



FROM TEXT TO SCREEN: CINEMATIC TRANSLATION OF METANARRATIVES IN *UMRAO JAAN*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the cinematic translation of metanarratives in two iconic works of Indian literature, Umrao Jaan, focusing on how these texts are reinterpreted through film adaptations. Both narratives, deeply rooted in India's cultural and historical contexts, reflect complex themes of love, loss, societal constraints, and identity. By analyzing various cinematic versions of this story this study investigates how filmmaker translate the literary metanarratives into visual and auditory experiences, while negotiating the cultural, temporal, and aesthetic differences between text and screen. The analysis of key adaptation by Muzaffar Ali (Umrao Jaan, 1981), the paper examines how director preserve, modify, or transform the metanarratives within the constraints and liberties of cinema. It discusses how elements like character development, narrative structure, and socio-political themes are reshaped by the visual medium, affecting the viewer's engagement with the original stories. The paper also considers the role of music, cinematography, and performance in reinforcing or altering the core messages of the literary works. By situating this film within the broader framework of cinematic adaptation theory and metanarrative discourse, this study aims to understand how translation across media impacts the reception and interpretation of these enduring narratives. In doing so, it contributes to the conversation on cultural adaptation, narrative transformation, and the power of cinema as a tool for reimagining literary classics.

Keywords: Cinematic Translation, Metanarrative, Adaptation Theory, Cultural Adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

Adaptation of first Indian modern literary masterpiece novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* (1902) into a classic film *Umrao Jaan* by Muzaffar Ali in 1981 involves the translation of the meta-narrative engaging the translation of the narrative techniques from one medium into another. Muzaffar Ali pays rich tribute to authentic women theme with the historical reception of women oriented fiction. In the decade of the 80s he rediscovered, reinterpreted rich representation of history through the portrayal of *Umrao Jaan* to the eager, receptive and appreciative audience without trivialising Umrao's experience and with great fidelity to the text depicts her as a symbol of accomplishment, respect and truth caught amidst masculine values, culture and myth. Adaptation of *Umrao Jaan* to film, like any other adaptation, follows the unique construction of theme, narrative thereby constructing history, political conventions, and cultural norms. This novel-film study has opened up the new arena to understand the possibility of the two medium at the point of convergence and divergence. The first fictional biography in a first person narrative of a famous courtesan from the rich cultural background of the erstwhile Lucknow, trained in singing, dancing and known for her rich poetical overtones eulogising rich ideologies, glorifying woman as icons, adored for her beauty and attributes, her self-sacrifice, and devotion. Ali reconstructs the image of nineteenth century woman caught in the complex web of socio-cultural norms coinciding with her strong sense of individualism.

Michael Klien and Gillian Parker identify three types of adaptations: in the first type, the film gives impression of being 'faithful, that is literal translation'; whereas, the second type of adaptation deals with the approach which "retains the core structure of the narrative, significantly reinterpreting, or in some cases deconstructing the source text"; and, the third type of adaptation is that which "regards the source merely as a raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work". Geoffrey Wagner's classification of "adaptation into transposition, commentary and analogy" somewhat tally with Klien and Parker's categories except that Wagner's "commentary" does not take into consideration an "out right violation" of the source text. Dudley Andrew also corresponds to the different manners in which the film can be related and their source novels, which are three like borrowing, intersecting and transforming, and are closely related to Wagner's categories what though if he does it in the reverse manner of the film fidelity to the original text.

Umrao Jan Ada, the novel, written in the first person narrative is pervasive with memoirs, anecdotes and poetry where Ruswa is a distinctive voice involved in a conversation with the old Umrao, replicating strong, blatantly staunch feminist voice, who speaks with a voice of "a woman of experience" (Ruswa 1961: 174), nostalgically reminiscing the good old days of the culture of the nawabs of Lucknow, beauty and youth spent in the company of "a few real friends who are men of culture with taste for poetry, literature and music and who demand nothing except good conversation" (Ruswa 1961: 174). But, in a film Ruswa is iconically inserted and signified metonymically between the character of Umrao and her poetic renditions. In the light of both films and literature as powerful narrative arts, *Umrao Jaan*, the film captures every aspect of the life of Umrao registering her distinctive growth to a sensitive poetess, known for her strong feminist overtones.

Within the pages of the novel, Umrao sensitively shares her feelings, her poetry, and the incidences of her life with Mirza Hadi Ruswa, a narrator, participant as a choric character. The technique used by the filmmaker is of a frame narrative, where Ruswa's contribution and also his presence in the novel are pertinent to the narrative. His voice pre-empts the readers to empathise verbatim with Umrao and facilitates to construct a significant aloofness. Muzaffar Ali in his depiction of the character of Umrao Jaan is literally reliant on its literary source, plot, characters and also conversation between them.

Although film does not translate narrational mode of the novel to first person which is difficult to translate on screen and hence, resumes to easier omniscient third person narrative. Moreover, since everything is viewed unobtrusively from the angle of a camera, we instead of sympathising with Umrao, empathise with her. According to Colin MacCabe, "the camera shows us what happens" (7) to a cognisant audience, is a very subjective experience and is borrowed from a filmmaker's viewpoint. Camera is an intrinsic contrived gizmo of a filmmaker and hence metonymic in its approach. In *I am a Camera*, a documentary film which came in 1978: "I am a camera lens, neutral, passive, subjective" is emphasised. Hence, when the film opens with Amreen all decked out, the empathy of the audience is nailed by the filmmaker. The film ironically unfastens the patriarchal setup, the fate of women, the history of zamindari system in the erstwhile Lucknow with the ceremonious frame of betrothal which ends with her abduction and auction. The precise eye of the camera from the first frame of the film to the last manipulates the finer sensibilities of the audience and forces them to sympathise with Umrao along with the filmmaker. Ali successfully manoeuvred the artistic interest of the audience by recreating the golden era of Lucknow, the city known for its rich cultural overtones, the splendour and magnificence of the bygone era of the nawabs known for their poetry, *adab*, *tehzeeb*, celebrated generosity and their culture replete with the historical essence of the 19th century. Incidentally, both the novelist and the filmmaker hail from Lucknow and were bred intrinsically into its rich culture heritage and hence the honesty of depiction makes their respective work famous and well received. The crucial perspective of Ruswa and Ali is here emphasised when the reader/audience is sensitized enough to empathise with the deplorable conditions of the courtesans in the inherent patriarchal setup. The ocular depiction of the appalling condition of Umrao, through the lens of the camera in the film, is succinct though but more poignant than the rambling prose depiction. Limited time frame of the film obstructs the theory of adaptation but the artistic liberty exercised by the filmmaker indicates to deviation from the literary source. The tapering watch of the camera is covetously absorbed in the character portrayal of Umrao. In the absence of the first person narrative, according to Joy Gould Boyum, the camera acts as the third person 'narrator'. The camera's poignant depiction of the character allegedly restricts the audience's understanding of anything beyond its visual effects. (Boyum 1989: 89) The observation of Robbe Grillet in *Last Year at Merienbad* is worth mentioning "The essential characteristic of the film image is its presentness. Whereas Literature has a whole gamut of grammatical tenses ... by its nature what we see on screen is the act of happening, we are given the gesture itself, not an account of it. (9) Ruswa's intricate manifestation of the present, past and future in the novel is untranslatable in the film. The unfolding of action sequences in the film can be simply regarded as only "a remembrance of things present" (10) despite the fact that the recounting of events takes place through series of flashbacks.

The departure of the filmmaker from the novelist emerges in its interpretation as the novelist is more concerned about the portrayal of 19th century patriarchal society, the lifestyle of the nawabs and aristocrats and their indulgences, while the filmmaker is focussed solely on the depiction of Umrao as a staunch feminist character, a trend which was fast emerging in the decade of the 80s. Women oriented films were fast becoming a trend amongst cerebral filmmakers in parallel cinema.

Throughout the novel, the far-ranging experience of Umrao is not depicted in isolation but also gives a bird's eye view into the lives of the other subjugated women as well. The nostalgic recounting of the tale by Umrao, when she grows old, shows the historical journey of the people, place and its changing perspective reverberating with the changing approach towards life and fresh mindset. Ruswa subtly and not ostensibly rewrites the history of the mutiny of 1857 and its unyielding effect on the old glory of Lucknow; and so is Ali expressively indebted to cinematically rebuild the culturally infused ambience of 19th century Lucknow.

Cinematic liberties allowed Ali to artificially recreate history, forge realism based on photographs, texts, history, to be as close to reality as ever. The use of rich hues in different frames of the movie, the decorated haveli is nostalgically contrasted with the use of black and white frames to depict richness of the bygone era with the dullness of the lost world. Since he belonged to Lucknow, in all probability it must have been slightly thorny issue for Ali to cinematically portray Lucknow with its unadulterated magnificence but certainly not impossible. It is believed that he even used ancestral clothes and jewellery belonging to his family and his own haveli in Lucknow for Khanum's kotha following strict adherence to the authentic details. The major challenge for the filmmaker was to recreate the old world charm in a historical or costume drama to maintain the closest fidelity to the text. Cinematic challenges are multifarious as well as fascinating in the use of camera techniques. The film is an attempt to take the audience selectively on the fascinating journey through the life of Umrao in Particular and the bygone magnificent traditions of Lucknow in general. The truthful rendition of the life of Umrao in the film is unthinkable without music and poetry. Moreover music is the heartbeat of any popular Indian cinema. Similarly and convincingly of course, music occupies a central role and is imbued stylistically within the film semiotics and also during the production process in a fictional biopic of a courtesan- poet Umrao Jaan.

It is believed that Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Dipti Naval were the obvious choice for the filmmakers donning the director's hat with parallel cinema and fast emerging with strong feminist introspection, while, commercially popular actress Rekha was busy churning out one successful blockbuster after another. When Muzaffar Ali offered the role of Umrao to Rekha in an award winning performance in *Umrao Jaan*, it raised the eyebrow of the critics. Rekha in her award-winning performance assaying multiple emotions of a betrothed, a courtesan, one who falls in love with Nawab Sultan, one who is loyal till the end, one who is agonized when he doesn't marry her, was convincingly infused from head to toe in the subtle delineation of Umrao on the screen doing great justice to the character of Umrao and the novel.

The film is a masterpiece and created an unforgettable magic with Rekha's expression producing an unforgettable magic on the silver screen with a rare combination of deep philosophical poetry by Kaifi Azmi, unforgettable renditions and mellifluous voice of Asha Bhonsle, soulful music by Khayyam. Quite contrary to her film image, Umrao in the novel appears as a realistic, practical and unmoved by love. Umrao in the film is the victim of thwarted and suppressed desires. In the short span of filmic adaptation Muzaffar Ali successfully depicts Umrao as a famous poetess, a quality which distinguishes her from other courtesans. Subtly enough the cunning lens of Ali's camera obliterates the rich cultural attributes of the other courtesans, in the tradition of the courtesan culture of the 19th century Lucknow, depicted vividly in the novel.

"My life was patterned after that of the people amongst whom I was brought up. There never any occasion to ponder on question of ethics or morality. No one in my circumstance would be expected to do otherwise." (Ruswa 1961: 171) "In the warped world of courtesans, there is no such thing as love. No man in his senses will fall in love with a courtesan because he knows that a courtesan can belong to no one." (Ruswa 1961: 175)

The portrayal of indifferent Khanum in the novel who "changed with the times and had become somewhat indifferent to life...When some of the girls left her to set up on their own, she was not unduly concerned. As a matter of fact, she began to show less and less interest in the money earned by the girls who lived in her establishment"(Ruswa 1961: 132) changed into a conniving character in the film, constantly manipulating ways to hold back Umrao in her kotha.

The film *Umrao Jaan* based on literature is measured against its literary source by studying how it transposed the narrative in addition to the popular trends in the Indian film industry in the 80s; the trends followed in the film industry and other resources intelligibly brought into effect by the filmmaker. *Umrao Jaan* is an adaptation. There are many fallacies operative at the moment especially when the question of fidelity arises. But the artistic liberties exercised by the filmmaker cannot nonetheless be overlooked and subjugated. Filmmaker, like the novelist, is an unchallenged creator of the character of Umrao bringing her alive as a person of deeper sensibilities on to the silver screen without bordering on impropriety.

The cinematic translations of *Umrao Jaan* reveal the complexity of adapting literary metanarratives to the screen, illustrating the interplay between text, culture, and visual storytelling. Through the various film adaptations, most notably Muzaffar Ali's *Umrao Jaan* (1981) and J.P. Dutta's *Umrao Jaan* (2006), we observe how directors reinterpret the literary narrative while retaining the cultural and thematic core of Mirza Hadi Ruswa's novel. These adaptations not only preserve the essence of the protagonist's journey as a courtesan navigating societal constraints but also enhance it through the unique affordances of cinema—music, visual aesthetics, and performances.

The transformation of *Umrao Jaan*'s metanarrative from text to screen demonstrates the challenges of maintaining narrative depth while appealing to the sensibilities of a contemporary audience. While the films capture the melancholic beauty and cultural richness of 19th-century Lucknow, they also introduce modern cinematic elements that reframe the character's story for new generations. In doing so, the metanarrative shifts slightly with each adaptation, reflecting the filmmakers' creative vision and the evolving social context of their time. Ultimately, the cinematic adaptations of *Umrao Jaan* serve as examples of how metanarratives can be both preserved and transformed in the journey from text to screen. The study of these films highlights the dynamic process of cultural adaptation, where literature and cinema coexist, each enriching the other while offering new interpretations and insights into timeless narratives.

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