

Politics of Adaptation and Consumerist Subversion in the Filmic Representation of Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*

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Abstract: The visual representation of literary works is powerfully considered by theorists like Linda Hutcheon, who argue that adaptations are “repetition with variations.” Nonetheless, cinematic adaptations of literary texts have been critiqued by Thomas Leitch, for whom “the primary motive of fidelity in the most well-known adaptations is financial, not aesthetic” (128). According to Leitch, literary property has all the rights to ‘presell’ itself to the viewers who have never gone through a literary work. We live in a consumerist society, like the film producers do, who are as much the participants in the rat race of ‘commercial hits’ as all of us are. Kazuo Ishiguro’s popular novel *Never Let Me Go* also falls prey to this Benjaminian notion of ‘mechanical reproduction’. The Filmic adaptation of Ishiguro’s novel lacks the interpersonal human emotions and psychological depth, thereby lending prominence to the politics of commodity culture. However, the 2010 adaptation of the novel centres on the theme of a love triangle between Tommy, Ruth and Kath. The re-presentation of Kath’s emotional first-person narrative is missing to an extent that it loses its sentimental depth, and there emerges the question of artistic fidelity that has to be owed to the novel. The core themes of the novel are subverted to shift the narrative from the commodification of clones, and the harsh philosophical undertones are softened by the producers to serve the likes of the global theatrical viewers. Moreover, “adaptation offers a scandal to aesthetics” (Leitch 7), which explores the idea of ethics and fidelity to a literary work. The paper seeks to identify the politics of contestation and subversion of bestselling novels to reach wider audiences, along with the commercial politics of adapting fiction into a cinematic text.

Keywords: Politics; Adaptation; Subversion; Filmic Representation; Consumerism

Adaptation studies is an interdisciplinary field that explores the transformation of a literary text from one medium to another. Adaptation studies have a Greek origin, where the epics of Homer were not just read but also performed on the stage. Moreover, Shakespearean plays were also influenced by the pre-existing works of playwrights such as Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd and many more. Therefore, it can be construed that transmedia adaptations have been commonly practised in Western cultures for ages. Even many of the blockbuster films in contemporary times are made up from the novels. Moreover, many famous comic books, short stories, non-fiction, autobiographies and mythologies have been adapted to films with the aid of interpolations and inculcations. George Bluestone, in his seminal work titled *Novels into Films* (1957), observes that till 1955, fifty per cent of the films were adapted from novels. He argues that novels cannot be compared to films because of the different demands put forward by media and thus alterations in the source texts become mandatory for these adaptive endeavors.

Additionally, a novel can take hours to indulge and comprehend the themes thoroughly whereas a film has temporal limitations, loaded with action and superficiality which considerably numbs the core idea of a novel, “The novel can give pages to the description of minutes and skip over years in a sentence; but while a film can dismiss time, it cannot expand it or hold it back to examine it in many facets” (Bunker). Novelists rely on language that is metaphorical and symbolic in its approach, which many times is largely compromised in films. Also, novels are written for a limited audience who understand the varied dimensions of language, while their adaptations are made to take care of the demands of people belonging to different age groups, different cultural backgrounds, learned or illiterate and so on. “The film is a group project—plots, dialogue and all the rest of the details are discussed and determined in council – in comparison with the lonely and individual efforts of the novelist” (Bunker). A film is a result of the collaborative efforts of the screenplay writer, director and other crew members; therefore, creative ownership is difficult to attribute, whereas in the case of a novel, it is a singular effort based on the experiences of a novelist’s life.

Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation via relying on its dictionary meaning, which is “to adjust, to alter, to make suitable” (7). For her, adaptation is a creative process which further decrypts the written words for theatrical audiences by reconstructing an original work. Thus, this shift in medium allows a narrative to be explored from a different perspective and offers interpretations that may vary in their appropriations and salvaging. This collaboration results in intertextuality, which leads to a deeper understanding and nuanced interpretations of a text. Her opinion on adaptations is affirmative because she views this transformation as a process of re-creation. In contrast to her views, many critics argue that adaptations retain an essence of their original work, making it problematic to present them as original entities.

Moreover, Thomas Leitch, a renowned adaptation studies scholar, believes that the adaptation academics support the violation of the integrity of a work through their support for filmic adaptations, and reviewers also try to prove their superiority over academicians. He upholds the opinion that “The two constituencies most likely to be scandalized by adaptation as such, then, are academics, especially literature teachers, who do not happen to be adaptation scholars, and movie reviewers who do not happen to be academics” (6). In filmic adaptations the integrity or fidelity owed to the source text is often overlooked by most of the directors to portray their filmic adaptation as a creative experiment. Additionally, “...adaptations rarely achieve anything like fidelity because they rarely attempt it” (Leitch 126). When a text is being ‘adapted’ or ‘translated,’ it owes fidelity to the original text, but the core idea of the parent text has been compromised in films like *The White Tiger*, released on Netflix, which was a plain cinematic experience as compared to Arvind Adiga’s novel of the same title. From the standpoint of fidelity, adaptations become questionable in several cases where a source text is altered to a great extent, while many of them are already present in the market to compete with each other. Meanwhile, in this never-ending business of adaptations, every creation needs to be different, as “the primary motive for fidelity in the most widely known adaptations is financial, not aesthetic” (Leitch 128). Even the timeless texts like *The Lord of the Rings* and *Gone with the Wind*

are coerced into a film, cutting dialogues and crucial episodes which appear to be unjust to their source texts.

Regardless of the efforts filmmakers put into their projects, they employ dazzling effects and motifs that have nothing to do with the original work. Robert Stam also notes, “infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration all connoting ghastly acts in one form or another” (qtd. in Georgy) are some of the acts that alter the essence of the texts adapted. The films based on these texts have had massive commercial success and received positive reviews, but the response was without going through the books themselves, as most viewers may not be aware of the books. In the Indian context, films like *Fitoor* (2016), *Aisha* (2010), and *Saawariya* (2007) are adapted from *The Great Expectations*, *Emma* and *The White Nights*, respectively. According to a review by *The New York Times*, the experience of *Saawariya* is visually enchanting but “it is pretty well drowned in Bollywood style” with “...colourful costumes, bellybuttons, almost kisses and 10 pumped-up, achingly sweet songs” and still could not live up to the expectations. Likewise, the cinematic experience of the Hindu mythological epic *Ramayana*, as *Adipurush* (2023), directed by Om Raut, faced a massive backlash from Hindu devotees because it had no story at all. The film lacks consistency with childish dialogues and unnecessary VFX, which could not fulfil the prospects its viewers had anticipated.

Films generally present fixed visuals at a constant pace of events, leaving less interpretive freedom for viewers; by contrast, reading is a different experience from watching films, as a reader engages in a dialogic process while interpreting a book. The symbols and metaphors used in a book are open to multiple interpretations before the reader opens it. Individuals from various cultural backgrounds, preconceptions, languages, and psyches align with and relate to the novel's comprehensive approach. There are many contradictions between what we read and what we see. As a result, the scope of thought-provoking capacity of a text ceases when viewed in a cinematic representation. To transform a narrative, screenwriters rewrite stories, reducing their complexity so they can be interpreted by the cinematic audience. “The contemporary definition seeks to crystallise

the way the story is transformed when it is adapted from one sign system into another” (Vallittu 160). In this process of rewriting the script, the core script of the text is altered to make it performance friendly. As the medium shifts from the paper to screen, the depth and complexity of the novel are compromised, “Adaptation transposes a specific medium into another generic mode. In the course of doing this, it trims and prunes along with adding, expanding and interpolating” (Sanders 18). Thus, altering and reducing the length of a text becomes inevitable for a filmic adaptation.

The intentional subversions in the storylines of the source texts are a political act. In the cinematic adaptation of Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), the assumption that all the characters must be white and the unnecessary love triangle disappoint the book readers. Also, there is a use of unnecessary erotic content to lure young audiences to theatres. These are some money-making tricks often employed by film producers for massive box office collections. Walter Benjamin has stated such ideas in his seminal essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” that the mechanical reproduction does not work on the principle of ritual but “politics” (6), and the function of art is reversed.

Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is set in an unknown future, where human cloning is normal, and they are brought up in a boarding house named Hailsham. It is a mini world where the students (clones) are otherized and exploited in an unconventional way. The novel starts with Kathy H saying, “My Name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old” (Ishiguro 3), narrating the novel from a first-person point of view. She states, “I’ve been carer of donors for over eleven years” (Ishiguro 3), reminiscing about her life from childhood to ultimate realisation about her future and eventually her final encounter with the horrific truth of her life. She acquires a tape of Judy Bridgewater and listens to her song “Never Let Me Go” holding her imaginary child which she can never have, “I’d grabbed the pillow to stand in for the baby, and I was doing a slow dance, my eyes closed, singing softly... ‘Oh baby, baby, never let me go...’” (71). Kathy H’s realisation that she can never grow old naturally, nor could she give birth, shatters the readers along with Kathy. While

reading the book, the reader learns about the fates of Tommy D, Kathy H., and Ruth C through Kathy's memories and stream of consciousness.

The novel's adaptation with the same title was released on 3 September 2010. It is directed by a British director named Mark Romanek, and the screenplay is written by Alex Garland. The film was released by DNA Films Films. The star cast of the film includes Carey Mulligan as Kathy H., Keira Knightley as Ruth and Andrew Garfield as Tommy D. All the main leads are British actors, and thus there is a "...dreamlike parable of Britishness — a particularly miserable Britishness, a Britishness which submits numbly and uncomplainingly to authority..." (Bradshaw). While Ishiguro's novel is about marginalisation and otherization, its tone is eerie, which gradually results in horror, an unexpected turn known to the reader from the very beginning. Contrastingly, the casting director did not try to depict the alienation and emotional vacuum of Hailsham. The casting of the film is done in a way where the fundamental notion of alienation seems missing in the adaptation, which could have been portrayed better by selecting the right actors. It would have represented a cut above by starring some interracial actors. Hailsham, in the novel, is a haunting void and a place where human evil is fundamental and systematic. Moreover, when we go through the novel, we find Kathy and Tommy to be best friends till the last part. Whenever Tommy is bullied for his disinterest in the arts, it is Kathy who tries to defend him. In the novel, Ruth is in a relationship with Tommy, but the adaptation portrays a love triangle among Tommy, Ruth, and Kathy.

Additionally, the filmic representation portrays a clash between Ruth and Kathy as Ruth says, "I know what you think, Kathy, I know you think that Tommy and you would have made more natural couple and you believe that there is a chance that Tommy and I would split up some day" (*Never Let Me Go*) which is not there in the novel. This unnecessary addition blurs thought-provoking aspects of the novel, such as what it means to be sterile. What is soul? How powerful fate can be? Moreover, Ishiguro has tried to introduce the characters distantly, lacking a detailed description, whereas in the filmic adaptation, the directors have failed to depict his intentional failure. The title of the novel *Never Let Me Go* is based on the motherhood instincts of Kathy in Hailsham. She is a clone who will be

donating her organs in the coming years of her life. In Hailsham, she gets a CD of Judy Bridgewater's songs in which she finds a song "Never Let Me Go". She plays her favorite track during a random evening, holds a pillow close to her chest and starts imagining a child while listening to the word 'baby' in the song. This episode raises several questions about Kathy's humanity, allowing the reader to delve deep into the questions, such as: Does Kathy have a soul? What is it to be a human? Kazuo Ishiguro, in an article, mentions, "What struck me about this title was the sheer impossibility of what was being requested. 'Please hold me for a long time' would be reasonable... there are times when we human beings wish, from the depths of our souls, for something we know to be beyond anyone's reach" (*Literary Hub*). Therefore, the title has an essence of pleading for something that can never be achieved, such as the 'baby' she imagines while listening to the song, as well as their fate as donors. Ishiguro has tried to highlight the commonality in the suffering of the clones and humans trapped in an unavoidable trap of fate and misery.

In the filmic adaptation, this aspect, which adds to the main theme of the novel, is eradicated like anything, "Meaningful conversations and significant scenes that the screenwriter Alex Garland has scrupulously extruded from the novel" (Manohla). The film portrays a scene where Kathy is trying to control her sexual urge while listening to this song, in order to give a sexual quotient to the audience. Additionally, the novel ends with a sense of loss, longing, and the fragility of human connections. During Kathy and Tommy's last meeting with Madame in the novel regarding the deferral, the conversation is deep and sentimental where Madame talks a bit about their remembrance of Kathy listening to that song saying, "I thought some foolish student had left the music on. But when I came into your dormitory, I saw you... a little girl... dancing sympathetically" (266). There is a melancholic feeling that makes the reader sorrowful for humanity as a whole: "I saw a new world coming rapidly... Very good. But a harsh, cruel world" (267), whereas the film ends with a feeling of Kathy H being alone and the viewers feeling bad just for Kathy. The last conversation is a very thoughtful dialogue between both of them and Madame, which is shortened in the film. This scene in

the novel has strong potential to stir readers' sentiments, but it feels short and superficial as one watches the adaptation.

In contemporary times, audiences develop a kind of fascination for some characters and stories. As a result, fandoms are being created, and the work unfolds to a wider audience through media. In transmedia storytelling, from a novel to film, there comes a semiotic shift in verbal and behavioural signs. Therefore, the narration of the story shifts when the medium changes: “In the case of transmedia storytelling, the emphasis is strictly on narrative, and each medium involved in the storytelling practice is assumed to do what it does best” (Jenkins 96). People try to connect through media and take part in activities others are in. This communitarian feeling among people finances film businesses “... transmedia storytelling practices may go well with marketing strategies of the industry aiming at creating blockbusters” (Schillar 100). People are urged to see their favourite fictional characters on screen, and film industry executives promote this, fueling the race for blockbusters. Moreover, transmedia authorship generates “collaborative authorship” to “encourage audience partnership” (Vallittu 102); thus, fandoms also participate enthusiastically in the meaning-making in a unique way through different cultural contexts. These reasons “should be considered seriously by adaptation theory, even if this means rethinking the role of intentionality in our critical thinking about art in general” (Hutcheon 95).

Additionally, the politics of the bourgeois to create copies and the tendency of the proletariat to consume whatever is available in the market are other reasons for this. The adaptations and remakes of those adaptations are expected to meet certain box-office targets. “Replicas were made by pupils in practice of their craft, by masters for diffusing their works, and, finally, by third parties in the pursuit of gain” (Benjamin 2). Ishiguro is a Nobel Prize-winning writer and thus, a brand face for production houses. Most of the films are adapted from popular books to influence and persuade more readers to see their favourite characters. Walter Benjamin contends, “The presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity” (3), which means that the concept of authenticity comes from the originality of a work. Nothing can be called authentic without the existence of the

original. Additionally, the mechanical reproduction of a work can never achieve the touch of originality. Benjamin contends that in contemporary times, the “... film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations” (13), which means that through spectacle and effects, film-makers promote a distorted reality that film industry is trying hard to spur the interest of the masses through illusion-promoting spectacles and dubious speculations” (13), which means that through spectacle and effects, filmmakers promote a distorted reality that is manipulative in nature. It is the politics of film production that generate such illusions, promoting the dominant ideology of the capitalists. In the film *Never Let Me Go*, the beautiful shots, the background music, the unnecessary love triangle, and the visual submission of the clones to their fate distort the novel’s effect, which otherwise is deeply psychological and emotional. A reader has plenty of time to understand a book's nuances, but a film has its own temporal limitations. Hence, the deep capitalistic undertones and narcissistic, self-serving humanness become explicit in adaptations. The film appears to be a romantic tragedy rather than a political dystopia. The visuals of any film serve as an anaesthesia for the masses, numbing them to deeper interpretations of the motifs and symbols. As a result, the aura and authenticity of a work disappear. This subversion of the core ideology of the novel is more or less political, deviating it from some serious themes to melodrama and entertainment.

To conclude, the analysis demonstrates how films, soap operas and other popular forms of transmedia adaptations are political at its core. The approach and target of screenwriters is starkly different from that of novelists. Additionally, the storytelling also transforms when the medium changes. This subversion from the core elements of the parent script is a result of capitalist mind play as well as the consumerist tendency of people. Mostly, the common crowd goes to the theatre for entertainment and nothing much. As a result, films are released to cash on from the leisure of the masses, not critical analysis. After studying the nuanced language of *Never Let Me Go* and then watching the filmic adaptation, it can be said that the film was a hollow and superficial experience. The most thoughtfully written parts were missing which failed to evoke genuine emotions like the

novel. Adaptations are also called re-creations which are different from translations, therefore, adaptations cannot and should not replicate the source text but offer its own perspective on the novel.

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