, in the original text, Bipin does not suffer from insanity, and the writer reveals that he never underwent treatment in a mental hospital, as his brother had tragically died in such a state. Here, the director introduces a new scene by utilizing the same character, deviating from the original narrative. This can be seen as an instance of invention strategy devised by Shafer.

The aforementioned topologies, as explored by Shafer in his thesis on the Porter's series, are evident in these adaptation practices. These practices

are observed in the screen adaptations of Indian texts, showcasing how the Indian context is depicted on OTT media platforms.

### **Barin Bhaowmick's Ailment**

The whole revolves around Barin's ailment that also becomes the cause of his repentance. Ironically, he learns that though nine years ago he had stolen the watch of his fellow passenger in the train due to Kleptomania, that very passenger too suffered from the same disease. Mr. BarinBhowmick, a well-known singer, was going to Delhi at the invitation of Bengal Association to sing at their jubilee celebrations, in a Delhi-bound vestibule train in the first-class compartment. The story is moving forward from the character's introduction to the main plot of the story. In the source text writer describes that, nine years ago the protagonist had stolen the travel watch of his fellow passenger PulakChakravarty (Pincho) due to his disease of Kleptomania. Thus, this is not a journey to Delhi from Calcutta, but it will become journey of protagonist's fear of being caught to accepting everything and repenting it, as he had stolen someone's watch due to kleptomania and that person is in front of him as his fellow passenger after nine years.

Within the source text, the author portrays the protagonist, BarinBabu, a renowned singer, and his fellow passenger, PulakChakravarty (Pincho), both afflicted with the same ailment known as kleptomania. Towards the end, BarinBabu openly acknowledges before PulakChakravarty that he was the individual responsible for the theft of his watch back in 1964. BarinBabu subsequently contacts his cousin, N. C. Bhowmick, working in the finance ministry in Delhi, and discovers that PulakChakravarty had also experienced the same condition of kleptomania.

However, in the target text the director excludes the character of N. C. Bhowmick and invents the new scene of Kabaliwala's shop. That shop described as not a Kabaliwala's shop RoohSafa or Soul Cleanse but as the shop where everyone has accepted his crime. As the shopkeeper of RoohSafa said, "Look, my friend, this isn't shop, it's bath and in bath..everybody stands naked. So leave your coat of honor outside" ("Hungama Hai KyonBarpa" 00:45:29). The rule of the shop is that everyone has to give up the stolen things and the name of the person from whom they have stolen the items. When Musafir Ali asked shopkeeper of RoohSafa "So you buy and sell stolen things?" ("Hungama Hai KyonBarpa" 45:48) he answered angrily, "You think this is a pawn shop? We don't buy anything. People hand them over on their own" ("Hungama Hai KyonBarpa"



45:53). And in this way, they accept their crime. In this included scene director shows very interesting things to the protagonist Musafir Ali like, Wajid Ali Shah's chillum, Lord Mountbatten's pajamas, Satyajit Ray's stolen short stories, Dara Singh's Medal and Maestro Gulam Ali's ring which were stolen by Aslam Baig (Jenga the wrestler) whose watch has stolen by Musafir Ali. When the shopkeeper said, "If you don't give me his name, your soul remains blemished. Simply washing your hands of it won't suffice" ("Hungama Hai KyonBarpa" 47:19).

Then Musafir gave the name of Aslam Baig and the shopkeeper said he was a regular client. At that time Musafir Ali came to know that he was also suffering from the same ailment as him. So, here director shows that there isn't any need of repentance of protagonist in the story, with the dialogue of Aslam Baig at the end "And if we all deserve a chance to atone for our sins, then why not poor Musafir Ali?" ("Hungama Hai KyonBarpa" 49:38). Whatever the crime he did with Aslam Baig, he has also done the same with him. Audience came to know about it very earlier, when Musafir Ali showed him the ring of Gulam Ali he got as a gift from him. Director also includes *Anand* (1971) and references Rajesh Khanna (an Indian movie actor), Shakespeare, Dada Muni (an Indian movie actor), Bahadur Shah Zafar etc. through characters when talking about the disease Kleptomania. This is how the director employs Shefer's invention strategy in the adapted text. In such a manner, Indian context is presented on OTT media as RAY.

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