

Kuntaka: The First Adaptation Theorist

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Abstract

The practice of intramedial adaptation within literature dates back to classical antiquity (Boyd, 2009, pp. 220-21; de Jong, 2004, p. 12; p. 215). Moreover, one accolade often bestowed upon the greatest of English dramatists, William Shakespeare, is that of his being “a master adapter” (Friedmann, 2010, p. 202). The pre-history and birth of (in the early years, chiefly Literary) Adaptation Studies and Theory in the West (Leitch, 2017, pp. 2-5), on the other hand, is often traced back to the early twentieth century wherein the names of André Bazin, Allan Dawn, and Virginia Woolf are often cited in case of the former whereas George Bluestone’s monograph *Novels into Film* (1957) is widely acknowledged in relation to the latter (Elliott, 2017, p. 681).

The present Paper, however, attempts to position the Sanskrit/Indian Theoretician Kuntaka (c. 950 – 1050) as *the first* Adaptation Theorist by virtue of his theory of *Vakrokti* expounded in the seminal text *Vakroktijīvitam*. The Paper goes on to demonstrate, through various examples from mainstream/popular Bollywood/Hindi cinema, how the theory of *Vakrokti* keenly anticipates the work and/or concepts of Adaptation Scholars including Geoffrey Wagner (1975); Dudley Andrew (1984); Brian McFarlane (1996); Kamilla Elliott (2003); Linda Costanzo Cahir (2006); Linda Hutcheon (2006/2013); Julie Sanders (2006/2016); and Thomas Leitch (2007).

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Keywords:

Adaptation. Kuntaka. Prakaraṇa vakratā.Vakrokti.

Introduction

Definitions of (cultural) adaptation have been as diverse as its practice is ubiquitous. Scholars have relied on the process (Cattrysse, 1992, p. 58; Hutcheon, 2013, p. 4, p. 8, pp. 18-22); the intertextual links and echoes that any adaptation evokes (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 8; Stam, 2005, pp. 24-26); and biological (Bortolotti and Hutcheon, 2007, pp. 443-53) and theoretical (Elliott, 2003, pp. 133-83) models to define, explain, and theorize adaptation.

Interestingly, the practice of adaptation, if we survey its intramedial history within literature, dates back to classical antiquity (Boyd, 2009, pp. 220-21; de Jong, 2004, p. 12; p. 215). Moreover, one accolade often bestowed upon the greatest of English dramatists, William Shakespeare, is that of his being “a master adapter” (Friedmann, 2010, p. 202), implying that adaptation is something that is unavoidable, though film adaptations of literature often inspired, at least during the twentieth century, much scorn over their secondary, derivative status (Woolf, 1926/1972, pp. 88-89; Jellenik, 2017, p. 38) even as adaptation serves to (implicitly) dismantle the notion of Romantic Originality (Bortolotti and Hutcheon, 2007, p. 445; Eliot, 1919/2014, p. 105-06; Elliott, 2017, p. 692; Jellenik, 2017, p. 38).

The pre-history and birth of (in the early years, chiefly Literary) Adaptation Studies and Theory in the West (Leitch, 2017, pp. 2-5), on the other hand, is often traced back to the early twentieth century wherein the names of André Bazin, Allan Dawn, and Virginia Woolf are often cited in case of the former whereas George Bluestone’s monograph *Novels into Film* (1957) is widely acknowledged in relation to the latter, though its intent has been characterized by Elliott (2017, p. 681) as ironic.

The Paper goes on to demonstrate, through various examples from mainstream/popular Bollywood/Hindi cinema³, how the theory of *Vakrokti*, apart from anticipating the opinions held by Wordsworth (1800/2005, p. 236) and Coleridge (1817/1973, vol. 2, p. 6) and the theory of Defamiliarization propounded by Viktor Shklovsky (1917/1965), keenly anticipates the work and/or concepts of Adaptation Scholars including Geoffrey Wagner (1975); Dudley Andrew (1984); Brian McFarlane (1996); Kamilla Elliott (2003); Linda Costanzo Cahir (2006); Linda Hutcheon (2006/2013); Julie Sanders (2006/2016); and Thomas Leitch (2007).

Kuntaka's *Vakrokti*

At the heart of Kuntaka's *Vakrokti* is the aim of making the work of art striking, imparting it a distinct identity of its own or in Eliot's (1919/2014) words, creating "the *really* [emphasis added] new" work of art (p. 106). The term *Vakrokti* is divisible into two parts: *vakra* (Striking, Deviant, or literally, curved) and *ukti* ([poetic expression or] speech).

G. Ayyaneth (2016) likewise defines *Vakrokti* as "[d]eviance" (p. 36) from ordinary speech or a way of expression which "converts the ordinary speech into poetical speech" (p. 90). While many accused the theory of merely rehashing the principle of *Dhvani* or Suggestion propounded by Ānandvardhana (Sharma, 1968, p. 49) wherein the connotation(s)/suggestion(s) becomes primary and the denotation(s) secondary (Ānandvardhana, qtd. in Seturaman, 1992/2015, p. 78), a thorough sifting through the six 'levels' or 'stages' of *Vakrokti* identified and demarcated by Kuntaka makes it evident that apart from identifying various 'sites' within language wherein suggestion and/or

3 For Krämer (2017), Bollywood denote[s] mainstream Hindi cinema since the mid-1990s and the industry, centered in Mumbai, that produces it. Despite its nationwide appeal (Vasudev 115), Bollywood is not to be equated with all of Indian cinema. Nor should the term, pace Joshi and others, be used to refer to earlier Hindi films, other regional Indian cinemas, or the so-called Indian art cinema or parallel cinema, a form of filmmaking following more realist protocols, which started to develop as an alternative to the all-India films of mainstream cinema in the 1950s. (pp. 251-52)

strikingness can be introduced (Gerow, 1977, p.263), he was also very much conscious of the practice of adaptation and sought to afford it further currency. For Kuntaka, a literary work becomes striking or unique by incorporating newness at various 'levels'(which are also further sub-divided), viz.:

- i. The Phonetic (*varṇavinyāsa vakratā*) – the use of alliterative language. For example: The repetition of the consonant 'd' in "[a]n old, mad, blind, despised, and dying king" (Shelley, 1839/2022).
- ii. The Lexical (*padapūrvārdha vakratā*) – the choice of the most appropriate, striking word(s), including puns. For example: Yeats' use of the word "cipher" in the line "[t]he children learn to cipher and to sing" (Yeats, 1928/2022) to refer to the subject of Mathematics taught to school children.
- iii. The Grammatical (*padaparārdha vakratā*) – the deliberate deviation from grammatical (as well as syntactical, capitalization, and punctuation) rules. For instance, the hyperbaton or the striking syntax of the line "About suffering they were never wrong / The old Masters . . ." (Auden 1940/2022) wherein the line begins with an adverbial phrase, is followed by a pronoun, with the subject appearing at the end, a clear inversion of the SVO pattern followed in English syntax.
- iv. The Sentential (*vākya vakratā*) – which can include either or all of the above. For example: Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" (1979) wherein everyday objects, events, and/or activities are described in defamiliarizing terms lending a special charm to the poem.
- v. The Contextual (*prakaraṇavakratā*) – which, as this Paper argues, implies adaptation proper, and
- vi. The Overall Arrangement (*prabandha vakratā*) – a combination of either all, one or more of the above five which imparts the literary work an individuality of its own.

In contrast to Hollywood, Hindi film-makers are known to “adopt the strategy of not signaling the film’s literary connection in order to protect their film’s mass appeal. In contrast to most Western film markets, “adaptation” is for them a genre label that is likely to repel, rather than attract, potential viewers” (Krämer, 2017, p.256). What is prevalent, rather, is the practice of unacknowledged adaptation, often reworking films from Hollywood, Asian cinema, South Indian Cinema or earlier Hindi films themselves. Leitch (2017) observes that

[f]ocusing on the adaptive practices of Bollywood cinema, Krämer... reveals a commercial culture in which adaptation of variously canonical sources that the industry considers the aesthetic commons is as rampant as it is unacknowledged, providing a challenge to Hutcheon’s dictum that “adaptation *as adaptation* is unavoidably a kind of intertextuality *if the receiver is acquainted with the adapted text*” [emphasis original](21) and a powerful alternative to Hollywood’s adaptation industry. (p. 11)

Indeed, because of less direct access to Hollywood cinema on account of the language barrier and the fact that “the status of the [sic] adaptation as a film genre in the sense of a contract between producer and spectators is weak” (Krämer, 2017, p.262) many Indian spectators might not be able to recognize or perceive the text(s) they come across as adaptations.

Adaptation Unrecognized: The Case of *Baazigar* (1993)

Kuntaka classifies *prakaraṇavakratā* into further eight types (“Kavya and Indian Poetics – Part Nine”, 2015). One among them is *utapādya lāvanya vakratā* or the Obliquity of Modified Source Story (Kuntaka, 2010/ca. 10-11 C.E., 189). The term *utapādya* can be translated as producible whereas *lāvanya* means beauty or elegance. What Kuntaka implies is that through their creative faculty adapters produce or add beauty to a source story (with which spectators might already be familiar with) by introducing significant changes therein.

Moreover, the implicit acceptance on Kuntaka's part that even the most complete of stories can be or need to be reworked is perhaps not only limited to maintaining spectators' interest but also hints at the necessity of making alterations to suit cultural sensibilities (Krämer, 2017, pp.259-60), especially in case of transcultural adaptations such as *Baazigar*.

The 1993 romantic crime thriller *Baazigar* (*Gambler*), written by Robin Bhatt, Akash Khurana, and Javed Siddiqui, adapts the 1991 film *A Kiss Before Dying* which itself is an adaptation of Ira Levin's award-winning 1953 novel of the same name and which had earlier been adapted for the screen in 1956. Keeping space considerations in mind, the present Paper shall trace a significant alteration made by the adapters of *Baazigar* to their multiple source(s), the most immediate being the 1991 film.

The central character in the novel and both its film adaptations is motivated by the desire to climb the social ladder at any cost, even if it requires him to commit cold-blooded murder(s). In contrast, Ajay Sharma (Shah Rukh Khan), in *Baazigar* seeks revenge against Madan Chopra (Dalip Tahil), the man who betrayed the trust of Ajay's father Vishwanath Sharma (Anant Mahadevan), leading to the death of the latter along with that of Ajay's baby sister (01:32:58 – 41:28; 02:02:42 – 06:17; 02:22:00 –25:15; 02:30:48 –36:34). Moreover, the trauma of losing her husband and daughter coupled with the shock of being thrust into abject poverty on account of Chopra's scheming leads Ajay's mother⁴ Shobha Sharma (Rakhee Gulzar) to suffer from a mental breakdown wherein fifteen year later she still believes that her dead husband has gone out for arranging medications for their sick daughter (00:07:26 –09:48).

4 Actor Salman Khan, who had turned down the offer to play Ajay, claims that his father, screen-writer Salim Khan, was the one who suggested to add this angle in the story: I had refused *Baazigar* as well. When Abbas Mustan came to me with the script, I asked my dad for his inputs. He felt that since it's a story of a negative character they should add an angle of the mother in it. They didn't agree. When I said no to the film, they went to Shah Rukh and then they added the mother angle! (qtd. in "When Salman Khan Said", 2021)

It is to avenge this wrong done to him and his family that prompts Ajay to cunningly plot and execute Chopra's downfall along with the murder of Seema (Shilpa Shetty), one of Chopra's daughters, which Ajay stages as if it were a suicide (00:57:34 – 01:01:15; 01:06:45 – 12:55). So strong is Ajay's desire for revenge that apart from Seema several other innocent persons too end up losing their lives (01:19:55 – 25:05; 01:49:20 – 57:21).

However, unlike the central character of Corliss (Robert Wagner [1956] and Matt Dillon [1991]) in the various versions of *A Kiss*, a large section of the audience, if not all, is likely to sympathize with Ajay despite his unbridled violence once the reason behind his actions is revealed to them.

As De (1961) observes, “[i]n a *prakaraṇa*, for instance, the special kind of *vakratā-vicchitti* (or the ingenious and charming turns) introduced in the incidents of a traditional plot is justified in so far as it contributes to the development of *rasas*...” (p. xl).

While neither *A Kiss* and its attendant adaptations nor *Baazigar* can be termed works with “a traditional plot”, the feeling of strong aversion towards Corliss on account of his greed coupled with his lack of morality, remorse, etc. in the various versions of *A Kiss* is nevertheless transformed to or developed in the direction of pity for Ajay when the motivations behind his violence is revealed to the spectators.

While denying that their film is heavily indebted to or borrows from *A Kiss* and its two screen versions, director duo Abbas-Mustan, acknowledging the influence Manmohan Desai's films have had on them, note that [i]n his [Desai's] films, the character of a mother was of utmost importance. We wanted to have that element in our film. It is all about bringing the right emotion for a film.

If the mother-son relationship is explored and justified properly on screen then it definitely strikes a chord with audience. If a son is taking revenge for his

mother[,] then his every sin is forgiven. And it worked well with the audience. (qtd. in Panchamatia, 2020)

It can be gleaned from the above discussion that not only Kuntaka anticipates Hutcheon's (2013) definition of adaptation as "repetition with variation" (p.4; p. 8) but the various taxonomies propounded by various Adaptation Scholars such as Dudley Andrew (1984, pp. 98-100); Linda Costanzo Cahir (2006, pp. 14-16); Thomas Leitch (2007, pp.95-126); Brian McFarlane (1996, p. 20); Julie Sanders (2016, pp. 37-38; p. 215); and Geoffrey Wagner (1975, pp. 223-27) all of which seek to determine or 'measure' the extent to which an adaptation follows, departs from, comments on or critiques its source, and can thus be said to be implicit within Kuntaka's *varṇavyāsa vakratā*.

For instance, Andrew might define *Baazigar* as a borrowing (1984, p. 98) from (and amalgamation of) the different versions of *A Kiss Before Dying*. Cahir would likely describe the film as a radical translation (2006, p. 16) of its source; Elliott would define it as a combination of Ventriloquist (2003, pp. 143-49), Genetic (p. 150-55), and De(Re)composing (p. 157-61); Leitch as an adjustment (2007, p. 98) or a revision (p. 106); whereas Sanders would in all probability call it an appropriation (2016, pp. 37-38), a version (p. 215), or a variation (p. 215) of the various versions of *A Kiss Before Dying*.

Adaptation Recognized: The Case of *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* (1999) and *Don: The Chase Begins Again* (2006)

Krämer (2017), citing Asaduddin and Ghosh (2012), goes on to claim that Hindi cinema's "predilection for myths is one reason why adaptation in Hindi cinema appears on the whole to have been less book-centric, and especially less novel-centric, than in Hollywood" (p. 254). Indeed, from *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), which Krämer briefly discusses, to *Rajneeti* (2010) to *Ra.One* (2011), Hindi films often borrow from either the *Rāmāyaṇa* or the *Mahābhārata*. Because Indian audiences across all age groups are likely to be familiar with these epics, they are likely to recognize when portions or aspects of it are adapted to a

modern milieu, once again denoting Kuntaka's *utapādyā lāvanya vakratā* at work.

A case in point is Sooraj Barjatya's *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* (1999) [*We Are Together*] which is a modern retelling of the Indian epic the Ramayana, aiming to reinforce the virtues of the Indian joint-family structure. Adapted by Barjatya himself, the following tables list the various characters from the film that correspond with those in the epic along with changes introduced or *lāvanya* added by the adapter.

Sr. No.	Character(s) in the epic <i>The Rāmāyana</i>	Corresponding Character(s) in the Film <i>Hum Saath-Saath Hain</i>
1	Rāma	Vivek Chaturvedi
2	Sītā	Sadhna Sharma Chaturvedi
3	Bharata	Prem Chaturvedi
4	Lakṣmaṇa	Vinod Chaturvedi
5	King Daśratha	Ramkishan Chaturvedi
6	Queen Kaikeyī	Mamta Awasthi Chaturvedi
7	Mantharā	Dharamraj Bajpai and Mamta Chaturvedi's three close friends

Table 1: Drawing Parallels – Characters in *The Rāmāyana* and *Hum Saath-Saath Hain*

Sr. No.	Key Incident(s) in the epic <i>The Rāmāyana</i>	Corresponding Key Incident(s) in the Film <i>Hum Saath-Saath Hain</i> along with changes introduced by the adapter
1	Mantharā, Kaikeyī's maidservant, poisons the latter's mind and heart against her step-son Rāma (Cantos VII-IX)	Dharamraj Bajpai and Mamta Chaturvedi's three close friends poison Mamta's mind and heart

		against her step-son Vivek (02:01:30 -05:22)
2	King Daśaratha of Ayodhyā, granting two boons he had promised to Kaikeyī, reluctantly sends his son Rāma to a fourteen-year long exile. As per Kaikeyī's demands, her son Bharata is to succeed to the throne (Cantos X-XVIII)	Ramkishan Chaturvedi, a rich businessman,refuses to give into his wife Mamta's demand to divide his business empire equally between his three children instead of making Mamta's step-son Vivek the Managing Director. However, Vivek's dutiful wife Sadhna overhears the argument between her in-laws and when she reports the same to her husband. Vivek approaches his (step)mother and willingly forgoes becoming Managing Director and decides to move to Rampur with Sadhna to take care of their new manufacturing plant being constructed there. Moreover, he also assures his mother that he would request his father Ramkishan to appoint Prem as the Managing Director (02:06:57 -15:15)
3	Rāma's younger brother Lakṣmaṇa decides to accompany his elder brother and sister-in-law in exile (Canto XXX)	Vinod decides to accompany Vivek and Sadhna to Rampur. Before leaving, Vivek assures Mamta that he would convince

		Vinod to return within a few days (02:13:06 –13:11)
4	Bharata, angry with his own mother Kaikeyī for her selfish act, rules as Rāma’s proxy without occupying the throne and places Rāma’s <i>pādukā</i> (footwear) on the throne as a mark of his elder brother’s right to the throne (Canto LXXI-LXXIII; Canto CXII)	8Prem, displeased with his mother’s selfishness borne of ungrounded fear, refuses to sit on the Managing Director’s chair as it rightfully belongs to his elder brother Vivek and moves his belonging back to his room from that of Vivek’s where Mamta had it shifted. Moreover, Prem swears in the name of his sister-in-law Sadhna that if his mother shall force him to replace Vivek, he shall not marry (02:24:06 –30:00)
5	Having sent his beloved son Rāma to a fourteen-year exile, King Daśaratha dies in grief (Canto LXIV)	Once Mamta realizes her mistake, Ramkishan forgives her and the family reunites (02:36:29 –39:56)

Table 2: Similar yet Different – Key Incidents in *The Rāmāyaṇa* and *Hum Saath-Saath Hain*

While *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* does not explicitly announce itself as an adaptation of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, an astute spectator paying attention to the opening credits of *Don: The Chase Begins Again* would note that the film signals its status as an adaptation[*of Don (1978)*], the screenplay for which was penned by Salim-Javed (00:06:59). The subtitle functions as a nod to the film attempting to rewrite the narrative, albeit modernized and stylized to suit contemporary times.

De (1961) observes that “[s]ometimes, the *prakaraṇa-vakratā* may be such that the *angī* or dominant *rasa* is developed in an act of a drama . . . to a climax which it has never attained either before or after” (p. xl).

In the Shah Rukh Khan-starrer *Don*, this involves the shocking revelation that Vijay (Shah Rukh Khan), the man purportedly impersonating the notorious criminal Don (Shah Rukh Khan) on account of his surreal resemblance to the latter, was none other than Don himself who, having overheard DCP D’Silva’s (Boman Irani)– himself revealed as, unlike in the original, the criminal mastermind Vardhaan – plan to have Vijay infiltrate the gang to bring them down, had succeeded in killing Vijay and taking his place instead, providing him an opportunity to wipe out all of his competition and/or rivals in the world of crime (00:49:18 – 00:54:28; 02:27:30 – 45:09).

Thus, the dominant *vīrarasa* during much of the 1978 *Don* is developed in a way wherein the climactic revelation not only subverts the (assumed) heroic nature of the supposed Vijay but transformsthe *śantarasa* during the denouement of the original (02:39:24 – 39:43) to *bhayanaka* or horrifyingly *adbhuta rasa* in the adaptation.

Conclusion

Kuntaka’s advice to aspiring authors on inducing their work with strikingness, charm, and/or novelty, apart from anticipating the opinions held by Wordsworth and Coleridge and Viktor Shklovsky’s concept of Defamiliarization, likewise contains a keen awareness of the need to rework or adapt stories whereby the adapter(s) can creatively update, rewrite, and/or critique familiar and prior works, an aspect discussed at length by Adaptation Scholars discussed herein. This acceptance on Kuntaka’s part that stories can be retold multiple times after making creative and necessary alterations to previous versions is also a clear indication that he is keenly aware that the notion of (Romantic) Originality is nothing more than a myth. Rather, on account of the adapter’s creative reshaping of already existing material, the work can claim a

pride of place *by virtue of the fact that it rewrites, borrows from and/or echoes previous works.*

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