

THE LIMITS OF TRANSLATION : SELLING AUSTEN IN FILM

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Abstract

Film and television adaptations of literary texts represent new readings which afford fresh insights into and create new perspectives on classic texts.. Indeed, a film adaptation, by prioritizing some of the concerns of the original text, and occasionally by extrapolating issues not present in the original, creates, in effect, a new text. These transformations inevitably alter the shape, proportions and narrative design of the originals, while largely retaining their essential integrity. However this paper intends to interrogate the validity of this position by examining certain instances wherein the 'integrity' of a given text may be seriously undermined through adaptation. In other words adaptation as a form of translation has to operate under certain limits which if ignored can and do destabilize the intended meaning.

We are living in an age where constant technological changes are taking place in the audio-visual medium. In the 21st century more and more people are getting their first exposure to literary "classics" through the audio-visual medium. Film and television adaptations of literary texts represent new readings which afford fresh insights into and create new perspectives on classic texts. However, some of these readings may be seen leading to the "commodification" (Debord 2002: 42) of the texts concerned. Indeed, a film adaptation, by prioritizing *some* of the concerns of the original text, and occasionally by extrapolating issues not present in the original, creates, in effect, a new text.

Filmmakers routinely make changes and depart from the original texts in order to fulfill the expectations of contemporary audiences. These transformations inevitably alter the shape, proportions and narrative design of the originals, while largely retaining their essential integrity. As Peter Reynolds remarks, "Such transformations do not automatically result in a loss of the intellectual and emotional impact of the original and do not unnecessarily compromise its integrity." (Reynolds 1993: 8). However this paper intends to interrogate the translation has to operate under certain limits which if ignored can and do destabilize the intended meaning. In the course of this paper some instances of such destabilization will be studied with specific reference to the works of Jane Austen.

Jane Austen's novels have been translated into countless television serials and films worldwide, which in turn have become new texts, each motivated and influenced by the cultural, racial, political and *commercial* concerns of the respective film makers. As Henry James noted early in the 20th century, Jane Austen is no longer just a novelist, but a cultural icon with commercial value. Johnson shrewdly sums up the situation today, "...Austen comes to us in dazzling movies from Hollywood and the British film industry featuring our favourite stars,...in published sequels, imitations and homages,...on T-shirts sporting Cassandra's portrait of her sister, on coffee mugs Austen is a cultural fetish" (Johnson 1997: 212). Besides, the business of bringing Jane Austen to the screen received a boost when Ang Lee's '*Sense and Sensibility*' (1995) starring Emma Thompson and Kate Winslet garnered a slew of Academy Award nominations and also proved to be a commercial success. In a single year as many as three of Jane Austen's novels were made into major films, culminating in *Emma* (1996) starring Gwyneth Paltrow (Fox *et al* 1999: 224).

The two specific works under study here are both adaptations of of Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (1813). Of these the first is the 2005 film version of *Pride & Prejudice* (hereafter *Pride*) directed by Joe Wright and produced by Universal/Scion;

and the second is *Bride and Prejudice* (hereafter *Bride*), the 2004 film directed by Gurinder Chadha and co-produced by Pathe, Kintop, and Bend It Films.

In these adaptations, Jane Austen is made to function both as a cultural artifact and a cinematic commodity to be marketed for a new generation of consumers. In order to achieve this end, filmmakers have not only extrapolated issues such as racial and cultural prejudice onto Austen's text in order to achieve maximum contemporary relevance, but also skillfully packaged popular box office genres and conventions like the costume drama, the song and dance routines of the 'Bollywood film'—as the commercial cinema originating in the Indian Film Industry located in Mumbai is informally described—and the fiction of exotic India to secure maximum financial advantage by pandering to the tastes of an increasingly globalized cinema audience.

In the first of these adaptations under discussion, *Pride & Prejudice* (2005) directed by British television director Joe Wright in his feature film debut, the original plot, situations and characters are retained by and large. But the novel consisting of over 260 pages is compressed inevitably into a viewing experience that conveniently lasts 127 minutes (2 hr. 7mins). Also, the accent is clearly on sumptuous spectacle; lavish costumes, picturesque locales and painstaking attention to historical detail, which are familiar elements in a popular cinematic genre known as the "period film".

Joe Wright's *Pride & Prejudice* apart from the mandatory sprinkling of elegant ball dances, makes extensive use of natural scenery. The Bennet estate, captured in a sweeping introductory ensemble piece, is designed to evoke the romance of rural England, circa 1797. The Bennet sisters move around in a rural setting full of greenery and the chirping of birds. This represents the idyllic world of Romantic literature. The film's primary image, used as a publicity still in its official publicity blog, is a long shot of Keira Knightley, who plays Elizabeth, standing outdoors with

her skirt swirling in the wind; a lonely figure framed in a corner to the far right, made more diminutive by a large tree on the left. She is framed against a vast panorama of rolling hills. It is an unmistakably Wordsworth like image and one which hints at the director's attempt to locate the film in its proper historical-cultural context. Stephen Hunter, in his review for *The Washington Post*, remarked that Wright's adaptation "...has been merged with another tradition in *costume filmmaking* (italics mine), which gives it the kind of dissonance that will be felt most painfully by Austen's many admirers. Her world has been masculinized" (Hunter N. pag.). In other words, Wright substitutes Austen's way of looking at the world—her female gaze, to borrow a term from Laura Mulvey—with his own male viewpoint.

Wright uses other eye-pleasing props to present his vision of the sophisticated, artificial world that stands opposed to the Romantic rusticity of the Bennet manse: the gorgeous Burghley House, a 16th century palace in Lincolnshire, stands for Lady Catherine de Bourgh's estate Rosings, while Chatworth House in Derbyshire, "the largest private country house in England" serves for Darcy's Pemberley. The DVD comes with a "bonus feature" titled "The Stately Homes of *Pride & Prejudice*." Copeland (1997: 131) makes a significant point that Pemberley exists as a "consumer token" both in the Austen text and in the on screen adaptations. Juliet McMaster opines that in Jane Austen's world, "human worth is to be judged by standards better and more enduring than social status; but social status is always relevant." (McMaster 1997: 129) Given the fact that in Austen's world social status is invariably linked to the possession of estate like Pemberley, it may be possible to infer that Austen's position on the incipient consumerist tendencies of her time were less than enthusiastic.

The fact that in this case the director's nationality had been crucial to the film's overall impact did not escape film critics on the other side of the Atlantic. Stephen Holden noted that the film served, "a continuing banquet of high-end comfort food perfectly cooked and seasoned to *Anglophilic tastes*" (Holden N.

pag.; italics mine).

The filmmaker also tries to keep in view the expectations of the contemporary audiences. The International Movie Data Base (IMDB) website reveals that the film carries the tagline, "a romance ahead of its time." The suggestion is an unmistakable: this could be a date movie dressed up to look 'arty'. It certainly has all the ingredients: the belief in true love, a heady mix of overcrowded halls, colourful dresses, spirited dancing, flirting and courtship conducted while the world whirls by.

In all fairness, Joe Wright's film does have its plus points. The film's fusion of romance, social satire and a sensitive portrayal of the plight of 18th century women, have given it a depth and complexity acclaimed by film critics. Also, it retains many of Austen's famously arch exchanges between Elizabeth and Darcy. The contrast between the economically impoverished domestic world of women on the one hand and the economically well off, politically assured world of men is set off rather well in the film.

But perhaps the most significant departure lies in the portrayal of the heroine herself. In the original text Elizabeth is presented as a young woman who may easily be passed over for being less physically attractive than her sister Jane. Darcy's condescending comment, "She's tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt *me*" (Mangalam 2004: 9), after all, sets off the crucial cycle of "Pride and Prejudice" in the novel. In the film version 'Lizzy' is played by the radiant Keira Knightley and her sister, 'the most handsome' Jane, by the less attractively presented Rosamund Pike. As Stephen Holden pointed out in a review in the New York Times, "Because Ms. Knightley, is, in a word, a knockout, the balance has shifted... Her radiance so suffuses the film that it's foolish to imagine Elizabeth would be anyone's second choice." (Holden N. pag.)

This shift of balance, needless to say, is made necessary by the demands of the box office. Keira Knightley is after all, the star

of the moment. She had become a solid box office proposition through international film hits like *Pirates of the Caribbean*; *Curse of the Black Pearl* (2003) and Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) before *Pride & Prejudice* went into production. The consequence of the filmmakers bending over backwards to accommodate their star is captured in these words by Stephen Hunter: "...this movie really is far more about Knightley than it is about Austen." (Hunter N. pag.)

The same problem arises in Gurinder Chadha's *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) alternatively titled as *Balle Balle! Amritsar to L.A.* Elizabeth's character, suitably Indianized as Lalita Bakshi, is played by no less a beauty than Aishwarya Rai, a former Miss World. Once again, her sister Jaya (Namrata Shirodkar) is a pale shadow of her literary original, Jane. Aishwarya Rai's Lalita compares favourably with Keira Knightley in terms of performance, but Martin Henderson as Darcy is an embarrassment. In Wright's version, Matthew Macfadyen manages not only to hold his own against Knightley, but actually manages to be human and likable.

Nevertheless, Chadha's film is an interesting adaptation, made clearly with an eye on the growing global market for what has come to be known as the "Bollywood Masala Mix." The playfully suggestive tagline in this case, drawn from the IMDB, leaves little to the imagination: "Bollywood meets Hollywood ... and it's a perfect match."

Chadha's version of Jane Austen's novel has the Darcy-Elizabeth love affair played out against a cross-cultural setting of contemporary India, London and the USA. Unlike in the original text (or Joe Wright's adaptation), England occupies a marginal space both in Chadha's film and the geo-political context of the 21st century. Here too we find the evocation of rustic beauty in the opening sequence; but it is the beauty of the lush, wind-swept wheat fields of Punjab. And William Darcy (Martin Henderson) is an American; heir to a large chain of international hotels, all managed by his imposing mother, Catherine Darcy (Lady Catherine de

Bourgh in the original; here played by Marsha Mason). The Indian connection is engineered via Balraj Bingley (Naveen Andrews), who happens to be Darcy's UK based Indian friend. The Bennets are transformed into the typically large Indian family of the Bakshis. Since the film's language is English, Chadha manages to have her Mr. Bakshi (Anupam Kher) paraphrase Austen's dialogue, for instance when he tells his favourite daughter "Lalita, do you understand what your mother is saying? She will never see you if you don't marry Mr. Kohli (Collins)...and I will never see you if you do" (*Bride*).

The politics of class, based on ownership of land is an important theme in Austen's novels. Lady Catherine de Bourgh dismisses the prospect of a Darcy-Elizabeth alliance as "The upstart pretensions of a young woman without family, connections or fortune." (Austen 239) Her prejudice against Elizabeth is rooted in the notion of class. Chadha substitutes for this a much more current form of prejudice—that which separates the privileged west from the disadvantaged 'Third World'. Lalita asks Darcy early in their acquaintance about the average rent for one of his hotel rooms in the US. When he says casually, "About 4 to 5 hundred dollars a night", Lalita responds: "Most people here make this in a year." (*Bride* N. pag.) Later, when Lalita meets Darcy's mother and invites her to visit India, the latter replies dismissively, "If I had a hotel in India I might have. But what with yoga and spices and Deepak Chopra and all the wonderful eastern things available here, I guess there's no point in travelling there anymore." (*Bride* N. pag.)

There are other concessions to the changing times, particularly altered gender equations. Mr. Kohli/Collins tries to augment his proposal of marriage to Lalita with the inducement that she would never have to work again in Beverly Hills. Lalita retorts, "But I like working!" (*Bride* N. pag.) Elsewhere, Lalita firmly defines the kind of man she would not like for a husband—a man who drinks, leaves dirty dishes in the sink or grabs the main chair at the dinner table – all this in the course of a full throated song.

There are no less than a dozen songs in Chadha's film, most of them accompanied by lavishly choreographed dances in the typical manner of the Hindi film. The songs themselves are a curious blend of Hindi film tunes and English lyrics. If Chadha's intention was to achieve a glorious celebration of multiculturalism, she didn't quite pull it off. Mark Pfeiffer observed in his blog 'Reel Times: Reflections on Cinema', "There's much to like about *Bride & Prejudice*, but the end result looks and feels like a cut-rate version of Bollywood and Hollywood sensibilities." (Pfeiffer N. pag.) There is even a Sridevi style snake dance performed by the youngest Bakshi sister in honour of the visitors from 'Amreeka'. But the song and dance routines, taken together with the incongruously Hindi film style fight between Darcy and Wickham (inside a cinema, with a Hindi film in progress!) betray Chadha's real intention. What looks at first like a send up of typical Hindi film conventions, becomes on closer scrutiny a desperate attempt to package a made-for-the-armchair-tourist montage of stereotypical 'Exotic India' images: the Golden temple by day, Goan beaches by night, *dandiya* dances, opulent weddings, caparisoned elephants, *et al.*

Chadha was certainly inspired by the box office successes in the US of Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) and Nancy Schleyer Meyer's *The Guru* (2003), both films that dealt with the Indo-American cross-cultural experience. Despite her best efforts, however, all she managed to draw from American audiences were mixed reviews of the type voiced by Pfeiffer.

Jane Austen, as Copeland points out, was "a shrewd observer of the economic terrain of her class, though always from the chilly, exposed position of an economically marginal female member of it." (Copeland 1997: 145) She was naturally ranged against the crude worldliness of Lady Catherine de Bourgh. Christopher Gillie cites from Austen's early draft, *The Watsons*: "To be so bent on Marriage—to pursue a Man purely for the sake of situation—it is a thought that shocks me; I cannot understand it. Poverty is a great evil, but to a woman of Education and feeling it cannot be the greatest." (Gillie 2003: 109) She was fiercely resistant

to the practice of her time whereby young women were treated as commodities for sale in the marriage market. The weapon she chose to fight with was of course, irony; the subtle irony that attaches itself to Lady Catherine every time she dilates on 'family, connections or fortune'.

Yet, there is a much more profound irony at work in these cinematic adaptations of Jane Austen. Austen, the supremely ironic analyst of the consumerist motive in society, has been transformed into a sleekly packaged commodity for the global market.

Chadha's product elicited this enthusiastic response from Derek Elley, writing for *Variety* magazine: "(it) delights in setting itself up as a target for cultural purists who will maintain that Jane Austen must be rolling in her grave. She won't. She'll be dancing." (Elley N. pag.)

But given such a monstrous presumption of the globalized "market civilization" (Gill 2008: 57) now ascendant all over the world, this conclusion is beginning to appear both inevitable and inescapable. As for all those who feel that Austen took a stand against the commodification of women through her ironic representation of the marriage market of her time, they run the risk of being brushed aside as carping "purists." But the irony underlying both the neatness of the reversal and its palpable bite is truly worthy of Jane Austen. When we consider the circumstance and rationale behind the production of the original text and the obvious motive behind the cinematic adaptations the difference in orientation becomes very clear. This may truly constitute the limits of translation.

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