

Transcreating *Lal Shalu*: Tanvir Mokammel’s Intersemiotic Translation of Syed Waliullah’s *Lal Shalu*

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Abstract

Roman Jakobson classifies film adaptation as an “Intersemiotic Translation” (qtd. in Munday 5) and Andre Lefevere sees every translation as “potentially the most influential form of rewriting” (qtd. in Munday 142). Both of the ideas open up a space to think about the relocation of language from the source text to the rewritten text and layers of transformation from the text to screen in case of making any film based on a literary text. In *Speaking of Films*, Satyajit Ray opines: “Just as a writer has words at his disposal, a film-maker has image and sound that make up the language of cinema” (28). Tanvir Mokammel’s film *Lal Shalu* draws attention significantly as an intersemiotic translation of Syed Waliullah’s *Lal Shalu* with all its changes and manifestations in cinematic language. There is no specific way of determining how much liberty one filmmaker can enjoy in converting the language of the source text into that of the target text, and it leads to creating room to rethink the parallelism between the language of the source text and the presentation of the “translated text” through image and sound. This paper aims at exploring how transformation takes place in Tanvir Mokammel’s *Lal Shalu* and its appropriateness as an intersemiotic cinematographic translation.

Keywords: translation, transcreation, film, intersemiotic, *Lal Shalu*

In the film *Lal Shalu*, Tanvir Mokammel presents the story of Syed Waliullah’s *Lal Shalu* with an effort to preserve the original intent, background, sentiment, and tone but as an intersemiotic translation, *Lal Shalu* addresses deviation, addition, and subtraction of the content. Apart from the translation within the same language and between two particular languages, Roman Jakobson describes intersemiotic translation as “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (233). On theoretical grounds, the conversion of literary texts into film, music, paintings, or other art forms finds its place in this category and essentially creates room to rethink and reassess the changes taking place in the translated text.

Intersemiotic translation always appears with a gap between two or more semiotic codes or between linguistic text-signs and nonlinguistic codes. While making a film based on a literary text, the translator, in fact, transforms the code from the book to the screen or from the book to the stage. The process of translation remains mysterious as there is no accepted layout of measuring the loyalty and faithfulness of the screenwriter or the director toward the source text. Every intersemiotic translation appears with the translator’s crafty transformation of a particular cultural system in their translated text and eventually, it



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becomes really improper to speak of the perfection of such a text. Octavio Paz says:

Every text is unique and, at the same time, it is the translation of another text. No text is entirely original because language itself, in its essence, is already a translation: firstly, of the nonverbal world and secondly, since every sign and every phrase is the translation of another sign and another phrase. (qtd. in Bassnett 44)

Translation is, in fact, a process that directly relates to a certain political as well as cultural context which is impactful in all respects of the transformation. Campbell and Vidal opine that “in literary translation, a text is translated into another text using purely verbal means” (xxvi). This process considers “intra-semiotic” as it remains in the verbal domain within the system of signs and meaning we call language (qtd. in Campbell and Vidal xxvi). They also add that “intersemiotic translation provides an interactive, participative platform with the potential to engage individuals and communities in connecting with cultures different from their own” (xxvi).

Torop theorizes “intersemiotic translation” as “total translation.” He says: “Co-existence of the verbal and the visual and non-coincidence of their border and the border between the verbal and iconic ... points to the productivity of a semiotic approach both in textology and in the analysis of texts of culture” (280). Torop sees intersemiotic translation as nothing but the study of cultural communication. Thus, placing cultural set-up in the translated text becomes one of the most challenging tasks for an intersemiotic translator.

Long ago, Dolet set out five principles, one of which is: “The translator should assemble and liaise words eloquently to avoid clumsiness” (qtd. in Munday 26). In the same way, Tytler says: “The translation should have all the ease of the original composition” (qtd. in Munday 26). When a text is translated, the translated text becomes a complete creation with an autonomous sense. Things are more striking in the case of intersemiotic translation in such a way that the texts cannot remain interchangeable at all.

All the narratives of a literary text cannot be translated into film and therefore, an intersemiotic translator has to advance with a series of alternative narrations to reach the audience. *Tree Without Roots* begins thus:

There are too many of them on this land, this piece of raped and ravaged land which yields no more. They know it, but what can they do? Every inch of it is ploughed and sown. Three times a year for rice, to make three harvests out of it. Then for jute, the only cash crop, and for a host of other things: sugarcane, linseed, mustard, rape and sesame. The land is ploughed and reploughed, sown and resown all the year round, every season, every day from sunrise to sunset. It has no rest, no peace, and, what is worse, no nourishment, at least not from these ravenous ones who suck it dry. (Waliullah 3)

This is the description of a particular area along with the unending struggle of its inhabitants. Now, this narration seems untranslatable due to its inclusion of a lot of subject matters within just a few statements. But careful observation reveals loads of images in the narrative and they are, in fact, the focal issues for a director. Satyajit Ray, in his *Speaking of Films*, writes:

An image here is not just a picture. It is a picture that speaks. In other words, the picture does not begin and end in itself, the way a painting does. What matters chiefly here is the meaning of that image. Every image is like a whole sentence, and the sum total of all the images is the final message of a film. Even in the silent era, images carried meanings. Their language was not dependent on dialogue. (30)

Tree Without Roots (1967) appeared as a transcreation by Syed Waliullah himself with some noteworthy changes to *Lal Shalu* (1948), his source text, and thus, the text went beyond common trends of bilingual translation. Deviation, subtraction, and addition take place in *Tree Without Roots* in such a way that the changes of characters, episodes, and incidents become one of the most significant issues in any discussion around the rewriting of *Lal Shalu*. In 2001, Tanvir Mokammel made a film based on Syed Waliullah's *Lal Shalu* and decided to transcreate the language on the screen by placing the story with cinematographic effect of images and sound.

Lal Shalu is centered around Majeed, a very intelligent poor man with great potential, who possesses a strong will to get settled in life. He did not want to live permanently in his birthplace where he grew up as “there are too many of them, too many mouths to feed and not enough land” (Waliullah, *Tree Without Roots* 3). A good number of young men learn about religion in the maktabas (Islamic elementary schools), but this learning does not come to practical use and therefore, they go out in search of better work opportunities. Majeed manages the job of the muezzin of a mosque in the Garo Hills, but he does not feel any sense of contentment in this hard and challenging life. His wit, unique perceptions, and cunning make him reach Mahabbatnagar, a remote village in the then Pakistan. The village was renamed as Mahabbatpur in *Tree Without Roots*, the English translation of *Lal Shalu*, but Mokammel retains the name “Mahabbatnagar” in his audio-visual translation due to his loyalty to the source text.

One of the major changes between the source text and visual representation takes place at the very beginning of the film. The source text starts with the background story of Majeed's arrival in Mahabbatnagar whereas Mokammel's intersemiotic translation avoids informing the audience about Majeed's back story at the opening. It is revealed later through a flashback. Such implication becomes a cinematographic necessity to create a sense of suspense around Majeed in the film.

From the viewpoint of Sergei Eisenstein, a filmmaker may take the source text completely or partially or he may stick to his commercial purpose only while making a film based on a novel (qtd. in Awwal 58). In this case, the source text centers on a social system and its multidimensional manifestations on the basis of religion, ideology, imperialism, customary practices, values, ideas on tradition and culture, roles of different kinds of institutions, and so on. The text shows that the “mazar” or tomb emerges as one of the most powerful institutions and establishes its influence even on the production system of this particular region. Majeed establishes himself and becomes the most influential figure of Mahabbatnagar, using, as capital, the customs and practices developed around the concept of the “mazar.” *Lal Shalu* is, in fact, a profound study of a societal system along

with its prevailing customs and cultural traits. The film *Lal Shalu* also remained faithful to the exposure of these issues and the subject matter of the novel.

The setting of the film echoes that of the novel with a village beset with socio-cultural and socio-economic strata. In drawing the picture of a village of 1948, Mokammel hones in on the signs and symbols used in the novel to recreate it with a sense of universality which makes the film contemporary. The *kharam* or shoes Majeed wears, the *surmadani* Majeed and Jamila use, Akkas's request for four or eight *anna* subscription for founding a school, Majeed's call for donating five *paisa*, the donation box of the mazar indicating the Bangla year 1354, for instance, clearly indicate the time period of the source text. Besides, the use of the Urdu language by the assistants of the Pir of Awalpur reminds the audience about the rule of the then Pakistan.

In the novel as well as in the film, Majeed legalizes his activities by using the "mazar" and "patrimonialism" simultaneously. He uses the local judiciary system along with influential and God-fearing people of the village to continue his personal control over every important issue of Mahabbatnagar. Majeed is very aware of his strategies in taking over Mahabbatnagar using religious fervor. In the film, he becomes anxious on hearing the harvest song of the villagers, stops baul songs, controls Rahima's usual daily activities, raises his voice against Jamila's make-up, and thus he establishes his ideals. Such activities of Majeed bridge the gap between the novel and the film in terms of thematic and cultural interpretation of *Lal Shalu*.

As an intersemiotic translator, Tanvir Mokammel uses the technique of "jump cuts" frequently and repetitively to control the time and space of the source text. In the mazar, Majeed mentions the divorce of Khaleque Bepari's wife and in the very next scene the audience notices her going back to her father's house, bag and baggage. But in the source text, it happens three days after Majeed's suggestion. Similarly, the audience sees Majeed first in the streets of Matiganj and finds him cleaning the jungle at Mahabbatnagar in the next shot. Staying at Khaleque Bepari's house, Majeed opines that he wants Amena Bibi to drink holy water and do some rituals at the mazar but within this conversation, the shot jumps into the action of the activities. Another jump cut takes place around the fight between the followers of two Pirs. The filmmaker omits the scenes centering on the hospital, doctor, and compounder that existed in the source text. He even avoids creating a sequence of Majeed's visit to the hospital. In fact, he has to remain very conscious about keeping the totality of the text within his time-frame in the film and, for doing so, he decided to delete the details. But such jumps do not deviate the filmmaker from establishing the theme of how influential mazar culture and pirontro (pir-culture) are in the society. According to Islam,

His (Majeed) domination was inexorably linked up with the process of Islamization within the framework of little tradition. Majeed was also possibly accepted by the rich peasants who could complete their upward social mobility through this process. Both Majeed and the village-chief (Khaleque Bepari) were partners in the dissemination of Islamic culture. (86)

As institutions, mazar culture and pirontro jointly work in retaining baseless old traditions as well as determining power in Mahabbatnagar. In another scene, Kahlelque Bepari inspires Majeed to marry and, in the next scene, the audience finds Rahima riding on a *palki* as the wife of Majeed. In another sequence, Amena Bibi returning to her father's house (after her divorce) and Jamila entering Mahabbatnagar take place simultaneously. Mokammel brings about all such changes on the grounds of cinematographic necessity in terms of image, sound, and a fixed amount of time.

Jamila, Majeed's second wife, is the only character in the novel who is able to make Majeed afraid as well as anxious about his own stance. When Jamila enters Majeed's house, she starts losing herself and falls victim to a crisis amidst a series of prohibitions. As an obvious outcome, she reacts with all the power inherent in her personality. In his transcreation, Mokammel uses perfect sound construction in creating this effect in the scene of Jamila's rage and her spitting on Majeed's face.

The images used in the film perfectly blend the contemporary culture, the theme of the source text, and symbolic interpretation. When Majeed goes inside the house after tying Jamila up in the mazar, ants are shown to scurry away. This symbolic scene follows the storm scene, leading to the only "freeze shot" of the last scene where Jamila is found dead or unconscious, but her feet are touching the "lal shalu" or red cover on the mazar. Notably, the source text includes something more: Jamila is brought back home, and Majeed goes out again to stand alone in the midst of the ruins, his eyes reflecting determination. In *Tree Without Roots*, Walliullah has Majeed decide to return to his own home, leaving Rahima and Jamila behind in Mahabbatnagar. It ends with: "He had to get back, with a firm, quick stride, he started on his way" (156) but the film, in contrast, remains open-ended creating a thought-provoking window for the audience.

Schleimacher considers translating scholarly and artistic texts as "being on a higher creative plane, breathing new life into the language" (qtd. in Munday 27). He says:

Although it may seem impossible to translate scholarly and artistic texts – since the ST meaning is couched in language that is very culture-bound and to which the TL can never fully correspond – the real question is how to bring the ST writer and the TT reader together. (qtd. in Munday 27)

Unlike Satyajit Ray's *Ganashatru*, where he alters Henrik Ibsen's theme completely, Mokammel upholds the theme of Walliullah's *Lal Shalu*, keeping it almost intact. His language in the film has been transcreated on the basis of an essential transformation from one medium to another though he has brought about a few changes, including the addition of a completely new character in his film.

Mokammel follows non-narrative style of storytelling with the frequent use of jump cuts, flashbacks, and flash forward, consciously ignoring the sequential order of the narrative formula. He uses the language of the film in his own way, adopting a vertical technique, not pyramidal or horizontal structures. Therefore, the film loses continuity in scene construction and changeovers. Every scene appears with a certain message and ends successfully. No

third scene builds up as an essential result of the clash between the previous two scenes. In the exposition of the film, the audience comes across the fishing scene of Taher and Kader. In the very next scene, Majeed is found discovering the grave. These are two completely different scenes but look parallel on the grounds of Majeed's expedition of hunting human beings instead of fishes.

In line with the source text, Mokammel's *Lal Shalu* represents the abuse and misuse of religion and shows how it gives birth to fear and anxiety through a number of customs and patriarchal practices. Jamila becomes worried and anxious when experiencing mazar culture, Hasuni's mother cannot trust marriage as an institution anymore, and every step that Rahima takes is dictated. Thus, the marriage system itself turns out to be a source of terror as Rahima, Taher's mother, Hasuni's mother, Amena, and Jamila never marry but rather are married off.

The filmmaker uses humor in the text not only to entertain the audience but also to advance the major theme of the plot. These humorous scenes include the incidents around the simultaneous circumcision of the father and the son, the satiric smile of the fakir, Jamila's statement of Majeed's not having ablution before going to the mazar, etc. Apart from these textual scenes, Mokammel adds a completely new but symbolic humor to the film: Majeed throws money to his newly arrived follower from Feni and instantly, this man stops fanning the grave and fans Majeed instead. When this follower asks Majeed, "Whose grave is it? Aren't you afraid of God?" (*Lal Shalu* 00:21:12), the audience, for the first time, finds Majeed unsettled and afraid. This additional character, who is absent from the text, becomes, thus, Majeed's conscience, a kind of extension of his self.

As an intersemiotic translator, Mokammel leaves his final message using symbolic images, the center of any cinematographic creation. At the end of the film, the revolt of Jamila and that of nature itself become the response to all the inhuman activities Majeed has done so far. The source text highlights the issue of resistance immensely and Mokammel sticks to this theme without new interpretations. By highlighting the character of Jamila and ending with Jamila's revolt, the film *Lal Shalu* also becomes a film of resistance.

Andre Lefevere claims that "the same basic process of rewriting is at work in translation" (qtd. in Munday 127). The film *Lal Shalu* is a rewritten version and to the novelist as well as the filmmaker, the text appears as the art of resistance in the guise of all the issues highlighted in the source text as well as in the intersemiotic translation. Waliullah's resolution in *Lal Shalu* includes nature for punishing Majeed but in his *Tree Without Roots*, he discards the supernatural ending. Taking the liberty as an intersemiotic translator, Tanvir Mokammel does not come up with any resolution; rather he creates an open floor for the audience bringing about an ending of his own.

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