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Are Intersemiotic Translations Destroying the Essence of the Original Story? A Case Study on *Nashtapetta Neelambari* and *Mazha*

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Abstract: *Nashtapetta Neelambari*, a short story by Madhavikutty, is known for its emotional depth and realistic portrayal of human relationships. The story revolves around Dr. Subhadra, Ramanuja Shastri, and Chandrashekhara Menon, exploring themes such as love, heartbreak, music, possessiveness, and other facets of human nature. Its simplicity and emotional resonance allow readers to identify with the characters and their experiences.

Lenin Rajendran's *Mazha* (2000) is an intersemiotic translation of *Nashtapetta Neelambari*. Featuring Samyuktha Varma, Biju Menon, and Lal in lead roles, the film expanded the brief narrative into a full-length feature and received critical acclaim, including a National Award. However, the adaptation introduced significant changes to the original story, leading some critics to argue that it diminished the importance of the source text and altered the characterization of the protagonist.

This paper examines the relationship between Madhavikutty's *Nashtapetta Neelambari* and Lenin Rajendran's *Mazha* to explore a central question: Do intersemiotic translations preserve the essence of the original work, or do they transform it beyond recognition? Through a comparative analysis, the study investigates whether the film adaptation retains or departs from the spirit of the original story.

Keywords: *Nashtapetta Neelambari; Intersemiotic Translation; Translation; Madhavikutty; Lenin Rajendran*

First, let us examine the differences in the portrayal of characters and events in *Nashtapetta Neelambari* and *Mazha*. The central character in the short story is Dr. Subhadra, whereas in the film her name is changed to Bhadra. The film begins with Bhadra as an energetic and fun-loving teenager who arrives in Madurai with her parents. In contrast, the story introduces Dr. Subhadra as an adult returning to Madurai in search of something she had lost long ago. Here, Madhavikutty presents readers with glimpses of a mysterious past, whereas Lenin Rajendran structures *Mazha* with a conventional narrative and a detailed introduction to the protagonist.

Lenin Rajendran also gives considerable importance to the character of Valiya Shastrikal, portrayed by Jagathy Sreekumar. In the short story, Madhavikutty mentions him only briefly and assigns him a relatively minor role. In the film, however, the character is expanded significantly, receiving emotional dialogues and scenes that showcase the actor's performance. Another noticeable difference is the physical portrayal of the protagonist. Madhavikutty's Subhadra is described as a dark-skinned, chubby girl, whereas Lenin Rajendran's Bhadra is presented as conventionally beautiful. Thus, the film introduces substantial changes to the protagonist's appearance.

Although the title of the story is *Nashtapetta Neelambari*, the Neelambari raga does not occupy a dominant place in the narrative. The raga serves mainly as the connection between Dr. Subhadra and her music teacher and lover, Ramanuja Shastri. However, readers do not experience its emotional intensity to a great extent while reading the story. In contrast, *Mazha* places significant emphasis on the Neelambari raga and its musical compositions. The film integrates music deeply into its narrative, making it an important element of the viewing experience. In this sense, *Mazha* can also be regarded as a musical treat for its audience.

In *Nashtapetta Neelambari*, the interactions between Ramanuja Shastri and Subhadra are limited. There are very few conversations between them, and they never openly confess their feelings for one another. The only scene that strongly suggests their mutual affection occurs when Subhadra nearly drowns and Shastri risks his life to save her. Through this incident, Madhavikutty subtly conveys their love without relying on dialogue.

In the film, Lenin Rajendran replaces this scene with an emotionally charged moment in which Ramanuja Shastri embraces Bhadra when she becomes frightened by a flock of pigeons. Through their expressions, gestures, and shared gaze, the audience is made aware of the deep affection between them. The performances of Samyuktha Varma and Biju Menon further enhance the realism of their romantic relationship.

Another major addition to the film is the flashback story of Ramanuja Shastri as a failed singer. This subplot is entirely absent from the original story and is a creative invention of Lenin Rajendran. Nevertheless, it adds emotional depth to the relationship between Bhadra and Shastri. By sharing his personal disappointments with her, Shastri's bond with Bhadra appears more intimate and believable. Such exchanges reflect the way individuals often share their deepest sorrows with those they love.

An important character in the short story is Njanam, Subhadra's best friend and Shastri's cousin, who is secretly in love with him. Madhavikutty portrays Njanam as an insecure and jealous young woman. She frequently mocks Subhadra's physical appearance and belittles her musical abilities. Although Subhadra is a talented singer, Njanam insists that she cannot sing well because she is not a vegetarian. Influenced by these remarks, Subhadra eventually becomes a vegetarian. In the film, however, this influence comes not from Njanam but from Ramanuja Shastri himself.

As mentioned earlier, there are no direct confessions of love between Subhadra and Shastri in the story. In *Mazha*, however, their feelings are openly expressed. The film also portrays Bhadra's struggle against her parents in pursuit of her love for Shastri. It is her father who first realizes the depth of her feelings. Furthermore, the film introduces conversations between Bhadra's father and Valiya Shastrikal, Njanam's father, who work together to separate the lovers. Eventually, they succeed.

In the short story, Subhadra returns to Shivapuram to attend the wedding of Njanam and Shastri. Njanam is fully aware of the love between Subhadra and Shastri and deliberately attempts to make Subhadra jealous by exaggerating stories about her married life. Lenin Rajendran omits this episode from the film, perhaps considering it unnecessary to the narrative.

Another significant difference is that, in the film, once Bhadra leaves Madurai, she does not return until the climax. This departure and prolonged absence create a stronger sense of separation and longing, thereby intensifying the emotional impact of the narrative.

Differences in the Portrayal of *Nashtapetta Neelambari* and *Mazha*

The central character of Madhavikutty's *Nashtapetta Neelambari* is Dr. Subhadra, whereas Lenin Rajendran renames her Bhadra in *Mazha*. The short story begins with Dr. Subhadra returning to Madurai in search of a lost past, creating an air of mystery. In contrast, the film introduces Bhadra as a lively and carefree teenager, providing a conventional narrative beginning. Rajendran also significantly expands the role of Valiya Shastrikal, a minor character in the story, giving him emotional depth and dramatic significance.

Physical characterization differs as well. Madhavikutty portrays Subhadra as a dark-skinned, plump girl, while the film presents Bhadra as conventionally beautiful. These alterations reshape the audience's perception of the protagonist.

Although the story is titled *Nashtapetta Neelambari*, the Neelambari raga itself receives limited emphasis. In *Mazha*, however, music becomes central to the narrative. Rajendran enriches the emotional connection between Bhadra and Ramanuja Sastri through songs and musical sequences, turning the film into a musical experience.

The romantic relationship between Subhadra and Sastri is also expanded in the film. In the story, their affection remains largely unspoken, conveyed subtly through Sastri rescuing Subhadra from drowning. In *Mazha*, Rajendran replaces this scene with more expressive moments, including a memorable embrace that visually communicates their love. The film further adds Sastri's backstory as a failed singer, a creative addition absent from the original text, which deepens their emotional bond.

Another important change involves Njanam. In the story, she is portrayed as jealous of Subhadra and often mocks her appearance and singing ability. The film reduces these aspects and instead shows Sastri influencing Bhadra's decision to become a vegetarian. Likewise, the film introduces explicit declarations of love and parental opposition, whereas the story relies on subtle emotional tension. Njanam's attempts to provoke Subhadra through stories of her married life with Sastri are omitted, reflecting Rajendran's selective adaptation of the source material.

The portrayal of Chandrasekhara Menon also differs significantly. In the story, he is depicted as a stingy and frustrated husband who suffers from Subhadra's emotional distance. In the film, Chandran becomes a possessive and suspicious husband whose jealousy borders on psychological abuse. His character evokes sympathy only near his death, when he realizes his mistakes. Unlike Madhavikutty's Subhadra, who remains emotionally attached to Sastri and largely indifferent to her husband, Rajendran's Bhadra is presented as a more sympathetic figure trapped in an unhappy marriage.

Rajendran further introduces new characters, including a senior doctor and his daughter, who do not appear in the story. These characters provide emotional support to Bhadra and highlight her psychological struggles.

The endings of the story and film reveal the most significant divergence. In *Nashtapetta Neelambari*, Subhadra reunites with Sastri after her husband's death, only to be rejected. Their love is finally confessed, but circumstances prevent their union. The pale moon she sees symbolizes the loss of her dreams and the unattainability of her "Neelambari."

In *Mazha*, Bhadra initially learns that Sastri is dead, only to discover later that he is alive. Njanam has become mentally unstable, and Sastri, suffering from throat cancer, can no longer sing. Their reunion is therefore marked by loss and resignation. The film concludes with Bhadra sitting by the riverside, reflecting on a love that can never be fulfilled and a Neelambari she can never hear again.

These differences demonstrate how Rajendran transformed a subtle and introspective short story into a visually rich and emotionally expansive cinematic narrative. While the film retains the core themes of love, loss, and memory, it significantly reinterprets characters, events, and emotional dynamics, raising important questions about whether intersemiotic translation preserves or alters the essence of the original work.

A major difference between the story and the film lies in the motivations of the protagonist. In *Nashtapetta Neelambari*, Subhadra returns hoping to reunite with Ramanuja Sastri and build a life with him. In *Mazha*, however, Bhadra's desire is more restrained; she merely wishes to hear Sastri sing the Neelambari raga once again. This distinction reveals a significant difference between Madhavikutty's Subhadra and Lenin Rajendran's Bhadra. Unlike Subhadra, who remains emotionally detached from her husband, Bhadra is portrayed as a woman who genuinely cared for her spouse. Consequently, the reasons for their return to Madurai are fundamentally different.

In conclusion, Lenin Rajendran reshaped Bhadra into a character more acceptable to the Malayalam film audience. Had he retained all the traits of Madhavikutty's Subhadra, the character may not have received the same level of acceptance. The film presents Bhadra as both sympathetic and morally relatable, while also portraying her husband as more possessive and antagonistic, thereby justifying her emotional conflict. Rajendran's adaptation follows a clear chronological narrative, making the story more accessible than the non-linear structure of the original text.

Although the director introduced several new characters, scenes, and subplots, these additions do not diminish the essence of the original story. Instead, they enrich the narrative and provide greater emotional depth. Music, particularly the Neelambari raga, becomes a central motif in the film, giving greater significance to the title itself. Rajendran also employs rain as a recurring symbol of love, longing, and memory. The performances of the actors further strengthened the adaptation, with Samyuktha Varma winning the Kerala State Film Award for Best Actress and Yusuf Ali Kechery receiving the National Award for Best Lyrics.

As a creative medium, cinema inevitably reinterprets literary texts according to its own aesthetic and narrative requirements. *Mazha* demonstrates how an intersemiotic translation can successfully transform a short story without compromising its emotional core. This case study suggests that

intersemiotic translations do not necessarily destroy the essence of the original work; rather, they can reinterpret, expand, and even enhance it for a new audience and medium.

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