

Film Adaptation from Tagore's "Shasti": A Critical Comparative Study

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Abstract: *Films adapted from literary texts have to go through some additions, deductions and alterations though the fidelity towards the source texts always remain an issue. The film, Shasti, adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's short story, "Shasti", by Chashi Nazrul Islam, a Bangladeshi filmmaker, is a 'commentary' adaptation though the last quarter of the film is a 'transposition'. The film successfully carries the Rabindric mood even after all the alterations needed for a generic shift; and moreover, the film itself is praiseworthy against the scale of filmic notions, though an adapted work is very often considered inferior to its source text.*

Keywords: *adaptation, film, Shasti, Tagore, Chashi Nazrul Islam*

A work of adaptation from a literary text into a film is a generic shift, and understandably so, an adapted film is subjected to contain few points of addition, deduction, and alteration against the written source text. Though the work of adaptation from a literary text into a film is a creative venture, it is somehow chained within an abstract frame of fidelity towards its source text. Bodeen (1963), co-author of the screenplay for Peter Ustinov's *Billy Budd* (1962), claims that, "Adapting literary works to film is, without a doubt, a creative undertaking, but the task requires a kind of selective interpretation, along with the ability to recreate and sustain an established mood. That is, the adaptor should see himself as owing allegiance to the source work" which reflects the first hand experience of a filmmaker trying to adapt a literary text.

Now, the film, *Shasti*, adapted from Rabindranath Tagore's short story, "Shasti", by Chashi Nazrul Islam, a Bangladeshi filmmaker, can be called a 'commentary' adaptation as a whole, because, some thematic issues of the original text have been stretched with some modification in the film version to capture the ideal length of a feature film. But, the last quarter of the film is rather a 'transposition' where the major incidents of the short story are presented keeping the fidelity almost intact. As a film, *Shasti* can be called an artistic one made under the direction of Chashi Nazrul Islam with its praiseworthy and touchy visualization of a well written screenplay. Now, another point to be noted here is, it is a common trend to consider an adapted film inferior to the literary text from where the film has been adapted. One of the main reasons for such belief is, people tend to consider that one inferior which follows something else and the thing that has been followed is considered superior. But, in terms of film adaptation from literary text, it can not be denied that an adaptation from text to film is a complete generic shift and a film has its own scale to be judged against and therefore, considering an adapted film 'better' or

'worse' than its source text should not be an issue because the comparison itself is not something logical, although, very often, the success of the film is popularly judged against its capability to capture the pivotal meaning and idealistic values of the source text.

Adaptation; Classification and Problems: An adapted film is basically the re-presentation of a literary piece in a new generic context. Film adaptation critic Wagner (as cited in Whelehan, 1999) offers a **classification of adapted films** which is, “**transposition** – a film that follows a novel almost to the core; **commentary** – original text is deliberately altered in some respects; and **analogy** – so many changes are done that little, if any, of the original text is left.”

Now, **adaptation** of any kind is somehow problematic. Additions, deductions, and alterations are needed in case of a work of adaptation, because, words in a text can express many such things (especially, the abstract ideas) that are hard to visualise in the film version. Even, a series of additions has to be made in order to catch the exact level of intensity of a single word. On the other hand, there are many such points that are pleasant to read in a text but can result in utter boredom if are visualised on the screen; and therefore, deductions and alterations are necessary in a work of adaptation. Moreover, a filmmaker has to think about the time length and has to avoid some lengthy sequences or has to concise some parts. For a film, the length against the unit of time is restricted as it is to be shown through a visual medium for a certain period where there is no such limit for a literary text as far as the time is concerned. On the other hand, a film has the benefit to touch the perception of its audience through the audio-visual effect which a literary text does not have. Therefore, an adaptation should not be judged and modified as 'good' or 'bad' from the perspective of its fidelity towards the original literary piece. In fact, no polarized judgement of worth or value is possible in case of an adapted film. An adapted film, rather, should be judged in terms of its own quality against the scale of filmic notions like the technical aspects, plot development, art of visualization, sound composition and so forth.

Before attempting the comparative study between Tagore's short story and Chashi Nazrul's film, the story line of the two works may help the cause. The **numerically outlined story progression of Tagore's 'Shasti'** can be as the following:

1. Dukhiram Rui and Sidam Rui, two low born, poor, Hindu brothers, attempt to go out for work, while their wives are quarrelling to each other.
2. The quarrel between the two wives, Radha and Chondora, is a usual and daily event, which is no more taken into concern by the neighbours.
3. It is a dark and gloomy day of rainy season. The river Padma keeps on flowing violently creating destructive erosion through one bank. All the people are busy in harvesting in the paddy-lands on the other side of Padma as the overflowing water of heavy rainfall is threatening to flood the paddy-lands. But, Dukhiram and Sidam are stopped to go to their paddy-land, forcefully taken to work in the landlord's outer house. The two brothers work there for whole day, are not allowed to go home and take food, have to be drenched in rain-water, are denied of proper wages, and moreover, are rebuked and insulted without any clue.

4. The tired and desolated brothers come home at the evening and find a gloomy atmosphere there as the two wives have quarrelled the day long.
5. Dukhiram, hungry and tired, seeks food, more specifically, 'vaat' (boiled rice). Dukhiram's wife responds wildly as there is no food and she replies with some insulting words that has ugly connotation.
6. Dukhiram, hungry and tired, insulted by the words of his wife, goes insane for the moment and deals a blow with the chopper in hand onto his wife's head. Radha immediately falls on the lap of Chondora, and dies.
7. Ramlochon Chakrabarti, a landowner, comes to the house of Dukhiram and Sidam to collect the unpaid land-tax. Ramlochon finds the atmosphere dark and gloomy. He calls Dukhiram and hears Dukhiram cry.
8. Ramlochon inquires the reason. Sidam comes forward. Trying to manage the situation, Sidam tells Ramlochon that, Chondora hits Radha with a chopper at one point of their quarrel and Radha dies.
9. Sidam falls onto Ramlochon's feet and pleads with Ramlochon for saving Chondora's life through inventing a way out.
10. Ramlochon suggests Sidam to tell that, Dukhiram kills his own wife not having food on his return home in the evening. But, Sidam tells Ramlochon that, if he loses wife, he may get another, but, if he loses his brother, he will not get a brother. Then, Ramlochon suggests Sidam to tell the truth that Chondora kills Radha (which is not the truth but Ramlochon is initially told so by Sidam) because one has to take the responsibility, both Dukhiram and Chondora can not be saved at a time.
11. Soon, it is known to all over the village that, Chondora kills Radha and the police immediately come to investigate.
12. As Sidam himself presents a false version initially, he finds no way out from it. So, he requests his wife to take the charge of Radha's murder. Sidam consoles his wife saying that, he will rescue her from the danger and she needs not to be worried.
13. Chondora gets inwardly shattered because of his husband's behaviour.
14. Sidam teaches his wife what to say before the police investigation. It is actually Ramlochon's suggestion that Chondora will say that, she had no intension to kill Radha, but Radha came to give Chondora a blow with the chopper and accidentally Radha was hit when Chondora tried to save herself.
15. But, Chondora takes the charge of murder on her shoulder without any attempt to save her life, because, her sentiment is extremely hurt by her husband. She, rather waywardly, because of her tortured ego, decides to take the punishment of death.
16. Chondora gets arrested and presented before the court for trial.
17. In the trial, Dukhiram tells the truth that he kills his own wife. Sidam admits that he kills his sister in law. But, Chondora remains firm on her claim. As it is the initial truth that Chondora kills Radha, the court is influenced to think that, Sidam and Dukhiram's claim are false. So, the court sentences Chondora to be hanged till death.

18. The doctor of the prison asks Chondora whether she wants to meet someone or not before her death. Chondora wishes to see her mother. The doctor says, “Your husband wants to meet you, will I call him in?” Chondora replies, “Death!” (2004)

Now, a **summary, with major turns and incidents, of the film version, *Shasti***, by Chashi Nazrul Islam is as follows:

Sidam Rui, a low born, poor Hindu, loves Chondora, the daughter of a decently affluent village ‘morol’ (village headmen). Chondora is a lively girl who initially denies Sidam but eventually falls in love with Sidam. Sidam marries Chondora but Chondora’s father rejects the marriage and arranges his daughter’s marriage elsewhere. Chondora elopes with Sidam and Sidam brings his wife home. Chondora’s angry father comes to Sidam’s house to take back his daughter as it becomes a matter of prestige for him. Chondora refuses to go with her father. Her father attempts to curse her while her maternal uncle stopped her father. Dukhiram’s wife, Radha initially receives Chondora warmly and Radha behaves well with Chondora. But, being provoked by a superstitious old village woman, Radha starts behaving rudely with Chondora with the issue of Radha’s son Ratan. Gradually, the quarrel between the two wives becomes a daily event though Chondora is hardly responsible. The harvest comes and the paddy needs to be cut and gathered soon before the land getting flooded by overflow of rainwater. Ramlochon Chakrabarti, a higher born but lecherous collector of the land-lord, comes and forcefully takes Dukhiram and Sidam to work in the landlord’s outer house. The two brothers are denied of going for the harvest. They have to work the whole day. They are not allowed to go home and take food. Dukhiram, who has been carrying a high fever, gets so tired that he falls down from the roof of a hut while working there, but even then, he is not shown any sympathy, rather he is tortured. While, back in home, the two wives severely quarrel with each other, break many pots and spoil the cooked food. The two brothers came home at the evening. Hungry, tired and desolated Dukhiram wants food. Radha replies him wildly with insulting words. Dukhiram goes insane for the moment blows the chopper on Radha’s head. Radha falls down to death. Ramlochon comes in the mean time, finds a dark and gloomy atmosphere and sees Dukhiram cry. Ramlochon inquires the reason. Unable to think clearly, Sidam tells Ramlochon that, Chondora kills Radha accidentally at one moment of their quarrel. Sidam then falls onto Ramlochon’s feet and pleads for Chondora’s life through inventing a way out. Ramlochon suggests to charge Dukhiram but Sidam refuses this option. Dukhiram attempts to admit his crime before the police. Sidam prevents his brother and asks his wife to say before investigators that Radha is accidentally killed as Chondora tries to save herself when Radha approaches her to blow with the chopper. Sidam consoles his wife saying that, she will be rescued. But, Chondora becomes inwardly shattered and because of her injured ego, takes the charge of Radha’s murder upon her shoulder. In the trial, Dukhiram admits the truth, Sidam tries to take the charge on himself, but Chondora remains firm on her claim. The court thus sentences Chondora to be hanged till death. Chondora gets hanged. Sidam has a hallucination that Chondora comes back to him alive, but soon after, he realizes the bitter truth that his wife is no more. Sidam floats away Chondora’s body-ash and bids her farewell forever. (1999)

Critical comparative analysis between Tagore's short story, "Shasti", and Chashi Nazrul Islam's film, *Shasti* along with necessary comments on the merits and demerits of the adapted version: As the two stories suggest, there are some points of difference between Tagore's "Shasti" and Chashi Nazrul Islam's *Shasti*.

The prime point of difference lies in case of dealing with the time span by Chashi Nazrul Islam. Tagore's short story is literally a very short one and through the way of incidental progression, it can not be visualized for such a duration that matches the ideal length of a feature film. Therefore, Chashi Nazrul Islam applies his innovation. He takes some thematic issues from the story, and in order to establish them, he creates some new twists and sub-plots (the notable ones will be discussed in the following part of this paper). He stretches the story in such a way that, the major events/incidents of the source text take place in the last quarter of the film, while the total duration of the film is around 2 hours.

First of all, Chashi Nazrul Islam changes the thematic focus of the story. Tagore's "Shasti" is more about a family crisis of a poor, low born, Hindu family, containing two brothers and their two wives. But, Chashi Nazrul's *Shasti* shifts the focus more towards the love story of Sidam and Chondora. This shifted focus serves multiple purposes for the filmmaker. It allows the filmmaker to incorporate some new events that contribute to the length of the film; it intensifies the emotional depth at the end of the film that contains the separation between Sidam and Chondora through Chondora's death; and it stands for the typical demand of a film in Bangladeshi context, that a film should contain a love story within its plot.

Chondora's family background and any active participation of her father, are not there in Tagore's story. But, Chashi Nazrul Islam adds the incidents related to Chondora's family and her father. This addition also contributes to the length of the film and shows the presence of a typical father figure in Bangladeshi film context, who refuses to accept his daughter's love marriage. In Tagore's story, Chondora's father is indirectly mentioned only for a single time, in which, her father is mentioned to express his satisfaction for his daughter's marriage at the time of his death. But, Chashi Nazrul presents Chondora's family as higher than Sidam's. And, Chondora's father, in the film version, seems to be unhappy with his daughter's marriage, unlike it is found in Tagore's story. Moreover, in the film, Chondora's father's attempt to curse his daughter foreshadows Chondora's upcoming fate, which is very artistically incorporated by the filmmaker.

Likewise, Chashi Nazrul Islam adds few more foreshadowing motifs that are the signs of his innovative merit. One such motif is the hunger of Dukhiram and his appetite for 'vaat'. In numerous occasions through the course of the film, Dukhiram's such appetite has been artistically visualized that ultimately contributes to comprehend Dukhiram's violent reaction in the murder scene where Dukhiram goes insane being denied of having 'vaat'.

Another motif incorporated by Chashi Nazrul Islam is the motif of women's hanging. In three occasions, by three different characters, this theme is presented that, women are not hanged to death in the reign of Queen Victoria. This motif works as the psychological logic behind Sidam's act of charging Chondora for Radha's murder in order to save his brother's life, and,

behind his words of consolation for his wife. This motif also contributes to the audience's positive judgement about the character of Sidam and the audience tend to feel sympathy for Sidam even after his rather unjust act of charging innocent Chondora.

The third such motif is Chondora's not having a child. In Tagore's story, Chondora is childless but this fact is not used to influence any event in the story. But, Chashi Nazrul Islam manipulates the very fact as the major reason of quarrel between the two wives. Because of the provocation from a superstitious old village woman, Radha tends to believe that, Chondora's not having a child is because of something ominous. And therefore, Radha becomes edgy about Chondora's care for Radha's son, Ratan. And, it forces Radha to misbehave with Chondora. Tagore does not provide any specific reason for the two wives' quarrel. But, Chashi Nazrul has to think of some reason as he has to visualize the quarrel in the screen before the audience, which is not possible without any clue.

Moreover, for the final and extreme quarrel between the two wives, Chashi Nazrul thinks of a more intense reason and therefore he utilizes the issue of Ramlochon-Chondora scandal. To construct this issue, Chashi Nazrul has to reshape the character of Ramlochon. This is another notable alteration made by Chashi Nazrul. Tagore's Ramlochon Chakrabarti is rather cunning yet respected middle aged person, but Chashi Nazrul characterizes Ramlochon as a lecherous person who keeps on eying lustfully on village women including Chondora. Ramlochon, in fact, serves the purpose of the antagonistic force in the film which is also a typical demand of this genre.

The ending is also altered a little by Chashi Nazrul Islam. Tagore's story ends with a word of despair from Chondora as she utters the word "death" regarding her husband. It also contains the complaining tone and an emotional detestation for Sidam from the shattered ego of Chondora. But, Chashi Nazrul tries to earn a kind of sympathy from the audience for the character of Sidam as it is discussed before. Therefore, Chashi Nazrul illustrates the ending a bit further where heartbroken and repentant Sidam has a moment of hallucination that Chondora comes back to him alive. But soon after, he realizes the bitter truth that his wife is no more. Sidam floats away the body-ash of Chondora and bids farewell to her forever, and the film ends with this. It also intensifies the appeal of Chondora-Sidam love story which has been the focus of the film.

The director also adds few singing and dancing scenes which are also the typical demand of Bangladeshi film audience. There are also few minor characters added in the film version who have their contribution to the plot development. Such few characters are the dance-girl, the landlord, the pundit, and the superstitious old woman.

One notable mistake, if it is considered so, can be the complexion of the character of Chondora. Tagore's Chondora is dark in complexion and her appeal sustains in her darkness of skin. But, Chashi Nazrul Islam's Chondora has a fair skin unlike Tagore's. This fact may have been managed with the help of artificial make-up but the director thinks otherwise.

So, to **conclude**, it can be said that, the film version by Chashi Nazrul Islam has its points of additions and alterations that are mostly justified as discussed in the aforementioned parts. As

an adaptation, *Shasti* is an illustrated one but it maintains high fidelity towards the source text, especially in the last quarter. As a film, it contains the praiseworthy innovative touches of the artistic sense of its director. Moreover, the contextualization of the characters, settings and costumes, successfully carry the Rabindric mood and notion.

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