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**HOW FAR CAN THE CUCKOO FLY? : NEGOTIATING THE CONCEPT
OF FIDELITY IN FILM ADAPTATION**

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Abstract:

*This paper aims to demonstrate film adaptation of written texts as a mode of translation that the concept of fidelity should not limit. By using the example of Milos Forman's 1975 adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962), the study will analyse the poetics of film adaptation. It will consider separately the various aspects involved in the transposition of the narrative to film, like narrative technique, characterization, thematic omissions, personal influences of the adaptor etc. Such an in-depth study aims to illustrate how factors beyond fidelity like the creative impulse of the adaptor and the socio-cultural and economic context in which the adaptation takes place will determine the adaptation process. A comparative study has been attempted between the novel and film to understand how, where, and why the film differs from the text and highlight them as necessary adaptation shifts. The analysis hopes to lead to a more open understanding of adaptation as a creative phenomenon.*

Keywords: *Adaptation Shifts, Translation, Fidelity, Intersemiotic Translation, etc.*

Text-to-performance transactions are complex and challenging, especially in films. As easy as it might seem with source and story already available, the poetics involved in effectively converting a written text to film is quite intricate. An adaptation is either lauded for complementing the original text or becomes widely criticized for straying too far away and butchering the storyline. Nevertheless, since its inception, cinema has looked to literature for dependable and pre-loved material, hoping to attract more audiences. On the other hand, the audiences have loved and promoted adaptations of famous or canonical texts, making them the most successful commercially. The popularity of adaptations can be attributed to two reasons; the thrill of seeing how the personally loved and culturally significant narratives and their characters have been transformed in the new medium, and for those who have not read the texts, it offers a chance to get familiar with it and learn and discuss information that has cultural capital. Hence fidelity becomes an important aspect in text-to-film adaptations. It is expected that faithful adaptations will act as another medium to immortalize great works and help them live on in more minds and souls. Hence how far an adaptation can stray from the original is a baffling question. Though readers expect one-hundred percent fidelity, it is impossible because what happens in film adaptations is not literal translation but a process of transposition involving adaptation shifts pertaining to the socio-cultural and political climate in which it takes place. Nevertheless, both audience and academia have for long insisted on fidelity as the primary criterion for evaluating adaptations and, in the process, have denigrated them by privileging the written text. This paper considers the example of the adaptation of Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) by



Milos Forman in 1975 to demonstrate the poetics of text-to-film transactions and understand why and how fidelity cannot be the primary factor in adaptation.

Equivalence between the source and target narratives is considered essential in any translation. Early translation studies scholars analyzed the dichotomy of literal and free translation and acknowledged translation shifts as inevitable and necessary for effective translation. A similar development was seen in the evolution of adaptation studies, where the experts tried to identify the parts of a text that should be adapted and parts that cannot be altered. There was also growing acknowledgment of contextual considerations that have a bearing on the end product of adaptation. Thus when a text is adapted for film, what should be expected is not one hundred percent fidelity but equivalence to the text that accommodates the creative process of filmmaking and the socio-cultural and political context in which the adaptation takes place. The power of the written word and its ability to induce imagination is infinite; the same book can constitute a separate personal universe and unique experience for each reader. Films, however, are limited in this aspect; they must adapt themselves into forms and shapes that can be enjoyed and understood by all audiences. Forman has done just that in his adaptation of Kesey's novel. However, the film is not without flaws. It ignores many ideas that constitute the soul of the text though they could have been re-created in the film with some effort. Taking a critical look at such films, considered masterpieces, will reveal the complex challenges of text-to-film adaptations.

Milos Forman's adaptation of the novel was as acclaimed as the original text. The film won the 'Big Five' Oscars among thirty-five wins and at least thirteen other nominations. It includes the Best Actor award for Jack Nicholson, Best Actress for Louise Fletcher, Best Director award for Milos Forman, and Best Adapted Screenplay for Lawrence Hauben and Bo Goldman. The film was hugely popular among the regular audience too. It shows how successful Forman was in adapting the novel despite the many changes he made to the plot, ambiance, and the characters. The following paragraphs will analyze why these changes are necessary to the creative process of filmmaking and how book-to-film adaptations are intersemiotic translations that are further affected by context and complicate the concept of fidelity.

The text tells the story of Randle McMurphy, who has a criminal past and, to escape labor duties in prison, pleads insanity and gets sent to the relatively luxurious setup of Eastern Oregon Correctional institution. In the asylum, McMurphy witnesses and endures abuse and degradation meted out to the patients by the oppressive Head Nurse, Miss Ratched, who exploits the vulnerabilities of the inmates and controls them. McMurphy, forever the rebel, rallies the patients to take a stand against the atrocities. McMurphy and Miss Ratched engage in a cold war in which McMurphy continues to win until the last round, where Miss Ratched wields her ultimate power to do away with him once and for all by lobotomizing him. However, by this time, most inmates in the ward have learned to stand up for themselves and gained enough confidence to go out into society, including Chief Bromden, the narrator of the story, who smothers McMurphy and kills him in order to save him from leading the life of a 'vegetable' before making his escape.

Narrative Technique:

The narrative technique is the first and most evident difference between the book and the film. It is a well-known fact that Ken Kesey actively participated in the script development in the initial stages of production till he had a fallout with Foreman regarding the casting and narrative point of view and withdrew. The novel's narrator is Chief Bromden, a chronic who pretends to be deaf-mute because he had gone unheard most of his life. It allows him to eavesdrop on conversations, including that of hospital staff. So it is only appropriate that the story is told through him. The film, however, takes an omniscient view allowing the story to unfold itself. Telling a story on screen through a single person's



eyes is a difficult task, worse still through a character like the Chief, who, on account of his pretense, does not involve in any social interaction until the final chapters of the narrative. Telling it through McMurphy would not have been a good choice either because he can never be a reliable narrator like the Chief, who had learned only to observe and not respond through years of practice. McMurphy, on the other hand, is a lively, belligerent spirit who has something to say about everything that is going on around him. Even though the protagonist of the novel is McMurphy the text delves into the Chief's life also and shows us what lead him to his present state; the growing issue of the encroachment of native land leads to a loss of identity in the Chief and the loss of a voice in society. Shock-therapy-induced trances of the Chief reveal his life history and the critical but unaddressed problems of the natives in Canada and the US to the reader. It is one of the many concerns that Kesey addresses in his novel. However, these elements are ignored in the movie, whose narrative style is much more succinct due to time constraints. A film's span is limited to a mere ninety to one hundred eighty minutes and is expected to be watched continuously without breaks. On the other hand, a written text can adopt detailed narration spanning many hours.

Characterization:

The characterization adopted by Forman is markedly different from that of the novel; many major and minor changes have been made to adapt the characters for the big screen effectively, including the protagonist McMurphy. McMurphy in the novel is more human, while in the film, he takes on the role of a classic hero and savior who sacrifices himself for his friends. The sacrifice is there in the novel, too; however, in the novel, his gradual maturation and growing understanding of the hospital's unjust realities make him compassionate enough to risk his freedom for other inmates. The novel portrays McMurphy as scheming and cunning. Most of the things he seemingly does to help the inmates are actually for his benefit; like the money he gets from taking the guys on a fishing trip, building confidence in the Chief about his strength, and using him to win a bet on whether the control panel can be lifted manually, etc. Further, in the novel, there is a brief phase when McMurphy realizes that Nurse Ratched has the sole power to decide when he should be released. He turns away from the other inmates and tries to conform to her rules and regulations as a growing sadness and frenzy regarding his impending doom overpowers him. In the movie, however, he continues to be rebellious from start to end and is seemingly unaffected by the oppressive nature of the institution. In the novel, we see that there are times when the inmates suspect his intentions and are angry with him; an inmate Cheswick is so heartbroken by Murphy's lack of support in demanding that the Nurse not ration their cigarette supplies that he goes on to drown himself in the pool. A series of incidents like these lead McMurphy to lose his grip on sanity; his character in the novel is carefully developed, and the readers are given chances to understand and sympathize with him despite his moments of weakness. However, there is no scope for such gradual development or maturation of character in the movie with its time constraints. It also does not include the insights and speculations of the Chief in the text, which helps the reader, understand McMurphy better. Without these observations, a character who leads a friend to suicide and swindles money from his friends will not find ready sympathy from the film audience and hence has been recast by Forman, who shows him in a much nobler light right from the beginning of the movie.

Critical changes have been made to other characters, too, like Dr. Spivey, who, in the novel, after discovering that he was in the same high school with McMurphy, really warms up to him and starts taking the side of the inmates whenever there is an argument with Nurse Ratched. He even goes on a fishing trip with them. In the film, however, he is a passive presence. Furthermore, some characters are avoided altogether, like Big George, a patient obsessed with cleanliness; in the book, he becomes the reason for the altercation between McMurphy and Washington, the African American



orderly who threatens George with an enema in the shower. The fight becomes the impetus for Nurse Ratched to send McMurphy and the Chief for electroshock therapy. Though the story is not affected by these omissions in the film, the more comprehensive description of the characters and their behavior in the text gives the readers insights into the psyche of mentally ill people. It helps us understand why they behave the way they do. Some background information is provided for each patient, which helps us understand the person and their illness better. However, most of the action and screen time are centered around McMurphy in the film. Though each actor plays his character brilliantly, there is not much scope for character development, and the full potential of the actors is not exploited. These changes also can be attributed to the time limit of movies; multiple subplots can distract and confuse the viewer and hence is beyond the scope of a film of standard length.

Thematic Omissions:

The film does not include many female characters in the novel, like Billy's mother, Harding's wife, the Japanese Nurse, Chief Bromden's mother, Etc., whose roles are critical to the personalities(disorders) of the men in the institution. However, it should be noted that the novel shows most of its women characters in poor light. They are either "emasculators" or "whores". The first category includes women like Nurse Ratched, Billy's mother, the Chief's mother, and Harding's wife. They are portrayed as sadists who manipulate and control men and destroy their personalities and confidence to the point where they become deranged and incapable of surviving in society. Harding's wife ruthlessly criticizes Harding's sexual incompatibility, even in public. Through the many supposedly 'therapeutic' meetings where he talks about his wife, we discover the reason for Harding's social anxiety- his repressed homosexuality, something his wife and Miss Ratched do not seem to get tired picking on. Billy's private demon is his fear of being refused or turned down, and his mother does everything she can to keep the fear alive. By keeping him an adolescent and dependent forever, she gets to feel young forever.

Chief Bromden's identity crisis springs from his father's loss of identity as Chief and a man; he says that his father began to "shrink" after taking his wife's (a white woman) last name as his own. The father and son are forced to take up a white identity and lose all that their Indian names and tribe stand for. Chief's mother forces his father to succumb to the white officers and sell their land so that she can return to the life of a white person. Nurse Ratched is the main antagonist in both the text and film and is described as the "ball cutter." She metaphorically castrates all the inmates by constantly minimizing them and turning them against each other. Even to the doctors, she is a formidable figure; she takes away their 'masculinity' through her powers of 'emasculatation.' Candy and Sandy are the "whores" who have dedicated their lives to pleasing men and doing what they are told. Candy and Sandy are the only women characters in the text who are not antagonized because they obey the men and help them retrieve their masculinity. The Asian-American Nurse strikes a middle chord between the two, but she appears only briefly in the novel and is not a part of the film.

Many critics have vehemently criticized the author's tendency to 'demonize' women and his insistence that they should be 'tamed.' McMurphy, at the end of the novel, not only tries to kill the Big Nurse but also strips her, thus exposing her bosom and her 'femininity' that she had tried to conceal for long. This imposing of femininity on her through an act of sexual violation guarantees a conclusive victory for the men by restoring male power in the ward. Kesey's novel is generally acknowledged as a reaction against the stigmatization and treatment of the mentally ill and the oppressive powers in society. However, many have exposed it as his raging objection to the changing gender roles of his time. The political and social climate of the time is sure to have had a bearing on his writing. However, Forman's film was created twelve years after the novel's writing. Hence, he adapts it to reflect the changed perspective of the society during the time and removes the maligned women



characters from the story. It is also probably why he altered Nurse Ratched's appearance by casting a petite Louise Fletcher so that her femininity would not directly link to her ruthlessness and dominating attitude.

Setting:

An essential element in the text that Forman leaves out in the movie is the Combine, a product of Chief Bromden's paranoia. His fear of institutions and authority makes him believe that a large mechanized matrix made of cogs and gears hidden behind the walls and beneath the floor controls humankind. The whole novel is set against this mechanical world of Chief's imagination. He has psychedelic hallucinations of the machinery, people who control it, and men emasculated and manufactured according to Combine's standards. Kesey uses Bromden's illness to criticize the authoritarian powers and mechanized ways of living in modern times. Forman, however, removes this dimension from the story altogether. Though with all the machinery and mechanical robot-like people, it would have constituted the ideal stuff for science fiction, which was all the rage in the 70s, the filmmakers opted to leave that part out from the film. Unlike written texts, it is not easy for films to jump from one mood to another quickly and keep the audience from losing focus. All the action and noise of the Combine, which pervades the novel, would distract the film's audience and hinder them from comprehending the action on screen. All that the Combine represents in the novel is conveyed as McMurphy's growing understanding of the system in the film.

Other elements related to the Chief's paranoia, like the fog, ticking sounds behind the wall, Etc., are also avoided. The imaginary fog acts an escapade for the Chief, who, unlike McMurphy, cannot fight the institution but wants to escape it. The fog also reminds us of wars and their effects on ordinary people. Having taken part in the Second World War, the Chief recounts how such artificially created fog was used to keep the soldiers hidden during combat. McMurphy also was a part of the Korean War, and so were most of the other inmates in the facility. Most of them likely suffered from PTSD. The fog then stands as a reminder of the inescapable trauma that war left on individuals. However, the film fails to address this issue; the fog could not be a part of the film because, unlike the novel, where the Chief becomes the eyes and ears of the reader, guiding us through the fog, the film demands the audience to see and understand things for himself. The director has employed a realistic screenplay in the film, and elements like the fog will obscure many finer details like the actual residents of the asylum the director retains in the background.

Furthermore, the creative process of filmmaking is a lot more expensive than writing. It is both technically and financially challenging to emulate the writer's exact vision on screen. And a text like *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, with its many surreal elements, would have challenged both the technical and financial capacity available to the filmmaker. The production cost of the film, even without these elements, went over the initial budget of \$2 million and could continue only because one of the producers personally funded another \$2.4 million.

Personal Influences:

As mentioned before, adaptation is not literal or even free translation, but the transposition of a narrative to a different medium that involves, above all, the creativity of the adaptor, which will be influenced by his personal history, belief systems, and resources available. However, his visions may not always align with the source text's writer. Like Kesey and Foreman, the writer and the creator may not see eye to eye on the changes to be made in the adaptation. Apart from logistical concerns, the adaptor's creativity determines how meanings are formed and conveyed in an adaptation. Forman was very vocal about his admiration of the text; "One day, I got a package from California. There was a book inside I'd never heard of written by an author I'd never heard of but when I started to read I saw



right away that this was the best material I'd come across in America" (<https://www.nytimes.com>) and yet had differences with Kesey regarding the adaptation. Each text contains multiple layers of meanings that are interpreted differently by individual readers based on their impressions and understanding. Forman relates the text to his life in Czechoslovakia under the communist regime; "To me, [the story] was not just literature, but real life, the life I lived in Czechoslovakia from my birth in 1932 until 1968. The Communist Party was my Nurse Ratched, telling me what I could and could not do; what I was or was not allowed saying; where I was and was not allowed to go; even who I was and was not" (<https://www.nytimes.com>) and it is to this understanding that he caters the adaptation.

To conclude, regardless of how far Forman's vision aligns with the author's intention or how faithful the adaptation is to the source text, the film struck a chord in millions of audiences worldwide. This once again proves that fidelity is not the yardstick to evaluate an adaptation and that it is a creative process inspired by, but different from the source. The analysis of Forman's adaptation proves that film adaptations are not simply a matter of creating equivalence. The changes made are not merely due to logistic limitations but conscious choices made by the filmmaker according to his creative impulse, the socio-cultural context of the time, and personal motivation. Thus adaption shifts are not merely adaption of meaning but are rooted in interplay of different factors ranging from creative to economic and social ones.

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