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Disability, Subversion and the "Creative Fidelity" in the Film Adaptation of *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (1992)

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Abstract. The article looks at Shyam Benegal's 1992 film adaptation of Dharamveer Bharati's novel, *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (*The Sun's Seventh Horse*), published in 1952, through the analytical lenses of disability, gender and the theoretical construct of "creative fidelity" in adaptation. By juxtaposing the cinematic text with its literary precursor, this study interrogates Benegal's hermeneutic reconstruction of marginalised identities, particularly those of women and individuals with disabilities. Situated in an examination of their respective sociopolitical contexts, the analysis scrutinises the extent to which Benegal's adaptation destabilises or consolidates dominant cultural narratives surrounding disability, gender and class/caste. The findings demonstrate a complex interlacing of subversion and compliance that characterises the adaptation's reconstruction of different themes, offering a comprehensive critique of its sociopolitical positioning. This study contributes to the broader discourse on representational politics in Indian cinema and contends that the adaptation is a liminal space where hegemonic paradigms are both interrogated and reaffirmed.

Keywords and phrases: disability, gender, film adaptation, creative fidelity, Hindi cinema

Introduction

Dharamveer Bharati's[1] *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (*The Sun's Seventh Horse*)[2] (1952) occupies a seminal position within the canon of post-independence Hindi literature. Set in the sociocultural milieu of rural Allahabad (now Prayagraj) during the 1950s, the novel presents itself as a profound exegesis on the emancipation of marginalised identities, with particular attention to the

systemic disempowerment of women and individuals with disabilities. While carefully structured as a series of five discrete narratives, the text employs a meta-narrative framework to coalesce these fragments into a singular, cohesive exploration of intersecting perspectives, emblematic of Bharati's sophisticated engagement with the techniques of metafiction. The narrative's layered structure, suffused with intertextual resonances, evokes the aesthetic ethos of classical Indian storytelling traditions. In his preface to the English translation of the novel, his contemporary "Agyeya" (1911–1987), extols Bharati's narrative virtuosity contending that to designate him a "genius" would fail to adequately capture the complexity of his oeuvre, which effortlessly integrates ontological inquiry with an accessibility that transcends didacticism. As a cultural artefact, the novel embodies the ideological and existential upheavals of a society negotiating its emergence from colonial subjugation into the precarious landscape of political autonomy. Its publication coincides with the ascendancy of the *Nayi Kahani* (New Story) Movement in Hindi literature of the 1950s and 1960s, which depicted the everyday struggles of the Indian middle class, as reflected in the works of contemporary writers such as Mohan Rakesh, Kamleshwar and Rajendra Yadav. Bharati, while ostensibly aligned with the *Nayi Kahani* ethos, transcends its paradigms by imbricating his narrative with a critical Marxist hermeneutic that interrogates deeply rooted systems of class/caste stratification. His exploration of gender and disability operates as a subversive critique of hegemonic social norms, particularly in its deconstruction of the sociocultural construction of womanhood. Despite its ideological grounding in Marxist thought, the novel exhibits a constructive critique of its practical manifestations within the Indian context, articulated through dialogic exchanges that emphasise the inherent tensions and disillusionments within local appropriations of Marxist praxis. Furthermore, the influence of the Progressive Writers' Movement[3] is discernible in the novel's commitment to articulating marginalised voices and advocating for socioeconomic equity and communal harmony. *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* thus emerges as a liminal text, simultaneously situated within and extending beyond its historical and cultural moment, offering an enduring commentary on the intertwined discourses of class, gender and disability, while interrogating the emancipatory potential and limitations of art as a medium of sociopolitical critique.

Produced under the auspices of the National Film Development Corporation of India, the film adaptation of Bharati's text, scripted by Shama Zaidi and directed by Shyam Benegal[4] in 1992, situates itself firmly within the idiom of parallel cinema,[5] a genre foundational to Benegal's creative vision and heavily informed by Satyajit Ray's neorealist aesthetic. Benegal, often celebrated as the precursor of realistic and socially conscious Indian cinema, occupies an

important role in shaping the trajectory of what has been variously described as new Indian cinema or parallel cinema. His cinematic rendition of *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* skilfully intertwines heightened emotional affect, redolent of commercial melodrama, with irony and meta-textual self-awareness, which subverts the conventional frameworks of parallel cinema. In her retrospective analysis for *The Hindu*'s Sunday magazine, Verma (2017) lauded the adaptation as a masterstroke, recounting the scepticism voiced by Bharati's contemporaries, who feared the literary integrity of the novel might be compromised. However, spurred by the release of the film adaptation, *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* underwent a significant reappraisal among Hindi literary critics, prompted by a broader shift toward postcolonial and modernist perspectives (Verma 2017). Hindi literary critics engaged with the novel's formal innovations, particularly its fragmented narrative. The discourse centred around the way novel's fragmentary narrative technique mirrored the ideological and political disillusionment of post-independence India. The novel was also seen as both a critique of societal structures and a dissection of the tensions between individual subjectivity and collective experience.

This critical shift, post the release of the adaptation, notably contrasts with the novel's initial reception. Early critics viewed *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* primarily as a cultural document reflecting the moral dilemmas of post-independence India. However, following the release of Benegal's film, the novel was reinterpreted through postmodern and poststructuralist lenses, with critics focusing on its metafictional play and subversion of narrative authority. This shift from a realist to a modernist reading emphasised the novel's interrogation of "truth" and identity and signaled a broader inclination in Hindi criticism toward exploring the complexities of representation in the postcolonial context. Completed within a remarkably brief production timeline of under a month, *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* encountered significant challenges, including suboptimal marketing strategies and limited theatrical release. However, its subsequent broadcast on Doordarshan—India's state-run popular television network of the 1990s—exponentially expanded its reach, facilitating its recognition within broader audiences. This exposure not only augmented its cultural resonance but also culminated in its receipt of a national award in 1993.

While *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*, as a novel, has been extensively analysed for its rich thematic trajectory, a noteworthy critical lacuna persists regarding its engagement with the intersections of disability, gender and the politics of adaptation in its cinematic recreation. Existing scholarship, as demonstrated in the works of Kotru (2017) and Chaudhuri and Samaddar (2023), largely attends to the text's thematic and structural innovations while eliding the pivotal question of how marginalised identities, particularly women and disabled individuals, are

reconstituted through the semiotic and performative modalities of adaptation. This article seeks to address this research gap by offering a rigorous analysis of the film's aesthetic and narrative reorientation, interrogating the mechanisms through which Benegal's adaptation transforms the novel's treatment of disability and gender. Situated within an intersectional and comparative framework that draws upon adaptation theory and critical disability studies, this study eschews the reductive teleologies of "loss" versus "gain" that frequently circumscribe adaptation discourse. Instead, it foregrounds the dynamic processes of re-articulation that simultaneously critique and reconstruct the representation of marginalised identities, positioning the adaptation as an ideologically situated intervention into systemic inequities.

Benegal's cinematic reinterpretation introduces three women—Jamuna, Lily and Satti—who hail from distinct yet intersecting socioeconomic backgrounds. Jamuna, as Manek's first love, represents the tension between romantic idealism and pragmatic acquiescence, eventually capitulating to societal imperatives by marrying an older, affluent man. Her decision, provoked by Tanna's incapacity to transcend sociocultural constraints, emphasises the dialectic between individual agency and structural determinism. Tanna himself, whose physical and moral disintegration following a debilitating train accident epitomises his symbolic impotence, serves as an allegory for the fraught intersections of disability, masculinity and societal expectations. Lily, another of Manek's romantic interests, succumbs to coercive marital pressures yet subsequently exercises agency by abandoning Tanna. Satti, the most acutely marginalised figure, endures systemic exploitation and patriarchal betrayal, showcasing the intersectional vulnerabilities borne by women at the nexus of caste, class and gender.

The novel's meta-narrative architecture, characterised by its polyphonic assemblage of subjective perspectives, resists linear narrative conventions and constructs an intricate dialectic of individual and collective viewpoints. Manek Mulla, as both narrator and participant, operates as a mediating consciousness whose interpretive lens shapes the reader's apprehension of events. While closely analysing the film, this article interrogates Benegal's adaptation through a tripartite analytical framework: the representation of disability, the subversion of structurally embedded gender roles and the dynamics of "creative fidelity". These dimensions are contextualised within Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness and the Body* (1995), which critiques the complicity of feminist and Marxist discourses in perpetuating ableist norms and marginalising disabled subjectivities. Davis's insights illuminate how Benegal's film navigates disability, questioning whether it challenges or reifies normative stereotypes. Furthermore, the article examines how the film reframes female agency,

offering a subversive critique of patriarchal archetypes and interrogates Benegal's creative engagement with Bharati's text. Rather than privileging fidelity to textual specifics, it argues for a conceptual fidelity that reimagines the novel's ideological imperatives. By situating disability, gender and creative interpretation as central axes, the article positions the adaptation as a critical site for exploring the intersections of art, identity and sociopolitical critique.

The Sanitised Frame: Ableism and the Cinematic Erosion of Disability

While the narrative of the source text predates contemporary disability discourses, it nonetheless foregrounds persistent concerns of communication and communal integration that profoundly affect disabled individuals. The film, though largely faithful to the novel's narrative trajectory, deliberately "normalises" and "domesticates" disability, aligning with societal tendencies to render disability more palatable and less stigmatised. This shift also reveals an important tension between textual fidelity, which seeks to remain faithful to the written narrative and what may be called creative fidelity, which aligns itself with cinematic conventions and ideological expectations. However, such portrayals, while ostensibly progressive, frequently succumb to reductive stereotypes that perpetuate skewed public perceptions. Nelson (1994), building on Biklen and Bogdan's (1977) seminal research, observes several pervasive stereotypes of disability representation. These include depictions of disabled individuals as pitiable or tragic figures, "supercrips" overcoming insurmountable odds, malevolent or criminal archetypes, subjects of enthusiastic rhetoric as "better off dead", emotionally maladjusted personas, burdensome dependents, or individuals incapable of achieving fulfilment or self-actualisation.

For instance, in the source text, Tanna's second sister (as shown in Figure 1), whose name remains conspicuously absent throughout the narrative, emerges as the first character explicitly marked by physical disability. She is depicted with congenital defects in both legs, a condition that renders her largely immobile, relegating her to either sitting in the corner or laboriously traversing the courtyard, often venting her frustration through curses and abuse directed at her siblings. Bolt (2014) posits that the absence of a name epitomises what he terms "normate reductionism" and "nominal displacement". Normate reductionism reduces disabled individuals to a set of stereotypical attributes that conform to societal "norms", while nominal displacement signifies the erasure of individualised identity markers, such as personal names, thereby reinforcing the marginalisation of disabled individuals as faceless or insignificant. The lack of a name for Tanna's sister reduces her to a generalised,

disabled body marked only by her "defective bones", thereby stripping her of agency and silencing her within the social fabric. Her representation, thus, reflects the internalisation of "social ordering and organisation" that relegates her to the status of a mere symptom of familial burden. In contrast, the film adaptation assigns her the name "Kamla", thus bestowing a sense of individuality and agency upon her character. However, this gesture is undermined by Kamla's continued peripheral status within the narrative and her portrayal remains ensnared by the reductive stereotype of the "burden" – a character whose existence primarily underscores the familial difficulties, rather than offering a fully realised, autonomous subjectivity.

Figure 1. A cinematic portrayal of Tanna's sister, whose disability (as narrated in the source text) is conspicuously omitted in the film adaptation in *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (Bharati 1952)

Tanna's frail heart often brought him to tears over his deceased mother and his sisters would join him, except for the physically disabled sister, who vented her frustration by flailing her legs. The next day, she would report their crying to their aunt or father. To preserve the family's honour, Mahesar Dalal, the father, harshly punished Tanna, leaving him bruised. Fearful, the sisters kept their distance, while the sister with disability, gleefully recounted Tanna's beating and spitefully wished his legs would break. Despite not even a single frame capturing her everyday struggles, her portrayal evokes a negative response from the reader. Disability has deep historical roots, often linked to cultural beliefs that associate physical impairment with moral or spiritual failure. In South Asian contexts, concepts like *karma*[6] suggest that disability can be seen as divine punishment for one's actions in this life or past lives. In *The Cinema of*

Isolation (1994), Norden argues that disability is often used as a melodramatic device in both popular entertainment and literature, particularly associating physical deformity with malevolence. He observes that "deformity of body symbolises deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil" (Norden 1994). This perspective reinforces the dehumanising portrayal of disability and also captures the association between physical impairment and moral deficiency in the societal and cultural imagination.

The contrasting portrayals of Kamla and Tanna make visible this tension between textual and creative fidelity, illustrating how adaptation often negotiates between narrative loyalty and ideological accommodation. The film adaptation further attenuates the presence of disability by conspicuously erasing any visual representation of Kamla's physical impairments. This renders her disability virtually invisible within the cinematic text. While the source text foregrounds her disability as an integral dimension of her character, the film elects to obscure this aspect, opting instead to emphasise her emotional volatility and outbursts. In doing so, the adaptation privileges creative fidelity over textual fidelity, remaining true not to the novel's social realism but to cinematic norms that seek to maintain emotional accessibility and aesthetic appeal. This selective erasure of disability echoes a broader trend in cinematic adaptations; wherein visual storytelling often privileges able-bodied norms and aesthetics. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) frame this omission as a manifestation of what they term "narrative prosthesis", wherein disability is repurposed primarily as a metaphorical construct rather than a lived, embodied experience. By rendering Kamla's disability invisible, the film appears to employ an adaptive strategy aimed at "normalising" the narrative, thereby rendering it more palatable for audiences who may be averse to confronting the complex and often uncomfortable realities of disability. Thus, what emerges is a conflict between the film's creative fidelity to audience sensibilities and its ethical responsibility to preserve the text's critical engagement with disability. Such narrative simplification, however, is also critiqued as a form of "infidelity" in adaptations, where the complex sociopolitical and emotional textures of the source material are sacrificed in favour of broader commercial appeal (Stern 2000, 291).

Moreover, the film's treatment of Kamla further exhibits a common trope within visual media: the exclusion of disability from the realm of sexuality. While all other prominent characters (such as Manek Mulla, Tanna, Jamuna, Satti and Lily), are shown as possessing heterosexual desires, Kamla's character is notably deprived of this natural human trait. As Fraser (2016) contends, "Narratives of disability—filmed or otherwise—rarely incorporate sexuality", with disabled individuals often portrayed as asexual and devoid of sexual subjectivity. Vertoont

(2017, 5) similarly notes that disabled characters are frequently constructed as "asexual and unattractive objects", rather than as subjects with private desires and full sexual agency. In a bid to perpetuate this asexualised portrayal, many films marginalise disabled characters altogether, or strategically avoid addressing their sexuality, thus safeguarding the able-bodied, heteronormative gaze. Kamla's total exclusion from the sphere of sexuality in the film, due to her disability, reinforces the pervasive trope of the "asexual disabled person", effectively stripping her of both "lived experience" and agency. This omission not only diminishes her character's depth but also caters to an able-bodied audience that is unwilling to engage with the nuanced physical and intimate realities that disabled individuals may experience daily.

In the novel, Tanna, the second character to confront the consequences of disability, undergoes a relentless series of misfortunes that expose his physical and existential vulnerability. Following his father's death and his wife's near-fatal childbirth, which leaves her emotionally distant, Tanna's health deteriorates rapidly. His ailments include greying hair, a stooped posture, cardiac distress, epiphora and liver issues that hinder his ability to lead a "normal" life. The ambiguity surrounding his condition—suspected to be tuberculosis or anaemia—adds to his plight. Economically devastated after losing his job, Tanna's hardships culminate in a catastrophic accident: struck unconscious by a swinging bucket while standing near an open train door, he awakens in a railway hospital to discover that both of his legs have been amputated. His trauma unfolds amid anonymous onlookers, their concern unable to alleviate his despair. Tanna's final moments, filled with an anguished longing to reclaim his severed legs, dissolve into hopelessness as he succumbs to death, a temporally ambiguous event in the narrative. The film adaptation dilutes this harrowing narrative, reframing Tanna's disability to align with broader audience sensibilities. The visceral depiction of his suffering in the novel is replaced by a more contained focus on the accident and its immediate aftermath. The brief portrayal of his amputated legs (as shown in Figure 2)—concealed beneath a sheet—minimises the visual and emotional complexity of his condition. By erasing the realities of living with a disability, the film forgoes an exploration of the social, emotional and practical challenges it entails. Instead, Tanna's sudden death serves as a narrative device that provides closure while erasing his lived experience of disability. This reduction once again reflects "narrative prosthesis", wherein disability is a plot device discarded after serving its purpose. The film also reflects the "better-off-dead" stereotype (Longmore 1985), which equates disability with insurmountable suffering and dependency. Such portrayals absolve society of its responsibility to address systemic inequities and the rights of disabled individuals, disregarding the possibilities of rehabilitation

and resilience. Critics like Ghai (2019) note that those acquiring disabilities later in life often experience a destabilising sense of loss when comparing their altered realities to their previous states. This, coupled with the film's failure to depict mechanisms for coping or adjustment, reinforces an ableist narrative framework. Tanna's story becomes a reflection of what Mitchell and Snyder (2000) describe as the "normate template", a societal framework dictating acceptable representations of bodies while sidelining authentic portrayals of diversity.

Figure 2. A shot capturing Tanna's severed legs on a stretcher (concealed by a sheet), serving as a haunting metaphor for his shattered identity in *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (Bharati 1952)

Adaptation, as a creative process, often becomes a site of "translational erasure". The nuanced interrogation of disability in the source text is softened or obliterated in cinematic storytelling to align with aesthetic and ideological priorities. This broader reluctance to engage with the complexities of disability results in sanitised depictions that reinforce ableist ideals. The film's superficial treatment of Tanna's disability diminishes its critical depth, signalling a systemic exclusion of disabled perspectives. It prioritises palatability over the authentic representation of diverse human experiences. In the fifth story, Manek recounts the troubling narrative of Chaman Thakur, the third disabled character, who embodies the interplay of physical impairment and moral degradation. In the source text, Chaman's history as a former barber who turned to soap-making after losing a hand offers a glimpse into his struggles, but his disability becomes

secondary to his depiction as a morally corrupt figure. The film adaptation exacerbates this reduction, presenting Chaman's amputation superficially and framing him as a caricature of greed and violence. By neglecting the nuanced portrayals of his disability, identity and agency, the film perpetuates a simplistic narrative that erases the sociocultural and psychological dimensions of his character. While the source text integrates Chaman's disability into the narrative with subtlety, the film reduces his character to a functional plot device. Chaman's severed hand in the novel—described vividly as "writhed and then hung down" when he greets others—serves as a symbol of his inner turmoil, enriching his characterisation. Far from evoking pity or sensationalism, his disability in the novel adds layers of complexity, reflecting his struggles and limitations. However, the film overshadows these dimensions by focusing on his "vices"—drinking, smoking and abusive behaviour—casting him as a stereotypical "villain". This portrayal aligns with Longmore's (1985) "sinister and evil stereotype", which imbues disabled characters with malevolence, reinforcing ableist tropes that equate disability with moral corruption and societal menace. The film's reliance on reductive stereotypes not only diminishes Chaman's humanity but also reflects a broader trend in adaptations that strip disabled characters of agency. Mitchell and Snyder (2000) and Garland-Thomson (1997) argue that such portrayals juxtapose the "normal" able-bodied protagonist against the "abnormal" disabled antagonist, consequently perpetuating societal fears and biases. The cinematic framing of Chaman eternalises these prejudices, suggesting that disability signifies moral failure or divine punishment. By failing to engage critically with Chaman's lived experience, the film denies his character depth and reinforces problematic narratives and prejudices about disability. The portrayals of Chaman Thakur and other disabled characters, such as Tanna and Kamla, reflect broader societal projections of stigma and prejudice. Longmore (1985) observes that popular media often displaces the fears and fantasies of the non-disabled onto disabled figures. The "sinister, evil and criminal" stereotype suggests that disability is a punishment for wrongdoing, that disabled individuals are embittered by their condition and that they harbour resentment towards the non-disabled. These portrayals dehumanise disabled characters, perpetuating structural biases and erasing their lived realities.

Both the source text and its adaptation employ grotesque and monstrous imagery to depict disability, further entrenching dehumanising stereotypes prevalent in society. For instance, in the novel, Chaman's severed hand is likened to a "blind python" that "wraps around children's necks, beginning to strangle them", invoking visceral terror. Similarly, Tanna's "severed feet …come dancing like demons", their "new iron chains" evoking imprisonment and doom. These disturbing images associate disability with brutality and horror, amplifying

societal fears while diminishing the humanity of disabled individuals. The recurring imagery of severed limbs and bodily disfigurement equates physical impairment with monstrosity, framing disability as a source of terror and moral aberration. Both texts repeatedly position disabled characters—Kamla, Tanna and Chaman Thakur—on the margins of their narratives. Their disabilities mark them as deviations from the "norm", as theorised by Davis's (1995) notion of bell curve, which privileges the "normate" body. These characters are relegated to the periphery, where their impairments are exaggerated or reduced to plot devices, emphasising their "deviant" status. Kamla's disability is trivialised in the film, reducing her to a burdensome figure devoid of depth; Tanna's amputation, though acknowledged, lacks meaningful exploration; and Chaman is caricatured as a grotesque villain, his disability serving as a metaphor for moral corruption. These portrayals in the adaptation reflect a systemic failure to integrate disability into the narrative as part of a broader human experience, reinforcing able-bodied norms that marginalise disabled identities.

While adaptations inherently involve a process of selection, privileging elements that align with the rhetorical, visual and thematic goals of the new medium, the sanitisation or normalisation of disabled characters in adaptations reflects societal prejudices about the acceptability of disability. As Mitchell and Snyder (2000) and Hutcheon (2006) suggest, adaptations have the potential to either subvert or reinforce stereotypes. By erasing or flattening the complexities of disability, the cinematic adaptation of *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* diminishes the critical potential of the source material. This "loss" in adaptation is not merely a deviation from the original text but a deliberate cultural act that marginalises disabled characters, denying them the space to exist as fully realised individuals. By reducing the complexity of disabled experiences, the film reinforces ableist stereotypes and denies disabled characters the humanity and dimensionality afforded to their able-bodied counterparts. This failure to engage with the layered realities of disability reflects a broader cultural tendency to marginalise and dehumanise disabled individuals, ultimately reinforcing their exclusion from authentic representation.

Subversive Silences: Female Agency and Strategic Compliance

In the film adaptation, the portrayal of female characters appears deliberately constructed to emphasise their resilience and strength. The women like Jamuna, Satti, Lily and Mausi, confront a patriarchal society with individual traits of compliance and quiet resistance. While they seemingly conform to traditional roles, their actions suggest a deeper critique of the patriarchal

order, positioning them as both victims and agents of resistance, an approach that resonates with the "feminist critique" of gendered representation in film. All three women assert their desires and preferences subtly. As a young woman, Jamuna bravely confronts her parents and societal norms to fight for her love. Benegal's use of subtextual resistance is evident in the portrayal of her character; her apparent submission to societal norms conceals her inner defiance. She emerges as a resolute and self-assured character, unafraid to express love and affection despite societal constraints. Determined to shield Tanna from the mistreatment he endures within his family, Jamuna defies traditional gender expectations. Although she cannot attend school due to her family's financial struggles, her love for reading exhibits her intellectual aspirations. Jamuna's mother also demonstrates strength, openly prioritising her own views over her husband's and firmly opposing any idea of her daughter marrying into a "lower subcaste" family. When faced with her mother's rejection of her love for Tanna, Jamuna boldly proclaims her unwavering resolve: she will marry Tanna or remain unmarried, rejecting societal pressure to conform. After her marriage, she strategically uses her newfound wealth to assert her agency, subtly challenging those who failed to support her in the earlier part of her life. Even after losing Tanna, Jamuna's passion for life and her capacity to embrace new possibilities in love reflect her resilience. Her journey reveals a nuanced form of agency, balancing bold defiance with compliance when necessary, illustrating how women grapple with and subvert restrictive social norms. Her decision to defy caste and familial boundaries in her love for Tanna reflects what Butler (1990, 3–17) terms as "gendered subversion", as she challenges the rigid caste hierarchies that exercise control over her life. Her forced marriage to an older man represents a hapless submission, yet her lasting love for Tanna suggests an emotional defiance of the oppressive structures around her.

The thread of "feminist critique" is further consolidated through reinterpretation of Lily's character from the source text. Lily represents a young woman from an intellectual and affluent upper-class background, firmly grounded in her principles and independence. Rejecting the idea of marriage to an unfamiliar suitor, she shares a deep connection with Manek, bonded by their shared passion for classic literature and high art. However, her widowed mother's anxieties about securing Lily's future ultimately led to her marriage to Tanna, against her own desires. Despite her marriage to Tanna, which was imposed upon her, Lily reclaims her subversive agency by leaving him to raise her child independently. Lily values her intellect and advanced education and her resilience becomes evident as she navigates life with her petty and narrow-minded in-laws. Disillusioned by her husband Tanna's incompetence and the toxic family environment, Lily takes a bold and rational step to secure her

child's well-being. She moves back to her natal home and raises her child independently, defying societal expectations of a submissive wife. Her refusal to return to her husband's home after childbirth, along with her indifference to Tanna's death, serves as an act of "strategic resistance" (Scott 1990). When she uncovers her father-in-law's deceitful attempts to exploit her mother, she firmly asserts her authority, demanding his immediate departure and threatening legal action if necessary. Benegal emphasises Lily's defiance by portraying her as a distant observer at the hospital, resisting the expected role of a grieving wife. The film's portrayal of her silent rebellion demonstrates the way women cope with patriarchal oppression within both public and private spheres, reframing domesticity as a site of potential subversive agency.

Satti's character in the narrative illustrates a more overt form of resistance, employing what can be termed "embodied resistance" (Grosz 1994). A self-reliant woman, Satti earns her livelihood by making and selling soaps, standing apart as the only woman among Manek's admirers who is financially independent. The film shows her tireless efforts, from crafting soaps to running Chaman Thakur's household, all while managing her business with indomitable determination. As a savvy businesswoman, Satti is perceptive and cautious in her dealings with men. When the corner shopkeeper tries to flirt with her, she quickly quashes his advances with a sharp warning. Similarly, she remains vigilant when Mahesar attempts to use wealth to manipulate Chaman Thakur into taking advantage of her, skilfully protecting herself from exploitation. Her physicality—carrying a knife and threatening potential harm—symbolises her refusal to be victimised by her circumstances. Despite the hardships she endures, Satti retains her hope for a better life. Her bond with Manek, inspired by his youthful passion for education, offers her a glimpse of escape from the constraints of her small town. Although hesitant at first, she allows herself to dream of a different future with him, channelling her inner strength to envision and strive for change. Her love for Manek, though unreciprocated, is portrayed as "pure and selfless", yet her struggle against male authority mirrors the imbalance of power that controls her life. Benegal's decision to render Manek's passivity and indifference towards Satti's plight with such nuance further reinforces a critique of "toxic masculinity" (Connell 2005), where men fail to protect or acknowledge the women who care for them. Satti's ultimate betrayal by Manek, who reveals her hiding place to her tormentors, represents not just his personal failure but also the larger societal failure to protect vulnerable women. In contrast, *mausi* (aunt) exudes a negative assertiveness and control over the men and children around her, despite not being married to the man she lives with. Benegal's adaptation grants her a level of agency absent in the source text, exploring her mannerisms, attire and language, particularly showcased in a scene where Mahesar banishes her for interfering with his affairs. This shift

can be understood through feminist film theory, which posits that adaptations often serve as a medium to critique or reinterpret gender roles within a specific cultural context. As noted by Mulvey (1975), the representation of women in films frequently reflects patriarchal structures; however, Benegal's portrayal of *mausi* challenges these norms, offering a more complex female character who, despite her flaws, asserts her agency in a male-dominated environment.

In contrast to the strong female characters, Manek Mulla embodies weakness and indecisiveness. His escapist tendencies are apparent as he avoids confronting challenges, particularly in his relationship with Satti, a determined orphan fighting for her rights. Instead of supporting her, Manek passively watches as she faces threats of physical abuse and ultimately betrays her by revealing her location to her uncle. This refusal to act lays bare his moral shortcomings and inability to take responsibility. Benegal's women exhibit what de Certeau (1984) terms "strategic compliance", where outward conformity serves as a cover for subtle forms of rebellion and self-assertion. Whether through a glance, a gesture, or a whispered conversation, they challenge traditional gender roles and reassert their autonomy within the boundaries imposed by their society. Benegal's film thus engages in "adaptive transmutation" as described by Cardwell (2002), where the source text is not only translated but transformed to offer a richer, more nuanced and layered engagement with the subversive female agency within the patriarchal framework of sociocultural context. This concept shifts the focus from fidelity to creative reinterpretation, which in the process, emphasises the filmmaker's role in reworking the adaptation with new meaning and context, distinct from the source text (Cardwell 2002, 25).

"Creative Fidelity" and Narrative Alchemy in Cinematic Reimagination

Adaptation functions as a form of intertextuality often engaging the audiences to experience works "as palimpsest through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon 2013, 8). This way of understanding invites a critical examination of how a plot is rendered differently in written and visual mediums. Adaptations, while striving to retain the core of their source material, inherently transform narratives to suit the conventions of the visual text. The cinematic translation of literature—whether classical or modern—ignites debates on fidelity and creative reinterpretation. In the case of *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (1952), the 40-year gap between Dharamvir Bharati's novel and Shyam Benegal's film (1992) brings to fore the evolving dynamics of societal values and representational strategies across mediums. Hutcheon (2006, 7) aptly describes adaptation as "repetition, but repetition

without replication", driven by intentions ranging from tribute to critique. Film remakes, for instance, can function as "contested homage" (Greenberg 1998, 113) to the source text. Rejecting the dominance of fidelity criticism, Hutcheon (2006) argues that adaptations should not be judged solely on their adherence to the source text but as creative works in their own right. This approach shifts the focus from replication to the interpretive and transformative processes of adaptation.

Benegal's adaptation incorporates mainstream cinematic tropes—unrequited love, patriarchal tyranny and class disparity—while subverting them through a sophisticated narrative structure. Simplifying the novel's multiple narrators into a single storyteller, Rajit Kapur, the film achieves narrative clarity without sacrificing thematic complexity. This condensation streamlines the storytelling while enriching Bharati's layered exploration of human relationships. His use of the "hyperlink narrative"—a relatively novel technique at the time—amplifies Bharati's fragmented storytelling. Through this structure, the film blurs the boundaries between memory and reality, inviting audiences to explore a layered narrative where perspectives and timelines intersect. Dasgupta's (1981, 45) observation that adaptations alter the "molecular structure" of their source material resonates here, as Benegal reimagines Bharati's text not merely as a cinematic rendering but as a dialogic creation that engages with contemporary sensibilities. Benegal himself acknowledged the necessity of modification, stating, "I made some changes …because if I had made the movie just like the novel, it would be a very bad film" (Filmkopath 2021). By integrating references to canonical works like Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Devdas* (1917), Benegal critiques the sentimentalism of earlier literary traditions. In Bharati's novel, *Devdas* is a passing reference; in the film, it becomes a focal point for examining how literary romanticism reinforces social constraints. For example, Jamuna uses *Devdas* to validate Tanna's filial piety, while Lily and Manek's dialogue expose the restrictive frameworks imposed by economic and gender divides. Furthermore, these alterations reflect the filmmaker's agency in constructing a distinct vision that dialogues with but is not subsumed by the source text. Through such juxtapositions, Benegal destabilises traditional romantic ideals, framing them within a critical sociopolitical lens.

The visual requirements of cinema necessitate a reconceptualisation of character revelation and narrative ambiguity. In Bharati's *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*, textual ambiguity arises from keeping the girl who eventually marries Tanna hidden for most of the novel; she is mentioned anonymously in the third story told by the narrator and is revealed only later when Manek discloses that she was his former beloved, Lily. While this delayed revelation generates suspense and surprise in the textual medium, the film adaptation must render

such information visually from the outset. Benegal compensates for the loss of textual ambiguity by employing careful staging, repetition and shifts in perspective, techniques he had also explored in his earlier film *Trikaal* (1985), sustaining narrative tension through cinematic rather than textual strategies. In *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda*, key scenes, such as Jamuna's visit to her parental home, are replayed with incremental variations and dual possibilities. The first iteration portrays Jamuna as indifferent to Tanna, while the second reveals her underlying emotional conflict (as shown in Figure 3). Such "repetition without replication" merges the comfort of recognition with the intrigue of reinterpretation not only enhances the narrative's emotional and intellectual complexity but also resists linear temporality, compelling viewers to actively reconstruct the chronology and significance of events. Benegal's approach echoes the essence of Bharati's novel while reimagining its form to suit the demands of cinema. As Hutcheon (2013, 8) asserts, adaptation is "a process of creation" that engages in both appropriation and innovation. This duality is evident in Benegal's handling of diverse themes, such as the interplay between love, memory and societal constraints. *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* not only shows how adaptation transcends the binary of fidelity versus invention but also expands its scope, crafting a visually cohesive, interpretive lens through which audiences engage with the text's philosophical questions. By synthesising literary depth with cinematic innovation, the film operates as a dialogic space where literature and cinema coalesce. In doing so, it offers a richly layered experience that challenges traditional evaluative frameworks, redefining adaptation as a creative act of cultural and artistic translation.

Figure 3. An incident in the film shot in two different frames, juxtaposing dual possibilities in the characters' lives in *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (Bharati 1952)

A key alteration in Benegal's adaptation is the reimagining of the relationship between Mahesar Dalal, his mistress and his children. In the novel, the children call her *bua* (father's sister), implying a platonic bond. However, the film recasts her as *mausi* (mother's sister), evoking maternal associations. Such cultural nuances, absent in the English term "aunty", deepen the relational dynamics. While the novel offers little character detail, the film enriches her portrayal, using dialect and visual markers like her betel-stained teeth to signify her socioeconomic status and assert her presence. Unlike her role in the novel, which is confined to serving Mahesar and cursing his children, the film grants her narrative agency. She challenges Mahesar's infidelities and asserts her dominance in the household, leading to conflict and her eventual expulsion, which heightens the narrative tension. Benegal's adaptation also introduces two significant deviations, infusing the film with heightened emotionality and dramatic tension typical of mainstream Hindi cinema. First, the depiction of Tanna's death differs significantly. In the novel, Tanna loses his balance at a train door, resulting in the loss of his legs and a solitary death in the hospital. In contrast, the film reframes this tragedy: Tanna is struck by a train while standing on the tracks after a fleeting moment of happiness with Jamuna and Ramdhan. Though he survives the accident, awakening in the hospital with Jamuna by his side, the film prioritises the emotional resonance of their bond. Jamuna's grief symbolised by her white saree (associated with widowhood) and her solace from Tanna's wife underscore a poignant subversion of traditional roles. The narrator's mournful gaze at the sky amidst thunderous darkness adds a cinematic gravitas absent in the novel. Second, while Mahesar's death is reported in the novel, the film leaves his fate ambiguous, giving him greater narrative prominence. Benegal amplifies Mahesar's villainy, portraying him as a morally bankrupt predator. His application of *surma* (traditional kohl) and lecherous singing before a mirror vividly symbolises his lasciviousness. In one charged scene, Mahesar exploits his role as a potential matchmaker to make advances toward Lily's widowed mother, revealing his duplicity. Through these depictions, Benegal positions Mahesar as a representation of systemic misogyny, whose actions shape the struggles of other female characters.

Benegal moves beyond textual fidelity to reimagine Bharati's themes for the cinematic medium. As Leitch (2007, 16) asserts, adaptation is inherently interpretive, with filmmakers reconfiguring source material to align with their creative imperatives and the affordances of cinema. Benegal's approach embodies this philosophy, crafting a film that simultaneously dialogues with and diverges from its source text. Rather than replicating Bharati's narrative, the adaptation expands its thematic scope and emotional depth, offering audiences a layered and ideologically enriched experience. In reconfiguring Bharati's

narrative, Benegal demonstrates the potential of adaptation as a dynamic act of recreation. His choices, rooted in both homage and innovation, transform *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* into a work that reflects its source and reimagines its possibilities, exemplifying the profound intertextuality of adaptation.

Benegal's choice of a secluded setting for Tanna and Jamuna's clandestine meetings (as shown in Figure 4) shows his unique approach to translation of the novel. By reimagining the narrative space into a visual medium, Benegal transforms textual silences into evocative cinematic zones. These spaces function as what Foucault and Miskowiec (1986) describe as "heterotopic zones", offering a temporary escape from the socioeconomic, familial and societal constraints. The adjoining houses serve as liminal spaces of refuge, while Jamuna's white shawl, a visual marker in the darkness, highlights her agency. This reconfiguration of narrative elements resonates Stam's (2005) concept of "media specificity", which demonstrates cinema's ability to evoke immediacy and emotional resonance that textual mediums often cannot achieve.

Benegal's adaptation also reworks character dynamics, particularly the implicit relationship between Jamuna and Ramdhan. The source text's ambiguities are stressed and reframed in the film through strategic visual cues, subtextual tension and character reorientations. Jamuna's legitimate husband is relegated to insignificance, while Ramdhan's transformation—marked by his adoption of luxurious attire after her husband's death—is emblematic of his growing dominance in her life. Their interactions, such as Jamuna's embrace in the Tonga or her departure with a child, suggest an illicit connection without overt acknowledgment. These elements remind us of Stam's (2005) framework of subtextual meaning, where cinematic emphasis on gestures and silences communicates deeper relational dynamics.

Furthermore, songs play a pivotal role in the adaptation, serving as cultural and narrative anchors. The inclusion of popular melodies like "Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat" (The King's Wedding Procession Will Arrive) from *Aah* (1953) and "Jiya Beqarar Hai" (The Heart is Restless) from *Barsaat* (*Rain*) (1949) establishes the temporal setting of the film, aligning it with the novel's publication period in the early 1950s. Benegal's strategic use of music shows cinema's advantage over textual forms, enabling auditory dimensions to enhance narrative layers. In adapting Bharati's work, Benegal also integrates the poet's oeuvre into the film's structure. Poems like "Ye Shamein, Sab Ki Sab Shamein" (These Evenings, All of These Evenings) from *Sapna Abhi Bhi* (*The Dream Still Remains*) (1968) and "Mai Kya Jiya, Mujhko Jivan Ne Jiya" (Did I Live, Or Was I Lived By Life) from *Thanda Loha* (*Cold Iron*) (1957) extend the narrative's intertextual resonance, positioning the film as a dialogue not only with Bharati's novel but with his broader literary

corpus. This intertextual engagement reflects Kristeva's (1980) theory that all texts exist as "mosaics of quotations", dynamically interacting with cultural and historical discourses. Additionally, the inclusion of folk songs like "Bitiya To Jaisan Chiraiya"[7] (A Daughter is Like a Bird), celebrating the father-daughter bond, deepens the narrative's cultural fabric and situates it within regional traditions. Benegal's approach, therefore, transcends mere adaptation and resonates with Jenkins's (2006) notion of "transmedia storytelling". By weaving Bharati's poetic universe into the cinematic narrative, Benegal creates a multidimensional narrative world that goes beyond the confines of a single text.

Figure 4. A scene from the film showing Tanna and Jamuna secretly meeting on the roofs of their adjacent houses at midnight in *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* (Bharati 1952)

The film's ending starkly contrasts with the novel. While the source text concludes with definitive closure, Benegal opts for an open-ended narrative that resists resolution. This decision reminds one of Benjamin's (1968) concept of a work's "afterlife", where reinterpretation allows the narrative to evolve across temporal and cultural contexts. By leaving the film's conclusion open to multiple interpretations, Benegal not only extends the narrative's relevance but also encourages audiences to engage with its thematic complexities anew. This openness ensures the story's resonance, transforming it into a dynamic cultural artifact. Benegal's adaptation exemplifies "creative fidelity", blending respect for Bharati's thematic core with the innovations of cinematic

form. By embracing ambiguity and innovation, Benegal invites audiences to become active participants in the interpretive process, ensuring the narrative remains relevant and resonant across generations. His adaptation serves as a testament to the symbiotic relationship between textual fidelity and creative reinterpretation, exemplifying the capacity of cinematic adaptations to act as both homage and reinvention. In doing so, Benegal not only venerates Bharati's "original" vision but also broadens its impact, reaffirming the enduring power of storytelling in its different mediums.

Conclusion

Benegal's adaptation of *Suraj Ka Satvan Ghoda* epitomises the cultural turn in translation studies, as articulated by Bassnett and Lefevere (1990). This theoretical paradigm reconceptualises translation and adaptation as cultural acts that privilege ideological, historical and sociocultural negotiations over mere linguistic fidelity. Through his creative reinterpretations, Benegal reinvents Bharati's text, transforming its narrative silences into a visually evocative medium. For instance, the rooftop encounters between Tanna and Jamuna materialise as "heterotopic" spaces, symbolising their transient escape from societal and familial oppressions. This cinematic manoeuvre resonates with Bassnett and Lefevere's (1990) conception of translation as rewriting, where adaptive choices are shaped by cultural norms and audience expectations. Moreover, Benegal's incorporation of folk and Bollywood songs anchors the film within its historical and cultural milieu, reconstructing its emotional resonance. By intertextually embedding Bharati's poetry beyond the narrative scope of the novel, Benegal not only foregrounds the film's thematic complexity but also reinforces its cultural authenticity. The film's open-ended conclusion demonstrates Benjamin's (1968) notion of a text's "afterlife", enabling new interpretations across temporal and cultural contexts. These adaptive strategies also reaffirm Hutcheon's (2013) assertion that adaptation is a "celebratory re-creation", achieving notable "gains" by enriching the source material's impact through the cinematic medium.

Nevertheless, amidst these creative and constructive choices, the film's depiction of disability constitutes a significant "loss". The disabilities of characters such as Kamla, Tanna and Chaman are relegated to mere plot devices, perpetuating reductive stereotypes that erase the lived realities of disabled individuals. This treatment reflects a broader cultural tendency to marginalise disability, denying these characters the voice and agency afforded to their non-disabled counterparts. While the adaptation liberates itself from circumscribed "textual fidelity" by employing different cinematic techniques,

its handling of disability reverts to a conservative framework that prioritises narrative utility over an authentic engagement with disabled identities. This erasure emphasises the limitations of an otherwise "creative" adaptation, revealing how cultural reframing can inadvertently perpetuate exclusionary ideologies. In addition to this, the film erases critical historical references, such as the Motihari drought and the Korean War and simplifies Bharati's multifaceted sociopolitical critique. While the adaptation retains a focus on class struggle, it marginalises the nuanced interplay of caste/class, disability and subversion that the novel subtly explores. This simplification reflects a domestication of the text's radical potential, presenting an incomplete engagement with its sociopolitical dimensions. Benegal's film, thus, emerges as an autotelic text that reimagines Bharati's narrative, creating a polyphonic and hybrid construct. By juxtaposing disability, subversive female agency and creative fidelity, Benegal's adaptation transcends its source material, facilitating a renewed engagement with its themes. As a target text, the film eschews mere replication, instead reinterpreting and enriching the source through intertextual references, visual symbolism and narrative innovation. In doing so, the adaptation delineates cinema's transformative potential to relocate the thematic and cultural dimensions of literary works, inviting sustained scholarly inquiry and reinterpretation.

Notes

1. Dharmavir Bharti (1926–1997) remains one of the most influential voices in post-independence Hindi literature. His works reflect a deep engagement with the moral, emotional and existential dilemmas of a newly independent nation, grappling with change and continuity. His contributions resonate not merely for their literary merit, but for their role in articulating the evolving consciousness of a society in transition. For an elaborate understanding of Bharti's works, refer to Bhandari's (2020) work, which provides a comprehensive analysis of his literary vision within the socio-historical context.
2. In Hindu mythology, the sun god, Surya rides a chariot pulled by seven horses, symbolising the days of the week or the colours of light (VIBGYOR – violet, indigo, blue, green, yellow, orange and red) and representing time, vitality and cosmic rhythm. The seventh horse, often seen as mysterious, signifies hidden truths and metaphysical insight. In the context of the novel, the "seventh horse" becomes a metaphor for subjective truth and the blurred line between memory and reality in storytelling.
3. The Progressive Writers' Movement played a seminal role in shaping modern Indian literature across various languages, particularly in the decades surrounding independence. Rooted in anti-colonial, socialist and humanist ideals, the

movement sought to align literature with the struggles of the marginalised and the aspirations of a just, equitable society. It marked a critical departure from romantic and escapist tendencies in pre-independence literature, advocating instead for realism, political engagement and social responsibility.

4. Shyam Benegal stands as a pioneering figure in Indian parallel cinema, known for his socially engaged storytelling and nuanced characterisations. His films often explore themes of identity, class, gender and power, reflecting a deep commitment to realism and sociopolitical critique. Blending cinematic craft with intellectual depth, Benegal redefined narrative cinema in India by bridging the gap between art and popular film traditions. His work not only shaped the discourse of new Indian cinema but also offered a powerful visual idiom for engaging with literature, history and contemporary society.

5. The Parallel Cinema Movement, which emerged in 1950s West Bengal, constituted a paradigmatic shift from the escapist spectacles of mainstream Bollywood, favouring instead narratives grounded in socioeconomic realities and cultural critique. Within the broader "golden age" of Indian cinema, parallel cinema drew deeply from literary traditions, offering an evocative mirror to the sociocultural transformations of the time. By the 1970s and 1980s, its resonance within Hindi cinema intensified, attracting a more expansive audience base.

6. In ancient Indian cultures, disability was often perceived as a manifestation of divine punishment, rooted in the doctrine of *karma*. According to this theological framework, an individual's actions (*karma*) in past or present lives determine their current circumstances, including physical or mental impairments.

7. The *banna* (wedding) folk song "Bitiya To Jaisan Chiraiya" (A Daughter is Like a Bird) is a poignant expression of familial emotion and cultural sentiment surrounding the role and departure of a daughter in traditional Rajasthani society. Performed typically during wedding rituals, the song draws on the metaphor of the daughter as a delicate, free creature destined to leave her parental home.

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