"To Win is to Lose Everything and the Game Always Wins": The Politics of Fidelity in Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* and its Screen Adaptation

Bashabi Gogoi
Assistant Professor, Department of English, Tezpur University, India

Abstract: Adaptation has been central to the Indian filmmaking process with filmmakers crafting their cinematic pieces inspired from literature. This paper will attempt to study the novel and the Netflix screen adaptation of Vikram Chandra's novel, *Sacred Games*. It will concern itself with postmodernism as a distinctive mode of writing and attempt to analyze the narrative strategies employed by the author Chandra and the makers of the Netflix adaptation. Fiction has been a productive site for postmodern narrative experiments with writers choosing innovative ways of structuring the narrative. This paper attempts to study how the plot in *Sacred Games* displays its flexibility of narrative manipulation and multiplicity of interpretation which are central to postmodernist thought. Employing Linda Hutcheon and Brian McFarlane's theories of adaptation and Robert Stam's fidelity theory, the paper will try to explore how the makers, while conforming to the prerequisites of Netflix, have tried to be faithful to the text by envisioning its essentially dystopic nature through thematic episodes whose titles foreshadow the events that transpire. The two- season web series of *Sacred Games* gives ample canvas to the makers to harness the cinematic potential of the text. They can reframe this neo-noir crime story and investigate the life/death binary while interrogating questions of identity, morality, religious fundamentalism, the cycle of karma and the "character" of the Bombay urban landscape. Fidelity, for Stam, is a "chimera" and the present paper will endeavour to study the profundity of the adaptation process through an analysis of Chandra's novel and its screen adaptation.

Keywords: Postmodernism; postmodern narrative experiment; literature and film, fidelity

I

> Adaptations are obviously not new to our time … Shakespeare transferred his culture's stories from page to stage and made them available to a whole new audience. Aeschylus and Racine and Goethe and da Ponte also retold familiar stories in new forms … The critical pronouncements of T.S. Eliot or Northrop Frye were certainly not needed to convince avid adapters across the centuries of what, for them, has always been a truism: art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories" (Hutcheon 2).

Adaptation has been central to the Indian filmmaking process with filmmakers crafting their cinematic pieces inspired from literature. This paper will attempt to study the politics of fidelity in the novel and the Netflix screen adaptation of Vikram Chandra's novel, *Sacred Games*. It will concern itself with postmodernism as a distinctive mode of writing and attempt to analyze the narrative strategies employed by the author Chandra and the makers of the Netflix adaptation. Fiction has been a productive site for postmodern narrative experiments with writers choosing innovative ways of structuring the narrative. This paper attempts to study how the plot in *Sacred Games* employs postmodern strategies like narrative manipulation and multiplicity of interpretation. Drawing from adaptation theory, it will try to explore how the makers, while conforming to the prerequisites of Netflix, have tried to be faithful to the text by envisioning its essentially dystopic nature through thematic episodes whose titles foreshadow the events that transpire. The two- seasons of *Sacred Games*, India's first Netflix original series, gives ample canvas to the makers to harness the cinematic potential of the text. Season 1 directed by Vikramaditya Motwane and Anurag Kashyap and Season 2 directed by Anurag Kashyap and Neeraj Ghaywan reframes this neo-noir crime story and investigates the life/death binary while interrogating questions of identity, morality, religious fundamentalism, existential dread, the cycle of karma and the "character" of the Bombay urban landscape. Season 1 was hugely successful, featuring in *The New York Times*' "The 30 Best International TV Shows of the Decade", while Season 2 released in 2019, received a mixed response from viewers.

Postmodernist fiction deliberately blurs the distinction between high and low culture with the employment of pastiche and eschew the possibility of any meaning at all. As Hutcheon says in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, "Postmodernism has called into question the messianic faith of modernism, the faith that technical innovation and purity of form can assure social order, even if that faith disregards the social and aesthetic values of those who must inhabit those modernist buildings" (11-12). Most postmodern fiction is intertextual, a mosaic of references to or quotations from other texts. In advocating experimentalism in form, the postmodern novel critiques the philosophical mirror theories of truth and attempts at reconceptualizing the concept of 'realism'. Fiction thus becomes an unfolding of a dream, a literal agonistic struggle that involves ontological confrontations.

The paper attempts to discuss the postmodern aesthetics and narrative strategy employed in Vikram Chandra's 2006 novel *Sacred Games* and its 2018 Netflix screen adaptation through the lens of fidelity politics. Chandra's writing, with its highly individual traits, skillfully employs fabulist imagery, magical realism, political satire etc. His first novel, *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) is a magical realist tale which consists of a series of inter-related stories stretching across continents and centuries. He brings together disparate elements and presents us with a medley of fiction, mythology, folklore and history in their contemporaneity. His first collection of short stories, *Love and Longing in Bombay* (1997) is a collection of five haunting stories set in Bombay with titles linking them to the Hindu concepts of duty (*Dharma*), strength (*Shakti*), love (*Kama*), economy (*Artha*) and peace (*Shanti*). In this novella, one story begets another in a kind of concentric narrative structuring which both formalizes the storytelling act and gives a kind of didactic entertainment. Chandra's second novel, *Sacred Games*, is a novel of epic dimensions that delves deep into the life of police detective Sartaj Singh (already featured in 'Shakti') and the criminal underworld of Ganesh Gaitonde, the most wanted gangster in India. Chandra felt that he had "unfinished business with the character of Sartaj Singh", and this divorced, insomniac policeman works as a perfect foil to the dreaded gangster. As Patricia Leigh Brown says, "… *Sacred Games* delves into many emotionally charged worlds of contemporary India, in particular the spidery links between organized crime, local politics and Indian

espionage that lie below the shimmering surfaces of its economic renaissance. Money and corruption form the golden thread. In interweaving narratives and voices, *Sacred Games* takes on even larger themes, from the wrenching violence of the 1947 partition of India to the specter of nuclear terrorism".

II

Adapting such a huge novel for the screen is an arduous task, as Thomas Leitch says, for here the "standard tactics of adaptation—selecting some obligatory speeches, characters, scenes, and plotlines and dropping others; compressing or combining several characters or scenes into one; streamlining the narrative by eliminating digressive episodes; reworking dialogue so that it is either more epigrammatic or more severely functional—are clearly inadequate" (Leitch 129). Therefore, the OTT medium with two seasons running into 16 episodes is an ideal alternative for the makers. The titles of each of the episodes are unique and serve as a portent for some significant incident that occurs in it. Season 1 derives its titles from Hindu mythology; for example, Episode 1 titled *Ashwathama* refers to the powerful, invincible warrior, son of Drona. It is noteworthy that Gaitonde calls himself Ashwathama; he remains alive through his story even after he is physically dead. Episode 3 titled *Atapi Vitapi* refers to the demon brothers who maliciously lured unsuspecting travelers and cannibalized them but were finally defeated by sage Agastya. This episode introducing Guruji is used to demonstrate the convoluted ethics of religion, where solace is sometimes bartered for commodification, consuming the very soul. Episode 7 is aptly titled *Rudra*, the manifestation of wrath, wherein we are witness to Gaitonde, blinded by rage, going on a killing spree of Suleiman Isa's men and Muslims in particular, to avenge the brutal murder of his wife Subhadra. The final episode of Season 1 titled *Yayati* explores the father-son relationship which is one of the conspicuous themes of the series. Gaitonde claims he had three fathers, with Guruji, his third father, being the most important one. Sartaj also realizes his father's connection to Gaitonde, and how he had tended to him while the latter was imprisoned. It was Dilbagh Singh, Sartaj's father, who advised Gaitonde to find a spiritual guru for himself in the quest for mental peace.

Along with Hindu mythology, the Season 2 episode titles were also inspired from Buddhist, Islamic and Jewish mythologies. For example, episode 4 titled *Bardo* refers to the liminal space between death and rebirth in Buddhism. Here Guruji tells Gaitonde that happiness can be ensured only if he sheds his mortal self and takes rebirth in a different spiritual avatar. This in a way prompts Gaitonde to become the proverbial Angel of Death in episode 6 titled *Azrael* when he agrees to Guruji's apocalyptic plan to bomb the city of Mumbai and establish a new world. The concluding episode of Season 2 titled *Radcliffe* is a reference to the line of demarcation between India and Pakistan. This episode is an adaptation of the *Insets* sections of the novel where Chandra narrates the story of Sartaj's mother and her family and the devastating consequences of the Partition of India, the mindless sectarian violence that ripped families apart. The violent nature of this tragedy created a huge gulf between these two nations, an atmosphere of extreme antagonism and hostile suspicion, the penalty which Mumbai has to pay. This episode also establishes the relationship between Sartaj and Shahid Khan, the fact that they are cousins unknown to each other. The series ends on a cliffhanger with Sartaj trying to defuse the nuclear bomb set by Shahid Khan, a bomb that Guruji and his followers like Batya Abelman has premeditated to decimate the city.

The novel, aimed at a mature audience, soon achieved cult status following its adaptation. The adaptation attests to Geoffrey Wagner's second "possible" category which is "open to the film-maker and to the critic assessing his adaptation", i.e. "commentary", "where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect … when there has been a different intention on the part of the film-maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation" (qtd. in McFarlane 10-11). Following Klein's three main "approaches" to adaptation, the Netflix series subscribes to both the first and second ones, i.e."... fidelity to the main thrust of the narrative, to the author's central concerns, to the natures of the major characters, to the ambience of the novel, and, what is perhaps most important, to the genre of the source", and the approach which "retains the core of the structure of the narrative while significantly reinterpreting or, in some cases, deconstructing the source text" (Klein 9-10).

III

Adaptation as a "theory" is relatively new, and to engage with larger theoretical issues, it is necessary to analyze the trajectory of the different mediums of adaptation. Each medium is unique with its distinctive artistic expression and its own set of challenges; therefore "the medium-specific theorist believes that 'each art form has its own domain of expression and exploration ... determined by the nature of the medium'" (Carroll qtd in Cardwell 44). While theorizing adaptation, it is imperative to think critically about what it means to adapt and appropriate and then engage creatively in the act of adapting.

The narrative in *Sacred Games* gives the author the opportunity to intervene between the reader and the story, and the authority to render a scene as he sees it rather than as people see it. Through a homodiegetic and a heterodiegetic mode of narration, this gritty saga of violence draws on the best of Victorian fiction, mystery novels, Bollywood movies and Chandra's first-hand research on the streets of Mumbai. As mentioned earlier, the urban landscape of Bombay is the real protagonist, a corporeal repository of life, love, loss, memories and amnesia, a place where dreams can be turned into reality. As Sartaj muses:

> …there were men like Ganesh Gaitonde and Suleiman Isa, who had begun with petty thefts and had gone on to own fleets of Opel Vectras and Honda Accords. And there were boys and girls who had come from dusty villages and now looked down at you from the hoardings, beautiful and unreal. It could happen. It did happen, and that's why people kept trying. It did happen. That was the dream, the big dream of Bombay. (Chandra 226)

There are two main plots: one, the hapless but honest cop Sartaj's quest to discover why Gaitonde blew his brains out after holing himself in a supposedly impregnable structure, interwoven with Ganesh Gaitonde's memoirs of his own criminal career, and the other is Satraj's own life and career. The two major narratives progressing with reasonable fluidity conjure up a kaleidoscopic vision of a city in perpetual motion- glittering and squalid, pullulating with energy, grossly overpopulated and chaotic, driven by the volatile forces of ambition, despair and religious ardour, a witness to the

unfolding of events and a participant in the karmic cycle. The novel revels in its binaries, blending noir, Hindu mythology, espionage, moral ambiguity and philosophical inquiry with both Sartaj, and Gaitonde, his nemesis, grappling with fundamental questions, which do not have clear answers. The Netflix adaptation negotiates fidelity not as being faithful but rather as an ideological act by condensing and modifying much of the source text, emphasizing more on Gaitonde speaking from beyond the grave, along with a focus on an apocalyptic narrative. Gaitonde's metafictional narration alternates with Sartaj's investigations of his death. Employing elements of detective and popular fiction, the novel in its epistemological aspect, places utmost importance in accumulating information, which is precisely what Sartaj does as "this popular genre has been drawn upon repeatedly by contemporary literary novelists in order to endow their material with a dynamic structure" (Gregson 73).

The spectral Gaitonde appears in the narrative and begins his story with: "So, Sardar-ji, are you listening still? Are you somewhere in this world with me? I can feel you. What happened next, and what happened next, you want to know" (Chandra 51). The novel was already rife with cinematic potential and the hypertextuality of the novel's narrative is restructured for coherence on the screen. There is also a new speculative timeline introduced with a sinister conspiracy involving an imminent nuclear holocaust, which makes the series a hybrid potpourri of crime thriller, detective, and science fiction tropes. Early adaptation theories focused mainly on faithfulness to the original, but it has now evolved to move beyond fidelity-based debates to consider the larger ramifications of adaptation. As George Bluestone says, "... the film adapter, beyond understanding the limits and possibilities of his medium, must make a serious adjustment to a set of different and often conflicting conventions, conventions which have historically distinguished literature from the cinema and made each a separate institution" (45). Therefore, a complex story like *Sacred Games* necessitates employing media-specific storytelling approaches like the OTT platforms wherein viewers engage more profoundly with the text.

Chandra's narrative triumph lies in the way he interweaves contemporary events into his text, how crime-solving can make police and criminals strange bedfellows and the way organized crime has worked its way into Bollywood. Chandra has limited Sartaj's sphere of activity and made his knowledge more partial than Gaitonde's. Gaitonde's narrative reveals his psyche when he muses:

> For the overwhelming majority of people, gangsters and spies only existed as figures of light, as glittering and temporary notions thrown up by electronics and celluloid. But I was in fact a gangster and spy, and so I knew well what was possible. My own life had taught me what was real, and I knew that what men can imagine, they can make real. And so I was terrified (Chandra 800).

Gaitonde kills Chhota Badriya without any qualms, only because his elder brother Bada Badriya was a traitor. Sartaj, like his father before him, is a good policeman and detective, but with all his idealism, he succumbs to the murky system, taking bribes, as the system itself depended on it. He even betrays Parulkar to acquire his promotion, which led Parulkar to commit suicide. The character of the mysterious hitman Malcolm Mourad created for the series who kills without qualms and slices off Sartaj's thumb after capturing him creates the necessary trauma so typical of potboilers. Violence on screen can elicit a strong emotional response because although there is awareness that these are not factual incidents, yet the fact that the viewer sees it leads to an immediate effect. A more visceral response is generated than the novel because of the sensory input which startles the viewer. Linda Seger says that unlike a novel where "we can receive only one piece of information at a time, … a film is dimensional. A good scene in a film advances the action, reveals character, explores the theme, and builds an image" (16). Being part of a family with close connections to Bollywood, Chandra has an insider's perspective on the workings of this unholy nexus between Bollywood and the underworld. So, the novel is "rife with characters with topsy-turvy moral compasses". Chandra himself has said that since they live in constant fear, "they construct a comprehensible moral universe for themselves", and since they know their "death is already written", they view murder as "part of the divine play of the Lord" (Leigh Brown). So, the title *Sacred Games* feels apt.

The novel's dramatis personae includes a wide range of female characters who contribute to the darkly glittering mosaic that Chandra has constructed. His control over the narrative structure is remarkable even while he builds up these very layered stories and finds significant tasks for them to do. In fact, Jojo Mascarenas finally is the catalyst to Gaitonde's doom, for she taunts him and his manliness:

> 'Shall I tell you the truth, Gaitonde? You are a coward. You used to be something, you used to be a man, but now you are a trembling little madman hiding in a pit'…'You, you're not a man…You bought women, so you think you're a great hero. None of them even liked you, you bastard. Without your cash, you wouldn't even have been able to come near them'… 'what a pathetic, weak little rat you are. You think you're anything in front of a woman like Zoya? She told us that she never got one good night in bed out of you' (Chandra 855).

Jojo Mascarenas is mainly seen because of Gaitonde's trauma. The adaptation reduces many of its women characters to mere plot devices, depriving them of their agency. The very competent RAW agent Anjali Mathur, a perceptive and intelligent figure in the novel, is killed off early in the series. Kukoo, the transgender character, and one of Gaitonde's molls, is newly introduced in the series to lend an exoticism and thereby sustain viewer engagement. The character of Batya Abelman, Guruji's woman Friday and loyalist in Season 2 appears to have some semblance of authority as she seems to have a deeper purpose, believing in Guruji's intention to bring back Satyug once again on earth. A layered character, Batya struggles with her beliefs and vulnerabilities, but has come to terms with the evil within. Thus, fidelity to the gender specific issues in the novel is sacrificed for the sake of dramatization. The conflicts and subtexts in the novel are much too complicated, like the relationship between Sartaj and Parulkar or between Sartaj and his ex-wife Megha, which in the Netflix narrative are rendered in a one-dimensional manner. However, these creative re-imaginings and subversions construct a new visual experience, something that the written text cannot, thereby enriching the narrative.

IV

While shuttling between the past and the present, Chandra's narrative technique gives us a sense of the changes and continuities that have shaped modern India. The story of Sartaj's mother, Prabhjot Kaur or Nikki, and Shahid Khan's mother Navneet, Nikki's beloved older sister, are inextricably embedded in the narrative, even while Sartaj "himself was distanced from it, not quite separated but gone away somehow, like a planet that had spun out too far from its sun" (Chandra 89). The story of Gaitonde's origins is convincingly mapped out to give an idea of how he eventually became the monster wanted by the law. Earlier, Gaitonde was "a poor man with a rich man's problems"; he was intent on amassing wealth and nursing an alienating superiority complex. But, as his material possessions and wealth multiplied, he found himself in a world of mirrors, which holds menacing secrets in its womb. He tries to reinvent himself continuously but struggles with his identity, becoming increasingly disillusioned. The undercurrent of Hindu nationalism is tangible when Gaitonde accepts Swami Sridhar Shukla, a Hindu guru and nationalist, a spiritual adviser of international renown, as his spiritual mentor. This plotline with the Guruji becomes prominent in Season 2. Here, Chandra brews a potent mix of spirituality with crime with its justification: "For the ordinary person, who sees only randomness, the world is just depressing. When you move along a little, you start to see its real loveliness. Then you realize that this exquisite perfection is terrible, it is frightening. When you conquer this fear, you know that beauty and terror are the same thing, and this is as it should be. There is no need for fear. For the world to be beautiful, it must finish. For every beginning, there is an end. And for every end, there is a beginning" (679). Amplifying the novel's religious themes, Guruji sermonizes to Gaitonde on the illusion of reality: "Reality itself, the real reality, is a madman's vision, a hallucination that the small individual human mind cannot hold" (731).

But the "existentially confused" Gaitonde finds out that Guruji is only a modern-day Machiavelli, and he was a pawn in the bizarre scheme of things. He realizes this after shooting Jojo dead in the safe house:

> In this clarity, I could see that Sridhar Shukla- Guru- ji- had been right. I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop anything. I was defeated. He had beaten me, because he knew me better than I knew myself. He knew my past, and he knew my future. What I did, or didn't do, was irrelevant. Or worse, it was entirely relevant. Whatever I chose to do would contribute to his plan, would end in fire. The world wanted to die, and I had helped it along. He had set up the sacrifice, and every action of mine was fuel. I couldn't stop it. (Chandra 857)

Guruji in Season 2 preaches about a warped idea of enlightenment, a return to Satya Yuga, which is nihilistic. Without direct political indictment, the adaptation critiques right-wing extremism choosing to avoid naming contemporary political figures for fear of censorship. The fundamentalist cult led by the wily Guruji advocates a kind of paranoid nationalism, a dystopian vision of *moksha*, where mass sacrifice, or mass cleansing begets a new dawn. This is not the teachings of our scriptures, but a distorted ideology which spells doom. The adaptation depicts the valorizing of death over life through queer fundamentalist logic. In this nuanced reworking and dialogical relationship between the source text and the adaptation, the politics of fidelity is sometimes molded by the politics of reception, involving a more radical transformation. Reactions to screen adaptations have always been polarized but an astute audience is always the best judge.

Chandra's final triumph is evident in the way he concludes Gaitonde's narrative told by his ghost in an utterly realistic, and at the same time fantastical manner. It was imperative for Gaitonde to tell his story to "somebody good, somebody simple", "somebody who had seen me not merely as Ganesh Gaitonde, but a human being". He chose Sartaj to hear his final revelations because Gaitonde was convinced that "despite all your Sardar- ji preening, you were moved by me. Our lives had crossed, and mine had changed for ever" (Chandra 858).

The life/death binary is depicted as metaphysical where Gaitonde's death in the beginning of the novel and his enigmatic warning to Sartaj emphasizes that life and death is a cyclical process. Gaitonde justifies his need to talk about himself and he continues to do so from a liminal space which blurs the lines between life and mortality: "Listen to me. If you want Ganesh Gaitonde, then you have

to let me talk. Otherwise Ganesh Gaitonde will escape you, as he escaped every time, as he escaped every last assassin. Ganesh Gaitonde almost escaped even me. Now, at this last hour, I have Ganesh Gaitonde, I know what he was, what he became"… "I do it for love. I do it because I know who I am. Bas, enough" (Chandra 859).

Gaitonde is a criminal without qualms, but his actions have a context, framed within the trauma and sufferings of his life. The trajectory of his life is underscored by his hubris and thereon to the *maya* that consumes him. Sartaj too, even when wrestling with his own demons, both personal and professional, rises to the occasion and takes the bull by the horns. Being a Sikh, he had never really practiced his faith, but his increasing disillusionment with the system is replaced by a sense of self-worth and self-realization, representing a karmic awakening. In the series, initially a passive character and even complicit with corruption, Sartaj redeems himself by undertaking the hazardous task of disarming the nuclear bomb; the final scene is left ambiguous, but this decision of his suggests an ethical rebirth.

The novel, along with parody, pastiche, appropriation or intertextuality, also employs multilingualism with local slang, profanity and patois to create a polyphonic effect. The series retains this with the Netflix staples like violence, gore, drugs, sex and cliffhangers to pander to the politics of cultural legibility. This is very crucial for screen adaptations as it facilitates understanding, and helps to navigate through the story, even when challenged with opacities at times. The novel with its layers of meaning calls for great dexterity on the part of the filmmaker to adapt it and make it comprehensible to viewers. Chandra delves into philosophical introspection in the novel, but the series without betraying the essence of the original, pivots to interrogate questions of power structures, government surveillance and biopolitical interventions. These deviations need to be appreciated for the way in which the adaptation tries to negotiate between the source text and the demands of audience expectations. Existing cultural narratives are reexamined, and new meanings are constructed which enhance the comprehension of the story. As Julie Sanders says, "Adaptation

studies needs to be understood as a field engaged with process, ideology and methodology rather than encouraging polarized value judgements" (24-25).

V

While discussing narrative and interpretation, Ira Bhaskar says that, "The reader/viewer's response to the narrative would dynamize his "perceptual, cognitive and affective processes", and the act of interpretation would then be concerned as much with understanding the text as with understanding our conceptual schemes and our temporal location in a world that may or may not be similar to the world of the text. Interpretation, then, is a dual-pronged activity- directed both outward to the text and its world and inward to ourselves and our context, in a mutually illuminating move" (390).

It is important to remember that while reframing *Sacred Games* for the OTT medium, the "adaptation is a text in itself, not a 'version' of a standard whole; and the text which an adaptation constitutes cannot simply be classified, explained or interpreted in terms of its being such an end-product or version" (Cardwell 20). There is talk about adaptation theories' resistance to theory, but "rather than solely adapting adaptation to theories, theories also need to adapt to adaptations" (Elliott 32). Kamilla Elliott goes on to say that "adaptations teach us that theories cannot predict or account for adaptations in all times and places, not only because the field is too large, but also because adaptations are always changing and adapting. Any theory of adaptation must therefore itself incorporate process and change. Adaptations admonish us to move continually beyond our present ideas and methodologies" (34). Thomas Leitch believes that an adaptation theory attuned to intertextuality, revision, and rewriting has unique potential as the "keystone of a new discipline of textual studies less ideologically driven, and therefore more powerful, than either contemporary literary or cultural studies" (20). We tend to use words such as *infidelity* and *betrayal* "when we have loved a book", but the "adaptation has not been worthy of that love" (Stam 54). But this reiteration about issues of fidelity and the implication of the supremacy of literature over film can hinder and inhibit the study of adaptation, restricting it from evolving. The adaptation of *Sacred Games* depends on the tapestry of intertextual references to maintain its efficacy of transposition. It is inevitably a case of selective perception and interpretation.

The touchstone of fidelity is how the makers reimagined the canvas of the novel in all its fullness and the convincing way they portray it. As Cardwell says, "Adaptations are rarely studied for themselves — rarely is interpretation valued as much as theorising; broader theoretical issues take precedence over local aesthetic concerns" (69). The adaptation is "based on the optical principle known as persistence of vision" (14), and the camera becomes an "artistic instrument", and therefore, "free to use almost endless variations" (15).

VI

The fidelity question has hounded the discourse of adaptation since its inception; as McFarlane says, the "discussion of adaptation has been bedevilled by the fidelity issue, no doubt ascribable in part to the novel's coming first, in part to the ingrained sense of literature's greater respectability in traditional critical circles" (8). Robert Stam considers fidelity a "chimera" and the possibility of "strict fidelity" very "questionable" (55). He has also criticised the valorising of literature over cinema which can reduce potential adaptations to mere derivatives. McFarlane contends that "there will often be a distinction between being faithful to the 'letter', an approach which the more sophisticated writer may suggest is no way to ensure a 'successful' adaptation, and to the 'spirit' or 'essence' of the work". He also says that "the fidelity approach seems a doomed enterprise and fidelity criticism unilluminating" (8-9). While adapting a literary text, Andrè Bazin observes that it would be advantageous for the film-maker to have "enough visual imagination to create the cinematic equivalent of the style of the original, and for the critic to have the eyes to see it" (20).

While referring to Stam and Leitch's views on fidelity, Glenn Jellenik in his essay "On the Origins of Adaptation, as Such: The Birth of a Simple Abstraction" reiterates, "For example, Robert Stam asserts, "The question of fidelity ignores the wider question: Fidelity to what?" (57), and Thomas Leitch argues, "Fidelity to its source text … is a hopelessly fallacious measure of a given adaptation's value because it is unattainable, undesirable, and theoretically possible only in a trivial sense"" (161). He further goes on to say that there is a "misbegotten urge to valorize fidelity. Fidelity is primarily driven by the fallacy of the begged question: our modern notion of adaptation actually enters the

culture via fidelity criticism. Thus, our cultural definition of adaptation is shaped by and emerges out of a central notion of and desire for fidelity, making it difficult to conceive of adaptation criticism without it" (9-10).

Adapting *Sacred Games* also contributed to a renewal of interest in the book itself as it added to the body of analysis, interpretation and critique of the text. An analysis of the differences between the text and the Netflix series is useful for a critique of the latter by delving deep into the question of what the makers sought to accomplish by adapting it, which is important in asserting whether the adaptation was successful or not. Jarrell D. Wright while discussing fidelity argues that "while the transposition of a narrative from a textual medium to the cinema might be able to explain the fact that the narrative has changed, the characteristics of cinema as a medium cannot explain why particular changes are made instead of others" (180). Frederic Jameson in his essay "Adaptation as a Philosophical Problem" is of the opinion that "the novel must give rise to a filmic adaptation that is not only governed by a wholly different aesthetic, but that breathes an utterly different spirit altogether" (217).

VII

The purpose of this paper in examining the text and screen adaptation of *Sacred Games* was to study how adaptation has evolved beyond fidelity debates by incorporating intertextuality, medium specificity, viewer agency and ideological ramifications, creating a framework for understanding how stories travel and transform across contexts. The novel interweaves the lives of the privileged and the downtrodden, the famous and the infamous, an uncompromising scrutiny of an urban landscape with all its aesthetics and frailties. This magnum opus rendered on screen also situates its core on the transitoriness of human existence and questions of morality, its narrative framework and character arcs underscored by the life/death binary. This genre-bending, multilayered and nuanced saga of flawed characters told in a compassionate manner is also a philosophical parable for the nation itself, a tribute to contemporary India.

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