

MUHAFIZ KAUN? THE ISSUE OF INTERTEXTUAL PRESERVATION ADAPTING ANITA DESAI'S IN CUSTODY

SANCHITA KHURANA

Abstract: The adaptation of Anita Desai's novel *In Custody*, which deals with the linguistic issue of preservation of Urdu, into a Hindi-Urdu film *Muhafiz* by Ismail Merchant, opens up to the reader-viewer a world of questions. While there is obviously the ideological-technical-circumstantial baggage that comes with any adaptation into film, there also needs to be an appraisal of the (always-unique) contextual position of any particular 'author'. The paper suggests that a just approach holds in realizing that 'realities' like modernization, communal histories and gender contribute significantly in shaping and influencing adaptational choices.

Keywords: Adaptation, feminist studies, ghazal, inheritance, Urdu.

When interviewed by Magda Costa on her reception of *Muhafiz* (1994), the award-winning film adaptation of her own novel *In Custody* (1984), Anita Desai reacted with careful objectivity: "...I just couldn't believe my eyes when I saw it in gorgeous Technicolor... That's the world of Ismail Merchant... I had to distance myself from it; I had to detach myself and accept the fact that it's his vision of the book. He is very happy with it. It is not my vision (*italics mine*): There were things though that I did enjoy very much in the film, like the music, and actually hearing the poetry in Urdu." (2001)

Of course she was referring to the adaptive techniques used by Merchant, the director of *Muhafiz*, in filming the novel and of course she was aware of the ideological and contextual politics inherent in any impulse to adapt a particular text. For any adaptation, it becomes necessary to siphon out much from the source text, to correspond to technical needs, as much as it is important to not lose the ideological underpinnings originally present.

Much as has been written on/ against the "fidelity criterion" of analyzing adaptations, and much as I may try to refrain from a comparative-contrastive study of an adapted text, I find myself aligning towards Julie Sanders' view of the pleasure principle of such a task. In her book on adaptation and appropriation, even as she introduces the reader to a basic understanding of what the two terms mean (through reviewing some of the various definitions and theories in adaptation studies), she finds consistent through all adaptations, an "inherent sense of play, produced in part by our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise." (Sanders, 2006: 25)

Muhafiz, being a work of great visual-aural aesthetic, can be understood and enjoyed in its own right. What has been considerably difficult for me, though, having read *In Custody* with great interest, is to not place this adaptation under a correlative lens, especially knowing the gap of ten years that separates

the two works and the common anxieties (cultural, linguistic) that unite the author and the director. Of particular interest to me is Ismail Merchant's treatment of the issue of preservation and inheritance of Urdu poetry, and of the revivalist attitude to Urdu language in general, as opposed to the more elegiac tone taken by Desai's written text. Drawing on Deborah Cartmell's categories of adaptation, I shall try to locate the

"forces of social struggle and political power or acts of historical consciousness" (Robert Weismann) that could be the influence generating Merchant's "alternative perspective" (Sanders, 2006: 98)

to Desai's novel, technical/ genre-specific demands aside. Shashi Kapoor as Nur aptly captures the decadence of a man who sees death as a way of escaping from the humiliation of his origins and identity, equally matched by the anxieties experienced by Om Puri who as Deven is stuck between desire and material need.

Old Shahjehanabadi: Culturally Transposed to Bhopal In a novel replete with symbolism and allusions, it could not have been incidental that the nostalgia for the culture of Old Delhi, of its mansions and havelis, of the Mughal lifestyle of the court and its royal language *zubaan-e-Urdu*, gets embodied in a poet named Nur Shahjehanabadi, living in this "pullulating honeycomb of commerce" (Desai, 2008: 39), in the walled-city once ruled by Mughal emperors: the city of Delhi, primarily called Shahjehanabad. The nur that is the glory of Shahjehanabad is dying in one of the dingy lanes of Chandni Chowk. Merchant's *Nur*, however, is located in Bhopal, a princely-state until 1947 and known for its ruling begums. In shifting the setting for this decadence of Urdu and all else that it seems to represent, to the heartland of India, is Merchant raising an important question about the non-specificity of Urdu-speaking regions? Or is he simply "proximating" (Gerard Genette) the world of Desai's novel to the world of the viewers of a much later time, where not only has significant industrial and

mercantilist invasion happened but also industrial disasters like the 1984 Union Carbide tragedy of Bhopal, the memories of which are as haunting as the Hindu-Muslim riots that aggrieved Bombay in 1992 (is it why Merchant is wary of the communally charged rants by the character of Trivedi in the novel)? Critic Sharmila Sen comments on the locational shift as an appropriation of the world of the Mughal nawabs into the homeland of a nawab, who, as she writes, “is certainly a far cry from the erstwhile Muslim rulers of Desai’s novel” (Sen 2008: 183). She is talking about the modern nawab from Bhopal, Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, cricketer-aristocrat, who, unlike the last nawab of Old Delhi (Bahadur Shah Zafar vying hard against the British to protect the Mughal Sultanate of Delhi), she almost suggests, is a sell-out to commercialism. Even as there is a suggestive shift in technological aspiration from the novel, in the film, the video recording never happens, unlike Merchant’s own video/film of course. Ironically, for a journal called ‘Awaaz’, all that can be put on tape is loud, meaningless peals of the “revered” poet as he drinks and eats nihilistically, reciting a verse or two occasionally, decorated with lewd puns here and there. Both Nur and Deven show a strange resistance to change. Can the movie then qualify as a Heritage film? Defining this genre, Eckhart V. Virchow writes, “Core heritage films are about both reading and showcasing the token nature of landscapes and costume props, about ruralist nostalgia that harks back to the neo-Romantic ideal developed in response to the threat posed by revolutions and industrialism.” (qtd. in Cartmell and Whelehan, 2007: 123). Not only is Nur nostalgic of the clear skies and the games of kushti in dusty grounds, he’s also very distinctly averse to modern gadgets. Where Desai’s *In Custody* evokes a triangular net of cultural and linguistic relations- English, Urdu, Hindi; Merchant returns to Urdu, his first language, to show the decay of Urdu (notwithstanding the English subtitles in the movie, which to some extent cause to dampen the “roaring” nature of Urdu dialogue). As Amina Yaqin suggests, there is a crucial shift of power dynamic in the telling of this tale from an English narration about Urdu to a re-appropriation of the story of Urdu in Urdu (Yaqin 2004). Merchant’s view about Urdu is different than Desai’s because he does not think that Urdu can die, which is enunciated not just in the Urduized Hindi of its dialogues but also in the vocal musical/ versifying traditions it employs. “Urdu dum tod rahi hai”- Ghazal as cultural preserver: The famous line by Murad (Tinnu Anand) about Urdu breathing its last has generated much response. The question to answer is: Is Urdu really dying? In an interview, the Bombay-born filmmaker recorded his belief that,

“Urdu cannot die out because it has very strong roots in Persia. The language itself is not only just the language of the Muslims, but it’s also the language of the Hindus. It’s more promoted by the Hindus. If you look at the popular Hindi films, all the songs are written in Urdu.” (2001)

Raza Mir asserts that Urdu is still very much alive in the performed linguistic traditions of India (2000). As the case might be, performed linguistic traditions correspond mostly to the ghazal and other Bollywood songs in contemporary India. The ghazalisation of Urdu poetry has been an important move towards popularizing Urdu poetry among a Hindi-speaking audience. In fact, quite different from the pastiches that Desai’s English text offers in the name of “translated / transcreated” Urdu poetry, which have been dismissed as failed elucidations of the codified metaphoric universe that the ghazal comes from, Ismail Merchant’s tasteful rendition of actual Urdu poetry by Faiz Ahmed Faiz as ghazals set to sarangi and tabla, serves to highlight two important observations: a) Recalling a poet who has been seen as the conflation of tradition and modernity, might represent not just rich literary taste but also the radicalizing vision of the director. Faiz was an active member of the All India Progressive Writers’ Movement, writing socio-political poetry against colonialism and willing to work towards world peace and communal harmony by subsuming change necessary for progress; Nur, on the other hand, is presented as reluctant to give up the conventional themes and metaphors of the classical ghazal and also the aristocratic lifestyle that once symbolized Mughal glory. “It is interesting that Faiz, stylistically wedded to the traditional form of the ghazal, was concerned with forging themes of modernity in his poetic message, constructing a new direction for his Urdu listeners and readers, while Desai, working with a modernist narrative, takes it back toward a sensibility rooted in tradition and pre-modern aristocracy.” (Yaqin 2004) b) The ghazal, which primarily means a song to the Beloved, hints back at medievalism (Russell 1969), having more cultural roots attached to it than might be apparent. However, when the Moghul Empire declined in the eighteenth century, along with the fortunes of the Muslim nobility who patronized the fine arts, the ghazal found new appeal among the courtesan class that began to cater to the emerging North Indian Hindu bourgeoisie in mehfil (Kasbekar, 2006: 24). This recorded form of ghazal is what Imtiaz Begum’s vocal performance corresponds to, with lyrics (by Nayyara Noor) that hint at the independence, self-assertion and manipulation that her character symbolizes. This form of subversive/ questioning addition in the adapted text seems to fit well in

Cartmell's category of "commentary" (Cartmell and Whelehan, 2007: 24), attesting to the ghazal being a sanctioned form of release of suppressed emotion. Of course the arguments about the tawaif song of Bollywood being a mere lip-sync, a prostituted version of the ghazal, have been long stated. If only as a humiliation to the "greatest living Urdu poet", Imtiaz Begum (my emphasis) performs and earns money for the poet's extravagant lifestyle. Sharmila Sen sees the movie as fusing the "tawaif song" of Bollywood with Urdu poetry and writes, "If Muhafiz is a nostalgic look at the dwindling number of Urdu poetry connoisseurs, then the quasi-tawaif song sequence is an ironic nod to the most popular vehicle through which Urdu lyrics reach a non-Urdu speaking audience." (Sen 2008: 187). With its "Hinduisation" in Bollywood, even in the hands of Urdu lyricists, and with its metaphor of the Beloved broadened to stand for much more than romantic love, the ghazal acts as a modern cultural custodian of the Urdu poetic tradition.

Urdu shayari kiski jaagir? : The question of inheritance A teary-eyed Shabana Azmi, playing the role of Imtiaz, stands enraged, proclaiming loud her literary ability, equating herself to men, both who write poetry and those who simply listen to it. The helplessness of knowing that she isn't being heard adds to the poignancy of the scene, while at the same time suggesting the filmmaker's verdict on a shayara like Imtiaz. Clearly discernible is the strong irony in the character of a fictional Urdu poet's "intellectual companion", as it were, being played by an actress actually married to a leading Urdu lyricist! The issue of literary inheritance recurs throughout the novel and the movie, exposing fissures that have been superficially closed by the complacent male world of primogenitors. One cannot deny noticing the homosociality of Nur's "literary circle"; neither is Deven's disappointment in the "prosaic" Sarla (a plainly dressed Neena Gupta in the movie) obscure. The poetic song of Imtiaz is unbearable to the men who claim to be connoisseurs of Urdu poetry. Deven would rather listen to his son's parrot song and Nur would rather versify to his drunken pseudo-intellectual followers. The right of inheriting poetic art can be gained only if one qualifies to be male. For Deven, this custodianship is not just the responsibility of Nur's life and art, but also of setting right (in his own eyes at least) his own paternal poetic lineage. Sen even suggests that the camera-focus on Deven's son at the beginning of the movie indicates the primacy of the young inheritor's narrative vision. In this light, the character of Imtiaz

Begum poses important questions, challenging this lineage and its categorizing rules. Even as she performs in mushairas in presence of drunken "wits", and even as she earns money through these performances, she does not concede to being called a tawaif. Her claim that she is a shayara is kind of testified in the short, silent scene where she is actually seen writing poetry. However, what appears subversive might not be so subversive after all. Imtiaz has no choice but to acquiesce to being a mouth-piece, maybe even a plagiarist of Nur's verses, which becomes the apparent reason for Deven's rage at the poetess. The eloquent dialogue between Om Puri and Azmi that follows is much more emphatic than the impersonal epistolary exchange in the novel, which of course doesn't change the fact that a female poet, jealous and insecure of a potential legatee of a male-dominated poetic culture, will not be the custodian of the Urdu poetic tradition. The movie veers away from the novel's open-ended culmination, in that it actually places the mantle of Urdu poetry on the Hindi professor. Almost like an epiphany, the scene where Deven is seen in Nur's funeral procession with the leather-bound volume of his verses, the scene becomes the film's resolution of the question of custodianship of Urdu poetry, which metonymically comes to represent Urdu language and further the once-illustrious Muslim culture as a whole. Desai's conception of the special friendship between an Urdu poet and a Hindi professor is appropriated by Merchant into a matter of honorable bequest. The sequencing of the scene of Siddiqui's haveli (which quite distinctly stands for the marginal position of Muslims in post-Partition India, reproducing the colonial constructions of a morally decrepit Muslim aristocracy) being razed to the ground, immediately before the funeral scene is a decisive standpoint on how mere sentimental elegizing of a lost culture might not work to save a dying language/ culture. Hence, if one is to nostalgically try to hold on to Urdu in its pre-modern, aristocratic form, there is Deven's self-satisfying, personally redeeming honor of having "in custody", Nur's Urdu verses in the written word. To have Urdu fit commercial Bollywood, there's the courtesan song, heard in a male culture with mirth, drunken praise and non-seriousness, considered the prostituted form of poetry as it is. To preserve in the true sense, therefore, the Urdu language and the best that can be got of Urdu poetic traditions, and to convey to the audience its true spirit without having to appear past-centric, there is, with its dialogues and poetic ghazals, Ismail Merchant's Muhafiz!

References

1. Aydelott, Sabiha T. 1998. "Memories of Faiz", *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poets*, vol. 18, p. 299-314. 18/03/11. <http://www.jstor.org/pss/521891>
2. Cartman, Deborah and Imelda Whelehan. Ed. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
3. Caswell, Michelle. May 26, 2001. "A Chat with Ismail Merchant", *Asia Society Arts and Culture*. < <http://asiasociety.org/arts-culture/film/a-chat-ismail-merchant>>
4. Costa, Magda. Jan 30, 2001. Interview with Anita Desai. *South Asian Women's Network*. < http://www.sawnet.org/books/writing/desai_interview.html>
5. Desai, Anita. 2008. In *Custody*. New Delhi: Random House Publication.
6. Guilhamon, Lisa. 2009. "Le Texte Etranger, The Echo of Urdu Poetry in Anita Desai's *In Custody*: Interlinguistic Pastiche and the Question of the Untranslated", *Journée d'études, T3L* < <http://www2.univ-paris8.fr/dela/etranger/pages/6/PDF/guilhamon.pdf>>
7. Hosagrahar, Jyoti. 2001. "Mansions to Margins: Modernity and the Domestic Landscapes of Historic Delhi, 1847-1910", *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, vol. 60, p. 26-45. 18/03/11. < <http://www.jstor.org/pss/991677>>
8. Kasbekar, Asha. 2006. *Pop Culture! India*. California: ABC- CLIO.
9. Khalid, Adeeb. 2008. "The Life and Work of Faiz Ahmed Faiz", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 23, p. 256-69 < <http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/23/27AdeebKhalid.pdf>>
10. Sen, Sharmila. 2008. "Urdu in Custody" in Anita Desai, *Critical Perspectives*. Ed. Devindra Kohli and Melanie Maria Just. New Delhi: Pencraft International.
11. Leitch, Thomas. 2008. "Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads", *Adaptation*, vol. 1, p. 63-77. 26/03/11. <<http://adaptation.oxfordjournals.org/content/1/1/63.full.pdf+html>>
12. Lelyveld, David. 1993. "Colonial Knowledge and the Fate of Hindustani", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 35, p. 665-82. 18/03/11. < <http://www.jstor.org/pss/179178>>
13. ---. 1993. "Zuban-e Urdu-e Mu'alla and the Idol of Linguistic Origins", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 8, p.57-67 < <http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/09/14LelyveldZuban.pdf>>
14. Mir, Raza. 2000. "Vo Yar Hai Jo Khushbu Ki Tarah/ Jiski Zuban Urdu Ki Tarah: The Friendly Association Between Urdu Poetry and Hindi Film Music", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 15, p. 315-21<<http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/15/18mir.pdf>>
15. Pietrangelo, Valerio. 2004. "Urdu Literature and Women", *The Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 19, p. 151-172 < <http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/19/10PietrangeloUrduLit.pdf>>
16. Russell, Ralph. 1969. "The Pursuit of the Urdu Ghazal", *The Journal of Asian Studies*,vol. 29, p. 107-24. 18/03/11. < <http://www.jstor.org/pss/2942526>>
17. Sanders, Julie. 2006. *Adaptation and Appropriation, the New Critical Idiom*. London and New York: Routledge.
18. Virchow, Eckart Voigts. "Heritage and Literature on Screen: Heimat and Heritage" in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature on Screen*. 2007: Cambridge University Press.
19. Yaqin, Amina. 2004. "The Communalisation and Disintegration of Urdu in Anita Desai's *In Custody*", *Annual of Urdu Studies*, vol. 19, p. 120-4<<http://www.urdustudies.com/pdf/19/08YaqinDesai.pdf>>
