

Literature of Media

THE POLITICS OF ADAPTATION

The History of Literary Adaptations:

Since the nineteenth-century Europe, adaptation of literary works has been a universal exercise of filmmaking. Over the decades, with the effective aid of elision and interpolation, adaptation from such diverse resources including novels, non-fiction autobiography, comic books, scriptures, plays, historical sources has been accepted by the masses. Gradually, the television adaptations of literary works also came into vogue. The history of television adaptation in the West can be traced back to the 1930s, when the BBC aired a screening of Pirandello's play, *The Man with a Flower in His Mouth*. A literary adaptation of R.C. Sherriff's play, *Journey's End*, was the first live television drama to be broadcast. The renowned works of the authors of the canon, including Shakespeare and Shaw, were also adapted to the mini screens. By the beginning of 1970 many literary adaptations, from historical as well as pulp fiction novels, occupied the small screens. In the post 2000 era, many popular television series are based on pop culture literary sources, such as *Boardwalk Empire* (2010-2014), *True Blood* (2008-2014) and *Game of Thrones* (2011- 2019).

Literary Adaptations on Indian Television:

Most of the serials aired on Doordarshan in the late nineties were adaptations of popular literary works. They include *Trishna* (1985) based on Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and *Malgudi Days* (1986) based on R.K.Narayan's work. And then there came a phase when such shows were rarely seen on the small screen mainly because of the immense fanfare for the 'saas-bahu saagas'. In a decade's time, the trend of making soaps out of famous literary works came back in vogue. A few shows aired by SAP TV namely, *Laaptagunj* (2009) inspired by the writings of the late Sharad Joshi and *Pappad Pol* (2010) was inspired by the works of Gujarati

writer Shahabuddin Rathod. When asked about the reason behind such a trend of the small screen turning to literary works for inspiration, Anooj Kapoor, business head SAB TV, “We began to do it to move away from the prevalent trend of showing serials where the women were being persecuted. We thought of adapting literary works into shows as we were sure that was the most obvious and logical move to connect with the audience”(Munshi 53). While tracing the history of adaptation on Indian television, there appears several shows even in the present decade. Produced by Aditya Chopra, *Kismat (Fate)*, aired on Sony TV in 2011, and was based on the novel *Kane and Abel* by Jeffrey Archer. Govardhanram Tripathi’s novel *Saraswatichandra* was made into soap with the same title by Sanjay Leela Bansali and was aired on Star Plus in 2013. In the same year, Life OK aired a show titled *Tumhari Pakhi*, which was based on the novel *Naba Bidhanby Saratchandra Chattopadhyay*.

This trend of novel adaptation became a successful Endeavour on Indian television with the involvement of Ekta Kapoor. In 2014 Balaji Telefilms launched a couple of soaps which were loosely based on literary works. They include *Meri Aashiqui Tum Se Hi (My Love is Only With You)* aired on Colours was inspired from Emily Bronte’s gothic classic *Wuthering Heights* and *Kumkum Bhagya (Vermillion in My Fate)*, aired on Zee TV, which she announced as an Indian take on Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*. The most popular among them is the prime time soap opera aired on Star Plus, *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein (This is Love)*, which is an adaptation of Manju Kapur's novel, *Custody* (2011).

The Politics of Adaptation:

The reasons behind the creation of adaptations are diverse, ranging from bringing of a literary text to a wider audience, sometimes to cash in on its cultural respectability and popularity or sometimes to comment upon or develop an aspect of the original text, and can vary from personal interests to sheer entertainment and social commentary. Such 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). One of the attractions of adaptation is the recognition of the pleasure of “repetition with variation”(Hutcheon4) in cultural media forms from television spin-offs, soap opera and webisodes. These forms are an industry imperative that keeps the story alive and the audience or fan base interested with on- going entertainment that has no boundaries in media (Hutcheon 4). The historical approach to adaptation and the focus on the source text has created a notion that literature exists as the

primary or original text and anything created after the literary work is a copy. "There is a standard value against which [the] success or failure [of a film adaptation] is measured" (Nevermore 6) based on the ideologies of high and mass culture. "The book is always better than a movie" (1) is a phrase used by Linda Cahir at the start of her book *Literature into Film: Theory and Practical Approaches*. It is used to typify the commonly held personal observation that encompasses many stimulating but ultimately unproductive discussions on adaptations into film. In the case of most adaptations, over the years, "the book was better than the movie" (Naremore 2) has been the prominent opinion expressed by every level of audience including movie viewers to scholars and historians. Robert Stam addresses the issues of fidelity surrounding the adaptation of novels into film, finding that this moralistic language is limiting when approaching the analysis of adaptations. He uses vivid terminology noting the expressions that are often applied when discussing adapted films: "infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration all connoting ghastly acts in one form or another" (54). These discourses of fidelity can be challenged by the consideration of the cultural and historical contexts of the source text and adaptation as well as the medium through which the story is told. The solution to moving beyond these limitations is to provide the most effective criticism and analysis "more rooted in contextual and intertextual history" (Stam 75).

The Adaptation of Custody

The prime time soap opera on Indian television chosen for detailed analysis, titled *Yeh Hai Mohabbatein*, is an adaptation of Manju Kapur's novel, *Custody*. Manju Kapur's novels are the portrayal of women's liberation and autonomy. She has followed a trend, of expressing the educated woman's psyche which deals with the autonomy between traditional values and making independent life choices at the risk of alienating oneself from the society, without being overtly feminist.

Published by Random house, Custody is a book that delves into the bitter depths of a broken marriage and the ensuing battle of the divorced couple, Raman and Shagun, to become the ultimate custodians of their teenager son Arjun and their adorable three year old daughter Roohi. Manju Kapur says, The family is where I see the impact of what is happening in Indian society. In my earlier novels, it was women who negotiated this relationship. Here it is everybody-the children, the father, the wives.

If you live free you pay the emotional price. (Random Reads: An Interview 2011) The story challenges the reader's sensitive taste bud as it illustrates the fast disintegrating marital values backed by untimely love affairs, disrespect for infertile women and most of all the orphaned children who are "torn between two mothers, two homes, two countries" (Kapur, Custody 365). The novel contains the most radical approach to custody, one which challenges the true and dedicated love of a step mother (Ishita) on one hand and the self-possessed diabolic biological mother (Shagun) on the other. Television is a producer's medium and the soap opera is the form which clearly demonstrates their power. The strength and impetus of soap opera comes from the producer" who is the "overall controlling influence in the genre and in the day-to-day, week-to-week developments of the series" (Hobson 63). Hence, the role of the producer is very pivotal to the success of any soap opera. "Production houses in India are mostly family run business" (Munshi 62).

Yeh Hai Mohabbatein is also produced by one of India's leading entertainment content providers, Ekta Kapoor and Shobha Kapoor, under the banner of their production company Balaji Telefilms. The "K soaps" of Ekta Kapoor that starts with the alphabet "K" reveals her belief in astrology, numerology and vastu. Ekta Kapoor "chooses a few titles and sends them to her astrologer Sunita Menon for approval" (Munshi 63). Even the title of Ye Hai Mohabbatein had to be changed thrice. The soap was initially called Mera Tera Rishta Purana but was changed to Ye Hai Mohabbatein. The writers of television shows are often referred to as "the lifeblood of the series" (Hobson 77). The script writers of Yeh Hai Mohabbatein, Sonali Jaffar, Ritu Bhatia and Ritu Goel, have appealingly fashioned characters, their personality and individuality through effective narrative techniques and

powerful dialogues. The director Ranjan Kumar Singh, along with the creative assistance of Sandip Sikand, with the effective aid of his technical team, constructs the complex love-hate relationship of the Tamil dentist Dr. Ishita Iyer and the Punjabi CEO Raman Kumar Bhalla who indulges in a wedlock for the custody of Raman's daughter Roohi Bhalla.

The fame of the soap primarily rests upon the shoulders of the actors and actresses, especially the main leads who are often identified as the faces of a soap opera. It is through them the characters evolve into a full-fledged form. Yeh Hai Mohabbatein has to its credit an array of talented star cast who breathe life into the characters with eloquence and dignity. The soap features Divyanka Tripathi as Ishita, Karan Patel as Raman and Anita Hassanandani as Shagun in the main lead, well supported by the child artists Ruhanika Dhawan as Roohi and Gautam Ahuja as Aditya. The title, Yeh Hai Mohabbatein (This is Love), title encapsulates the essence of soap much more precisely (Hobson 72). It has to its credit multiple layers of meanings as it reveals not only the romantic relationship between the couple, Raman and Ishita, but also the intense emotional bonding between Ishita and Raman and Shagun's daughter, Roohi. It also denotes the various relationships portrayed in the soap mainly mother-daughter relationships, sibling relationships and familial relationships.

The Opening credits are also pivotal to a soap opera. Most soaps feature the female protagonist in the opening montage. Yeh Hai Mohabbatein, primarily features Ishita clad in red, along with Raman. The montage was designed to complement the red logo of Star Plus. Opening montage changes over time as the narrative progresses. For instance, the very first opening montage featured the young, arrogant Raman holding his daughter in distress, Roohi, who was attracted towards the caring Ishita which in course of time changed into that of a happy family that featured Raman and Ishita holding hands with a young, delighted Roohi. Music used in soap operas plays a significant role in attracting viewership. "The signature tunes of all soap operas are recognizable even from the first tune that serves as a "siren call to view" to the audience (Hobson 71). It has to be

recognizable from outside the room where the television set is located as it heralds the beginning of the program and calls the viewers into the room to watch. Music forms an integral element in the way that audiences perceive characters and their relationships in soap operas (Munshi 97).

Composed by Pamela Jain, the title track "Pal Pal Bade Yeh Hai Mohabbatein", functions the soul of the soap. "Tere Dil Ka Mere Dil Se Rishta Purana Hai" is yet another melodious song that convey the theme of the soap. There happens an incredible amalgamation of catchy title songs, the opening montage, making these soaps a visual treat to the audience. The process of adaptation, like the process of linguistic translation, is itself a creative act of authorship that results not in a variant version but in a distinctively original text. How a story is told not only depends on the cultural and linguistic conventions but also on the parameters of the specific medium through which it is articulated. Hence, adaptations tend to have different themes and goals as they try to fit into the conventions of the intended medium. To convert a literary text into a television program, the makers have to fulfil certain requisites that include an ideology, an established television genre or text type, conventional narrative deployment of character, action, dialogue, setting, iconography by using the using the technical conventions of televisual construction. Len Ang observed that "a genre is...a complex of themes, narrative structures and styles that groups of individual films or television programmes have in common with one another" (51).

In the simplest sense genre refers to the classification and organisation of television programs which are mainly classified into fiction and non-fiction. Soap operas, serials, and sit-coms comprise of the fictional genres. "It is in the storytelling format that we can differentiate between the soap, serial and series, though the difference between these is not always distinct. A serial is spread over many episodes but tells a complete story. They differ from soaps in that there is a closure to their narratives" (Munshi 2). In soaps as Christine Geraghty observes, "stories are never finally resolved and even soaps which cease to be made project themselves into a non-existent future (11). The non-fiction genres include news programs, talk shows, quiz and games shows, and recently reality shows.

Despite this narrow division of genre, time slots or rather the hour in which a program is aired can also alter the content of the program. As a consequence, the soaps aired on primetime, usually between seven or eight in the evening to about eleven in the night, would differ vastly from day time soaps. Prime time soap operas in India share some of the generic features of the soaps, outlined in Mary Ellen Brown and Veena Das's works, which differs as per the socio-economic and cultural context in which they are produced and telecast.

According to Shoma Munshi,(20) Indian prime time soap operas, broadcast from the year 2000 onwards, share the following generic features which include the following:

1. Open-ended narratives told in episodic form which resists narratediscourse
2. Multiple characters, plots and sub-plots
3. Use of time at a dual level
4. Emphasis on dialogue and attempt at resolution
5. Mixing of genres of melodrama, myth, realism and entertainment
6. Hook, Recap and Precap
7. Male characters whose actions move the narrative forward
8. Women as the central protagonists
9. The family home as the main setting of the show.

In the course of fitting into the generic features of the intended medium "it trims and prunes along with adding, expanding and interpolation" (Sanders:18). The narrative structure of the novel is altered in order to fit into the required episodic format which is fragmented, non-linear and open ended.

Soaps use a pastiche mode of narration, a very postmodern characteristic, focusing on the relations and emotions of characters rather than action. In Yeh Hai Mohabbatein, the plotline is stretched beyond the 396 pages in the book, Custody, with the inclusion of very many additions and deletions. The book features around ten characters whereas the television adaptation features around thrice the same prominent characters with occasional additions and guest appearances. The subject matter of soap opera is overwhelmingly that of interactions between characters, but the storyline developed in those interactions is subjectively interpreted.

While the novel follows a linear plotline with prime focus on the custody battle, the soap features very many subplots built through the numerous new characters introduced to the storyline. The narratives of the Indian televised soaps tends to a wave pattern. "In Warhol's words, this wave patterns contribute to the rhythm of suspense in the serial form, and results from the forms radical resistance of closure. No subplot is ever really resolved, as the undertow of emotional repercussion after the crisis keeps the pattern of affect constantly moving" (Fulton 186). The soap goes beyond the timeline of the novel with the aid of occasional leaps.

Yeh Hai Mohabbatein took a seven-year leap, in April 2016 that features the teenager Roohi followed by a one- year leap in November 2016 and then a two-year leap in November 2017. The "use of time at a dual level-one, which parallels actual time and implies that soap characters' lives go on whether we watch or not and two, when the narrative takes a generational leap to introduce new characters and new story lines"(Munshi 20). Each soap opera has its own visual style and this is largely established by the sets that the audience immediately recognizes (Munshi95). Most of the drama in Yeh Hai Mohabbatein takes place within the Bhalla household. Hence, family becomes the main setting of the soap. The Bhalla house and the Iyer house become the two major sets where the action takes place. The occasional outdoor shoots showcasing romantic dates, hospital sequences and others further improves the visual appeal as well as the aesthetics of the show. Post leap, Yeh Hai Mohabbatein has filmed at several foreign locations including Australia, Budapest and London. The costumes and makeup of each and every

character “help to create personality and register the changes I personality” (Hobson 68).

The creation of character through dress and appearance is an important aspect of fictional representation. Costume can create the ordinary or the most glamorous. The clothes has to be completely ‘in character’ for soap opera and its style (Hobson 68). The emphasis on dialogue and attempt at resolution is also significant to the core of the narrative. The stress, pitch and intonation of each and every utterance can also convey implicit meanings that elucidates the implied ideology. There involves a mixing up of melodrama, myth, realism and entertainment in the soaps. Emotions are expressed loudly both in terms of the rhetoric of dialogues as well as the camera movements. The marital, sacrificial and romantic elements apply to the ambit of soaps loosely borrowed from Indian films. The romantic song and dance sequences frequently used in the course of the narrative are notable examples for the same. Mostly the beginning of every episode starts with a recap of the previous day’s events. Now-a-days precap which is the preview of the next day’s episode is more into prominence. The main narrative of the day reaches a climatic point where the hook captures the audience’s attention. It has become a traditional practice for the Hindi soaps to leave the last freeze frame on the face of the central female lead character.

The codes of traditional Indian values in a joint family structure carry forth the plot of this narrative in Yeh Hai Mohabbatein. The soap showcases lots of emotional conflicts on display. The agony of being separated from the off springs, the frustration of being a discourse, the disappointment in constant rejections, the maternal bliss, the joy of togetherness in one big family are all celebrated in varying degrees in the soap. The epic content usually forms a secondary subtext in the narrative. There is an apparent connection of the plots in these soaps with the aesthetics of Indian epics like the Mahabharat. For instance, Yeh Hai Mohabbatein opens with an animated tale that narrates the story of Lord Krishna. Male characters whose actions move the narrative forward are common to most Indian soaps. Although Ishita is portrayed as the central protagonist, much power and agency is vested with Raman, as the hero of the soap, whose words and deeds matters the most in the Bhalla household. Almost all soaps aired in India have become “saas bahu sagas” with minor regional variations in the depiction of

the bond shared between the two. With the course of action, Yeh Hai Mohabbatein gradually deviates from the usual “saas bahu” track as the heroine shares a very affectionate relationship with her mother-law. Still the conventional incorporation of multiple twists and turns of plot which include generation leaps, amnesiac bout, rapes, murders and extramarital affairs are critical to the core of the narrative, which in turn provides more scope for television drama. Indian soaps follow the return of the dead with alacrity probably with the notion that “death in the US soaps has long been recognized as being by no means irretrievable” and that there are many possibilities of “returning from dead” (Geraghty 19). Both Ishita and Shagun have portrayed the returning from the death drama in Yeh Hai Mohabbatein.

CONCLUSION:

The study brings into light the fact that soaps based on books do not stay true to the source matter for as long as the open ended format of the soaps demand much melodrama which cannot be satisfied through the limited materials in the source text. Hence a very faithful adaptation seems to be impossible for the makers as these shows often get stretched for many years and the story alters as per the audience response and eventually turns into a ‘saas-bahu saga’. Thus, owing to its mass reception, the television adaptation of Manju Kapur’s Custody Yeh Hai Mohabbatein contradicts the often idealized notion that literature exists as the primary or “original” text and anything created after the literary work is a copy. The immense popularity of the adaptation in question, which even eclipses that of the parent material, intensifies debates on ‘originality’, ‘authenticity’, and ‘fidelity.’

Granted, popularity alone cannot be the metric of the literary merit and identity of a text but the immense impact the adaptation has on popular consciousness cannot be overlooked. What then, is the primary function of an adaptation if ever there is one? Also, what are the metrics by which an adaptation and its source material can be legitimately compared? Can Custody and Yeh Hai Mohabbatein be reconciled to form a ‘unified textual identity,’ as different as they are? Things are always ‘lost’ and ‘gained’ in translation. The ‘text’ as such, is in a state of constant flux. At what point of such a dynamic metamorphic process does an

adaptation remain 'faithful' and at what point does it become an entirely discrete text of its own? These are some of the questions, limits, and challenges posed by this paper. To address these questions is beyond the scope of the paper.