

Tracing the Transition of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* from Text to OTT

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Abstract: Adaptations, whether in the form of film or on OTT platforms, visually reflect the world of a literary masterpiece and provide a distinctive form of infotainment. By employing distinctive set design, costumes, cinematography, and other visual elements, they introduce new interpretations of classic narratives. OTT platforms are more effective in exploring and presenting long and complex narratives than mainstream cinema, which is obligated to present the story within a specific time frame. In 2020, Mira Nair adapted such a giant and groundbreaking novel, *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, into a Netflix drama series of the same name. Published in 1993, this nearly 1400-page novel, densely populated with characters, has garnered numerous accolades. Several transformations have occurred during the process of transferring it from the pages to the screen. This paper is an endeavour to deeply examine those transformations and address questions such as: To what extent is fidelity essential? In the series, what are the inclusions and exclusions? Do these additions and deletions have any socio-cultural, psychological, gender-centric, historical, economic, or technical implications? Does the series negatively impact the novel it adapts, or does it infuse it with fresh energy? Furthermore, by using the “compare and contrast” method, it will evaluate the use of literary tools in the novel and cinematic devices in the series in accordance with the theories propounded by George Bluestone, Michael Klein, and Gillian Parker.

Keywords: A Suitable Boy; Adaptation; George Bluestone; Mira Nair; Vikram Seth

The contemporary world is a world of OTT platforms. Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar and many more such platforms are widely popular. The adaptation of a novel into a screenplay for a film or series has become a distinct genre in the twentieth century. Long, complex narratives are often

adapted into series because mainstream cinema is obligated to present the story within a specific time frame of a few hours. Adaptations, whether in film or series form, visually reflect the world of a literary masterpiece and provide a distinctive form of infotainment. By employing distinctive set design, costumes, cinematography, and other visual elements, they introduce new interpretations of classic narratives. In 2020, Mira Nair adapted Vikram Seth's groundbreaking novel *A Suitable Boy* into a Netflix drama series of the same name. It was the first BBC period drama series to feature a non-white cast. It first aired on BBC One in the United Kingdom from July 26 to August 24, 2020 and was subsequently released worldwide on Netflix. Published in 1993, Vikram Seth's nearly 1400-page novel, densely populated with characters, has garnered numerous accolades. Several transformations have occurred during the process of transferring it from the pages to the screen. The process of converting linguistic signals into visual signs always entails some form of compression. Some characters may be removed while others may be modified. This paper attempts to examine those transformations and, using the "compare and contrast" method, evaluates the use of literary tools in the novel and cinematic devices in the series in accordance with the theories of various theorists.

Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* is a grand narrative that weaves together the lives of four notable families—The Mehras, The Kapoors, The Khans, and The Chatterjis—set in post-independence India during the 1950s, amidst a landscape of political and social turmoil, marked by religious strife and land reform. Besides portraying Rupa Mehra's search for a suitable boy for her daughter Lata, this masterpiece serves as a political fable that portrays the emerging democracy, vote-bank politics, and communalism that were beginning to undermine the nation's essence. The OTT adaptation of the novel *A Suitable Boy* captures the essence of the narrative and the ethos of post-independence India quite faithfully. The star-studded cast of the series presents the finest actors. Tanya Maniktala portrays Lata Mehra. Ishaan Khattar plays Mann Kapoor, Danesh Razvi plays Kabir Durrani, and Tabu plays Saeeda Bai. Shahana Goswami plays Meenakshi Mehra. Rasika Dugal plays

Savita Kapoor, and Mahira Kakkar plays Rupa Mehra. Ram Kapoor plays Mahesh Kapoor, and Namit Das plays Haresh Khanna.

Bringing a novel to celluloid is not an easy task. The main challenge lies in maintaining its fidelity and the connection between novel and film encompasses the fundamental conundrum of words and images that are irreducible and untranslatable to one another. Cinema operates within its own distinct realm, characterised by unique aspects of economics, authorship, production, distribution, and reception; certain issues present in the novel are muted while others take centre stage. This paper explores the intricacies of adapting Seth's novel from this perspective.

This cynicism regarding the untranslatability of words and images originates from the Saussurean concept of the arbitrary link between the signifier and the signified. There are, however, strong formal, generic, stylistic, narrative, cultural, and historical ties between the two ways of representing things. Several poststructuralist critics have written on this peculiar connection between words and pictures. Discussing the connection between text and visuals in his book *Illustration*, the Yale critic J. Hillis Miller shares his insights:

A picture and a text juxtaposed will always have different meanings or logoi. They will conflict irreconcilably with one another, since they are different signs... Neither the meaning of a picture nor the meaning of a sentence is by any means translatable. The picture speaks for itself. The sentence means itself. The two can never meet, not even at some vanishing-point where the sun has set. (Miller 95)

There are four main schools of thought on book-to-film adaptation, namely: (1) constructivism, (2) adaptation scepticism, (3) structuralism, and (4) cognitive equivalency. Constructivists believe that adapting a novel into a series or a film is not merely a transfer of the work, but an act of recreation, because many changes are made to suit the visual medium. Like an "architect," the filmmaker or director blends elements from the novel, but the products that emerge are a different creation with a unique cinematic setting. Adaptation Scepticism theory views films as autonomous, evolving productions that offer unique experiences, rather than mere imitations of the original material.

Sceptics doubt that a film that closely mimics its source is better. They disagree that literature is superior to films. Change is encouraged, as each new medium requires adjustments. They acknowledge the filmmaker's role in adapting the story for the medium. They believe films and OTT series are different from the original. It's an innovative story with its own strengths and implications, not merely a different take on the same subject. According to a structuralist view of film adaptation, adaptations convey meaning through universal structures and standards, like language, rather than simply copying original material. Using semiotics, structuralism examines how signals create meaning in codes. The cognitive equivalence method, based on translation studies, suggests that film adaptations should try to provide audiences with a similar experience to the original source material. This method emphasises overall meaning and emotional depth over word-for-word translation. Cognitive equivalence in adaptation states that a movie should make viewers feel and think the same way, regardless of alterations to the story or visuals to fit the new medium and environment.

Mira Nair's primary approach in Series *A Suitable Boy* is Adaptation Scepticism. As this approach acknowledges that a literary work cannot be fully or faithfully translated into another medium, like film or television, Mira has skillfully engaged in reinterpretation, reduction, and reconfiguration to suit the visual medium. Vikram Seth's narrative unfolds across 1,349 pages — a grand tale brimming with a multitude of characters and complex storylines, but Mira Nair's series takes a different approach by condensing the narrative into 6 episodes, reordering the events, removing various subplots, and either condensing or omitting certain characters. This viewpoint highlights the limits of adaptation. Nair delves into themes such as post-Partition identity, love, religion, and politics, yet she navigates them through a cinematic rather than a literary lens. George Bluestone, the pioneer of adaptation studies, is a major supporter of this idea. He believed that film and literature are very different because one is linguistic and the other is visual. As Bluestone claimed, "changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium (05)." For instance, the internal substance of the mind, like memory, dreams, and imagination, which are such

a big part of literature, can't be fully transmitted into film. Also, literature is about internal thought, character, and the psychological, whereas film is about exterior action, narrative, and the social.

The transfer of characters from book to movie is also not as effective because visuals can't match the force of words. Bluestone says that the narrative form is the only thing that can be transmitted between these two media. In sum, Bluestone concludes:

What happens, therefore, when the filmmaker undertakes the adaptation of a novel, given the inevitable mutation, is that he does not convert the novel at all. What he adapts is a kind of paraphrase of the novel—the novel viewed as raw material. He looks not to the organic novel, whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which have somehow detached themselves from language and, like heroes of folk legends, have achieved a mythic life of their own. (62)

Nair's work also contains constructivist elements. Constructivists emphasise that both creators and audience play a part in constructing meaning. The OTT version highlights this with its distinct visual and cultural elements, such as costumes, language, music, and architecture, which help viewers in “constructing” meaning within an Indian socio-historical context. Mira Nair's casting highlights innovative viewpoints as she chose a primarily Indian cast speaking Indian English, which has encountered some criticism for its unconventional accents. This decision encourages the audience to delve into their personal understandings of identity, contemporary culture, and heritage.

Narratives change drastically when they are exported from books to films. Roland Barthes' narrative theory, notably his ideas about functions and codes, explains this distinctly. In his book *S/Z*, he has categorized the narrative structure into two parts: cardinal functions (hinge points) and catalysers (less important acts). Cardinal Functions are the most important parts of a story that change its course. When it comes to adaptation, changing or taking away cardinal functions can make the plot very different from the book it is based on. McFarlane recounts

Overall, then, there is a close parallel between the cardinal functions which carry the action in the novel and those in the film. Sometimes, as indicated, these appear in different orders in the

two.... The social and affective discrepancies between the two texts will generally be located at other levels of the text, sometimes at the level of the catalyzers which surround the cardinal functions...but more significantly at the level of enunciation, through the exercise of those strategies peculiar to the medium in question. (178)

Barthes found five narrative codes—hermeneutic, proairetic, symbolic, semantic, and cultural—that affect the meaning and structure of a story. Vikram Seth employs all five of Roland Barthes’s narrative codes in *A Suitable Boy*. The novel's broad sweep and length permit a detailed examination of various codes, with some more pronounced or quietly integrated than others, depending on the particular narrative context. Seth uses Semantic code to add deeper meanings to things. For instance, the title of the book, *A Suitable Boy*, has meaning in and of itself, prompting readers to consider the social norms and pressures surrounding marriage in post-independence India. The symbolic code appears in repeated images, objects, or characters that stand for bigger concepts or themes. For example, the monsoon season might symbolise both destruction and fresh beginnings, just as the changes in society and politics at the time did. The story of the novel is built around a succession of events and acts, as searching for a suitable boy, political rallies, and personal fights, thus carrying proairetic codes. The quest for a suitable boy, the novel’s main mystery, is a classic example of the hermeneutic code. This code pulls the reader in and makes them want to find out more about the characters and their interactions.

Mira Nair’s BBC and Netflix drama preserves all these codes. Hermeneutic code is created by the question: Who will Lata Mehra marry? This mystery appears in all six episodes. The Maan Kapoor-Saeeda Bai subplot tackles hermeneutic concerns of desire, loyalty, and social acceptance. The series' proairetic code is Lata's increasing love for Kabir, Maan's obsessive passion for Saeeda Bai, and Firoz’s stabbing. These elements add excitement and clarify socio-political concerns by providing momentum and motivation. Classical music, religious symbols, and traditional attire chosen by Mira Nair have symbolic meanings and thus represent semantic codes. Saeeda Bai's constant use of the “*ghungroo*” (anklet bells) demonstrates her prostitution, women’s limitations, and

desire's commercialisation. The garden where Lata and Kabir first meet symbolises perilous beauty, forbidden love, and rebellious idealism. The series uses opposites like tradition and modernity, Hindu and Muslim, duty and desire, and urban and rural to create a symbolic code. Lata's battle with arranged marriage and romantic autonomy shows the cultural divide between tradition and modernity. Kabir and Firoz represent the Hindu-Muslim conflict and post-partition nationalism. Maan struggles between duty and desire. The socio-economic and cultural transformation of India in the 1950s is evident in both feudal villages and cosmopolitan cities. The cultural code of common knowledge, historical context, and intertextuality underpins Nair's adaptation.

Cardinal functions are effectively preserved and presented in Mira Nair's Netflix series. While the changes can be seen in *Catalysers*. The Netflix version of *A Suitable Boy* simplifies and, at times, modifies characters because it is hard to turn a long book into a short series. The book portrays Lata as knowledgeable, thoughtful, and eager to learn. Despite her young age, she questions norms, notably arranged marriage. She manages familial and personal demands. Her inner thoughts reveal her hardships and growth. The Series showed Lata as more confident on the outside. Though entertaining, the performance lacks emotional depth. The text mentioned that the main character, Lata, looked dark. The opening few pages' sarcastic comments about her skin colour, including the claim that pink doesn't suit her, grab readers' interest. Her mother fears "black grandchildren." However, Mira Nair's Lata is lighter-skinned than rest of the rest of the cast. She wears a blouse without sleeves. However, Seth's traditional Mrs. Mehra would have certainly disapproved of a revealing top, considered a bit 'too modern' for the 1950s. In the book, there was a contrast between Pran and Savita that was like "Beauty and the Beast." People say that Savita has light complexion and is pretty, while Pran has dark skin and isn't particularly appealing. But the actors who portray the parts don't look like they fit together at all.

Maan is careless and has many emotions that surface in the novel. He is close to Firoz, but homoerotic undertones are subtle and take time to surface. In the series, Ishaan Khatter plays expressive, passionate, and magnetic Maan. His homoerotic tension with Firoz is obvious at a

distance, resulting in a stronger but less nuanced portrayal of their connection. In the book, Maan celebrates Holi with his friend at Pran's house and he drowns a senior professor during Holi. In the series, they celebrate Holi at their father's house, and the state revenue minister and Maan submerge the Home Minister in a fountain to bring him down. It increases rivalry amongst the ministers. The Home Minister is portrayed with greater malice and cunning in the series to amplify the tension. In the book, Maan is present for his mother's last rites, whereas in the series, he is confined to jail. The Home Minister takes on a more nefarious role. In the book, the Home Minister takes the initiative to call the police and instructs them to accompany Maan for his mother's last rites. In the series, the Home Minister stops Maan from getting out of the prison, denying him the chance to bid farewell to his cherished mother.

It is comprehensible that a significant number of characters are not included in the series, as there would have been insufficient time to adequately develop their arc. However, Imtiaz Khan was one character who was unjustly eliminated. In the book, Maan's closest friend Firoz has a twin brother named Imtiaz; however, in the series, Firoz does not have a twin. Another character that stood out for her absence was Maan's older sister, Veena. Veena's son, the extraordinary maths genius Bhaskar, is featured in the series, yet his parents remain unseen. At one point, it seemed Bhaskar was meant to be the son of Praan and Savita in the adaptation, but that turned out not to be the case. Bhaskar looked like a lost child, crammed into the sets.

The Chatterjee lineage is also notably diminished to three siblings. The third brother, Dipankar, and the youngest brother, Tapan, have been severed from the narrative. It was important to highlight because Tapan drew some inspiration from Vikram Seth's life and was truly an endearing character.

Saaeda Bai Bibbo is portrayed as youthful and voluptuous in the book. At a certain point, she successfully entices Maan into sharing a kiss with her, a moment missing from the series. The on-screen Bibbo presents a more mature, robust figure, in contrast to the mischievous portrayal in the

book. Saeeda writes to Maan, imploring him to curtail his rural tour and return to Brahmipur, missing him. None of that happens in the book. She doesn't write him a letter or invite him back in the book.

Varun's short romance with Kalpana and his interview for the Indian Administrative Service occur much earlier than depicted in the novel. The series does not include the sub-plot concerning Meenakshi's second pregnancy and her miscarriage. In the novel, the three potential suitors of Lata—Kabir, Amit, and Haresh—collide while enjoying a cricket match. In the series, they encounter each other outside her brother's residence. In a somewhat dramatic scene, Lata proposes to Haresh that they marry while he is travelling to Calcutta by train. Although it was a refreshing change, it was also overly cliché, as these airport/train station sequences are a common feature in the climax of numerous Hollywood and Bollywood romances. The final minor deviation from Seth's narrative is that the Durrani family is invited to Lata's wedding in the novel; however, Kabir is unable to attend for sentimental reasons. In the series, there is a rather sombre scene in which a wistful Kabir is seen on his bicycle, observing a joyful Lata as she is married off to Haresh.

The tone, style, complexity, and cultural nuance of the language in Vikram Seth's novel *A Suitable Boy* and the language in Mira Nair's Netflix adaptation (2020) are very different. This is mostly because of the distinct requirements and limitations of their mediums: literary fiction vs. visual storytelling. Vikram Seth writes in a very advanced, literary English that includes complex sentence structures, deep inner monologues, and many references to other cultures. The work imitates the style of 19th-century English literature, such as Dickens or Tolstoy, but also incorporates Indian cultural and linguistic elements, including words from Hindi, Urdu, and Sanskrit. The chapter names are written as rhyming couplets, which gives the impression of a musical structure behind the story. Seth's original work is rich in literary elements, including ghazals, classical poetry, and an internal rhythm; “The rose laughs at the activities of the nightingale-/ What they call love is a defect of the mind” (127).

Mira Nair turned the couplets into musical interludes. She deems the ghazals “the soul of the film” since they made a “musical cinematic language” that was important to the tone of the

translation. For instance, one Urdu poem, “Mehfil Barkhast Hui,” was written and commissioned for Saeeda Bai to sing, bringing writing to life through performance. Therefore, despite the fact that Seth’s novel and Mira Nair’s BBC series share a common plot, they differ significantly in numerous respects, a phenomenon that is entirely natural when adapting a narrative for the screen. Both works of art were effective in leaving a lasting impression on readers and the audience.

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