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## Film as a Dangerous Supplement: A Comparative Study of Tagore's *Atithi* (1895) and Tapan Sinha's *Atithi* (1965)

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### Abstract

Focusing on two primary texts- Rabindranath Tagore's short story *Atithi* (1895) and its Bengali film adaptation, also named *Atithi* (1965), by the Bengali film-maker Tapan Sinha- the present study serves two purposes. First, it identifies some independent elements in the film which were not there in the story and treats these elements found in the film as "supplements" (as conceived and understood by Jacques Derrida) to the story. They are not necessary to the plot, yet their mere presence enhances the appeal of the text and creates a more fulfilling system of meaning. Second, the study admits that the film, though based on the short story, stands apart by its own virtue. The short story is essentially lyrical because of its inherent poetic nature which is caused by its lack of dialogues and its emphasis on one particular theme- the theme of freedom. Here the narrator's voice reigns supreme, reflecting only the narrator's worldview. The film, on the other hand, allows the free play of different perspectives of different characters by using dialogues. In this context, analysing the film using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and dialogism can create a significant discourse regarding the flexible nature of storytelling that the medium of film characterizes. The goal of this study is to suggest that the film adaptation of the short story is more fitting than the story itself to render the theme of freedom as reflected by Tagore. In the process, this paper shall also try to address the relevance of film adaptations of literary texts in the current time.

### Keywords

Derrida, Bakhtin, films, supplement, dialogue

The problematic relationship between literature and film can, perhaps, be best comprehended by comparing it with humans' dependence on machines. We live in an age which is dominated by science. We must admit that machines have made our life comfortable. Yet, at the same time, we feel the anxiety of being replaced by this technology and if that happens it will not be something unprecedented in history of human civilization. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, in different parts of the world, machine took man's place rendering manual labour redundant and making thousands jobless. We have entered into the conflict zone of man versus machine. When it comes to the matter of storytelling, literature also faces a similar crisis if put against the popular medium of film. Literature, usually, has been a rigid medium in its way of storytelling. It has, for the most part, been dependent upon the practice of reading the printed or written texts (in the larger sense of the word). Film, on the other hand, had begun its journey as a visual medium in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The later inclusion of audio has given it the liberty to tell a story in a more flexible and convenient way. Standing in this situation, one can rightfully ask whether it is possible for film to replace written literature and considering the wide popularity of the audio-visual medium, this question does not seem irrelevant at all. Also, to answer the question, we need to reconsider the nature of the consumer. Young people, nowadays, may not keep patience to finish reading a standard size novel in three or four days when a three-hour long film adaptation of that particular text is easily available. From this perspective as well, the question of film replacing literature is very pertinent. Time is not the only issue however. The flexibility of storytelling which favours the medium of film also makes the adaptation of a literary text more delectable and aesthetically appealing.

The binary, if that term can be used in this context, between literature and film can be conceived as the result of a long drawn historical process. The ancient Greek philosopher, Plato imagined an antagonism between speech and writing. Obviously, Plato's preference for speech over writing had some legitimate reasons. He believed that writing affects our capacity to memorise something, in the process making us dependent upon it. The same logic is found in Walter Benjamin's essay, *The Storyteller*, where he laments the slow death of the practice of storytelling due to the rise of the novel. The act of storytelling depends largely upon the storyteller's memory. The advent of printing press and the dissemination of novels allowed us not to depend upon our memory. According to Benjamin, "experience has fallen in value" (Benjamin 12). Few decades after Benjamin, Jacques Derrida makes his entry into the field of philosophy and literary criticism. Derrida, in his book *Of Grammatology*, discusses the concept of "supplement". Though Derrida talks about supplement in relation with the speech-writing binary, it can also be used in any comparative study between a literary text and its film adaptation. It helps to establish a binary between literature and film where film can be conceived as a supplement to its source text. I shall use the concept of supplement to compare Tagore's short story *Atithi* (1895), translated into English as *Guest* by William Radice, and its film adaptation, also named *Atithi* (1965), by the famous Bengali film-maker Tapan Sinha.

The relation between a literary text and its film adaptation has always been problematic. Critics are often much bothered about the inherent translation politics of the whole process. Also, there works a feeling of distrust in the critic's mind when it is not a

novel but a short story being adapted into a film. The venture is risky indeed and the risk is doubled when someone like Tagore is being represented on the screen. Sinha was not the first person to adapt a text by Tagore, neither was *Atithi* his first enterprise. Before *Atithi*, Sinha had worked upon another short story by Tagore- *Kabuliwala*. When he prepared his script of *Kabuliwala* for the screenplay, it was criticised by Nareschandra Mitra, another contemporary director of Sinha's time, on the ground that the script had failed to capture the spirit of the story (Mukhopadhyay 46). Whereas Tagore's story was more elite, in the other director's view, Sinha's version was more popular, hence vulgar. Undaunted by this unexpected criticism, Sinha resolved to write the screenplay for *Atithi* (46). The film that released in nineteen sixty-five successfully retained the spirit of the lyrical short story. One cannot question Sinha's fidelity to Tagore's original short story when he adapted it into a film. The film stood out and received warm reception by the contemporary viewers and reviewers. Sinha skilfully managed to represent the theme of freedom in his film. But in order to do that, he had to invent and incorporate some new elements into the film. These elements were not there in the story. They serve as supplements. These supplements mainly consist of cinematic images and music- most of them highly symbolic.

The concept of supplement implies an 'extra' which is added to the original. The original, by its own virtue, is more important of these two. But the supplement suggests a lack in the original. Therefore, in Derrida's understanding, although the original is more important, it is not complete and therefore, in some cases, it is not sacrosanct. It leaves the provision to add something to it and create a more fulfilling system of meaning. A supplement thus enriches the original. In Derrida's conception, supplement is the "exterior" whereas the original is the "interior", therefore more important. But then he writes, "supplement is maddening because it is neither presence nor absence" (Derrida 154). Supplement is enigmatic because it is not something essential, yet it may happen. Supplement is confusing because it cannot be always explained in terms of an ontology which explains the original. Hence, Derrida introduces a new term, "hauntology" (Royle 50). The name alludes to the haunting nature of a supplement. Derrida further compares supplement to a virus that can infect a body of system permanently. In his *Of Grammatology* he writes, "one wishes to go back from the supplement to the source, one must recognize there is a supplement at the source" (Derrida 304). Once one is aware of the existence of the supplement, one cannot imagine the source in absence of the supplement. Supplement is dangerous because it is not the same as the original, but it points out what the original lacks. It problematizes our understanding of the source. It disrupts what we understand as the beginning or the end by opening up a new vista of possibilities, demolishing the sacrosanctity of the source in the process (Royle 56). Sinha's *Atithi* (1965) has some cinematic elements that can be seen as supplements to Tagore's *Atithi* (1895).

In the short story Tagore describes Tarapada, the eponymous guest as "weary of ties as a young fawn, like a deer in his love of music" (Tagore 200). Deer occupies an important role in the Hindu and Buddhist myth. In China, deer symbolizes longevity (Beers 83). In ancient India, ascetics used the skin of deer as their sacred seat for meditation. They possibly believed that the deer skin enhances concentration, brings

peace and awareness in mind and increases tranquillity (83). Tarapada, to some extent, resembles the ascetics. His characteristic detachment with the material world and sense of being in union with the natural world remind us of an ascetic in recluse. Deer also symbolizes the fleeting moments. Deer are also very fond of music. From Tagore's narration we come to know that Tarapada can play flute very well (Tagore 200). Like a deer, he is also very fond of music. He regularly visits the yatras in the neighbouring villages. The use of the deer image also anticipates bonding. It anticipates that Tarapada, as restless as a fawn, will fall into a trap, the trap of *samsara*. Tagore puts Tarapada in bondage only to free him at the end. Obviously, the taste of bondage is prerequisite for enjoying the taste of freedom. Tagore shows in the story how humans entangle themselves into ties without being aware of it and the pain of separation follows.

Sinha is more symbolic in his treatment of bondage and freedom in the film. In the beginning of the film, the director's lens focuses on few kites flying in the high sky. Kite is a bird which cannot be tamed easily. It symbolizes the untameable wander-thirst of Tarapada. This scene is preceded by the playing of two Rabindrasangeets, "*Amar mukti aloy aloy*" and "*Venge mor ghorer chaabi niye jabi ke amare*". Sinha's choice of these two songs established the theme of freedom from the very beginning of the film. In the movie, when Tarapada enters Matilalbabu's place, he sees two stuffed tigers in the inner palace. Sinha's use of this stuffed tiger-skin is loaded with meaning. It symbolizes Matilalbabu's power as a Bengali zamindar. During the nineteenth century, tiger-hunting was a very common and popular pastime among the aristocrats. The authority figures of the British Raj used to travel the jungle with loaded rifles to hunt tigers. As a result, the population of Bengal tigers decreased significantly. The skin of the dead tiger was exported to England. It was used as a cosy rug at the fire side. The stuffed head of the tiger could make a memorable gift. For Matilalbabu, the stuffed tigers are the symbol of his aristocracy. In the film, it beautifully creates a contrast with the awestruck Tarapada who comes from a very poor family and possibly has never seen something like this before. His initial uneasiness with Matilalbabu's opulence alleviates a little when he joins the village teacher Ramratanbabu in fishing.

In the village Kathaliya, Sinha shows in the film, Tarapada joined the village tutor Ramratanbabu in fishing. The bachelor master could not ultimately catch the fish although at one time he felt that he would catch one easily. Though a fish got caught in his hook, he could not control it and the fish escaped. Later in the movie, his pupil, Tarapada also escapes from the village. He attended the tutelage of Ramratanbabu for two years. But ultimately, he escaped like the fish without giving anyone any hint. That Tarapada would escape is narrated by Tagore, but Sinha deserves our admiration for his ingenious use of these symbols. Here the fish represents free mind, the mind of Tarapada. Fish are caught by net and this net symbolizes *samsara*. Tarapada, like the fish, escapes the net.

In the film, Sinha has frequently directed the camera eye on various bodies of water. We see the village wives fetching water from the river, the tutor fishing from the pond, the boat of Matilalbabu floating on the river. In Hindu mythology we find most ashrams situated near either ponds or rivers. In these ashrams, the ancient gurus used to bestow the wisdom that could help the disciples to attain *moksha*. Thus, Sinha connects

these topographical images with the theme of freedom. In the film, there is a scene from yatra in which Tarapada plays the role of Avimanyu fighting enemies with a single wheel. Wheel is also a very important symbol in both the Buddhist and the Hindu mythology. It symbolizes the sun and the sovereignty of the sun. Throughout the film, we never see Tarapada losing his own independence to the will of someone else. He is as sovereign as the sun in the high sky. “The wheel represents motion, continuity and change” (Beers 185). In Buddhist philosophy, we find the concept of “*dharmachakra*”, also known as “the wheel of law” or the “wheel of transformation” (185). Beers notes that “the wheel’s swift motion symbolizes the rapid spiritual transformation revealed in Buddha’s teaching” (185). The wheel that Tarapada uses in the yatra anticipates his journey of life. The rapid transformation of Tarapada can be observed in the final moments of the film. He was set to marry Charu, but the tune of his new flute and the news of the fair in the neighbouring village reinvigorated the wanderer’s spirit in him. He left his cage and flew away like a free young bird. In Ramratanbabu’s tuition, he recites few lines from a poem *Hohenlinden* by the Romantic poet Thomas Campbell (1777-1844). Sinha consciously used this poem which records the battle between two opposing forces. The idea of romantic escapism permeates in the scene. In the next scene, we find Tarapada singing a song. The song, again a great selection by Sinha, is a Rabindrasangeet- “*Dhora diyechhi go, ami akasher pakhi*”, aptly explaining the situation of Tarapada.

At the middle of the film, Tarapada frees a horse from chain. Sinha uses the horse again in the end of the film, at a crucial moment when Tarapada is about to be bound in wedlock with Charu. Only the day before the marriage, a man riding a horse comes to the gate and informs Tarapada about a fair. He follows the sound of the hooves of the horse and leaves the palace of Matilalbabu and never comes back. The horse represents youth, energy and vitality (Beers 60). No chain can bind its spirit. In the final scene of the film we find Tarapada playing on his flute the tune of the Rabindrasangeet, “*Venge mor ghorer chaabi niye jabi ke amare*”. He has joined few *bauls*, the wandering singers.

Tapan Sinha himself admitted that *Atithi* was a lyrical film (Mukhopadhyay 114). Music plays an important role in this movie. *Atithi* is the first film in which Sinha worked as a music director. His choice of the songs and the background scores help to maintain the spirit of the short story in the film. Though it is an adaptation, Sinha has not hesitated to overtly show his allegiance to Tagore. Of all the songs used in this film, three songs are written by Tagore. The film opens with the song- “*Amar mukti aloy aloy*”. The metaphysical lyricism introduces us to the physical domain of Tarapada’s village. The orphan boy who lives in dire poverty with his mother and three other brothers takes us into his confidence by playing the tune of this song in his flute and by his innocent smile. *Mukti* or liberation is something he seeks. The mundane world with all its wants could not bind him in chain. Sinha’s use of this song saved him precious time by giving a hint of Tarapada’s free spirit.

In Kathaliya, Tarapada becomes somewhat famous for his ability to sing songs. Sonamani asks him to play flute. He plays the tune of “*Venge mor ghorer chaabi niye jabi ke amare*”. Possibly it would be the most appropriate song at that context. Tarapada has willingly come as a guest to the zamindar’s palace which will compel him to be bound by their rules. For a free-spirited lad like him, it is nothing less than a prison. The tune of the

song anticipates a time when someone will free him from this prison. But the song suggests that the singer does not know who will become his liberator. In the case of Tarapada as well, a stranger comes riding a horse and helps him to reunite with his destiny. The momentary deviation of two past years has no effect on him whatsoever.

There is another Rabindrasangeet- "*Dhora diyechhi go, ami akasher pakhi*"- which has been discussed earlier in this paper in respect to its aptness in describing the bondage of Tarapada. But the second line of the song is also suggestive. The line goes like this- "*Nayane dekhechhi tabo nutano akash*". When this particular scene is shot, the camera takes two close shots of Tarapada's face and Charu's face, hinting at the budding stage of an unexpected love. Here Sinha's use of these Rabindrasangeet is very appropriate. The songs were very popular and therefore the audience could easily connect with the context. Also, using Rabindrasangeet put Sinha on a safe ground from the possible criticism. Also, there are two songs which Sinha himself wrote, composed and incorporated in this movie (Sinha 423). One of these two songs, interestingly, falls back upon the theme of bondage. The song, "*Chirodiner bondi aami, bondi sabakar*", records the plight of an imprisoned lady (424). The camera zooms onto Tarapada's face in this scene, finding him lost in thought (Sinha, *Atithi*). This episode happens when he is living at home, before joining the yatra troop, suggesting his weariness caused by the compulsion of living at home.

These are some of the elements which are not there in the story. Sinha invented them and used them with such a mastery that it is almost impossible for anyone to read or reread the story after watching the film without recapitulating what happened in the audio-visual medium. The film thus stands apart from the short story in its own right in spite of being extremely faithful to its original source. I would like to call these elements the supplements to the story. They were not in the story, neither were they essential, yet their mere presence in the film is extremely rewarding to the viewers. They complement in the audio-visual medium what Tagore wrote and published in the print medium. These supplements are dangerous because after watching them in the movie, they remain a haunting presence whenever we read the story. Obviously, these additions make the film more entertaining and meaningful. Their memory rekindles the supremacy of speech over writing.

In many cases of adaptations of literary texts into films, Bakhtin's concepts of heteroglossia and polyglossia are applicable. In his famous essay, *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse*, Bakhtin talks about the essentially dialogic nature of novel and contrasts it with the monologic nature of epic and other poetic genres. He finds the popular, thematic analysis of a text insufficient (Bakhtin 106). The language of the text, in Bakhtin's view, becomes the battle ground for an inherent class struggle where the all-controlling narrator aims to narrow down the meaning of the text and achieve his own purpose by producing one single accent, the narrator's accent. However, in the parodic representation of any text, the basic multi-accentuality of the language becomes prominent. In the process, the participating voices get the opportunity to convey their worldviews without being subordinated to the controlling purposes of the author. In his *Discourses in the Novel*, Bakhtin discusses two opposing forces at work in different genres of literature. He calls them centripetal force and centrifugal force (Bakhtin 272). According to Bakhtin, poetry embodies the centripetal force where the voice of the

narrator functions as a powerful centre and all other aspects of the text seem drawn towards it (272). Here the narrator's voice regulates all other aspects. As a result, we get only one worldview, the worldview of the narrator. Therefore, the scope of poetry or any other monologic medium is limited when it requires the perspectives of different persons involved in the development of the plot. According to Bakhtin, these limitations are largely eliminated in novel. Novel, unlike poetry, is characterized by a centrifugal force allowing enough space for the free play of different perspectives and voices. The centripetal force in poetry controls the free play of language. Here the diction used by the poet/narrator is the only standardised style. Dialectical variants are seemingly misfit in comparison with the serious, poetic diction. But in novel, the dialects are often used judiciously and they fit into the plot very well. Hardy's rustic characters or Joseph, the servant in Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* make the plot more life-like. It is this inherent nature of the novel which bestows the author/narrator with the freedom of expression. This freedom of expression creates a variety of discourses within the language. Bakhtin famously calls this heteroglossia. "Bakhtin argues that the form of the novel is essentially heteroglossic and it employs different voices through different characters and use different discourses to create a variety of worldview" (Klages 37). These ideas can be very useful in any discussion of a literary text and its film adaptation.

In Tagore's short story we can feel the centripetal force at work. Throughout the story, the diction used by Tagore is essentially poetic and serious. Its refined nature easily separates it from the speech of the common man. Sinha, after reading the story, actually felt that Tagore had invested his own spirit in the character of Tarapada. What the poet, the *baul* in him, could not do due to several physical limitations, he did through the story of Tarapada. Tarapada's worldview is actually Tagore's worldview. Although it does not affect the aesthetic qualities of the story, it does not provide much space for the other characters as well. The short story is lyrical because of its inherent poetic nature. This poetic nature is created by its lack of dialogues and its emphasis on one particular theme—the theme of freedom. It reads like a long narrative poem written in prose. The narrator introduces the characters and narrates what is going on inside their mind. The narratorial intervention tells us when Charu is jealous, when Sonamani is afraid, when Matilal is happy and when Tarapada feels caged and bound in metaphorical chains. The sense of freedom is conveyed by the narrator with the help of rustic and poetic images. In the presence of the God-like narrator, we never feel the need for dialogues. The story, therefore, is essentially monologic. Here only the voice of the narrator reigns supreme.

The film is different. It had to be different. The director had to introduce dialogues in his screenplay. The omnipresent narrator of the story is not there in the film. The characters speak for themselves and create a simple, rustic worldview of emotions and aspirations. According to Julie Sanders, a very important feature of an adaptation is "voicing the silenced and marginalised" (Sanders 19). There are different voices and each of these voices are more or less prominent and distinct. Even the silence of Tarapada's mother is loaded with meaning. The idea of bondage and freedom is conveyed through dialogues. The village tutor's admiration for Tarapada, the village wives' private invitation for playing cards with them, his elder-brother's guardian-like love and command are the linguistic traps which bind the free spirit of Tarapada. When this bond

is snapped, the tears cloud in the corner of his mother's eyes. In the film, Sinha's characterization of Tarapada depends a great deal on his dialogues and behaviour or body language. The presence of these different voices makes the film an example of heteroglossia. Tagore's narration makes us believe that Tarapada can play flute, sing *pacali*, or prepare sweetmeats. Sinha shows it all in the audio-visual medium.

Thus, the dialogues play a huge role in the movie. The articulation of language makes us realize the multifaceted functions of the speeches. These dialogues come from different voices carrying different implications and they create the atmosphere of a real rural life. The theme of freedom is not only conveyed through the images and the dialogues, but also through the cinematic style which is not rigid like the poetic style of the short story. In *From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse*, Bakhtin makes a very interesting observation. He writes, "every available style is restricted, there are protocols that must be observed" (Bakhtin 109). Obviously, the protocols are there in different genres of literature, but their natures vary. These protocols create an aesthetic appeal yet, at the same time, they restrict the freedom of expression to some extent. However, the restriction in a novel is much less compared with that in poetry. In a similar fashion, in the audio-visual medium of representation most of these restrictions are overcome. The very genre of film reasserts the sense of freedom and that becomes more prominent when we compare a literary text and its adaptation on screen. Some protocols are still there but they are reduced to the minimum.

But what about the reception? The Bengali people are generally emotional and egoist. For them, Tagore is not just an author. He is an emotion, something beyond a great poet. To Bengalis, Tagore is timeless. But modern western literary theory questions the timelessness of an author. Essays like Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* or Michel Foucault's *What is an author?* have rendered the role of the author secondary, bringing the reader to the front seat of affairs. Barthes even goes to claim: "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes 150). In the case of *Atithi*, the short story, Sinha is the reader. But when he adapts it into his film *Atithi*, he himself becomes an author. He interprets and represents Tagore in his own way in the film and then the film itself becomes a text open to different interpretations. Many critics have raised an interesting point that in the cinematic adaptation, the story of an original text loses its open-endedness. Readings of a particular text by different readers at different place and time could generate different meanings, but the audio-visual representation of a given text closes all the windows except one. The other possible meanings are not given the opportunity to blossom. But we can as well believe that the film is also a reading, an interpretation by the film-maker. It keeps the provision to interpret the original in infinite other ways without being antagonistic to the film. There is another issue worth explaining in this context. Interpreting Tagore to Bengali audience requires a lot of courage. The critics are always ready with incisive invectives to accuse the director of misinterpretation and misrepresentation. The directors who had worked upon any text by Tagore were all well aware of this. They were not actually competing with the original text. Their common enemies were the people's own interpretations of texts that they were working upon. Linda Hutcheon uses the term "masochism" to explain this tendency of deriving pleasure by adapting a text into a film where there is a fair chance of being severely

criticised (Hutcheon 86). This pleasure is motivated by the sense of freedom which also works the other way around.

Let us come back to the point of being replaced with which this paper begins. Is it possible for the audio-visual medium to replace the print medium in the case of storytelling? This question cannot have any definite answer as such. It depends on the consumer or the modern reader's choice. We have been accustomed to live a very fast life. Not every single person we meet on the road is a student of literature, neither all students of literature in our country are passionate readers. Yet the literary enthusiasts believe that literature can inculcate some really important and noble virtues like tolerance, for example, in human psyche. The debate between film and literature will continue for an eternity because it seems like both sides have agreed to disagree. But in order to meet the demands of time, films can be considered as a better option than the hardcopies. The films supplement the papers. They add what could have been there in the source or deduct the redundant portions, but they successfully send the message in a comparatively new, more modern and more conventional and time-bound way. Obviously, much is gone, but much resides. If alive, perhaps Plato would have been very happy because film reinforces the superiority of speech over writing.

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