

Unsettling the Family Space : An Indian Take on Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

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Abstract. The fact that Arthur Miller's classic *Death of a Salesman* has been adapted into a Hindi film (*Kapoor and Sons*, 2016) is a revelation of some sort. The movie does never acknowledge its sources, and yet the number of associations between the two texts is no less than astounding. A comparative study of the two texts will not only focus on the notion of 'dialogic' process of adaptation, but will also consider a film (that too a Hindi popular film!) as a serious affair; or rather as a text which opens up the limited scope of the source text and reaches out to a larger audience. The alterations made to the source text, if justified, might elevate both texts to a pedestal unforeseen. The Hindi film has retained many issues and devices of its source; it has deviated on a number of accounts too. A comparative discussion will attempt to understand the common grounds binding the two texts together, cutting across time and space.

Keywords : Cinematic medium; adaptation; audience; dialogic process; contextualizing; time and space; family.

After nearly a century since Virginia Woolf had severely attacked the cinema for being a 'parasite' medium, and for being 'simple' and 'stupid' (see the 1926 essay "The Cinema"), the general consensus among scholars as regards the claim of cinema as a separate, dignified art medium hasn't really improved to a considerable extent. From a purely theoretical point of view, "a film adaptation of a fiction/drama is supposed to be a dialogic process in which the shadowed subtext of the source text is brought to the fore and contextualized depending on the changed time and space" (Stam, 54-76). The source text, now a 'palimpsest' in the eyes of the adaptation theoretician, gets re-written as various issues only implied then now get explored. And this inevitably brings in the question of an adaptation film being a derivative work, and not an independent work of art.

Indian film critics have not been very generous in appreciating the ventures of Hindi film makers in adapting English classics; of course, not each movie rises up to the stature of *Maqbool* (2003). Vishal Bhardwaj's *Haider* (2014), a self-proclaimed adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, is a fine example of how the film maker's vision to alter the basic course of events (i.e. neither Hamlet nor Claudius dies at the end) might alienate and even infuriate scholars all across the globe. That, however, is not the case with the adaptation the present discussion aims to have a look at. Shakun Batra's *Kapoor and Sons* (2016) has been universally hailed as Bollywood family drama at its best - a "fantastic family drama after a long time" (Rohit Vats of *Hindustan Times*), "the actors breathe life in these movements" (Anupama Chopra of *Film Companion*), "*Kapoor and Sons* is intense and incisive

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in its observation of human inadequacies but is always entertaining" (Saibal Chatterjee of *NDTV*), "A likeable enough little film with fine characters" (Raja Sen of *Rediff.com*), "breath of fresh air" and "one of the best family films ever made in Bollywood" (Ankush Bahuguna of *MensXP.com*) and the list of accolades seems never to end. (Wikipedia) The entire string of praises might have changed its course had there been any declaration on the part of the movie makers that it is an adaptation of Arthur Miller's 1949 masterpiece *Death of a Salesman*! The present article will attempt to trace the strangely obvious links that hold the two texts together, without ever trying to force one text to fit into the other. The context is now different; and so is the treatment.

The very observation made in this article that *Kapoor and Sons*, a typical 'well-made' product of the Bollywood film industry, is indeed an adaptation of such a canonical dramatic work as *Death of a Salesman* might appear to be shocking for many reasons. First, and most obvious, is indeed the fact that nowhere in the press or even in any personal 'table talk' has any of the cast and crew members made the claim of there being any connection with the classic of Arthur Miller. Indian film makers, almost as a set rule, spare no chance to boast if the basic storyline is even remotely based upon some English classic (even more so if the source is Shakespearean). A possible explanation might be the unwillingness of the writer to disclose the lack of authenticity of the storyline. This interpretation, however, might prove to be doubly intriguing, since *Kapoor and Sons* actually concerns the moral and psychological problems of an author (Rahul) who, although unbeknownst to himself, ends up 'stealing' his own brother's (Arjun's) story! Is this a self-referential confession on the part of the writer of the film? A far-fetched hypothesis, no doubt about that; but this indeed adds to the facets on which the adaptation now works.

The film, not much unlike the source play, is about 'writing' stories. All the characters seem busy writing their own narratives, only to meet the counter-narratives of people surrounding them. The typically 20th century phenomenon known as the 'American Dream' is universally acknowledged as one of the core axes of Miller's play. The Indianized version of the same story too, deals with the pursuit of happiness leading to the creation of a self-deceiving edifice of illusion and falsehood. This, perhaps to suit the more cosmopolitan ambience of the movie, has now garnered a more global stature. The issues related to diasporic identity (a popular theme in Hindi movies since the last decade of the past century, and an obvious by-product of the liberalization of the Indian economy) now take precedence, and the homecoming (prodigal?) sons looking for their roots occupy the central space of the narrative. The interaction between past and present, unlike in the play, is not done very overtly. The audience is not aided by apparently 'reliable' devices such as flash-backs or focalization. Instead, what one gets is a number of narratives, often contradicting each other. Memory and guilt, just like in Miller's play, play a very crucial role in the film. Also, the yearning for love gradually

metamorphoses into the yearning for truth, thus destabilizing the family space with all its fallacies and facades.

On the surface level, the movie indeed borrows many key ingredients from its source play. The list is a bit too lengthy – the attention and affection of the partial parents being bestowed upon only one of the two male children, the two sons at one point planning to do business together, the father idolizing his brother who has succeeded in realizing his ‘American Dreams’, the father constantly escaping the economic realities and finally meeting his inevitable ‘death’ while driving a car, the favourite son discovering his father’s extra-marital affair (though the moment of discovery has been withheld in the film), and the list seems to continue. On a thematic level too, much like the original story, the film questions the ethical and moral grounds existing behind the notion of success. The mood of the story is complex – an admixture of the comic, tragic, melodramatic, romantic, pathetic and many more. Perhaps one reason is to be found in the trend of Hindi ‘family entertainers’ to provide the audience with a wide range of *Rasas* (moods or emotions, as per the Sanskrit theory of drama) within the scope of two and a half hours. Nevertheless, this is no ‘family’ movie, compared to the other family dramas coming out of the stable known as Dharma Productions that are notoriously over the top, exaggerated and even nonsensical. *Kapoor and Sons* too, has its over the top, super-glamorized moments; but one cannot help being a bit too generous while in view of the masterpiece it aims to contextualize. Like Miller’s play, the movie too records how “All of a sudden everything falls to pieces!” (Miller, 54) The audience however, cannot miss the irony that nothing was really in the illusory, well-organized shape that the characters claim their past to have possessed. The elder brother, not being able to come clean with the truth of his gender orientation must have added to the element of discomfiture of the more conventional sect of the Indian audience.

The points upon which the film departs from the original should be studied very cautiously. The present discussion by no means attempts to justify all the minute changes the Indianized version has implemented, nor does it rigidly pan the limitless scope of creative license. Taking the film more as a case study, the present article rather attempts to trace the basic principles of recontextualizing during the process of adaptation. The most obvious change can be traced in the art of characterization – characters are now more complex, as one character now exhibits traits earlier exhibited by multiple characters. This process of ‘assembling’ characters was necessitated by the film-makers’ urge to present a slice of life, and not an overtly ‘theatrical’ experience. In fact, the film very diligently observes almost all the basic rules of verisimilitude (Even the 1985 televised version of the American play, famously played by Dustin Hoffman, was anything but a ‘cinematic’ experience).

The father’s emotional and spiritual crisis is not anymore the chief concern of the story; other characters have been further explored and realized with great

care. Multiple subplots and well-delineated minor characters contribute to the shifting of focus to a broader canvas. The ‘death’ of the father is never expected by the audience, and he even fails to secure much sympathy on their part. The patronizing and compromising wife of the play has been replaced by a modern woman (though no less helpless, agonized and emotionally dependent), struggling to realize her individual worth. The question of stealing (literal) here takes on a symbolical meaning; the elder son (though unknowingly) ends up stealing the younger son’s identity, and eventually success, glory and self-confidence. Here the self-pity is expressed not by the favourite son, but by the prodigal son. The favourite son’s success is a fact, and not a made-up story; he causes disappointment only because of his sexual orientation (a huge spoiler for those who haven’t watched the film yet!). The elder son’s ‘failure’ to be a perfect son suddenly raises the younger, imperfect son in the gaze of the mother, and he finally gets back his due ‘space’ within the household and his bit of glory and success.

The warmth of the father-son relationship is strikingly absent here. But the most daring departure from the original text is as follows: the character of the grandpa has been created to portray the deluded, impractical, nostalgic, even senile mentality of the father in the play; in his presence the boys can behave like children (thus normalizing the ‘theatricality’ of temporal/spatial cross-section). In fact, the warmth of relationship that Willy and his two sons seem to have possessed in the past has been replicated in the cheerful and easy interactions between grandpa and Rahul-Arjun. The death-obsession is exhibited by the grandpa, and not by the father. In Miller’s play, Linda confesses to Biff, “He’s dying, Biff”, while referring to her husband. (46) In the movie, however, the grandpa’s constant suicide attempts to draw the attention of his family members evoke only a little amount of compassion, and is rendered merely comical.

Both the brothers pursuing the same passion (of becoming a successful English fiction writer) and supposedly dating the same girl creates the scope for rivalry, which is absent in the play. The story establishes the elder son as a ‘perfect’ protagonist, and then strips him of his glory due to his failure to fit into the category of the universalized masculine protagonist (the selection of Fawad Khan, one of the few Hindi-speaking actors known for their ‘masculine’ charm, must have been a daring venture!). Structurally too, the film deviates from the play on a number of accounts. The ‘secret’ that Willy might have had an extra-marital affair has been hinted at from very early in the play. Linda suggests to Biff, “It seems there’s a woman...” (47). Biff however, seems to have known the whole thing all the while. In the movie, the secret is divulged to the elder brother, and not to the audience, near the end as everything rushes toward a well-crafted, though somewhat melodramatic crescendo.

The death of the father is literal, on-camera, and really unexpected; unlike in the play where the premise has been prepared since the beginning of the play

(even before that, the title too suggests the ‘death’). The death is not a suicide meant for providing for the family; it, however, resolves many problems and crises. The play does not allow the audience to visualize the ‘death’ of the father, thereby suggesting the death to be a more metaphorical event than literal. The movie however, takes the whole thing on a literal and obvious level; a practice perhaps intended to meet the requirement of the Indian cine-goers (not to forget the typical Bollywood, foot-tapping numbers inserted here and there in the film).

Finally, it is the family space that acts as the buffer zone to bring together two works separated by space-time, and even media of expression. The very notion of a ‘happy’ family is a collective construction, depending much on a combined project of play-acting and desperate attempts to hide the unpleasant secrets that may erupt any moment only to scatter everything. In the movie, the two children living abroad and struggling to cope with reality in their own ways is the chief reason behind the disjunction of the family unit (a sad truth applicable to almost all Indian upper-middle class families). For the elder son the occasion is a highly decorated and celebrated homecoming, whereas the younger son’s return resembles the return of the prodigal son. The sibling rivalry and jealousy (often caused by the high expectation of the parent/s) does not however, destroy the easy understanding between the two brothers. The discrimination on the part of the parents is evident as the elder (‘perfect’) son has always been encouraged to be a writer; whereas the younger one has been treated as the epitome of failure and confusion.

The disintegration of the family is a truth that the members are trying desperately to hide; it is indicated in various ways: mock-deaths attempted daily by the grandpa, utter incompatibility of the parents, coldness existing between the two brothers, the elder brother being perpetually in pursuit of a ‘perfect’ accommodation, the ‘leaking’ pipe in the kitchen, and, perhaps most significantly, the synchronized surfacing of all the dark secrets of all the members during the well-crafted climax. After so many years, capitalism has merged with a ruthless post-truth consumerist society which values wealth as the key indicator of success in life; the craving for a conglomerate communal existence is bound to get marred by the fact that each member has constructed a cubicle of his/her own, thus preventing the outside world from intruding. The subplot of the orphaned girl is necessary to indicate the vacuum caused by the lack of familial bond; the remarkably ‘westernized’ mode of living also has its own setbacks, thus offering no better choice. All the characters are always on a move, perhaps with the urge to find a better version of themselves, as well as to avoid facing the naked truth (escapism?). The household thereby becomes a locus of pain, guilt, adjustment/compromise and suffocation.

The problem is that each of the members seems unwilling to take the necessary first step towards self-disclosure and self-knowledge. The arrival of the

‘successful’ uncle changes the vibe of the household, and the members appear to be genuinely elated; although a temporary game of role-playing, it brings forth the picture of the ‘happy’ family. The death of the father seems to resolve many of the problems, and finally, the illusions having been removed, the rest of the members face each other as who they really are. The utter incompetence of the father is emphasized by the visual of the enlarged cut-out of the dead father better succeeding to hold the family together; ironically, the father in his death becomes what he was always supposed to be. The tragedy lies not in the death of the father, but in the fact that it is only the death (or the impending death, as in the opening sequence) of some family member that can bring the other members together. The denouement lies in each character understanding that nobody is ‘perfect’, and it is wise to accept our close ones as the embodiment of all the fallibilities.

Now the final question, as with all adaptations, is bound to address the relevance and validity of the issues dealt with in the source text. From a domestic context, the film further explores and recontextualizes the dynamics of the relationship between husband and wife, and parents and children. Going beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the source drama, it portrays and challenges, various myths associated with the popular representation of the Indian family unit. As an extended commentary on Miller’s play, the film critiques the financial pressures exacted upon human beings (women have been included now) by an increasingly late capitalist world. And there is this universal issue of the male child facing the pressure to prove himself as competent, responsible and sensible. Shakun Batra’s adaptation then succeeds with aplomb to work upon the source text with a license duly justified, and eventually produce a work which can stand on its own. Willy Loman’s melancholic flute has been replaced by a polyphony only to broaden the scope and to strike the chord with as many audiences as possible.

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