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Adaptive Narratives: Cinematic Echoes of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*

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Abstract:

This article delves into the intricate process of adapting novels into films, using Aravind Adiga's acclaimed novel, *The White Tiger*, as a primary example. The adaptation of literary works into cinematic forms has become a prevalent practice in the film industry, offering a unique lens through which to explore the creative dynamics and cultural implications of the adaptation process. Focusing on the adaptation of *The White Tiger*, the paper addresses the challenges faced by filmmakers in translating the intricate narratives of these novels into visual storytelling. *The White Tiger*, a political Satire novel by Aravind Adiga, has been adapted into a film by Ramin Bahrani, prompting a nuanced analysis of the adaptation's fidelity to the original work. The article examines how the film both adheres to and deviates from the spirit of the novel, assessing its visual portrayal of India, its success in capturing the political satire of the source material, and its critique for perceived shortcomings in depth and complexity. By delving into the successes and challenges of adapting *The White Tiger*, this paper aims to provide a comprehensive exploration of the adaptation process, offering insights into the cultural significance of the work and its representation in the film medium.

Keywords: Film Adaptation, The White Tiger, Arvind Adiga, Literary adaptation,



Introduction:

The realm where literature converges with cinema sparks a dynamic and interdisciplinary field known as film adaptation studies. This alchemical process involves delicately translating the written word into the visual language of cinema, presenting filmmakers with challenges and opportunities to balance fidelity to the source material with the cinematic medium's unique storytelling capabilities. Beyond a mere transfer of plot, adaptation requires a profound understanding of the literary work's essence, themes, and characters. As critic Linda Hutcheon states, "Adaptation is not just the replication of a pre-existing text, but a creative and dynamic process of reinterpretation and re-presentation" (Hutcheon).

Literature and Movie:

In the contemporary media landscape, cinema has emerged as the dominant cultural force, overshadowing the dwindling audience for literature. Despite this shift, both realms share a fundamental connection through the concept of 'narrative'. This common thread is particularly evident when novels undergo cinematic adaptations, triggering a heightened interest in the original text. Bluestone claims that "the novel has three tenses; the film has only one" (Selby et al.). Novels employ diverse perspectives, offering insights into individual characters and the overarching narrative, whereas films often utilize an omniscient viewpoint, occasionally leading viewers to focus solely on a designated protagonist. The potential distortion of the source material's essence amid cinematic storytelling raises questions about the perceived truthfulness of the visual medium. Uncovering the nexus between literature, film, and art reveals that thematic or plot congruence may take a backseat to subjective resonance, reflecting authors' perspectives on reality and the zeitgeist, ultimately contributing to a nuanced understanding of the creative process.

Films, often described as dynamic visual narratives captured by a camera, possess a distinctive storytelling power that diverges from the textual realm of novels. While words in novels articulate settings, surroundings, and moods, the camera in movies takes center stage, utilizing movement to convey these details. However, the visual medium encounters limitations in capturing the nuanced shifts in people's attitudes and the subtleties of their



inner selves. Joe Wright's adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) exemplifies this challenge (Wright); while adept at portraying the vibrant characters and their movements, it struggles to encapsulate Jane Austen's intricate narrative of evolving perceptions towards Mr. Darcy. The film, unable to delve into the depths of Austen's insights, relies on dialogue and character interactions to navigate the complex landscape of Darcy's personality. This adaptation, though captivating, raises questions about the medium's ability to fully do justice to the richness of the original text, emphasizing the intricate interplay between literature and cinema in capturing the essence of a narrative (Austen).

History of film adaptation

In her article *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders defines adaptation as a specific process involving the transition from one genre to another, such as novels into a film or the dramatization of prose narrative and fiction (Sanders 19). The tradition of adapting literary works into films has a rich history dating back to the early days of cinema, with pioneers like the Lumière brothers. By the 1910s, adapting literature became a marketing strategy, encompassing classics, plays, and contemporary texts. In India, filmmakers like Harish Chandra S. Bhavadekhar and F. B. Thanawala drew inspiration from the country's values, natural beauty, and rich culture, embracing adaptations of revered texts like *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*. This tradition reflects the multifaceted nature of Indian storytelling on the silver screen. A movie adaptation, while not fully unlocking the interpretative potential of all literary works, can enhance verbal concepts by providing visual connections and supporting the latent meanings of words. John Ellis's *The Literary adaptation: An Introduction*, which Julie Sanders quotes, 'adaptation trades upon the memory of the novel, a memory that can derive from the actual reading, or as is more likely with a classic of literature, a generally circulated memory' (Sanders 25).

Literature Review:

In comparing the book and film adaptations of *The White Tiger* by Aravind Adiga, both Patrick Cremona's Radio Times article (Cremona) and Nitish Pahwa's Slate (Pahwa) piece highlight significant divergences. Cremona focuses on differences in framing, character arcs,



and the ending, emphasizing the film's fidelity to the novel's satire but acknowledging alterations that may impact viewer interpretations. Director Ramin Bahrani is mentioned discussing the challenges of adapting the nuanced source material for the screen. Pahwa, on the other hand, emphasizes major divergences in storytelling format, shifts in timelines and character relationships, and discrepancies in key events, particularly noting the nuanced development of Ashok and Balram's relationship. While both articles acknowledge the film's strengths, Pahwa concludes that the book provides a more intricate and engaging narrative.

Tanul Thakur's critique of the film adaptation of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* in *The Wire* points out its overly faithful approach to the source material, resulting in awkward scenes attempting to include too many lines from the book. Thakur argues that a successful adaptation should carve out its own language, noting issues with the English voiceover, substandard acting, and clichéd diction that hinders the film's portrayal of authentic Indian settings and characters. Thakur emphasizes missed opportunities for the film to make a powerful statement about social inequality and success myths (Thakur). On the other hand, Megha B and Shima Mathew's article in the *Journal of Arts* analyzes the cinematic representation of the novel, highlighting differences such as the altered portrayal of Balram's journey, his relationship with Ashok, and the expanded depiction of certain events in the film. The article notes the film's use of voice-over and a more linear structure compared to the book's narrative shifts, offering a comprehensive exploration of both the similarities and notable deviations between the cinematic and literary versions of *The White Tiger* (B and Mathew).

In summary, while there is ample literature on the cinematic adaptation of *The White Tiger*, there exists a substantial gap in understanding the intricacies of these adaptations. Films have struggled to fully capture the essence of the original novels, and comparative studies exploring the divergences between the books and their cinematic counterparts are lacking. Given the challenges of adapting complex novels, a more comprehensive analysis is necessary to bridge these gaps. This article aims to thoroughly examine the adaptation process, highlighting how the films deviate from their source material and offering insights into the broader implications of cinematic adaptation as a creative endeavor.



Methodology:

This article aims to analyze the cinematic adaptation of the prominent Indian novel, focusing on *The White Tiger*, using a qualitative case study approach. The research involves a comprehensive literature review on cinematic adaptations of literary works, emphasizing *The White Tiger*. Data collection includes analyzing the novels and employing film theory and textual analysis for the film adaptations. Critical reviews and interviews may supplement insights. Thematic analysis will identify similarities, differences, and the effectiveness of the adaptations. The findings will inform conclusions, and recommendations for future research on cinematic adaptations of literary works will be proposed, contributing to the existing literature on the subject.

This study aims to scrutinize the film adaptation of the novel, investigating its faithfulness to the original text and discerning the alterations made to accommodate the visual medium. Additionally, the research seeks to evaluate the impact of the film adaptation on the themes and messages of the novel, assessing whether it enhances or diminishes their effectiveness. Furthermore, the study delves into the visual storytelling techniques employed by the film adaptation to convey the narrative and character development originally portrayed in the novel. Lastly, the research endeavors to examine how the film adaptation transcends the constraints of the written text by infusing cinematic techniques, contributing to a unique storytelling experience.

Key Observations:

Arvind Adiga's *The White Tiger* intricately weaves the protagonist Balram Halwai's identity with his name and age. Initially named 'Munna,' he becomes Balram in school to avoid confusion. His unrecorded birthdate is assigned the age of 18 during elections, a crucial aspect omitted in the movie. The novel sharply critiques India's electoral corruption, exposing how those with unrecorded birthdates unknowingly have votes cast for them. This satirical commentary is absent in the film adaptation, diluting the novel's condemnation of corruption. Moreover, the book sheds light on corruption within India's healthcare system, illustrating the dearth of doctors in government hospitals who prioritize private clinics for financial gain. The



film fails to capture the novel's vivid portrayal of unhygienic conditions and the exploitation of patients' families.

Regrettably, the film falls short in effectively conveying this satirical element, lacking the vivid and poignant details that the novel masterfully presents. The movie misses the mark in capturing the depth and impact of these critical aspects portrayed in the book.

A notable distinction between *The White Tiger* novel and its cinematic adaptation lies in the precision of time and place. The movie establishes a clear timeline, stating that the narrative unfolds in 2007, a detail absent in the novel, which doesn't offer a specific timeframe. Furthermore, the film explicitly mentions that Balram's scholarship is in Delhi, whereas the novel leaves the location unspecified. These subtle yet impactful details in the movie contribute to grounding the narrative in a specific time and place, enhancing the audience's comprehension of the contextual backdrop for the unfolding events.

The movie adaptation of *The White Tiger* omits the character of Vijay, a former bus conductor who serves as an inspiration for Balram in the novel. Vijay, now involved in politics and often seen on trucks, is not referenced in the film. In the novel, Balram acknowledges Vijay's shift from his old job to politics, stating, *Vijay, the bus conductor, was always on one of these trucks. He had quit his old job and joined politics now* (Adiga 99).

Additionally, a minor alteration is noted in the game played by Ashok and Pinky in the movie. While in the novel, Pinky plays badminton with Ashok in the evenings within the house compound, the movie depicts Ashok playing lawn tennis instead. This subtle change may reflect a decision by filmmakers to align with current sports and gaming trends.

In both the novel and the movie adaptation of *The White Tiger*, a scene unfolds where Pinky expresses anger towards Balram, although the circumstances leading to this confrontation differ. In the novel, Balram, recovering from a hangover, is asked by Pinky to make ginger tea. Unintentionally scratching his groin while preparing the tea infuriates Pinky, leading to her berating him for his hygiene and appearance before ordering him to leave. The movie alters the sequence, presenting Pinky discussing relationship issues with a friend when Balram, not drunk, enters the room and is observed scratching his groin. Despite these



differences, both versions highlight Pinky's dissatisfaction with Balram's hygiene and behavior, resulting in a heated argument.

Following Pinky's scolding in the novel, Balram takes a significant step towards self-improvement. He purchases toothpaste, brushes his teeth for the first time, and buys a white T-shirt reminiscent of Mr. Ashok's. "*Mr. Ashok was wearing a T-shirt... The larger part of it was empty and white and there was a small design in the center*" (Adiga 149). The movie effectively portrays Balram brushing his teeth, emphasizing his newfound determination for a better life. However, the film diverges by showing Balram wearing his master's clothes and accessories, symbolizing his aspiration to emulate the affluent lifestyle, a deviation from the novel's depiction of him visiting a mall in his new white T-shirt. Both versions convey Balram's ambition and desire for a prosperous life, though through slightly different visual narratives.

The climax of both the novel and the film adaptation of *The White Tiger* centers around Balram being accused of an accident caused by Pinky, with Stork and Mongoose planning for Balram to take the blame. However, the fortunate turn of events, where no one has registered the accident, is concealed from Balram by Stork and Mongoose. Instead, Ashok and Pinky personally inform him about the lack of a case against him.

In the novel, Stork's mistreatment of Balram, including hitting him on the head, triggers a change in Pinky's behavior, leading her to retreat to her room. The Stork dismisses Pinky's desire to compensate the victim's family as madness. The film portrays a heated argument between Stork and Pinky, with Stork kicking Balram. Pinky, upset about Stork's refusal to compensate the victim's family, shouts at him. While the dialogue remains consistent in both versions, the film provides a more explicit visual representation of the scene, whereas the novel leaves some details to the reader's interpretation.

Chandeliers hold a significant symbolic role in Balram's life in *The White Tiger*. From the novel's beginning, Balram is mesmerized by the chandelier in the Wild Boar's residence, symbolizing the opulent lifestyle of India's wealthy. As the Wild Boar mentions Balram's



father's fascination with chandeliers, it becomes clear that these ornate fixtures represent a certain status and extravagance.

As Balram transforms into a self-styled successful businessman, he incorporates chandeliers into his surroundings, using them to convey affluence and impress the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao. Beyond mere decoration, the chandeliers carry a profound symbolic meaning for Balram, encapsulating the exclusive realm of the India of Light, reserved for the privileged. Balram's fixation on chandeliers reflects his aspiration to break free from poverty and enter the elite class. Regrettably, the film adaptation falls short in conveying the depth of the chandelier's significance. Unlike the novel, the movie provides only a fleeting glimpse of the chandelier, failing to effectively capture its symbolic importance in Balram's journey and his quest for a life of affluence.

Director Ramin Bahrani has acknowledged that one of the most challenging aspects of adapting *The White Tiger* for the screen was deciding which scenes and details to include and which to omit. In a recent interview with the Radio Times, Bahrani spoke candidly about the difficulties of translating the novel's complex themes and characters into a visual medium.

The hardest part was cutting things that I liked because I like everything in Aravind's brilliant novel... That was very tough. You're trying to capture a tone, that was a constant thought in my head – what is the tone of the film? the novel was very fun: it's very fast, it's quirky, it's funny, it's satirical but then in the middle of the film, right dead set in the center of the book and in the film, something happens and from there moving forward it shifts to something a little bit darker and weirder... It still has the humor but it's darker and we constantly had our eye on that while writing the script and making the film (Cremona).

The film adaptation of *The White Tiger* successfully captures Aravind Adiga's essence while carving its own distinct language. Director Ramin Bahrani carefully preserves the first-person narration through Balram's voiceover, maintaining the novel's intimate perspective. Bahrani remains dedicated to key scenes, honoring the source material while allowing the film to stand as an independent work of art. Although not every moment from the book is translated



to screen, the film's slight structural differences enhance the viewing experience, offering a visually stunning and unique presentation of the novel's narrative arc and themes.

Conclusion:

When a work of art undergoes adaptation into a different medium, it transforms into an independent entity with distinct qualities. The original text and its adapted counterpart, such as a novel turned into a film, are rarely equivalent and should be evaluated independently. Adapting a story requires navigating the demands of the cinematic medium while staying true to the original spirit. While cinematic adaptations open up new artistic possibilities and cater to diverse audiences, it is crucial to recognize and appreciate each adaptation as a unique entity. The cinematic adaptation of novels has been a topic of scrutiny and debate due to the challenges of translating distinct artistic structures. Critics often argue about the fidelity of these adaptations to the source material, pointing out necessary changes and omissions. The visual nature of film is criticized for potentially diminishing a novel's charm and leaving too much open-ended for viewers, as the literary complexity may be lost in translation.

Literature is a boundless realm where words breathe life into diverse meanings. Crafting a novel is an immersive journey for authors, who infuse their unique style and perspective, resulting in a piece of art that captivates readers, transports them to different worlds, and ignites their imagination. A well-written novel has the power to evoke varied interpretations and emotions, offering readers a personal and distinctive experience. The beauty of literature lies in its ability to leave gaps for readers to interpret, fostering a unique and personal connection with the text. When a literary work is adapted into a different medium, it becomes an opportunity for collaborative artistic expression, where the filmmaker's vision merges with the author's creation. This dynamic process creates a distinct adaptation that retains the essence of the original while presenting a new form of art, offering audiences varied interpretations and expanding the work's reach. Despite the challenges, literary adaptation into film remains an intriguing exploration of the intersection between different creative minds, cultures, and audiences.



The White Tiger, directed by Ramin Baharani, serves as a loose adaptation of Aravind Adiga's novel, maintaining the essence and major plot points while introducing notable differences. The film omits scenes, characters, and alters events, resulting in changes to character personalities and motivations. Despite these deviations, the adaptation strikes a balance between fidelity to the source material and creative adjustments, establishing itself as a compelling work in its own right. When transitioning a text between forms, such as a novel to a film, the change in medium doesn't diminish the original meaning but necessitates adjustments. Recognizing that each medium brings unique tools and elements, like visual and auditory components in film, allows for a fresh perspective on the text. Rather than seeing the new form as a limitation, it presents an opportunity for exploration and interpretation, unveiling new layers of meaning and contributing to the creation of an independent work of art. *The White Tiger*, directed by Ramin Baharani, serves as a loose adaptation of Aravind Adiga's novel, maintaining the essence and major plot points while introducing notable differences. The film omits scenes, characters, and alters events, resulting in changes to character personalities and motivations. Despite these deviations, the adaptation strikes a balance between fidelity to the source material and creative adjustments, establishing itself as a compelling work in its own right. When transitioning a text between forms, such as a novel to a film, the change in medium doesn't diminish the original meaning but necessitates adjustments. Recognizing that each medium brings unique tools and elements, like visual and auditory components in film, allows for a fresh perspective on the text. Rather than seeing the new form as a limitation, it presents an opportunity for exploration and interpretation, unveiling new layers of meaning and contributing to the creation of an independent work of art.

This research explores the successful adaptation of novels into visually expressive cinematic forms while maintaining respect for the original work. The filmmakers demonstrate a creative synthesis, borrowing ideas while employing their strategies to construct unique plots through different mediums. These adaptations reach a broader audience, offering varied interpretations and shedding light on the significance of understanding the relationship between literature and film. The study emphasizes the importance of appreciating cinematic adaptations for their distinct qualities, acknowledging changes made for the demands of the



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medium, and recognizing the transformative power of adapting novels into films. The objective is not to determine superiority but to analyze how films infuse unique cinematic techniques into the original stories, providing new dimensions and opportunities for exploration. Both novels and film adaptations share the common goal of portraying human experiences, each with its strengths and weaknesses, and should be appreciated as independent forms of artistic expression.



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