

Cinematic Reconstruction of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: An Extensive Critique of Adaptation

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Citation: Supriyo Chakraborty, et al (2024), Cinematic Reconstruction Of Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger*: An Extensive Critique Of Adaptation, *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(1), 4792 - 4796

Doi: 10.53555/kuey.v30i1.8437

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

With the revolution of media culture, adapting bestsellers and masterpieces has become popular. Instead of reading a text carefully, people prefer to watch the content being visualized. Visual representation of a fact or situation significantly and effectively affects the audience's thoughts and emotions. When a reader sees the same writing as a movie on the screen, the analysis stands out more. Similar to how a reader analyses a text critically, a viewer's mind is also stimulated by a film. Herein lie the obstacles and difficulties that filmmakers and directors must overcome to adapt and produce a movie from an original text. There are various theoretical approaches and methods to make a movie based on any text maintaining similarity in storyline, reliability, and with a mix of entertainment. The paper aims to examine the rationale behind the experimental cinematography with all these theoretical frameworks of adaptation of a trendy Man Booker Prize-winning debut novel of Arvind Adiga, *The White Tiger*.

Keywords: adaptation, cinematography, visualization, creativity, narrative, media culture

1. Introduction:

The rapid transformation of media culture has changed the modus of literary practices. The printed or written form of traditional literary works claim constructive change to interpret the texts in a new light. The modern media form introduces adaptation of the literary pieces on screen to satisfy the visual appeal and entertain the readers. This emerging adaptation trend possibly delineates the original texts, but in many cases, it recasts the main story for the reader's demand. Adapting raw materials is familiar in the film. Still, they gradually overlap remakings and create fresh adaptations of famous fiction (short stories, novels, plays), non-fiction, autobiographical books, etc. James M. Welsh and Peter Lev (2007) assert in "The Literature/FilmReader: Issues in Adaptation":

After a century of cinema, movies have changed substantially, both technologically and stylistically, but after a hundred years, mainstream cinema is still telling and retelling stories, and most of those stories are still being (or have been) appropriated from literary or dramatic sources, as much as 85 percent by some calculations and accounts. Adaptation has always been central to the process of filmmaking since almost the beginning and could well maintain its dominance into the cinema's second century. (Lev and Welsh, xiii)

A good adaptation follows three main elements- i) Fidelity of the story, ii) Creative additions iii) the maintenance of a temporal media distance between the original text and the movie. Fidelity to the story is the most desirable element that gives justice to the story through its truthfulness. Creative additions combine music, characters, and places accordingly. Temporal media distance communicates between the visualization of cinema and the imaginations of the readers. The researchers are exploring the interconnections between the literary text and its adapted movie version. In their edited book *English Novel and the Movies* (1982), Michael Klein and Gillian Parker elaborate on the rapport between a work of literature and its cinematic adaptation. They describe three kinds of adaptation: i) "most films based on classic novels attempt to give the impression of being faithful, that is, literal, translations." ii) "retains the core of the structure of the narrative, while

significantly re-interpreting, or in some cases de-constructing, the source text.” iii) “regards the source merely as raw material, as simply the occasion for an original work.” Louis Giannetti (1978) also sees three types of adaptation: i) Literal adaptation, ii) Faithful adaptation iii) Loose adaptation.

Adapting a literary piece into a movie is more challenging to satisfy the audience; instead, it is a great challenge to overcome. Written words can not stimulate our sensory perceptions directly, but visual images and sounds help to experience language, colors, and movements directly. It is impossible to construct the whole work of literature within a few hours, so the directors compress it. Generally, ‘Literal adaptation’ relies on the original text and exactly follows the plot, characters, and tone of voice. It aims to re-create the work of literature in a cinematic form. The demands of audience for a fascinating narrative insist on removing some scenes, actions, dialogues or characters and incorporating extra flavors into the original storyline, i.e., ‘Faithful adaptation,’ to maintain a close touch to the original text. The ‘Loose adaptation’ maintains a long distance from the original and follows the primary text slightly.

2. Looking Back to the History of Adaptation in India

The Indian film industry is showing its craving for adaptation by producing super-hit movies adapted from novels, plays, and short stories by regional writers and foreign writers in different languages. Simultaneously, foreign industries are showing their vehemence to Indian English novels. Today, adapted cinematography has touched its zenith and begged the readers’ attention to the screen from the printed pages. The Indian film adaptation has an experimental history as Bimal Mitra’s *Saheb Bibi Golam* (1953) is adapted into ‘Sahib Biwi Aur Ghulam’ (1962) and produced by Guru Dutt. Vijay Anand directed ‘Tere Mere Sapne’ (1972), which is based on A.J. Cronin’s *The Citadel* (1937), *Pinjar* (1950), a notable Punjabi novel by Amrita Pritam is adapted and has been released as ‘Pinjar’ (2003), R.K.Narayan’s *The Guide* (1958) is released in 1965 as ‘Guide,’ Sanjay Leela Bhansali directed ‘Devdas’ (2002) in different ornamentation and expressed his tribute to Swarat Chandra Chattopadhyay. Jhumpa Lahiri’s celebrated novel *Namesake* (2003) is adapted and directed as ‘Namesake’ (2006). William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* are adapted and directed by Vishal Bhardwaj as ‘Maqbool’ (2004), ‘Omkaara’ (2006), and ‘Haider’ (2014). Chetan Bhagat has become a prominent figure in the field of best-selling books. The Bollywood industry shows more interest in adapting novels after the grand success of ‘3 Idiots’ (2009), which Rajkumar Hirani directed. This movie is based on Chetan Bhagat’s *Five Point Someone* (2004). Consecutively his novels *The Three Mistakes of My Life* (2008) and *2 States: The Story of My Marriage* (2009) are released as ‘Kai Po Che’ (2013) and ‘2 States’ (2014). Arvind Adiga, an Indo-Australian writer, and journalist, has attained massive recognition after publishing his debut novel *The White Tiger* (2008), and its recent adaptation has captivated the audience.

3. Adiga’s *The White Tiger*: A Netflix Adaptation

The White Tiger (2008), a stunning Booker Prize-winning novel by Arvind Adiga, has been adapted into a drama film in 2021 and produced by Mukul Deora and Ramin Bahrani. Ramin Bahrani, Adiga’s friend, directed the film. Ramin Bahrani has fulfilled Adiga’s dream by producing a faithful Netflix adaptation of the book. According to the movie’s production notes, Ramin asserts, “We connected on being outsiders on a predominantly white campus. We spoke of books, films, and our ambitions. I wanted to be a filmmaker, and he was on his way to becoming a novelist” (notes provided by Netflix). ‘The White Tiger’ premiered in Las Vegas on 6th January 2021 and screened in the United States on 13th January 2021. Streaming of the movie begins globally through the Netflix platform on 22nd January of the same year. The movie has received a tremendous response and positive comments on the casting direction, screenplay, and acting. It is a literal adaptation of the novel with slight changes where the expertise in cinematography brings proper texture and acceptance of the text. Indian common sentiments like poverty, corruption, injustice, and marginalization have been appropriately visualized. The storyline helps the audience to reminisce about the plot of ‘Slumdog Millionaire’ (2008), directed by Danny Boyle. Dr. D. Jockim (2016) writes;

Adiga points out a new kind of workforce slavery that is emerging in India because of the vast gap between the haves and have-nots. The class divide is institutionalized very systematically by exploiting the economic condition of the poor. The exploited are not in a position to realize their real position. The question of survival overpowers every other aspect of their life. (2)

Adiga’s novels are categorized as social and autobiographical. The novel *The White Tiger* (2008) is a social novel with a social criticism that powerfully portrays a naked picture of Indian society and social situations through its use of irony, satire, and humor. It naturalizes the downtrodden’s pain, pangs, misery, and suffering. It tells the story of a ‘white tiger’ (Balram Halwai) who breaks the chain of slavery and misery to taste the freedom of entrepreneurial life and become a ‘thinking man.’ Adiga represents the socio-political conflicts through the depictions of Laxmangarh. Balram was born and raised through experiencing poverty, oppression, and injustice by the landlords. He has to leave his school education with a heavy heart due to his family’s financial crisis. His dreams are shattered when he is sent to work in a tea stall to repay the familial debts.

Balram witnesses corruption in the medical system when he fails to save his father's life for insufficient treatment. The writer depicts several social issues related to education, occupation, class and caste conflict, cultural crisis, and corruption of the society and the government. It is the story of Balram Halwai, who escapes from the dark chapter of his life and establishes himself as an independent entrepreneur. The novel begins at Balram's office, where he is writing a letter to The Premier's office as he is informed that Premier Wen Jiabao is coming to Bangalore. Balram writes the secret story and the untold journey of his life. Rashmi Ahlawat writes:

The White Tiger delivers a dark side of India's class struggle through the narration of Balram Halwai, a village boy. Adiga says his novel attempts to hear the voice the men you meet in each and every corner you travel through India – the voice of the downtrodden. According to Adiga, the need for *The White Tiger* was to catch the unheard voice of people from 'the darkness' (12).

It is a tremendous challenge for a director to visualize the whole novel within a short span of time. Besides this pressure, he has to fulfill the demands of enthusiastic audiences by rearranging the aspects of the original text. Manmeet Kaur and Divya Rastogi Kapoor (2018) draw fundamental differences between a novel and a screenplay adaptation. The novel indirectly affects us, while the film creates a direct sensory perception and engages the audience directly through its effect on language, color, sounds, emotions, and movements. B. Bao (2008) states, "Many films are based on novels. However, each of them uses different ways to tell similar stories. The paper discusses the differences from several aspects in terms of their nature, ways of narration, as well as the effect they bring about". Arvind Adiga creates magic among the readers through his extraordinary telling of *The White Tiger* in 2008. After reading this masterpiece, the readers are waiting to watch it on the big screen. Finally, in 2021, the movie was released on Netflix and starred Adarsh Gourav (Balram Halwai), Rajkumar Rao (Ashok Shah), Priyanka Chopra (Pinky Shah), Vedant Sinha (Dharam), Kamlesh Gill (Granny), Nalseesh Neel (Vitiligo Man), and others.

3.1. Tabulation:

Parameters	Novel (<i>The White Tiger</i>)	Movie (<i>The White Tiger</i>)
Year	2008 (Published)	2021 (Released)
Popularity	Very Popular and won the Man Booker Prize in 2008	Worldwide Number-1 film on Netflix across the world
Characterization	The narration of the novel is detailed and minutely elaborated	The plot and characters are unchanged, but some events and characters are skipped to focus on the pivotal incidents
Ratings	4.4/5 (Amazon) 3.8/5 (Goodreads) 4.2/5 (Flipkart)	7.1/10 (IMDb) 2.5/5 (Parent Previews) 91% (Rotten Tomatoes)

4. Reconstruction of the Movie by Deconstructing the Text

The novel begins in 2007 at Balram's office while he is writing an email to Wen Jiabao, who is coming to meet Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh. It is fragmented into eight lengthy emails written over a week by Balram, but the adaptation uses this email as a medium of narration without splitting it into eight parts. Premier Jiabo's visit is the central event, but the meeting between Balram and Mr. Jiabo is missing. For the sake of a proper ending, the adaptation shows the meeting. The movie adaptation is complete justice to the novel as it presents every action with exact direction. In both the novel and movie, the plot remains same. They show Balram's growth at Laxmangarh in Bihar with his lower-caste family. Although his upbringing and family life are depicted in great detail in the novel, the movie concentrates on the most significant events. In the book, Balram's family is not anxious about his name; they used to call him 'Munna,' but his school teacher gives his name 'Balram' which has been missed in the movie scene. 'The White Tiger' is a compliment that he receives from the School Inspector, Mahesh Pillai, and it changes his life. The oppression of the cruel landlords has a significant impact on his family. His schooling is over since he is forced to work with his brother at a tea business in Dhanbad to pay off his father's debt. In the letter titled "The Autobiography of a Half-Baked Indian," this sentiment is conveyed. Balram Says; "That's what I ought to call my life's story. Me, and thousands of others in this country like me, are half-baked, because we were never allowed to complete our schooling." (6)

Balram decides to learn to drive, and after his training, he visits door-to-door for a job. At last, he comes to the house of Stork, the landlord of his village. Stork's youngest son Ashok has arrived in India with his wife Pinky,

and Balram is appointed as their driver. In the book, Stork's eldest son Mukesh appears in this scene, but in the movie, Mukesh (Vijay Maurya) previously comes to the village with his father. In the landlord's house, Balram finds his master to meet the area's ruling minister, the Great Socialist, who is a man in the book; "The photo was of a plump man with spiky white hair and chubby cheeks, wearing thick earrings of gold; the face glowed with intelligence and kindness. 'He's the Great Socialist' (20) but the Great Socialist is a woman (Swaroop Sampat) in the movie. They have a conflict regarding the sharing of taxes and demands for bribes. In the movie, Ashok, Mukesh, and Pinky Madam decide to go to Delhi for a few months to visit politicians for a deal. The Delhi trip is an opportunity for Balram, so he secretly discovers that Ram, the other driver of the family, is a Muslim, and by forcing Ram, he appoints himself as the driver for their trip. However, in the book, Balram does not spy on Ram until the announcement of their Delhi trip. The visualization of Delhi and the living of Delhi are quite different in the novel and the movie. The novel describes an impoverished picture of Balram's staying at the servant's quarters, while the movie version is pleasurable. The relationship between Balram, Ashok, and Pinky is uniquely depicted in both the book and the movie. Unlike his family members, Ashok is very frank with Balram and asks him not to call him 'sir' or 'master.' Pinky is sympathetic towards Balram as she always supports and speaks for him. In the movie, Pinky (Priyanka Chopra) has been represented as a modern-era lady who speaks what she thinks is right or feels to speak. The novel takes it to turn on Pinky's birthday while Balram drives them to a restaurant to celebrate her birthday. A horrible incident happens at the time of their return when Priyanka, being drunk, demands to drive the car. Suddenly she is in an accident where a boy is crushed by her car.

I got into the backseat. They did another U-turn across the middle of the avenue, and then drove off at top speed, racing through one red light after the other. The two of them were shrieking, and pinching each other, and making giggling noises, and, helpless to do anything, I was just watching the show from the backseat, when the small black thing jumped into our path, and we hit it and knocked it over and rolled the wheels of the car over it. (94)

It is not mentioned in the book whether the child is killed. To create a thrilling twist, the director uses flashbacks to bring this event to the beginning of the movie. He creates a crime scene by clarifying the child's death and the consequences of the accident. Events after the accident are similar in the book and the movie: The Stork and Mukesh reach Delhi and ask Balram to sign a confession paper where he takes responsibility for the accident. However, this is not needed as the police do not receive any report from the family of the victim. After a great quarrel with Stork and Mukesh, Pinky leaves India, and Balram drives her to the airport. Ashok becomes lonely, and Balram gives him company. Mukesh comes to Ashok, plans to pay off the government minister, and asks him to change his driver. Mukesh repeatedly insists that Ashok remarry Ms. Uma, his former love; Balram finds "Mr. Ashok down to Lodi Gardens along with Ms. Uma; he was spending more and more time with her these days." But the character of Ms. Uma is not present in the movie. In the Election, the Great Socialist wins. Balram and Ashok go to attend the celebration. Dharam, a relative of Balram, comes to him in Delhi. As a driver, Balram drives Ashok from place to place. One day, while Balram drives Ashok, he secretly finds a red bag that is full of money. Balram is planning a murder that is powerfully dramatized in the movie. On the way, Balram tells a lie to Ashok that one of the wheels is not right, and he comes out of the car. Ashok comes out and tries to fix the problem. Balram suddenly stabs him amid hesitation. He takes the bag with him. The ending is the same as the movie. Balram and Dharam leave for Bangalore, where they hide for a few weeks. One day Balram realizes the need for taxis to take the workers to the call center and decides to inaugurate a business of transportation. He gives bribes to the local police and starts "The White Tiger" taxi service. At the end, the book does not mention whether Mr. Jiabo meets Balram. Still, the letter ends with Balram's comment, "Yet even if all my chandeliers come crashing down to the floor—even if they throw me in jail and have all the other prisoners dip their beaks into me—even if they make me walk the wooden stairs to the hangman's noose—I'll never say I made a mistake that night in Delhi when I slit my master's throat" (191). The movie captures the scene where Mr. Jiabo shakes Balram's hand and ends with a meeting for which Balram is waiting.

5. Conclusion:

Mr. Ramni understands the metaphor of the title "The White Tiger" and keeps the same name for his adaptation. He proves his mastery in the arrangement of thoughts and emotions according to the characters and the plot. The technique of arranging the events is different in the book and movie. He emphasizes certain events and uses flashbacks to thematize crime, thriller, and suspense. Adarsh Gourav's (Balram) performance is so realistic, whereas Priyanka Chopra (Pinky Shah) and Rajkumar Rao (Ashok) perform so well. The movie is faithful to the novel and gives satisfaction to the audience. The main focus of this novel is to narrate the pain and pangs of poor Indian people through the journey of Balram. Adiga's intention is evident, whereas Ramni Bahrani takes the challenge to portray the unseen and feel the unheard voices through emotion and feelings.

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