

## CINEMATIC ADAPTATION AS TRANSLATION: A DISCOURSE ON ISSUES OF FIDELITY AND SUB-GENRE OF CINEMA

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**Abstract:** This paper would try to establish cinematic adaptation as an extended form of translation with the films based on Indian literature. Complying with the words of Patrick Cattrysse, “there seems to be no valuable argument to keep reducing the concept of translation to mere cross-linguistic transfer processes. The scope has to be extended to a contextualistic semiotic perspective”, this paper attempts to highlight the semantics, cultural transfer, transfer of metaphors, and other common transformational processes of translation and cinematic adaptation of literary works.

The first part of the paper examines the similarities and differences between translation and cinematic adaptation. While, the second part of the paper is focused on the movies, which have drawn inspiration from scriptures and literary works, particularly, related to Indian subcontinent. The latter part of the paper evaluates fidelity issues in Mira Nair’s cinematic adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake*. This part also examines the relevance of the moralist discourse on ‘fidelity to the original work’, as well as, it tries to endorse cinematic adaptation as a sub-genre of cinema that shares aesthetic features with translation.

**Keywords:** Cinematic Adaptation, Translation, Aesthetics, Fidelity, Indian Literature.

### INTRODUCTION

In the West, cinema was the single most popular form of entertainment in the first half of the twentieth century. It was a wonderful means to break away from the Depression and the troubles of the war. The magic continued in the post-War period, and prior to the television age, movies were a great way of inexpensive amusement. Weekend morning shows and matinees became a ritual for a generation of children. This fashionable source of entertainment reinvented itself in the form of modern multiplex cinema, but not before experiencing a period in the doldrums.

It is noteworthy that since its initiation, cinema has been borrowing freely from literature that subsequently initiated the discourse on the relationship between the two. “Nearly all of the classic works”, asserts William V Constanzo in his book *Reading the Movies*, “students study in high school have been adapted for film, some several times in several different eras. But turning a novel into a screenplay is not just a matter of pulling dialogue from the pages of a book.” (Constanzo, 1992) This probably is the reason that cinema finds itself spanning the entertainment/art divergence that has often divided popular cultural forms from their more fortunate and established counterparts, *i.e.*, the literary works. Analysis of films as a serious

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cultural activity paved the path of film studies as an academic discipline, which has worked hard to situate itself on the “right” side of the divide, and it is only recently that sincere efforts to explore its value and its aesthetics are attempted by scholars.

Wikipedia defines Cinematic adaptation as “the transfer of a written work, in whole or in part, to a feature film commonly understood as a derivative work”. More often than not, novels are used as a basis of a feature film; though miscellaneous resources like plays, historical and journalistic works as well as comic books have also been tried successfully. In India, almost every veteran filmmaker has attempted making memorable films that were inspired / adapted from novels. Beginning as early as 1937 with first indigenously made Hindi feature film *Kisan Kanya*, based on a novel by Saadat Hasan Manto, this trend is on, as evident in the 2009 bollywood hit *Three Idiots* based on Chetan Bhagat’s bestselling novel *Five Point Someone*. In this context, a few other worth mentioning adaptations are – the all-time favorite film *Guide* based on R K Narayan’s critically acclaimed novel by the same name, Satyajit Ray’s landmark movies of the 50s, the *Apu Trilogy* based on Bengali Novels by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay and his masterpiece *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* adapted by Munshi Premchand’s book by the same name, 2004 movie, *Pinjar* based on the Punjabi novel of the same name written by Amrita Pritam, Ruskin Bond’s novella *A Flight of Pigeons* made into critically acclaimed movie *Junoon* by Shyam Benegal in 1978, Deepa Mehta’s acclaimed novel *1947: Earth* based on Bapsi Sidhwa’s novel, Cracking India, *Ek Chadar Maili Si*, an adaptation of Rajinder Singh Bedi’s Sahitya Akademi Award winning Urdu novella of the same name, and the several versions of *Devdas* based on Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyaya’s Bengali novel *Devdas*. Then, there are movie adaptations of English novels like 1994 Dev Benegal film *English August* based on Upamanyu Chatterjee’s novel of the same name, 2006 Mira Nair Film *The Namesake* based on the novel by Jhumpa Lahiri, and, 2010 Apanra Sen’s film *The Japanese Wife* based on Kunal Basu’s novel.

It isn’t difficult to comprehend the liaison between novel and film in the Indian context. Novels are perceived to be an easy way out for filmmakers to generate a mass following and mint money, yet to present it artistically is not a humble task. Things alter when it comes to visually portraying the described subject. Narration is no more through words but through living characters. What changes when the novel is being compressed into a three-hour long film is the sensitivity of the audience. They need not imagine things; they can see it on screen. However, restricted hours fall short to give the details that the novel entails. There lies the danger of cluttering the spirit of the story by compressing it to fit in the limited duration, eventually which is why adaptations lead to poor box office results many a time. Many adaptations turn out to be disappointments at the Box Office, whereas, the novel stays a prized possession for the readers.

In these cases, adaptation is a form of criticism and recreation, as well as translation. Shoma Chatterji points out this tension in her article as:

“All problems linked to the two mediums of cinema and literature mainly spring from the common belief that cinema ought to be a celluloid translation of the literary source it is based on and that no permutations and combinations through the directors personal creative inputs should be used. There is a difference between translating a literary piece of work from two dimensional media of the printed word to the three- dimensional media of cinema and adapting a literary work for cinema” (Chatterji, 2009)

Alteration in adaptation is crucial and virtually inevitable, commanded both by the constraints of time and medium. Since a transcription of a novel into film is impossible, even holding up a goal of ‘accuracy’ is absurd. Some film theorists argue that a director should be entirely unconcerned with the source, as novel and film are entirely separate genres, and the two must be seen as separate entities. Others argue that what a film adaptation does is modify to fit, adapt, in other words, and the film must be precise to either the aesthetics or to the theme or the message of the novel and that the film maker must revise to make it meet the demands of time and to maximize proximity.

Astonishingly, movies inspired from literary works are still largely estimated in terms of fidelity to the originals which are professed to be revered. Thomas Leitch in his review article “Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads” interestingly remarks how film adaptations are not only seen as ‘hybrid texts’ but also as texts holding “dual citizenship in two modes of presentation.” (Leitch, *Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads*). He mentions that they are assumed to be studied in the context of literature as it is cinema’s natural progenitor. He adds “It is as if adaptation studies, by borrowing the cultural cachet of literature, sought to claim its institutional respectability and gravitas even while insuring adaptation’s enduring aesthetic and methodological subordination to literature proper.” (Leitch, *Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads*). Filmmakers’ innovative *modus operandi* receives scant attention, and no goals or aesthetic measures have been set for film adaptation. The dispute stands basically on false notions of the objectives of film adaptation and on a misconstruction of the adaptation process. In fact, few scholars and critics have attempted to determine the criteria used to label an accomplished adaptation.

Andrea Reisenauer cites the instance of author David Mitchell as he commented on the complex structure of his novel and its implications for film adaptation. He states “Adaptation is a form of translation, and all acts of translation have to deal with untranslatable spots” (In a 2012 interview in *The Wall Street Journal* regarding the film adaptation of his novel *Cloud Atlas*). Translation Studies originated from the field of linguistics, whereas, Adaptation Studies originated from the fields of Literary Studies and Film Studies, and is struggling to defend its status as a discipline in its

own rights. During the late 50s scholar George Bluestone published his influential book *Novels into Film* 1957, often cited as the “founding text” of Adaptation Studies (Cattrysse, 2014: 27). With the growing academic interest, it became less about condemning adaptations as inferior works and more about appreciating the relationship between a text and its adaptation. Unlike Translations Studies, however, the development was not theoretical and methodological. Adaptation Studies scholar Patrick Cattrysse states that “adaptation studies as a discipline has had and still has to struggle for acceptance in the academic world” (Cattrysse, 2014: 27-28). Being the older art form, literature enjoys the central and lofty position over the modern art of cinema, and adaptation is viewed as a relatively modern and non-serious product of popular culture lacking originality, hence, peripheral. Cattrysse further analyses the similarities between the two forms and concludes that both translations and adaptations undergo a one-directional, irreversible process and have “context-based creators, actions, end products, users, and recipients.”

He adds that both are applied upon speech or texts and produce utterances or texts, and are therefore considered intra / inter- textual or intra / inter-semiotic. Correspondence and fidelity are common concepts that can be applied to both processes. According to Cattrysse, the notion of fidelity is associated with the “widespread but erroneous belief that the translation process would be more faithful to the source text than the adaptation process” (Cattrysse, 2014: 47- 49). His outlook is shared by Cynthia Tsui, who states that “Adaptation and translation, in fact, share a similar set of debates: these include fidelity vs. creativity, author vs. adaptor/translator; and adaptation or translation practices such as the interpretation, contextualization, and transformation of meaning” (Tsui, 2012: 55). Ironically, given that adaptations imply the existence of primary texts, it falls prey to a moralist discourse in search of fidelity of the movie to the original work. As a result, the adaptation process is often considered a lower form of creation which cannot escape what slow degradation of an original work. An adaptation is hardly evaluated in terms of aesthetic creativity and originality. It performs a significant function as it not only replicates a primary text but also ensures the afterlife of the original and the dissemination of cultural elements contained in it.

It becomes imperative to comprehend the concept as well as the misconceptions regarding translation before exploring its relation / comparison with adaptation. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, it is the transmission of what is expressed in one language or set of symbols into another language or set of symbols. Simply, translation is an activity involving the interpretation of the meaning of a source text in one language, and the production of a new, “equivalent” target text / translation in another language. It is a wrong assumption that translation is like cryptography to some extent and a definite one-to-one correspondence exists between the words and phrases in different languages which makes it rigid, like cryptography. Therefore, the belief that the only thing needed to decode a given text

is a translation dictionary, is erroneous, too. Linguists acknowledge the limitations of the translated words. They feel that translated words shed previous associations and cannot carry exactly the shades of meaning as the original, and that they do not have the same scope due to their dissimilar roots. Therefore, it goes without saying that if it is a question of equivalence, flexible analytical methods are obligatory to acquire a proper translation. A simple document like a product catalog can be quickly translated using simple techniques familiar to advanced language students. But, an editorial, or a book, or the text of a speech by an eminent person, requires not only the craft of good language skills and research techniques but also the art of good writing and cultural sensitivity. To ensure communication of the same message while keeping in mind the various constraints placed on the translator, a successful translation should aim at “fidelity” and “transparency”, conforming to the grammatical, syntactic and idiomatic rules. Western traditions strongly adhere to these. However, the translators in the Indian tradition have been enjoying greater liberty as is evident in the availability of various versions of the epics. The idea that adequate translations can be as creative and artistic as their source text, is gaining impetus these days.

Another theory raises the pertinent question whether the reader can know if the translator understands the original author perfectly. While what one reads is the translator’s work, it is the author who is praised for the work; but the question is how much can a translation be considered as the author’s work? So this criticism renders translation as “legal plagiarism”. As per this analysis, it is by a series of minute changes that a translation becomes an adaptation. There is the further consideration, that practically every detail, every name used in a fictional work is chosen by the author for some reason; this could be the mere sound of the name, or it could involve some imbedded morpheme that evokes an associated sense. Therefore, since all languages have different phonologies, and different morphemes, we cannot but expect changes in a translated work.

The notion that adaptation can be considered a form of translation made an early appearance in Translation Studies in the late 1950s with the work of linguist and Translation Studies scholar Roman Jakobson. In 1959, Jakobson explained the existence of various forms of translation in his influential article “On Linguistic Aspects of Translation” which discriminated between “intralingual translation” (translation within the same language), “interlingual translation” (translation from one language into another or the reinterpretation of a message in another linguistic code), and “intersemiotic translation” (translation from one linguistic system to another between mediums, or between a verbal and nonverbal system ) (Jacobson, 1959). Film adaptation, then, according to him, would be considered an “intersemiotic translation” between two mediums. If the translation of non-literary works is regarded as a skill, the translation of fiction and poetry is more of an art. Again, in the same paper, he proclaims that “poetry by definition [was] untranslatable”.

The semiotic point-of-view determines the mode by which one text represents another. Recently, semiotics has been active in analyzing visual texts, exploring the implication of the Peircean distinction between index, icon, and symbol in visual terms, discussing the nature of representation. It has added to the structuralist model both a concern with the social status and the working of the sign, and the position and task of the spectator / reader in relation to the text. Each of the semiotic activity has its own system of meaning. Semiotics has been nurturing competing theories, giving precedence now to the social, now to the psychoanalytic, now to the descriptive. More and more studies comparing the fields of Translation Studies and Adaptation Studies and the processes of adaptation and translation have revealed many parallels like the similar transformative processes and the problematic notions of source-text fidelity. Film adaptations mean all films that present themselves as cinematic adaptations of texts originally written in another semiotic code<sup>1</sup> (typically: to be read as a novel or performed on stage as a play). Translation Studies scholars João Azenha and Marcelo Moreira reach a conclusion in their article “Translation and Rewriting: Don’t Translators “Adapt” when they “Translate”?” (2012). Translations can be considered transfers that take place across cultures, while adaptations are transfers that take place across media.

Although the notion of fidelity to the original as unique, sacred, and indisputable still troubles the translator of today, translations have been more and more seen not as products derived from the original, but as resulting from diverse readings (Bennett, 1982). From this perspective, translation is a semiotic activity, with a guaranteed right to greater freedom and creativity. In this context, intersemiotic translation consists of looking for equivalence between the systems. An element occupying a certain place in a certain sign system, performing a certain function, would be substituted, in translation, by another element, having the same function, occupying the same place, but in another sign system. The issue becomes the type of translation equivalence they reveal. When one decodes information in one language modification is necessary, even if only slight, since every semiotic system is characterized by its own qualities and restrictions, and no content exists independently of the medium that embodies it. This content cannot, for this reason, be transmitted, or translated, or transposed, independently of its semiotic system. Translation, then, is not produced in ideal laboratory setting, uncontaminated and dispassionate, but in the in-between place of various customs, cultures, and norms. Every translation is therefore a cultural translation.

Since translated text does not propose to be a replacement for the original one, there is no loss. Normally, such translation is intended for readers who are familiar with the original and have the delight of evaluating the texts as an intellectual exercise. The subtext is emphasized, often sacrificing fidelity in favor of a stylistic

equivalence. Each translator needs to find in the text what is significant for him/herself, for only there the multiple dimensions of the work of art can achieve meaning keeping the interrogation whether it evaluated for its value as a film, or for its being adapted from a certain work.

The study of adaptation as translation, a phenomenon as old as the cinema itself, did not offer any coherent method that would allow the study of film adaptation in a systematic manner until the work of Patrick Cattrysse (1992), which is based on the Polysystemic theory of translation. According to Cattrysse, film adaptation can have two kinds of functions: one that is innovative and another conservative. The adaptation has an innovative function when the stability of the film's genre is in danger, but it will have a conservative function when the genre that is being imported has a successful and stable position. The function, whether conservative or innovative, seems to determine the politics of selection as well as the mode of adapting the source-text. In all of his works, Cattrysse assured that "PS (Polysystem) theories provide some promising tools to start developing a theory of film adaptation without forcing researchers to start working from scratch" (1992: 59). In the article, he cited the descriptive, functional, target-oriented nature of the Polysystem approach and all that it entails as these promising tools.

It is also important to mention what Cattrysse refers to as a 'pioneering' congress that took place in 2008, titled 'Adaptation as Translation', sought to bring together scholars of both disciplines and led to the launching of *The Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*.

Cattrysse reminds that film adaptations are not restricted merely to one source, for example, the source, i.e., the literary work in question, as many other practices serve at the same time as models for the production process of the target, the film, at a different level. Other elements may as well serve as a translation model. For this reason, every film must be studied as a set of elements of discursive or semiotic practices, whose production is determined by other, preceding discursive practices and by the general cultural or historical context. The study of adaptation consists, then, of finding and explaining the relations between the discursive practices and their respective contexts socio-cultural, psychological, political, economic; in discovering which transfer practices have, or have not, worked as adaptation, translation, parody; and, finally, in explaining why all this has happened the way it has happened.

Translation, and by extension film adaptation is a sign, for something, at a certain moment or point in the semiotic sequence. It is no longer, as traditionally defined, the carrier, whether from one language or system to another or others. It becomes a complex procedure that involves cultures, artists, their socio-historical contexts, readers/ spectators, traditions, ideology, the experience of the past and the expectations of the future. It involves the use of conventions, of former or



contemporary techniques, of styles and genres. To translate also means to perpetuate or contest, to accept or challenge. From the same point-of-view, it involves, above all, a transcultural reading, for, translation is also acculturation. In his article titled "Film (Adaptation) as Translation: Some Methodological Proposals" (1992), Patrick Cattrysse reminds scholars the difficulties faced by theoreticians who try to broaden the concept of translation studies. He concludes saying: "there seems to be no valuable argument to keep reducing the concept of translation to mere cross-linguistic transfer processes. The scope has to be extended to a contextualistic semiotic perspective" (Cattrysse, 1992). He emphasizes the need of research involving inter-disciplinary studies and taking into account the common transformational process at the core of translation and film adaptation.

Translation aids in the transmission, distribution, and regulation of the cultural wealth between cultures, and often within one given culture. Adaptation fulfills a similar task as this process also involves encoding and decoding. When a literary work / novel is adapted for the silver screen, the adaptation (the product) broadens the reach of its circulation due to greater visibility. In a translation / adaptation, metaphors are changed into more intelligible illustrations, colloquial terminology is reinstated by unambiguous expressions and cultural customs are explained in an effort to make them more accessible to the reader. The middleman, the translator / adaptor negotiates the interaction of the audience with the source text. The transaction between two elements—two historical periods, two cultures, two media and/or two languages—is at the center of film adaptation. Displacement in time and/or space is bound to take place even if the transfer takes place within the same culture or between different cultures.

However, the transfer of metaphors and typical cultural references, at times prove to be complicated tasks. They suffer major changes during the switch. The linguistic shift occurring during the rephrasing period is a critical step involving a numerous random decisions. This unavoidable textual change resulting from the transformation of a novel into a script is another common feature shared by cinematic adaptation and translation. Evidently, there are obvious differences between the single-track translation of a novel (inter / intra-linguistic translation), which only deals with words, and the multi-track medium of cinema, which not only combines words (written and spoken), but also actors' performance, music, sound effects and moving images. In the case of film adaptation, the process is more complex as the target text is later translated into visual images resulting in intersemiotic translation).

Now, these discussions would be better comprehended when they are applied on a work. We shall try to understand by applying them on Jhumpa Lahiri's critically acclaimed novel *The Namesake* and Mira Nair's movie adaptation of the same name. The dialectics operating between diverse media used in the film encourages the active participation of the audience, who must reconstruct the story of Gogol



Ganguly, using bits and pieces from various sources. The filmmaker invites spectators to work out the adaptive process through their active involvement. In this intersemiotic translation, Nair beautifully borrows the cultural capital of Lahiri's novel and projects them through immediate visual signs such as dress and décor, ambience and music. In fact, Nair's film attempts a different cultural product than that of Lahiri's. The film is distinct because it makes use of the formal elements of a different medium and in so doing exhibits a separate set of choices than those Lahiri faced as a novelist. The film version of *The Namesake* is composed of various different elements, such as dialogue, setting, music, editing, lighting and tinge, close-up, framing and perspective.

The cultural elements present in Lahiri's *The Namesake*, are also found in Mira Nair's film version. What differs is the narrative pattern of the printed text and the visual medium of the film. Nair presents Bengali cultures clearly through audio-visual modes and relies on "chronotopic" motifs, in other words, the sequences of time and spaces in narrative pattern that bring together various temporalities and shared pasts. The narratives in the source and the adaptation begin in different times and at different places. The novel's story starts with Ashok's and Ashima's travel to the US in the 1960s. The film moves forward the timeframe by ten years, enacting Ashok's accident and marriage to Ashima in the 1970s. Whereas the novel starts in the 60s, the film starts with the train journey of Ashok in the mid-1970s. Mira Nair modifies the remarkable but linear representation of time that emerges from the space of the hospital.

One of the central themes Lahiri is found lingering throughout the novel is the theme of identity. In the novel, almost every character struggles with his or her identity, because of the tug and pull of different cultures, different traditions, and different dreams. Gogol and Sonia are stuck between two cultures- the Indian traditions of their parents and the mainstream American culture in which they grows up. It's related to the struggle of Ashoke and Ashima endure as immigrants. The most crucial modification is the shift in theme of identity is Gogol's resistance and his embarrassment over his name. The Bengali practice of keeping of 'calling name' (pet name) and *bhalonam* (goodname) is also used in the film by Nair. But her film becomes a different text because it chooses to hang on certain relationships and thus creates a romantic tone that was not felt in the novel as Lahiri chooses to keep mum on that aspect.

Though the need of interlingual transfer does not arise in case of *The Namesake*, as both the source and the adaptation are in English, some conversations between Ashima and Ashoke is in Bengali. This is done deliberately to add the cultural flavour, and to confirm the diasporic people's ethnic continuity in familial spaces. Lahiri keeps the Bengali terms for addressing the relatives. But her dialogues are in English and she mentions it when the family members conversed among themselves

'in Bengali'. The novel conveys the ethnic background through detailed descriptions of the attitude of characters, the food and the ceremonies. Nair wonderfully depicts the same with her use of Rabindra Sangeet, Nazrul geeti, traditional lullabies and *baul* and *bhatiali* (forms of Bengali folk songs). The folk songs play in the background during Gogol and Sonali visit India with their parents. The music conveys the mood and emotion of the characters beautifully, compensating for the loss of numerous other events during the transfer.

Mira Nair allows the metaphors to alter as she exploits the audio visual mode. We notice *samosa* replacing fish in the film. Bengali food-culture is intimately associated with fish, which is an important motif in the novel. Nair, probably ignores this subtlety for she lets her characters be more Indian than Bengali. The provincial diasporic sensibility is overshadowed by the national one in the movie. Other leitmotifs are suitcase, airport, and bridges that Nair uses to highlight the notion of displacement and dislocation of the diaspora. She herself declares in an interview with Cynthia Fuchs: "Airports are like the temple for an immigrant. We're always in these neutral spaces, you live your most crucial hours in them, as you're on your way to from one home to another." (Nair's interview with Fuchs) She discusses how she wanted to shoot the two important cities of the novel, Calcutta and New York, as one:

"It was moving to me, and I was able to cut to the chase each time, to decide on the bridges [the Howrah Bridge over the Hooghly River and Manhattan's 59th Street Bridge], because the bridges were the same. And then to decide on shots of "nature," trees and such. Knowing these places so well made it easier to make transitions between locations, without resorting to clichés and spoon-feeding by subtitles and voiceover and all that." (Nair's interview with Fuchs)

These two bridges of two countries stand for the diasporic longing for connection with the past and journey into the future. The shots of the bridges introduce the metaphor of separation and get-together. They symbolize reconciliation between the cities, between the East and the West and between the first and second generation Gangulis.

It is really difficult to reconstruct the novel which is a verbal narrative through an audio-visual media, *i.e.*, film; that too, as it is to be done within a limited and fixed time. Thus, though one can get the main cultural transmission of the source text like a living picture in the film, but it does not fully communicate the Bengali diasporic spirit presented in the novel. Mira Nair alters many diasporic elements in the movie, yet the nuances of the Bengali culture is exhibited in a better manner than the source text. Here, we may agree with George Bluestone, one of the first critics to study film adaptations of literature, who believes that the filmmaker is an independent artist, "not a translator for an established author, but a new author

in his own right.” (Bluestone, 1957) Mira Nair exercises her artistic liberty as she translates the movie in her own way, the way it aesthetically appealed to her. Yet, she claims fidelity to the original work. She acknowledges during the interview:

“The book is very different. In spirit, it’s very similar, but the book moves from the parents very quickly to Gogol. I knew because of my love for the older generation, that I wanted to have two pillars in the story. First, a very adult love story, which I think is a very erotic idea, two strangers who marry and then fall in love in a completely foreign, terribly cold place—it’s an enchanting a strange idea. And then, of course, it’s Gogol, what they create. I fashioned more of a balance between those stories. For the parents, every scene is economically designed, to show the depth of their love and the uniqueness of their love.” (Nair’s interview with Fuchs).

From the semiotic perspective, Mira Nair’s adaptation is an extended form of translation as the movie displays aesthetic features of a good translation. The moralist discourse on fidelity issue becomes irrelevant. It does not make sense to create a hue and cry when one weighs and balances the constraints and challenges of the transformation process, particularly if the end result is satisfactory.

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