

## 論文

# Rajshree Ojha's *Aisha* (2010) and Capitalism in the Indian Film Adaptations of Jane Austen's Novels

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### 要旨

文学作品の映像化翻案作品は原典の二次的産物として見られることが多いが、文化的作品は間テキスト性を重視したアプローチにより理解の幅が広がる。ジェイン・オースティンの『高慢と偏見』、『分別と多感』、『エマ』の三作品はよく映像化される人気作品であり、いずれもインド視点からの翻案が存在する。どれも原作との差異から読み解くとき、資本主義的構造への批判が浮かびあがる。英米合作の『花嫁と偏見』では英国の帝国主義的支配にとってかわった米国の資本主義への批判が、タミル映画『カンドウコンダイン・カンドウコンダイン』においては資本主義的構造の否定と継承拒否による構造への挑戦が現れ、ボリウッド映画『アイーシャ』では、ヒロインの描出のされ方を原作小説や他の翻案作品と敢えて対照させ、現代インド上流社会の消費主義的側面を強調することにより、西洋化された現代インド人の姿を魅力的と見る風潮を皮肉り、伝統的価値観への回帰を提案している。

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Film adaptations of a literary work are regularly confronted first with the most plausible criticism of being different from the original. Especially when the original work is of the elitist high culture, a mere product for the masses is easily dismissed. Some of the “heritage” and historical films may garner recognitions for being authentic and true to the original work – which still means that the original is placed higher than its adaptation, and some other art films may earn admirations for their aesthetics as they can be considered as forms of high culture themselves. Troost and Greenfield basically see the problem as inherent to the nature of film as an art form, for films flesh out the novels too much with an abundant amount of texture and information, with the visuals and the sounds, leaving less room for imaginations and interpretations on the viewers’ part, and thus taking away the delights of the precious ambiguities that literary works present.<sup>1)</sup> Their approach to read films as a way to understand us and our society, rather than for the merits of the interpretation of films themselves, therefore, is quite a sensible one, which can be justified through the discipline of cultural studies as well. In fact, it is logically contradictory to dismiss an adaptation (or a makeover) for being “different” from the original in the first place. If one is to view an adapted work in relation to the original, one is supposedly viewing them intertextually. An unquestionable intertextual understanding would be rendered on the premise that the works stand equal to begin with. Then the verdict to drop one of them as inferior should only be justified when the other is proved to be superior. It is imprudent to simply accept the superiority of an existing work just because it has been created first, although being the first does deserve some merit. Still, any scholar should know the danger of readily accepting unproven preconceptions or pre-existing judgments as they are. There lies the beauty of criticism – to doubt pre-existing notions and ideas. We can only be intellectually free when we break away from preconceived notions. Thus, it is not fair or smart to conclude that an adaptation is a secondary, inferior work without a proper examination process. The cultural practices of adaptations and makeovers naturally demand us to appreciate the body of works not individually but intertextually. Adaptations and remakes are not to be disregarded because of their differences (from the “original” works) they display; rather, the very differences are to be understood as representations of the political dynamics of our contemporary culture in addition to the connections and references they make to other works. The “fidelity” approach to film adaptations of literary works is only one of the possible disciplines and nothing more. It is my attempt in this essay, therefore, to look at three typically underrated Indian film

adaptations, or “appropriations” as some scholars claim, of the novels by Jane Austen (1775-1817), who is one of the most distinguished and loved authors in the history of English literature, and explore the ways in which the adapted works help us understand the world we live in. As I have already discussed two of the three films to some extent elsewhere, my focus in this essay will be on the third film, Rajshree Ojha's *Aisha* (2010), which shows indications of its inspiration coming from Amy Heckerling's *Clueless* (1995), a “makeover” film of *Emma* (1815), and thus has often been doubly undervalued.

Compared to the likes of William Shakespeare, Anton Chekhov, and Charles Dickens, for example, not many screen or TV adaptations of Jane Austen's novels actually exist.<sup>2)</sup> Clearly, it has partly to do with the number of works the writers have produced, and the form of the writing – as plays are easier to be adapted for obvious reasons, as well as the film industry's preference in sensational and dramatic subjects and stories.<sup>3)</sup> Nevertheless, considering the number and the type of novels Austen has left for us, she is indisputably one of the most adapted classic authors, especially in the recent decades. Among the numerous global and transnational – oftentimes non-English – adaptations or reworkings of Jane Austen's novels and characters, the Indian “appropriations” stand out in their singular tendency to depict capitalism as one of the defining elements that affect the plot as well as the work's messages.<sup>4)</sup> For each of the top three adapted novels by Jane Austen, an Indian (or partially Indian) film version is produced: These are Gurinder Chadha's British-American production of *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) for *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Rajiv Menon's Tamil film *Kandukondain Kandukondain* (2000) for *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), and Rajshree Ojha's Hindi film *Aisha* for *Emma*. There must be some particular appeal to the Indian audience these quintessentially English novels by Jane Austen hold.<sup>5)</sup> Significantly, capitalism figures as one of the crucial factors in each of the films. On the other hand, not many literary scholars of Jane Austen have traditionally focused their readings of the novels on the historical representations of the economy in England, for the author's commentary on the social class does not go so far as attacking the system of the landed gentry, indicating that her central concerns lie elsewhere: She is more interested in the daily lives of the women of the English gentry in the countryside. Even though Austen does deal with the social hierarchies of the time in her stories, as it can be seen in the fact that the matter of her characters' marriages is tied to their economic survival, her novels do not seem more political than personal. While the very social systems show signs of capitalist structures even in her own works as the Bennetts and her

notable heroes such as Mr Darcy and Mr Knightley are the members of the landed gentry, which cannot be detached from the emergence of agrarian capitalism in England, Austen seems to have been not threatened by the possibility of those systems giving rise to industrial capitalism and therefore exploitation of the lower class. (Of course, one of the standard criticisms directed at Austen is that her works show that she little cares about the servant class.) Austen is not interested in changing the system, at least in terms of economy, even though she is presenting a critique on the social classes of the time. It is noteworthy, therefore, that each of the adaptations from an Indian perspective magnifies the politics of economy in the film.

*Pride and Prejudice* is undoubtedly Austen's most popular novel, soundly followed by *Sense and Sensibility*, even in terms of visual adaptations. The classic American (MGM) production of *Pride and Prejudice* (1940) where Greer Garson plays Elizabeth Bennet and Laurence Olivier the first iconic Mr Darcy was well received as a well-made comedy of manners with brilliantly portrayed leading characters despite its alterations from the novel: the period of the film was set to a later time than that of Austen's work, which enabled the characters to dress in more spectacular costumes, and the meanings of some characters' behaviours were distorted as a result of the changes in the scenes and lines. Arguably the most famous production, the 1995 BBC television series with Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth, whose portrayal of the character was so phenomenal that he became to be associated with Mr Darcy most often and even inspired writers such as Helen Fielding to create a modern version of Mr Darcy, remains to be the most "authentic" visual adaptation of the work to date, while Joe Wright's star-studded, romantic heritage film (2005) was generally praised by film critics, mainly for its beautiful cinematography and Wright's direction and film techniques, in spite of the film's distance from the original novel; altered scenes and dialogues as well as additional scenes from Mr Darcy's perspective, on which most of the criticisms from literary critics and devoted Austen readers concentrated. What Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* does in comparison is politicising the characters' relationships by spelling out Imperialism as a highest form of capitalism through a conversation between Will Darcy, who is an American<sup>6)</sup> in a hotel business in this adaptation, and Lalita Bakshi, a daughter of a farm owner in Amritsar – an Indian equivalent of Elizabeth Bennett. The variations in their characters allow them to talk, while they are enjoying the sun in the resort town of Goa, about how American capitalists are commodifying India.

Lalita: "I'm sure you think India's beneath you."

Darcy: "If I really thought that, then why would I be thinking about buying this place?"

Lalita: "You think this is India?"

Darcy: "Well, don't you wanna see more investment, more jobs?"

Lalita: "Yes, but who does it really benefit? You want people to come to India, without having to deal with Indians."

Darcy: "That's good. Remind me to add that to the tourism brochure."

Lalita: "Isn't that what all tourists want here? 5-star comfort with a bit of culture thrown in? I don't want you to turn India into a theme park. I thought we got rid of imperialists like you!"

Darcy: "I'm not British. I'm American."

Lalita: "Exactly!"

Just as in Said's criticism of *Aida* in *Culture and Imperialism*, the Western commodification (which makes one refuse to acknowledge the reality) of the East is highlighted, and a strong association is made between British Imperialism and American capitalism as a contemporary Western subjugation of the East. The postcolonial critique on British Imperialism emerges through the film's unique repositions of the characters, and Will Darcy's attempt to learn the real Indian culture in the end, in the form of playing a traditional drum, brings about a connotation of a union of the West and the East, which the director is attempting to achieve through the film on many levels.

An attack on capitalistic ideas and structure is more central to the story and the characters in the case of *Kandukondain Kandukondain*. While the characters' decisions to seek a better livelihood and a fortune through marriages are not so much as condemned in Austen's novel, the characterisation of Srikanth (an equivalent of John Willoughby) and his profession in the film expose the foulness of capitalism. As opposed to Willoughby, whose flirting and insincere dealings with women make him at fault, Srikanth does nothing wrong in terms of his affection towards Meenakshi (Marianne), except for his ultimate betrayal which results from his belief in the capitalistic system. Srikanth's finance company does well when being operated on a small scale, but once it expands its scheme and starts to do business on a global scale, it goes bankrupt. The film critiques the capitalistic system through a warning from Sivagnanam, a common but wise character with a practical mind. When Sivagnanam's friend loses in a card game and mutters that

he should have deposited the money to Srikanth's company instead of betting on the card game, for then he would have still got the interest, Sivagnanam points out the possibility of losing the principal altogether, which is exactly what happens later. Srikanth's love is true, and he would not have betrayed Meenakshi if his company had not gone bankrupt. If he had not been absorbed in the idea of exploiting the depositors and investors in the first place, nothing would have stood in the way of the couple. All the blame is cast on his capitalistic ideas. In the end, he gets married to a minister's daughter to save his company. He who aimed to play the capitalist ironically ends up selling himself. What Manohar, the Edward Ferrars equivalent, goes through as he attempts at directing his first feature film in India also challenges the "globally" accepted Western ideas – the hegemony of Hollywood as the global standard, and therefore the capitalistic structure. Western-influenced Manohar originally wishes to make an action-packed suspense film in an American-style, transplanting a commercially successful Hollywood film *Speed* (1994) into an Indian setting, but he eventually gives in to the opinions of his staff and backers who insist on making nothing more than a traditionally Tamil film with various elements, including the extravagant song and dance scenes, to satisfy the local audience. His Western ideas do not work in India: As his father tells him, "foreigners (Western people) may be satisfied with a chicken, but the Tamil audience will not be satisfied without a variety in their cuisine." On the other hand, Manohar's eventual success in the industry lets him live independently with his own skill and talent and reject his father's offer to take over his factory with 600 workers. This refusal to succeed his father's business is plainly analogous to rejecting the given path by the previous generations. Alterations in the sisters' characters also indicate how the film politicises the social structure while tailoring the story and the characters to the values of the modern audience. Sowmya (Elinor) becomes the main source of income for the family after they are driven out of Poongudi after the death of their grandfather who has left nothing for them. She works as a telephone receptionist before getting promoted to a computer programmer. Meenakshi pursues a career in music and soon becomes quite successful as a singer. As they have become able to establish and support themselves professionally in the city of Chennai, they could afford to turn down the chance to return to their old house in the village. When Sowmya and Meenakshi start to make a decent living, thanks to their capacities and talents, their uncle, who has originally inherited the properties from their grandfather, passes away and leaves the house to his sister, the girls' mother.

Meenakshi: "We don't want it. We have faced enough problems (because of not getting the inheritance before). We can live without Poongudi now."

Uncle's Wife: "Even if you don't want it, take it at least for your future husbands."

Sowmya: "Our husbands-to-be should come and marry seeing us, and not by seeing the walls around or the properties."

This kind of blatant refusal of inheritance is not found in the original novel or other adaptations. In the novels by Austen, the characters find ways to get by within the system. The maintenance and the succession of the property were of their great and prior concern. In contrast, the characters in *Kandukondain Kandukondain* strive to live by their own merits without having to do with inherited status and properties. The incarnations and relocations of the characters do not simply make the film relatable to the local audience: They create a proper background to convey the film's message. The film's differences from the novel demonstrate not just the results of the process to mix Western and Indian cultures but the testimonies of the film's political statement.

As often argued by Austen critics, the film's some other alterations from the novel – additional details and scenes that are not present in the original – suggest that *Kandukondain Kandukondain* is in fact not a genuine adaptation of the novel but rather a remake inspired by Ang Lee's 1995 film, whose award-winning script was written by Emma Thompson.<sup>7)</sup> Just as Colonel Brandon presents Marianne a piano, Major Bala brings Meenakshi a tambura. Furthermore, both films end with a memorable scene of a double wedding of the sisters. It seems that Menon simply borrowed the ideas in Lee and Thompson's successful film which was convenient to tell his story to the local audience, much in the same way Manohar first attempted to transplant *Speed* into an Indian setting – a common practice in the Indian filmmaking. Similar evidences can be seen in the case of *Aisha* and *Clueless*. *Aisha*, too, is often accused of employing too much details that are not found in the novel from *Clueless*, the American high school version of *Emma*, to be considered a serious adaptation of Austen's English novel. Although Theresa Kenney's intention is to argue how *Aisha* is closer to the world and novel of Austen than *Clueless* is, she nevertheless admits to the similarities between the two films, citing Ian Crouch's review of *Aisha*. She believes *Aisha* adheres more closely to *Emma* than *Clueless* does. While recognising the differences between the film and the novel, claiming that *Aisha* is more of a descendant of the heroines in other Bollywood romantic comedy films than of

Emma, and the film's negligence to the values in Austen's time, she points out that "[t]hrough the dialogue is certainly changed from the novel, these set pieces mark Emma's progress through her story, and they allow the film to resonate Austen's realism, her building of character and of tensions in relationships. They also develop her themes of self-delusion, class consciousness, and *noblesse oblige*." Kenney compares *Aisha* with *Clueless* only to undermine the film's references to its American predecessor later. Rosa M. García-Periago extensively and convincingly discusses *Aisha* as an instance in the long tradition of Bollywood films, rather than a transnational remake of an Austen makeover: *Aisha* "is more indebted to Indian culture and Bollywood conventions," portraying diasporic characters who struggle to find the balance between Western modernity and the traditional Indian values.

In most cases, the major point of comparison between *Aisha* and *Clueless* (and consequently with *Emma*) is the heroine's character. To fit into the urbanised locale (as opposed to the provincial one in the original) of each film and to simultaneously satisfy the contemporary audience optically, both Aisha and Cher (the heroine in *Clueless*) are portrayed as rich and vain, much in the traditions of chick flicks and of popular television series of urban rich girls, whereas one of Emma's virtues is literally her lack of vanity. *Clueless* begins with a montage of Cher having fun, driving her Jeep without a licence, shopping at the mall, and clubbing without a care in the world. The first half of *Aisha* is full of product placements of high-class labels, and Aisha looks like a model in those TV commercials for designer's brands. It also begins with Aisha driving a yellow Volkswagen, though she must have a licence unlike Cher. The difference between the two may seem subtle on this matter of vanity, but the subtle difference calls for our attention. The vanity of the heroine is narratively and cinematically demonstrated through her need to give a makeover. Partly because Cher is still 16 years old, her makeovers of a transfer student Tai Frasier who looks "clueless" in terms of appearance and of her teacher Ms Geist are rendered without money. The fact that she does not buy new things for the makeovers when in reality she could have (with her father's plastic) should be pointed out. On the other hand, Aisha goes for a serious shopping at an expensive department store for the makeover of Shefali, her new middle-class friend from a small town, and the camerawork makes sure that we see Aisha's consumer driven life by showing the credit card being swiped and the bill being signed. This ostensibly subtle difference begins to weigh more significance in a later scene when Shefali finally realises that Aisha has been manipulating

her. Neither in *Clueless* nor in the original novel, the Harriet character denounces the heroine's selfish manipulation or hypocrisy in such a way Shefali does Aisha. Shefali finally sees how Aisha has been treating her with condescension and for her own gratification when Aisha tries to make Shefali give up on Arjun, her Mr Knightly, for she is beginning to fall for him herself:

Aisha: "But Shefali, you and Arjun are different. He's not your type. You are so different. You're not his type, Shefali."

Shefali: "What do you mean by different? Aisha, what do you mean by that? Is it because I don't wear good clothes like you do? *Because I don't speak English like you do?* (italics mine) Because my father isn't as rich as you are – that I'm middle-class? . . . Because I'm a villager, right?"

Aisha: "No. You are misunderstanding."

Shefali: "I understand everything, Aisha. You never considered me as your friend. . . . I'm just a project. 'Cut that poor thing's hair.' 'Give that poor thing some clothes.' 'Take that poor thing to Mumbai.' . . . 'Shefali, Randhir is nice.' 'No, Shefali, Randhir isn't nice.' 'Shefali, Dhruv is nice.' 'No, Shefali, Dhruv is not nice.' Enough, Aisha, enough! You've never considered me as an equal to you, have you?"

It is made clear in Shefali's understanding (and as this leads to Aisha's reflection and her eventual character development, what Shefali points out here corresponds with the film's sentence) that Aisha is at fault for her imposition of her Westernised way of life, especially the use of the English language, on Shefali as well as for her arrogance among other things. Furthermore, Aisha comes close to becoming an epitome of consumer capitalism here. If the characters in *Aisha* represent the diasporic or postcolonial prototypical characters of popular Bollywood films, as Garcia-Periago argues, Shefali's denouncement of Aisha becomes at least one of the film's political statements in terms of the Indians' ideal attitude toward the West and Western consumerism, whose growth coincided with the growth of capitalism, and the characterisation of Aarti (the Jane Fairfax equivalent) as an ideal diasporic individual who maintains her Indian identity and respects Indian traditions and rituals reinforces the film's inclination.

Another defining factor of the heroine's character is the portrayal of the world she lives in. Both *Aisha* and *Clueless* retain the depiction of the heroine's world as a small and limited one, though not presented as visually symbolical as in the 1996 theatrical film

version, directed by Douglas McGrath, where it opens with Gwyneth Paltrow holding a small globe in her hand. Instead, Cher is depicted as an airhead who lives comfortably in her small world which consists of her big house and high school in Beverly Hills. Stepping out from familiar areas immediately invites danger to her being: She is put a gun to her head once she is outside of her father's and Josh's care and protection. Her oral argument (in Valley Girl dialect) in a Debate class never surpasses the threshold of her lawn: World problems are turned into a story of her party. The limitation of her world is exposed geographically and intellectually. Even though Cher learns to be less self-centred and have a wider view of the world in the end, her intellect fails to improve: She only becomes emotionally intelligent, if any at all. On the other hand, Aisha's geographical world is wider than that of Cher's. She moves back and forth from Delhi to Mumbai, in addition to having holiday trips. She is also not as intellectually lacking as Cher, even though she is much more arrogant and condescending than her counterpart. The limitation in Aisha's world results from the very arrogance and condescension: Arjun criticises her for staying "in [her] own little bubble," when she thinks too highly of herself and cannot imagine other people might have different and better ideas. In the small society of her friends and family in the upper-class world, there is nothing to discourage her from being the princess, but her world begins to collapse as her matchmaking effort fails repeatedly, making her realise the deficiency in her perception of the world. That is when the self-centred girl really begins to see and understand "others" for the first time. She is grown and has a wider view of the world in the end just as Emma matures and learns there is a world outside of her in the novel. It is significant, therefore, that *Aisha* ends with a scene of a wedding in the style of Bollywood films. While the wedding at the beginning of the film was in a Western style, the four couples at the end of the film, including the bride and the groom, are all dressed in traditional Indian attire. This return to the traditional presents the film's message distinctly. The overwhelmingly extravagant Western life Aisha was embracing at the beginning of the film begins to assume an ironical hue. Even though it is indeed entertaining to watch the life of the riches, the latter half of the film rewrites its impression. Some may feel the discrepancy in the moods of the lively first half and the darker latter half of *Aisha*, and that is as it should be. Just as the English part and the Jewish part of George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* should be read together, the two halves of the film give meaning to the audience through the combination. The first half's excessiveness was stressed so that the latter half could turn the table over and make a

claim: to return to the traditional Indian sensibilities.

*Aisha*'s references to *Clueless*, then, also begin to take on a new meaning. As stated above, the two films begin in a similar way, making the Emma character drive her car daringly. In the first few scenes, *Aisha* makes a verbal reference to *Clueless* by repeating Cher's pet phrase "whatever." There are a number of scenes where *Aisha* seems to pay homage to *Clueless*; Tai's listening to "their song" repeatedly and Shefali's stealing of Randhir's CD, the Harriet character being rescued by the person who really cares and ignored by the person intended for her (by the Emma character), and the way the Harriet character gets rid of her memorabilia. The two films even share the wedding finale, too, even though the connotations of each wedding scene should be taken into consideration. It must be a conscious decision on the filmmakers of *Aisha* to make use of the scenes in *Clueless* so that the differences are given emphasis, for in the differences lie the film's political message: They present a critique on consumer-oriented American capitalistic society. *Aisha* is not a mere remake of *Clueless* but a legitimate adaptation of Jane Austen's English novel, as we can see more details from the novel fleshed out in *Aisha* than in *Clueless*: However, *Aisha* simultaneously makes a postcolonial statement to the audience by way of making references to *Clueless*. In the time when literary works are adapted or appropriated globally and transnationally all the time, a faithful translation of a work gets more and more ambitious to say the least. An intertextual approach is an answer to the problem. This intertextual reading of *Aisha* proves the film to be a complex work of art that not only talks about Jane Austen's novel but also about the postcolonial Indian sensibilities and about Bollywood films. On the other hand, it can also be said that *Aisha* is repackaging Austen as a commodity as well. It is talking back to the world where the West regularly commodifies the East, and taking revenge, as it were, for a change.

## Notes

- 1) "Introduction: Watching Ourselves Watching." *Jane Austen in Hollywood*.
- 2) According to the *Internet Movie Database*, William Shakespeare has 1,355 writing credits (including those still in the pre-production stage) under his name, Anton Chekhov 473 credits, and Charles Dickens 389 credits, whereas Jane Austen has only 74 credits, as of 24 March 2018.
- 3) In the early history of narrative cinema, filmmakers often adapted 19th century sensation novels into films, where they only used shocking or spectacular scenes in their 10- to 20-minute duration of the

- film. Most films were only 1 or 2 reels before 1910, which made a decent story-telling impossible.
- 4) I have already discussed how *Kandukondain Kandukondain* takes a postcolonial stance in its depiction of capitalism and the class society in my previous essay, “De-colonisation through *Kandukondain Kandukondain*, a Masala Austen Film.” The main points will be briefly referred to for clarification here in this essay.
  - 5) *Bride and Prejudice*’s director Gurinder Chadha and Sonam Kapoor who plays the titular heroine in *Aisha* have both said in interviews that the rules and regulations and the class society in Austen’s time is still very much prevalent in contemporary India which makes it easier for them to make the connection. Kapoor has also insisted that the audience would be able to relate to the story and the characters as the situations are the same all over the world.
  - 6) Chadha has expressed why she made Darcy an American in her interview with Aftab: “I did not want Darcy to be English, because of the connotations of the Raj, and also because of Colin Firth and his performance in the BBC television adaptation. I did not want to put that pressure on a British actor. Also, because of the Iraq war, it was good for me to make him American, as Americans feel like they rule the world.” All characters except for George Wickham are given new race or nationality in this film. The Bingleys (Balraj and Kiran) are NRIs in London, and Mr Collins (Mr Kohli) is an Indian accountant in Los Angeles. Leaving Wickham, the villain in the story, to be the only English Caucasian invites speculations of a kind. For further details on the reading of the film’s alterations in the characters’ race and nationality, I am indebted to Suchitra Mathur’s article.
  - 7) “There seems to be no homage to Austen’s novel, only echoes of Thompson’s screenplay,” in Troost and Greenfield’s words.

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