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## Adapting Adiga: Examining the Cinematic Portrayal of Balram Halwai

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### Abstract

This research paper aims to study the cinematic adaptation of Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* on OTT platform with reference to its central character Balram Halwai. This paper critically analyses certain complexities and strategies involved in the process of adaptation on OTT platform. An OTT platform can be defined as "an online service that can be regarded as potentially substituting for traditional telecommunications and audio-visual services such as voice telephony, SMS, video on demand and television" ("ITU" 4). This paper focuses on the portrayal of the central character- Balram Halwai. This study delves into the challenges and creative choices involved in translating the complex narrative and character dynamics from the written medium to the visual form. It aims to provide insights into the nuances of storytelling and character development in the transition from literature to cinema.

Film adaptation theory is the study of how works of literature and other forms of storytelling are translated into film. The process of adapting a story from one medium to another is complex and can involve many changes to the original source material. Similarly, the adaptations of Adiga's Balram Halwai rework the stories and the narratives of a select Indian English novel, *The White Tiger* (2008). Thus, this research paper examines the paradoxical relationship between an adaptation and its source material and the character representations on screen.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, OTT Platform, Indian English Novel, Netflix, *The White Tiger*.

### Introduction

Arvind Adiga was born in Madras, India and educated in India and Australia. He is best known for his best seller, well-known novel *The White Tiger* published in 2008 and adapted as a film on Netflix as Netflix original content in 2021. *The White Tiger* is a novel centred on protagonist Balram Halwai and how he became the most renowned entrepreneur of India, who belongs to the small village called

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Laxmangarh. This novel is in the form of a series of letters written by Balram Halwai to the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao. It is about the fascinating economic scenario in India and has changed the perspective of people about the Indian Economy, with the birth of the character Balram and his life in the city of Delhi.

Works from Indian literature have been adapted onto screen since the inception of television and media, where the target system was well defined and organised. Durdarshan was the first platform where Indian texts were adapted and presented in audio-visual form, and was managed by a government body. There were lots of Indian adaptations that were immensely popular and well received in those days. Like, *Malgudi Days* (1986) *Katha Sagar* (1986), *Ramayana* (1987), *Mahabharata* (1988) *Bharat Ek Khoj* (1988), *Vikram Betal* (1988) and others. (Parmar)

The analysis focuses on Balram's journey from village boy to become one of the most famous entrepreneurs of India. Exploratory and quantitative methods are employed for close comparative textual analysis of verbal and visual texts. The research paper utilises a broader eclectic framework encompassing comparative literary studies and adaptation studies. Specifically, the focus lies on recent theories in screen adaptations using Shafer's seven categories. Moreover, these strategies serve as a methodology for studying novels adapted into movies on OTT platforms.

#### **OTT in India:**

Nowadays, OTT platforms have become one of the major mediums of entertainment for people. People are fond of watching contents on OTT platforms for entertainment which run on monthly or annual subscriptions. The Pandemic time proved to be one of the fertile periods for this binge watching. OTT being a new form of media, it demands a study. An OTT platform can be defined as "an online service that can be regarded as potentially substituting for traditional telecommunications and audio-visual services such as voice telephony, SMS, video on demand and television" ("ITU" 4). OTT stands for Over-the-top media services. It is a kind of platform or service, which is more than television and less than theatre. There are lots of OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO Max, Disney+, Hulu, Peacock, and Sling TV. All the OTT streaming services have one common characteristic, that they all use the internet to deliver video content. Indeed, OTT platforms have become a part of the audience's daily life since the pandemic in India.

Netflix is one of the popular OTT platforms nowadays in India, which originated in America on August 29, 1997, by Marc Randolph and Reed Hastings in Scotts Valley, California. American streaming service Netflix entered India in January 2016. Netflix has started its original production from 2018 as 'Netflix Original'. In 2018 The Netflix company came up with its first original series in India titled *Sacred Games*, which has its roots in Indian English novels and then continued with the shows like *Ghoul* (2018), *Leila* (2019), *A Suitable Boy* (2020) and many others. *Leila* was the novel written by Prayaag Akbar in 2017, originally adapted on international medium Netflix, directed by Deepa Mehta. *A Suitable Boy* was a novel written by Vikram Seth published in 1993, directed by Mira Nair in 2020. Besides this there are lots of other adaptations on OTT (Wilbert).

So, in this modern era people are more attached towards the OTT platform than TV. They prefer to watch movies as well as web series on OTT platforms rather than in theatres. The rise of OTT platforms for Indian viewers has also become faster. The number of users of OTT platforms increases day by day. Thus, this research focuses on comparative analysis of Balram's narratives in the novel *The White Tiger* (2008) and its adaptations on global screen Netflix.

#### **Film adaptation:**

Film adaptation as a field of study has become a large area of study in the last few years. With studies from various cultures (and languages) of adaptation being conducted, the field has become very dynamic. Indian film adaptations have a history as long as films themselves. Adaptations of national

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and regional classics, and of popular fiction seems to be a frequent phenomenon. Arrival of OTT platforms has added a new dimension into it.

The task of the director is to carefully adapt the piece of literature to another medium with markers of the source text, often referred as the 'spirit' of a text. Virginia Woolf called the visual medium a 'Parasite' and literature as its 'Victim' (Hutcheon 109). Geoffrey Wagner proposed three categories for adaptations: transposition, commentary and analogy (Wagner). Transposition is the direct translation from novel to film with minimal interference, analogous to a direct copy. Commentary describes an adaptation that follows the original work but with purposely altered elements from the novel. Lastly, analogy is further deviation from the original work to the point where the film can be seen as a separate work of art (Grobstein). It means the director is not intervening in the source text in transposition. The second category commentary is about adding his/her own interpretations and views and analogy is about changing the whole idea of the source text.

Studies of film adaptations have often produced heavily fidelity-based and personal readings of films based on literary texts. The seven adaptation strategies/procedures/categories developed by Shafer will be put to use in this study as a methodological tool and model consisting of a descriptive, interpretive, and comparative component. Philip M. Shafer has given seven topologies for analyse the adaptations and their original source in his Harry potter adaptation analysis. Those seven topologies are Inclusion, Exclusion, Compression, Extension, Resequencing, Substitution and Invention. Adaptation Studies can benefit from Shafer's seven adaptation practices, analysing how the two different mediums of Novel and the Movie treat elements like plot, characters, cultural and social themes, as the form of expression will be changed and how the cinematic adaptations can be seen as independent texts. (Shafer 4)

#### **Adaptations of Adiga's Balram Halwai on Screen:**

Aravind Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* (2008) is a novel, that has the protagonist called Balram Halwai, a compelling character that navigating the complexities of modern India. The transition of this multidimensional character from print to screen offers an appealing opportunity for analysis. In this exploration, the cinematic portrayal of Balram Halwai will be analysed assessing the transformation of his character, performance, visual representation, adaptation choices, cultural context, and overall impact.

Balram Halwai's character underwent significant transformations in his depiction from novel to its movie adaptation. In the book, Balram emerges as a multifaceted figure, embodying ambition, intelligence, societal defiance, and a strong desire for upward mobility. His narrative voice allows readers to delve deeply into his thoughts, conflicts, and moral dilemmas within India's complex social hierarchy. However, during its transition to film, Balram's character faced challenges of condensation and interpretation. Filmmakers grappled with compressing his multifaceted personality within limited screen time, potentially sacrificing some of the book's subtleties and inner dialogues that enriched his character.

When Balram's story moved from the book to the movie, it raised questions about how well his feelings and challenges could be shown on screen. In the book, we get to peek inside Balram's thoughts, which is harder to do in a movie. Films rely on what we see, so showing his inner struggles becomes more difficult. Using things like facial expressions, small movements, and symbols could have helped show his feelings better in the movie. The book's detailed thoughts might not have translated as clearly to the visual storytelling of the film. The cinematic portrayal might have aimed to make Balram more relatable or sympathetic to a wider audience, possibly necessitating alterations to his character arc or motivations. This adaptation process likely led to a slightly altered version of Balram, aligning with the requirements of visual storytelling while preserving the character's essence.

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Adiga's character Balram Halwai's life changed with the two important incidents in his life in the novel and its adaptations as *The White Tiger*. First incident when he is not a murderer but his master wants him to take his blame on him as he is his loyal driver and loyal servant. Though he has to confess that crime which actually he never done.

In this confession, Balram Halwai formally declares that he was responsible for a hit-and-run accident that occurred on the night of January 23. He states that he was driving the vehicle when it struck an unidentified person or persons and that, out of panic, he failed to assist the injured victims or take them to a nearby hospital for medical treatment. Balram further asserts that no one else was present in the car at the time of the accident and that he alone was responsible for both the incident and its consequences. Through this statement, he accepts complete accountability for the event while emphasizing that he acted of his own free will in making the confession (Adiga, p. 100).

Another important incident is when Balram actually became the murderer. When he kills his master with a broken liquor bottle. Both the incidents indicate the desires of Balram. The first incident indicates his desire to become loyal servant of his master and second to become loyal and faithful master. When they want to declare that Balram has to take this blame on his head, at that time in the text Ashok wasn't there in the incident, he was on call in his room, the door was closed and Pinky madam was also in her room. In the movie Ashok was standing there and opposed what they were doing with Balram. As it is mandatory action or situation to include for the director to tell the audience that he is not with them but he has to do this, as it is the matter of his own self and Pinky.

In the novel Balram was called two times in the room, first time Mongoose flattering him, welcoming him and giving indication of the future, when he says, "Sit, sit, make yourself comfortable, Balram. You're part of the family" (Adiga 165) Balram's heart fills up with pride after listening to these words. As he doesn't know the things that will happen with him in near future. Then Mongoose sends him downstairs and tells him to wait in the servant's quarters. Again, they call Balram and appreciate him with flattery. They said to sit down comfortably. Lawyer was sitting at the dinner table near mongoose. Whereas in the adaptation the director excludes the two-time narration of one incident and compresses the scene due to the time crunch. Instead of this he has completed the translation of text from the movie into one scene.

Another important narration of the novel is when Mukesh told to read the paper given to him by lawyer, that document describes that the accident happened on the day of 23<sup>rd</sup> January of this year Balram drove the car, and he was alone in the car, alone responsible and hit an unidentified person or persons or object. Whereas in the movie that document described that on the night of November 3<sup>rd</sup> this year, Balram drove the car that hit an unidentified person and he was alone responsible for that. This substitution is important for the director as there is a gap between the publication year of the novel and the year when text is adapted on Netflix.

Balram's ambition to become a great master is centre to his desires. In the novel, his decision to kill his master stems from this aspiration, as he seeks to rise to the status of one of the best masters. Adiga illustrates this desire by referencing Mr. Ashok's former lover, Ms. Uma, whom Mongoose suggests he reconnect with after separating from Pinky. However, in the movie adaptation, this narrative is omitted. Instead, when Balram drives Mr. Ashok to the Sheraton Hotel, Mr. Ashok informs Balram that Pinky called, urging him to return to New York. Despite this, Mr. Ashok declines, expressing his desire to remain in his homeland. During this conversation, Balram shares the tale of the cunning Brahmin who deceived the Buddha. This alteration in the movie adaptation underscores Balram's commitment to Mr. Ashok and his decision to stay in India, diverging from the novel's emphasis on Balram's ambitions and relationships. Another important scene director mentions the Muslim poet Iqbal, who says, "The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop

being a slave." (1:46:31) These are the invented scenes by the director which are not there in the text. Another important description director excludes from the text is, when Balram smashes the skull of Mr Ashok and kills him brutally at that time he narrated the situation of Mr Ashok that, "The blood was draining from the neck quite fast- I believe that is the way the Muslims kill their chickens." (Adiga 285) as it may be occurring the cultural differences from the audience. There are many modifications that director has done with recreations. This novel is adapted as Netflix original movie on the global OTT platform Netflix. Though the deep analysis of the character of Balram Halwai, the researcher has found that, Balram's childhood scenes and village scenes are compressed by the director in the adaptations. Hence, the novel is in written form, it is epistolary novel and to representing that particular scene, the director uses the audio-visual narratives, where Balram narrates his story and the condition of India, which is presented in the novel via writing an Email to Chinese premier. "India is two countries in one, an India of light and an India of darkness." (00:04:51)

### Conclusion

Balram Halwai's portrayal captures India's complex societal layers and cultural wealth, yet adapting his narrative to film faces the challenge of preserving depth. The novel's rich cultural context resists the constraints of cinematic medium, striving to maintain the essence of India's heritage. Linguistic diversity, a vibrant surface of the book, encounters barriers on screen, despite efforts through subtitles or adapted dialogue. Visual symbols in the film embrace diverse interpretations, moulded by cultural perspectives, shaping nuanced audience viewpoints. Amidst adaptation choices balancing authenticity and accessibility, Balram's global reception hinges on navigating India's multifaceted societal, cultural, and linguistic landscape, aiming for resonance while safeguarding his cultural roots.

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