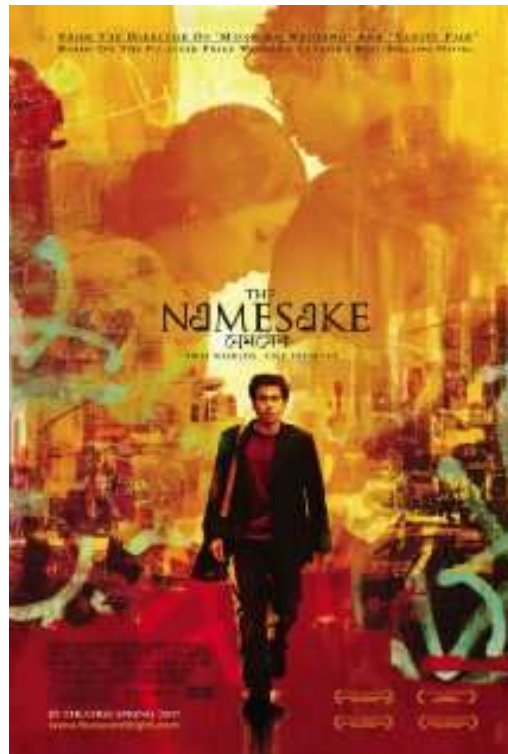


Transposal from Fiction to Motion Picture: Crafting Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* on Celluloid

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Abstract

Literary ventures are ongoing journeys towards boundless horizon with creative experiments and discussions. The film makers are exploring creative experiments by adapting the literary works on celluloid due to their high-minded respect for literary works, blended with ambitious mood of crass commercialism. Fiction and motion pictures are two different art forms, two distinct vehicles of storytelling. They are different in terms of the structures, perception and narrative. Films adapted from novels are diluted versions of novels, with remarkable mutations to the source material. Adaptations are now being analysed as “avatars of artistic creativity”.

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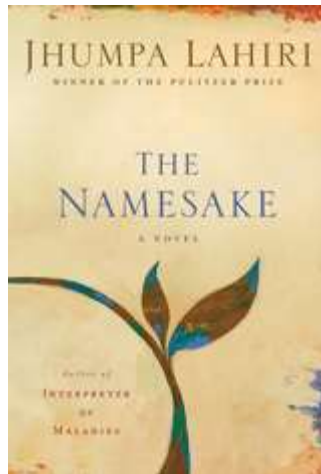
Transposal from Fiction to Motion Picture: Crafting Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* on Celluloid

Film is an art for audience's sake. Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* presents sociologically realistic and ethnographically detailed portrayal of Bengali Americans in memoir style with their quest for identities. Mira Nair transposed Lahiri's novel into visual poetics on celluloid in 2007, which foregrounds the generation difference between American born Gogol Ganguli, and his immigrant parents of Bengali origin.



The two art forms of *The Namesake* through the perception of two women illustrate the thematic convergence as well as narrative dissonances. Though the book does not have a clear-cut narrative arc, Nair has successfully transcoded Lahiri's elusive style on celluloid. She probes into the boundary of Lahiri's emotional citadel and snaps Lahiri's poignant feelings of immigrant experience through her visual venture. Both the creators, being cultural transplants themselves, have crafted the immigrant experience, with fine combination of ethnographic and autobiographical touches. This paper is an attempt to scrutinize how the two art forms of *The Namesake* promote a symbiotic relationship between scientific and artistic activities.

Introduction



Literary ventures are ongoing journeys towards boundless horizon with creative experiments and discussions. Henry James claims the same in his *Art of Fiction*, “Art lives upon discussion, and upon experiment ... upon variety of attempt, upon exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints...” The film makers are exploring creative experiments by adapting the literary works on celluloid due to their high-minded respect for literary works, blended with ambitious mood of crass commercialism. Dudley Andrew observes, “well over half of all commercial films have come from literary original... (10)” (qtd. in Cora). Morris Beja reports that more than three fourths of the awards for ‘best pictures’ “since 1935, the largest proportion have been film adaptations of novels (78)” (qtd. in Cora).

Film and Fiction are two different art forms, two distinct vehicles of storytelling. They are different in terms of the structure, perception and the narrative. Brimming with creative inspirations, adapting necessary literature of hundreds of pages onto a three hours movie is not an easy task. Cinematic considerations must be made where novel is to be successfully adapted to the filmic media. This paper is an attempt to explore the chords of intertextual relationship between literary and cinematic versions of *The Namesake* foregrounding adaptation theories and the creators’ ethnography and autobiographical touches.

Adaptations: Avatars of Artistic Creativity

Majority case studies on adaptations appear to dwell on the question of fidelity. Geoffrey Wagner suggests three possible routes for the assessment of effectiveness of adaptation as

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Transposition, Commentary, and Analogy. Transposition is the least satisfactory method, in which “a novel is directly given on the screen with the minimum of apparent interference” (Wagner 222). Film where an original source is either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect is categorized as Commentary. Such films are regarded as “creative restoration” (223). The final mode is an analogy where the film becomes “another work of art” (227) as the creativity of the director is privileged over the author.

Most studies that compare literature and film adaptation fail to move away from the fidelity issue. But in the last decade of research, there has been a significant shift towards this attitude. The discussions have “moved from a moralistic discourse of fidelity and betrayal to less judgemental discourse of intertextuality” (Robert Stam 209). The success of adaptation lies in the issue of their fertility not their fidelity. Stam reinforces that an adaptation should be faithful not so much to the source text but rather to the “essence of medium of expression”. (58).

Panorama of Ethnography and Autobiographical Touches

Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* (2003) presents sociologically realistic and ethnographically detailed portrayal of Bengali Americans with their quest for identities in memoir style. Mira Nair transposed Lahiri’s novel into visual poetics on celluloid in 2007, which foregrounds the generation difference between American born Gogol Ganguli and his immigrant parents of Bengali origin. It is imperative to probe into the creators’ life and culture to disentangle the mysteries embedded in their work of art.

Both the creators have come from multiethnic backgrounds. Viewed through the prism of the authors’ origins, it is apparent that their lives have been affected by cross roads. Lahiri and Nair have experienced diverse (geo)-cultural and ethnic milieu. Being an Indian by ancestry, British by birth and American by immigration, Lahiri enjoys a sense of authority and freedom while mining immigrant experience in her novel *The Namesake*. It is the novel of dichotomy between Indianism and Americanism, which raises the cultural conflicts. It is the story of the protagonist Gogol Ganguli’s rebel against his odd nomenclature and his peregrination for identity.

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The conflict arises because of his double identity – as Gogol Ganguli, the Bengali boy and Nikhil, the American avatar.

As a Bengali by heritage, Lahiri grew up with the tradition of good name and pet names. Formally named Nilanjana Sudehna Lahiri, she was encouraged by kindergarten teacher to go by pet name, Jhumpa. This is of course of Gogol's experience. Lahiri accepts "I'm like Gogol in that my pet name inadvertently becomes my good name". She avails the space of her novel to explore pet name/good name distinction. The original spark of the book is the fact that one of Lahiri's kinsmen in India has the pet name Gogol. Lahiri overlaps with her characters. She is about the same age as Gogol and whose parents are from West Bengal like the writer. Like Moushumi she feels closest to being British since Britain is her country of birth. She ruminates in her interview released by Houghton Mifflin: "... it bothered me growing up, the feeling that there was no single place, I was fully belonged".

Born in a small town, educated at Harvard, Nair somewhere identifies more with the writer Lahiri and the protagonist Ashima. In her interview by Aseem Chhabra Nair reminisces, "Then there is ... this image of Ashima in her sari, hauling her laundry cart in snow... reminds me when I came to the U.S.". The film *The Namesake* is personal for her at many levels. She found Lahiri's novel as a "bolt of lightning" when she mourned for the sudden death of a close relative as that of Ashoke in Lahiri's novel and the book was like a solace to her. It is an emotional return to her creative roots in a city where she acquires her cinematic sensibilities. She herself claims in her interview by Paul Fischer, "I was here from 1968 till 1976... I can capture so many things in Kolkata in my film". *Times of India* has rightly acclaimed, "*The Namesake* is Nair's tribute to her Janmabhoomi". (Nikhat Kazmi).

Ethnography is an account of exploring cultural phenomena of a particular society or community. Both the semiotic and filmic version of *The Namesake* unfolds the conflicts of ethno-cultural dislocation of the Bengali-Americans. The first generation immigrants strive to weave Indian nests on non-native domain with the twigs of cuisines, pet names, good names, ceremonies and rituals of Bengali heritage. Their children struggle to identify themselves as thoroughbred

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Americans. They stumbled in their cross-cultural roads, as it is strewn with their cultural conflicts and hybrid identity and beget the scar of identity crisis. The film is beautifully shot as well, taking the audience from skyscrapers of New York to the streets of Calcutta tying culture and geography together seamlessly with carefully wrought visual imagery. The film shuttles between Calcutta and New York teeming with people with their cultural differences and conflicts. Both forms of *The Namesake* are subtle depiction of flipsides of the coin of autobiography and ethnography.

Thematic Convergence

Nair transposes Lahiri's elusive style in her photographic medium successfully. She probes into the boundary of Lahiri's emotional citadel and snaps Lahiri's poignant feelings of immigrant experience. *The Namesake* through the perception of two women illustrates the thematic convergence and narrative dissonances. Lahiri's novel suspires themes of generational difference, clash of cultures and conflicts between East and West, Naming and renaming etc. The main protagonist Gogol's odd nomenclature is the metaphorical backbone of the novel. He was named after his father's favourite Russian author Nikolai Gogol on the spur- of- the moment. Gogol toggles to throw off the shackles of name and nationality, which increase his identity crisis. He struggles to find himself through star-crossed relationship. Even his marriage with Moushumi does not last long. His inclination to rebel and declination to come home reveals his identity crisis. His rebellion becomes evident when he starts to live with his white girl friend Maxine who lives with her parents. Intoxicated with western way of living, he made an expedition to wipe away the granules of Indianess, embedded in his birth and psyche. The shock of his father's death brings him back to his roots.

Nair can capture the thematic threads interwoven across Lahiri's novel. She has not introduced any new character except the cinematic liberty of transforming Ashima into a fledging singer. The prime plot of the novel is successfully transposed into film. But at times she leaped over some brilliant nuggets of character and plot development as she shoe-horns the novel's narrative into a two hour film. The movie could not stick to the book for some pivotal dramatic sequences like Ashima missed her bag of shopping on the metro but felt bonded to the city in a strange way, when she got it back from MBTA lost and found. "...the following day the bags are

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returned, not a teaspoon missing. Somehow this small miracle causes Ashima to feel connected to Cambridge in a way she has not previously thought possible” (*The Namesake* 42). The very next day of hearing about her father’s demise she purposely boards the metro and left the bag of shopping she did for her father. Lahiri discloses Ashima’s anguish and distress in her semiotic version “As the train slows to halt she stands ready to disembark. She does not turn back to look at the shopping bag, left purposely beneath her seat. “Hey, the Indian lady forgets her stuff”, she hears as the doors shut, and as the train pulls away she hears a first pounding on glass, but she keeps walking, pushing Gogol along the plat-form” (46).

Obviously Gogol’s break up with Maxine seems sudden and inexplicable. Again Nair visualizes Moushumi’s infidelity to be the main cause of their breaking of marriage bond. But Lahiri develops the plot of the same with the psychological insight. Nair has to pour ten gallons of voluminous novel into one gallon jug of film. So she adopts some remarkable mutations with incision and interpolation to fit the demands of time and to cater the taste of her audience. Though at times, the film fails to bring out the complexity of the novel with its truncations, it captures the heart beat of the novel. Nair summed up in her interview by Paul Fischer: “the book is our mantra and though there are condensations, the characters are pretty much from the book”.

Narrative Dissonances

Fiction and Film tell us stories via narratives. But these two genres are different in their techniques, methods, and presentation of narrative, with different code systems. The writer is God-like whose creations are with innate beauty and integrity. But the film maker like sculptor has to chisel his artistic creation with cinematic devices and strategies to enthrall his audience. As stated by Monaco “the structure of the cinema is defined by cinematic codes” (175), as the film lacks language codes. These codes enable us to read film narratives and learn to ascribe its meaning. Lahiri’s *The Namesake* in semiotic version and Nair’s *The Namesake* in photographic medium have operated on two language systems- one worked wholly on a symbolic platform, while the other worked through the interaction of cinematic codes.

The point of view of Lahiri's novel, an icy third- person partial omniscience is well suited to capture the confluence of conflicts that churn through the book. The third person narration shifts different perspectives, usually it enters the perspective of Gogol/Nikhil, occasionally sharing the perspective of Ashima, at least once entering the perspective of Ashoke and in one chapter the perspective shifts to Gogol's wife Moushumi. Lahiri persistently spotlights the identity crisis of Gogol's namesake by focusing the narrative choice to consistently call him Gogol not as Nikhil except for one chapter which is in Moushumi's perspective. Moushumi's relationship to Gogol is tied up in confused relationship to her own past. Lahiri unfolds it here: "She'd genuinely liked Nikhil. She'd liked that he was neither a doctor nor an engineer. She'd liked that he'd changed his name from Gogol to Nikhil... it was a thing that made him somehow new, not the person her mother mentioned" (NS 248). However in the final two paragraphs of the novel the third person narrator describes Gogol Ganguli only in pronoun form and the writer shifts from present to future tense narrative and leave his future identity open. "He will apologize. ... He will walk downstairs with his mother, join the crowded party ... anxious to return to his room, to be alone, to read the book he had once forsaken" (290).

Lahiri herself claims that her style is plain, restrained and an integral part of the story. She knows how to strike a chord with her readers. Evoked meanings are sweeter than the explicit ones. Symbolism and allusiveness with evoked meanings adds literary beauty than the visual representation of conveyed meanings. Allusions to Nikolai V. Gogol's short story *The Overcoat* permeates throughout the fabrication of Lahiri's novel. Judith Caesar opines: "... as in Nikolai Gogol's short story, the meaning of Lahiri's novel seems to lie not so much in the plot line, as in the style". She adopted the restrained, elusive style and infused the trend of modernists that the "style is the meaning, not merely the means of conveying it".

Lahiri layers on detail after detail, but always left out something essential deliberately. When Ashoke quotes to him, "we all came out of Gogol's *Overcoat*", Gogol Ganguli asks, "What's that supposed to mean?" His father does not answer, but merely tells him it will make sense to him someday (NS 78). Here the writer does not tell the reader how it makes sense to Ashoke, or how it will later make sense to his son. Lahiri often gives a catalog of the details of the

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surroundings but never depicts what the character feel, who they are to themselves. It is the same technique Lahiri used to convey Gogol's desolation at the loss of his father. She describes all of Ashoke's possessions in intricate detail catalog after catalog to announce Gogol's grief. She describes objects instead of grief, as grief is beyond words. "He sees a pair of his father's sneakers, and a pair of flip-flops ...four plates, two mugs, four glasses. In a drawer he finds one knife and two forks... In another cupboard are a box of tea bags, Peek Freans short bread biscuits, a five-pound bag of sugar that has not been poured into a bowl, a tin of evaporated milk" (NS 175). Judith Caesar rightly points out, Lahiri "intends to evoke meanings rather than to convey them" (106). Nair managed to pack such intricate layers of the novel's narrative into grand shows with her cinematic codes and strategies to enthrall her audience.

The film lacks language codes, and "the structure of the cinema is defined by cinematic codes" (Monaco 175). The absence of a narrative subject is to be compensated for by the construction of a "visual narrative instance" which includes *mise-en-scène* and montage all put together configures the syntax of the film. (Deleyto 219) (quoted in Schmidt). It bequeaths the film some verisimilitude. In adaptation of novels, the director has to invent all *mise-en-scène* by himself/herself unlike plays. *Mise-en-scène* refers to almost everything that goes into the composition itself: settings, props, lighting, movement of camera and actors, costumes and soundtrack all put together emulate the composition. Lahiri's novel is not a classic-scene- and dialogue based novel. It is fascinating that many scenes in the film are dilated from little things in the book. Unaccustomed to the western style, Ashima shrivels Gogol's sweaters in the wash tub. He is furious at her, she locks herself in the bathroom then he convinces her with his words of love. This is how Nair an artist of integrity, visualized their bonded relationship. But Lahiri as a writer who breathes words, never thought of visualizing it and in the book it is one throw away sentence "...their first argument had been over a sweater she'd shrunk in the washing machine"(NS 10). Lahiri herself appreciated Nair in her interview by Vibhuti Patel for the "scenes that came out of (small details, throw away lines)".

Lahiri tells the story from a great narrative distance and in present tense that flattens the temporal context of events. The Gangulis are not emoters or talkers with extended conversation in

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her novel. As a result the feel of the character remains a little out of reach. In its cinematic elucidation this distance is bridged through human voice. Human voice has the power to move people's feelings and adds new force to the literary text. Lahiri's characters are just "blurry images" loomed in the mind of the writer in an abstract way in words. But Nair makes them 'real' by making her characters to speak in Bengali, in the film's early scenes. Lahiri accepts that her characters are "not real as the actors made them on screen I have forced my characters to speak English... when I'm writing I hear the words in Bengali on my head ... I loved (it)".

The casting seemed all round perfect and Nair used it as vehicles of expression to bring out the literary essence unfurling the themes, character and conflicts. The emotional power of this film rests on the shoulders of Tabu and Irfan Khan than on Kal Penn. Many critics commented on their screen chemistry and their endearing performance which gives the film much of its passion.

The sensual force of the spoken word is intensified by the Music in the film. Music reinforces the symbolic richness of the literary work by shedding new light on its "meaning, mood, and textuality" (Fulton108). Nair begins and ends her film *The Namesake* with songs. The sound track of this film is the confluence of Western and Indian classical music, and it parallels the struggles of the family straddling between two cultures. Nair enchants the audience with vibrant Baul songs (folk music by roving minstrels of rural Bengali), Rabindra sangeet (Tagore songs) and Western rap music.

Costume always serves to enhance the narration by implying psychological disposition and social position of characters. In the film Maxine in her black dress signals a cultural conflict when all the Bengalis at Gogol's home garbed in traditional white to mourn the death of Gogol's father Ashoke. Elmes' camera communicates it with visual eloquence. Nair is ebullient and likes dramatic flourishes. Gogol does not shave his head in the book after the death of his father. But Nair used it as a powerful *mise-en-scène* to show his grief in a dramatic manner. In an interview she exposes this; "We invented that for the story... because it shows me in short hand his (Gogol's) regret ... his atonement".

Montage is an art of creative editing in which series of short shots are edited into a sequence, to condense space, time and information. The montage effect is accomplished by fading one shot into another. The literary narrative of *The Namesake* is premised on the spatial distance between India and America but the adaptation emphasizes the continuity between these sites. By substituting New York for Boston, Nair establishes a visual continuity that bound together Calcutta with New York. Nair's ambition is to "shoot these two cities as if they were one". By this technique Nair perplexed the audience viscerally where they are and thereby highlights the in-between world of immigrants. Nair uses several cinematic techniques to link New York with Calcutta throughout the film. Medium shots and still camera images are consistently used as transitions between countries as well as across time. Nair uses bleached bypass on select scenes throughout the film to link together Ashoke and Ashima's memories of home in India with their present experience in the United States.

Summing up

Jhumpa Lahiri and Mira Nair being cultural transplants themselves have crafted the immigrant experience with lucid perception and authority. The literary works are natural expression of emotive feelings from inner heart and soul. So the writer Lahiri neither cared for her own intention nor for that of her audience while conceiving thematic structure and narrative of the novel. Indeed literature is an art for art sake with veiled meanings which adds to its literary beauty, while the film is an art for audience sake. Nair has managed to unveil the intricate layers of the novel into visual vibrant shows with authentic locales, breathing characters and excellent cinematic codes. She probes into the boundary of Lahiri's emotional citadel and snaps Lahiri's poignant feelings of immigrant experience through her visual venture.

In Nair's presentation of Lahiri's text, she has almost achieved the matting of fidelity discourse and preservation of the medium of expression. Nair's end product is not a reduced "book illustration" but a "creative restoration" (Wagner 223). Lahiri acclaims, "It's Mira Nair's stamp" on Lahiri's story. As Bluestone claims, the film maker is not a translator but a new author. Many critics have lauded Nair not only a translator but also a new author as she has magnificently transcoded the source text on celluloid. Nair can also be acclaimed as an aesthetic chemist, who

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came out with an embellished end product using her cinematic codes as catalysts. Thus Jhumpha Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* makes a successful journey from verbal art to visual art and promotes a symbiotic relationship between scientific and artistic activities.

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