

Repetition without Replication: A Study of *The White Tiger* through Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation

Umema S Dahodwala,¹

Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Avinashi Rd, PSG CAS, Civil Aerodrome Post, Coimbatore- 14, Tamil Nadu, India

Rajkumar P.²

Department of English, PSG College of Arts & Science, Avinashi Rd, PSG CAS, Civil Aerodrome Post, Coimbatore- 14, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

This article examines the Netflix film adaptation of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* through Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, particularly her concept of "repetition without replication." Moving away from fidelity-based criticism, the study views adaptation as a creative and interpretive process shaped by medium, audience, and cultural context. The article analyses the narrative structure and thematic concerns of both the novel and the film adaptation to understand how the story is reimagined in cinematic form. It argues that while the film retains the thematic essence of the novel, it transforms narrative strategies to suit visual storytelling and a global streaming audience, thereby functioning as an independent cultural text.

Keywords: Adaptation Studies, Linda Hutcheon, Narrative Structure, Class Inequality, Netflix.

Introduction

Adaptation from literature to film has traditionally been evaluated in terms of faithfulness to the original text. Such approaches often assume that the literary text is superior and that the film is a secondary representation. Linda Hutcheon challenges this hierarchy by arguing that adaptation should be understood as reinterpretation rather than imitation. Her concept of "repetition without replication" highlights how adaptations repeat core ideas while transforming their narrative form.

Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* offers a sharp critique of class inequality, ambition, and moral ambiguity in contemporary India. Its adaptation into a Netflix film provides a valuable opportunity to study how a literary narrative is reshaped for a visual medium and a global audience. This article applies Hutcheon's theory to examine how narrative structure and thematic concerns are reconfigured in the adaptation.

Theoretical Framework: Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation

Linda Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, defines adaptation as a process of reinterpretation and re-creation. She argues that adaptations are autonomous works that exist in dialogue with earlier texts rather than as inferior copies. According to Hutcheon, adaptation involves "repetition without replication," meaning that while the story may be recognisable, its mode of telling changes according to medium and context.

Hutcheon emphasises medium specificity as a key factor in adaptation. Novels rely on language, narration, and interior thought, whereas films communicate meaning through image, sound, and performance. Audience reception and cultural context also shape how stories are adapted. This framework allows the Netflix adaptation

of *The White Tiger* to be analysed as a legitimate cultural product shaped by cinematic form and global circulation.

Narrative Structure of the Novel

The novel *The White Tiger* is structured as an epistolary narrative addressed to the Chinese Premier, Wen Jiabao. The story unfolds through the first-person narration of Balram Halwai, whose voice dominates the text. This narrative structure allows Balram to recount his life story while simultaneously offering commentary on Indian society, class oppression, and political corruption.

The novel relies heavily on interior monologue and retrospective reflection. Events are filtered through Balram's consciousness, giving readers direct access to his psychological transformation and moral reasoning. This narrative strategy creates intimacy and foregrounds subjectivity, making the narrator both confessional and unreliable. Through this structure, the novel presents social critique as a personal narrative shaped by memory and justification.

Narrative Structure of the Film Adaptation

The Netflix adaptation restructures the narrative to align with cinematic storytelling. While the film retains elements of voice-over narration, it significantly reduces dependence on verbal explanation. Narrative meaning is instead distributed across visual composition, performance, pacing, and editing. The story progresses through action and visual sequencing rather than extended reflection.

The epistolary framing functions mainly as a narrative device rather than a dominant structure. Narrative authority is shared between voice-over and visual storytelling, reflecting the film medium's preference for showing rather than telling. In Hutcheon's terms, this narrative restructuring illustrates how adaptation reshapes storytelling techniques in response to medium-specific demands.

Thematic Concerns of the Novel

The novel foregrounds themes of class inequality, social immobility, and systemic oppression in post-liberalisation India. The metaphor of the "Rooster Coop" encapsulates how the poor are psychologically conditioned to accept exploitation. Fear, loyalty, and social conditioning operate as invisible mechanisms that sustain hierarchy.

Another central theme is moral ambiguity. Balram's pursuit of freedom is accompanied by ethical compromise, raising questions about whether social mobility within an unjust system can be achieved without transgression. Satire and irony further strengthen the novel's critique of political corruption, economic disparity, and social hypocrisy.

Thematic Concerns of the Film Adaptation

The film adaptation retains the core thematic concerns of class disparity and ambition but reframes them through visual narration. Inequality is expressed through spatial contrasts, material conditions, and bodily positioning rather than internal reflection. The film emphasises visibility and immediacy, allowing themes to emerge through image and atmosphere.

Moral ambiguity remains central, though it is expressed through action and consequence rather than prolonged justification. The adaptation highlights survival and resistance as dominant themes, aligning its interpretation with the expectations of a global audience. This thematic transformation exemplifies Hutcheon's idea of "repetition without replication," where thematic essence is preserved while narrative expression changes.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation provides a productive framework for analysing *The White Tiger* as a novel-to-film adaptation. By moving beyond fidelity-based criticism, the Netflix film can be understood as an independent cultural text that reinterprets the novel's narrative and themes within a cinematic and global context. The transformation of narrative structure and thematic expression illustrates adaptation as a creative process shaped by medium, audience, and cultural circulation. Through "repetition without replication," the adaptation preserves the novel's critical vision while reimagining its storytelling form.

Works Cited

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