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From Text to Screen: Intersemiotic Translation in Satyajit Ray's *Devi*

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Abstract

*This article investigates *Devi* (1960), directed by Satyajit Ray, as a case study in thematic intersemiotic translation—the process of transferring meaning from a literary text into a cinematic form. Adapted from Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story, the film reimagines central themes of faith, superstition, and patriarchy within the socio-cultural context of 19th-century Bengal. Grounded in Roman Jakobson's concept of intersemiotic translation and informed by adaptation theory, the study examines how Ray reconfigures the original narrative's structure, imagery, and thematic emphasis for the screen. It argues that *Devi* transforms the written word into an expressive interplay of visuals, sound, and performance, preserving the cultural and social essence of the source text while highlighting the inherent complexities of translating meaning across different sign systems.*

Keyword: Satyajit Ray, *Devi* (1960), Intersemiotic Translation, Cultural Studies, Adaptation Studies

Introduction

The term "**intersemiotic translation**" was coined by Russian-American linguist **Roman Jakobson** in 1959, in his remarkable essay ***On Linguistic Aspects of Translation***. In this essay Jakobson argues that meaning of a word is a linguistic phenomenon. That meaning lies with the signifier (the word or expression) and not in the signified (the object or idea itself). Thus it is the linguistic verbal sign that gives an object its meaning. And only by three ways a verbal sign can be interpreted rather translated. These are—***Intralingual, Interlingual and Intersemiotic***. In this essay Jakobson states that "*the verbal sign; it can be translated or into another, nonverbal system of symbols*" (Jakobson, 1959). In layman terms, changing words into something that's not made of words — like pictures, music, or

gestures. It's basically turning a written or spoken text into another form of expression that doesn't use language directly. This particular theory has been the key point for ages when literature is transformed into cinema. It provides a precise framework for studying how meaning shifts from verbal systems to audiovisual ones. In the context of Indian cinema — especially Bengali cinema — the adaptations of Satyajit Ray offer an outstanding example for such analysis.

Aim of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine ***Devi*** (1960) as a work of thematic intersemiotic translation, exploring how Satyajit Ray transforms Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's

short story into a cinematic narrative. The research focuses on how themes such as faith, superstition, and patriarchy are reinterpreted through the medium of film using visual, auditory, and performative elements. It also seeks to understand how Ray's adaptation negotiates between preserving the socio-cultural essence of 19th-century Bengal and employing cinematic techniques to engage contemporary audiences.

This study does not attempt to revisit Satyajit Ray's politics, nor does it focus on feminist readings of his women characters, or the familiar debates around cinema's negotiation of modernity and tradition in postcolonial India. These perspectives—while valuable—have already been explored in depth by numerous scholars, including **Darius Cooper's *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity*** (1999), **Chandreyee Ganguly** (2016), and **Debashree Sanyal** (2021). To recover this ground would risk repetition and obscure other equally significant aspects of Ray's filmmaking.

What remains underexplored is the intersemiotic process itself—the way in which a literary text is transformed into filmic expression through the interplay of image, sound, silence, and performance. By examining *Devi* (1960) as a case of intersemiotic translation, this research shifts the critical lens away from questions of fidelity, politics, or feminism, and towards the mechanics of meaning-making across semiotic systems.

The purpose of this study is therefore twofold: **first**, to move beyond the fidelity debate that dominates adaptation studies; and **second**, to highlight how Ray's *Devi* works as an act of intersemiotic translation. The guiding research question is: *How does Ray's **Devi** reconfigure Mukhopadhyay's short story through the*

process of intersemiotic translation, and what does this reveal about both the strengths and limitations of Jakobson's model when considered alongside Hutcheon's theory of adaptation?

Limitations

This study is limited in scope to a single adaptation—*Devi*—and does not attempt to provide an exhaustive survey of all of Ray's literary adaptations. The analysis concentrates on thematic and semiotic translation rather than technical filmmaking aspects like editing or cinematography or the basics of film lighting. This paper does not engage in an extensive comparative analysis with other directors or adaptations of the same story, or other adaptations of Ray. The interpretation is based primarily on textual and visual analysis, without incorporating any other perspectives.

Research Gap

The concept of “intersemiotic translation” clearly states that the transfer of meaning from verbal signs to non-verbal systems such as images, music, or performance. This idea is especially relevant to cinema, where written texts are transformed into audiovisual form. However, Jakobson's model is limited because it focuses mainly on the mechanics of sign transfer and less on cultural or contextual factors. To address this, Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) offers a broader perspective, treating adaptation not as a copy but as both a process and a product that gains new meaning in different cultural and historical contexts.

Scholarship on Satyajit Ray has been extensive, but it has largely concentrated on a few recurring themes. Critics have consistently examined his mastery of direction, narrative style, Indian aesthetics, and his postcolonial approach to cinema—whether in his original screenplays or

his literary adaptations (Seton, 2003; Nyce, 1988; Cooper, 2007; Ganguly, 2016). A parallel body of scholarship has explored Ray's feminist sensibility and the representation of women in his films (Sanyal, 2021; Mukherjee, 2012).

However, what remains strikingly absent in this body of literature is a consideration of Ray's films through the lens of intersemiotic translation. Even when *Devi* (1960) is discussed, the focus typically falls on the titular character, the *mise-en-scène*, or Ray's representation of patriarchy and superstition. But they don't ask: how does Ray actually translate Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story into film? What happens to meaning when it shifts from text to screen?

This absence is important, because Ray's films—especially *Devi*—are full of rich examples of how cinema transforms literature. By focusing on intersemiotic translation, this study fills a clear gap in Ray scholarship. It shows not only a new way of understanding *Devi* but also why adaptation should be seen as more than just a matter of being “faithful” to the source text.

The Statement of The Problem

This research idea came from the researcher's earlier work on Satyajit Ray's films. While reviewing literature on Ray and Bengali cinema in general, it became clear that most film adaptation studies in Indian cinema focus on fidelity instead of looking at the bigger process of intersemiotic translation. For example, in *Devi*, the short story by Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay is brief and suggestive, leaving much to the reader's imagination. Ray's film version, however, expands the story and reshapes it through visuals, themes and symbolism. This difference between the short story and the feature film raises the questions- How do elements like the narrator's voice, tone,

symbolism, and a character's inner thoughts from the book survive or change when turned into a film? What techniques — both in form and in ideas — does Ray use to make this shift?

People often judge a film adaptation only by how closely it follows the source material. But this ignores the fact that books and films use very different “languages” to create meaning. In Ray's case, his adaptations are not exact copies of the original stories — they are thoughtful re-creations shaped by his film-making skills and cultural background.(Stam, 2005).

This is why the present study matters. Most critics have ignored *Devi* when discussing Ray's adaptations, and almost no one has studied it as an act of intersemiotic translation. By focusing on this, the research fills an important gap: it moves beyond the tired fidelity debate and shows how Ray actually translates literature into cinema, creating new layers of meaning in the process.

Literature Review

Roman Jakobson in his essay *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation*.(1959)distinguishes between intralingual, interlingual, and intersemiotic translation, with the last referring to the interpretation of verbal signs by means of non-verbal sign systems. Umberto Eco -the Italian novelist, medievalist, semiotician, philosopher, and literary critic, in his seminal book- *Experiences in Translation*(2000) conceptualises translation as negotiation, Translation isn't just about matching words in two languages — it's about interpreting a text across languages, which also means moving between different cultures.. Robert Stam - American film theorist working on film semiotics, in his book- *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*(2005) rejects fidelity as the sole

measure of adaptation, promoting instead a dialogic and intertextual approach.

More recent scholarship has sought to broaden the conversation around intersemiotic translation. *O'Halloran, Tan, and Wignell* (2016) reconceptualise it as *resemiotisation*, a multimodal process in which meaning shifts dynamically across different sign systems. *Perdikaki* (2017) proposes a model for film adaptation as intersemiotic translation, moving beyond static comparisons to emphasise transformation across modes. *Cattrysse* (2014), in *Descriptive Adaptation Studies*, also calls for a systematic framework that treats adaptation as a cross-disciplinary phenomenon rather than as a subset of literary studies. These newer approaches make it clear that adaptation is best understood not simply as transfer, but as a complex negotiation across semiotic, cultural, and ideological boundaries.

The famed “*Ray Scholars*” such as Andrew Robinson (*Satyajit Ray: The Inner Eye* -1989) have examined Ray's work in the context of Bengali literature, noting his sensitivity to cultural nuance and his skill in translating literary themes into filmic expression. However, much of this work focuses on *Pather Panchali* or his Tagore adaptations, leaving *Devi* relatively underexplored in terms of intersemiotic translation. Similarly, well-known critical works—such as Darius Cooper's *The Cinema of Satyajit Ray: Between Tradition and Modernity* (Cambridge Studies in Film, 1999), *Ben Nyce's Satyajit Ray: A Study of His Films* (Praeger, 1988), and Marie Seton's *Portrait of a Director: Satyajit Ray* (Dennis Dobson, 1971)—engage with Ray's aesthetics and his dialogic engagement with literature in terms of narrative fidelity or aesthetic merit.

More recent work has examined Ray's treatment of women (*Mukherjee, 2012; Sanyal, 2021; Ganguly, 2016*). Yet, despite this breadth, Ray's

films have rarely been studied as an act of intersemiotic translation, and Ray's adaptations as a whole have not been situated within the more current theoretical debates outlined above.

This paper addresses that gap by applying semiotic and adaptation theory to a detailed comparison of Mukhopadhyay's short story and Ray's film.

Research Methodology

This study uses a qualitative approach, focusing on analysing both text and film. It compares Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story *Devi* with Satyajit Ray's 1960 film adaptation. The analysis is based on Roman Jakobson's idea of intersemiotic translation, along with ideas from Umberto Eco's semiotics and Robert Stam's adaptation theory.

The research process includes:

Primary Source Analysis- Carefully reading the short story to understand its plot, characters, themes, and symbolism.

Film Analysis – The film was watched multiple times, with notes taken on setting, framing, sound, silence, music, performance, and symbolism. Specific scenes were selected for detailed analysis because they represent turning points in the adaptation process.

- *Kalikinkar's dream* — how a short description in the text is expanded into a highly symbolic cinematic sequence.
- *The healing of the sick child* — how belief and collective psychology are visualised and dramatised.
- *Umaprasad's return from Calcutta* — how space and body language communicate estrangement.

- *The final breakdown of Doyamoyee* — how the understated ending of the short story is turned into a haunting visual sequence.

Comparison – Looking at similarities and differences between the story and the film to see how Ray changes or keeps elements from the original.

Criteria for Comparison

- Each scene was compared against its counterpart in the short story, focusing on:
- How narration, tone, and inner thought were handled in prose versus film.
- What new symbols, images, or sounds Ray introduced.
- How character relationships and emotions were altered or expanded.

Theory in Practice – Jakobson's model of intersemiotic translation was used to explain the transfer of meaning across sign systems (verbal → visual/auditory). Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* was applied to consider the broader cultural and interpretive aspects of the adaptation. Robert Stam's work on intertextuality also informed the rejection of "fidelity" as the sole measure of adaptation.

By combining these steps, the methodology ensures that the analysis is both systematic and replicable: another researcher could follow the same process, examine the same scenes, and test the same theoretical frameworks against the text and film.

Why this approach?

The choice of close reading and comparative scene analysis is deliberate. Since the research question centres on how Ray translates literary meaning into cinematic form, the most direct evidence lies in the text–film comparison itself.

Focusing on scenes where narrative, symbolism, and characterisation undergo significant transformation makes it possible to observe the mechanics of intersemiotic translation in practice.

Why not other approaches?

- Audience reception studies can reveal how viewers understand *Devi*, but this research focuses more on the process of adaptation itself. More importantly, it does not explain intersemiotic translation. At best, it can measure fidelity, but not the act of translation between different sign systems. Archival research could uncover production histories or Ray's personal notes, yet the focus here is not on authorial intent but on how the film functions as a translation of the text.
- Socio-political readings are valuable, and many scholars have already analysed Ray's politics, modernity, and tradition. However, this study aims to fill a different gap: the lack of attention to intersemiotic translation in Ray scholarship.
- There are many books and articles on Ray's feminist approach to films, but this paper does not take that direction. Its aim is only to study Ray and his adaptation of *Devi* through the lens of intersemiotic translation, nothing else.

Findings & Discussion

"The director is the only person who knows what the film is about.."

— Satyajit Ray

This section presents the key findings from a comparative analysis of Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story *Devi* and Satyajit

Ray's 1960 film adaptation, analyse through the lens of thematic intersemiotic translation.

Primary Source Analysis – The Short Story

Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's *Devi* is a concise yet haunting narrative set in rural Bengal during the mid-nineteenth century, a period when colonial modernity was beginning to brush against deeply rooted religious traditions. At its heart is the story of Doyamoyee, a young bride who has recently entered the household of a prosperous zamindar family. Her life changes abruptly when her father-in-law, Kalikinkar, experiences a vivid dream in which she appears to him as the goddess Kali incarnate. Convinced of the dream's divine truth, he declares her a living goddess, transforming her from a daughter-in-law into an object of forced respect for both the family and the surrounding village. (MUKHOPADHYAY, 2015)

Though the plot appears simple, the story is layered with psychological and cultural complexity. The three central characters embody sharply contrasting worldviews:

Doyamoyee – Soft-spoken and dutiful, she embodies the idealised virtues expected of a nineteenth-century Bengali bride. Yet beneath her compliance lies a quiet tragedy: she is caught in a role imposed upon her, with no agency to question or resist it.

Kalikinkar – A devout and authoritarian patriarch, his life revolves around ritual worship. His dream becomes an unquestionable revelation, and his unwavering faith blinds him to the human cost of his conviction.

Umamprasad – Doyamoyee's husband, studying in Calcutta, represents the rationalist, reformist influence of the Bengal Renaissance. His scepticism of religious superstition sets him at odds with his father's beliefs, but his physical

absence leaves Doyamoyee vulnerable to the unfolding events.

Thematically, the story probes the tension between reason and blind faith, the oppressive structures of patriarchy, and the dangerous allure of religious absolutism. Symbolically, Doyamoyee's elevation to divine status is deeply ironic—it strips her of personal identity, reducing her to a vessel for collective belief. Her deification becomes a metaphor for how individuals, particularly women, can be crushed and silenced under the weight of tradition.

Film Analysis – Satyajit Ray's *Devi* (1960)

Satyajit Ray's *Devi*, released in 1960, is a quiet yet deeply unsettling film that stays faithful to the heart of Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story while giving it more depth and atmosphere.

Ray's adaptation keeps the core plot intact but reimagines it through the cinematic grammar of image, sound, silence, and performance. His film fills in the gaps of Mukhopadhyay's story, turning its allegorical simplicity into a layered psychological and social tragedy.

Four key scenes are-

Kalikinkar's Dream

Short Story: briefly mentioned as a revelation.

Film: expanded into a striking sequence, with dim lighting, shifting focus, and music by Ali Akbar Khan. Doyamoyee's image overlaps with the goddess idol, making the dream feel both surreal and convincing.

Analysis: Jakobson's model is clear here—textual description becomes image + sound. Hutcheon's view adds that Ray interprets the dream not just as plot, but as cultural spectacle, shaping how audiences understand religious conviction.

The Healing of the Sick Child

Short Story: presented briefly as proof of Doyamoyee's supposed divinity.

Film: slowed down into a dramatic set piece, showing the mother's fear, the hesitant crowd, and Doyamoyee's reluctant blessing. Devotional music and reaction shots of villagers amplify the sense of belief spreading communally.

Analysis: Ray translates a minimal text into an emotionally charged scene. Jakobson explains the semiotic shift; Hutcheon helps us see how Ray repositions the event for an audience grappling with faith and superstition in postcolonial Bengal.

Umaprasad's Return from Calcutta

Short Story: framed mainly through dialogue and rational argument.

Film: framed spatially—Umaprasad is kept apart from Doyamoyee, who sits elevated like an idol surrounded by worshippers. His alienation is shown visually rather than told verbally.

Analysis: Jakobson shows how verbal reasoning is turned into body language and *mise-en-scène*. Hutcheon highlights that this is also a cultural negotiation—modern rationality failing to rescue a woman trapped in patriarchy and belief.

The Final Breakdown of Doyamoyee

Short Story: ends with understated suggestion of collapse.

Film: extended into a haunting visual: Doyamoyee wanders into misty fields in full goddess attire, silent and broken, as natural sounds replace music.

Analysis: Jakobson accounts for the transformation of a brief cue into an elaborate sequence. Hutcheon's framework reveals Ray's interpretive agency—he turns an allegorical

ending into a deeply personal tragedy, speaking to modern audiences about the cost of blind faith..(Devi, 1960)

Comparative Analysis – Short Story and Film

Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's *Devi* and Satyajit Ray's 1960 film tell the same basic story, but they work in different ways to create their impact. The short story is brief and tightly focused, almost like a cautionary fable. Its power lies in its simplicity—the events are described without much embellishment, leaving the reader to feel the weight of the tragedy through the bare facts. The characters are drawn in clean, sharp outlines: Doyamoyee as the obedient bride, Kalikinkar as the devout patriarch, and Umaprasad as the rational modernist. The themes—faith versus reason, the dangers of blind devotion, and the erasure of personal identity—are clear and direct.

Ray's film keeps this core intact but slows down the telling, filling in details of setting, atmosphere, and emotion. Where the short story sketches, the film lingers.

The comparison between Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story *Devi* and Satyajit Ray's 1960 adaptation reveals how the film transforms the source through intersemiotic translation, moving beyond fidelity to create new layers of meaning.

Four key scenes are -

Kalikinkar's Dream

In the story, Kalikinkar's vision of Doyamoyee as Kali is a brief description. Ray turns it into a fully realised sequence: dim light, dissolves, low-angle shots, and music blend to make the dream central to the narrative. What is suggestive on the page becomes visceral on

screen, showing how cinema amplifies the psychological weight of revelation.

The Healing of the Sick Child

The text treats this episode as a short turning point in the villagers' belief. In the film, it becomes an extended spectacle—hesitant gestures, swelling music, shifting expressions of faith—drawing the audience into the collective psychology of devotion. The shift illustrates how film can heighten emotional intensity by expanding what prose leaves understated.

Umaprasad's Return

Where the short story contrasts his rationalism with his father's blind faith through dialogue, Ray conveys estrangement visually. Umaprasad re-enters a home now turned shrine, his wife elevated and inaccessible. Spatial separation and body language replace narration, showing how cinema communicates conflict through *mise-en-scène* rather than words.

Doyamoyee's Final Breakdown

The prose ending is restrained, hinting at her collapse in a few lines. Ray, however, extends it into a haunting image: Doyamoyee wandering into mist, dressed as a goddess yet vacant-eyed, surrounded only by silence. The understated text becomes an unforgettable meditation on despair.

Summary

Across these scenes, Ray does not copy the story but reimagines it. The brevity of Mukhopadhyay's prose is expanded into atmosphere, sound, and performance, demonstrating adaptation as a process of transformation rather than replication. *Devi* thus exemplifies cinema's ability to translate literature into its own grammar, where meaning is reshaped through image and sound. Both versions condemn the destructive force of unquestioned faith and patriarchal authority, but

they do so in different registers. The short story is spare, almost allegorical; the film is immersive and emotionally devastating. Together, they show how the same narrative can speak with two different voices—one through the precision of words, the other through the textures of sight and sound. (O'Halloran et al., 2016)

Theory in Practice

The differences between Mukhopadhyay's short story and Ray's film adaptation of *Devi* become most vivid when examined through specific scenes, where intersemiotic translation turns brief textual moments into layered audiovisual experiences.

The first clear instance is the moment following Kalikinkar's dream. In the short story, this is delivered in a few sentences that simply state his conviction. In the film, Ray transforms it into an almost sacred revelation: the camera frames Kalikinkar from a low angle to stress his authority, the sound of a temple bell merges with his expression, and a slow dissolve shifts to Doyamoyee, seated quietly with her face half-veiled. Here, Jakobson's intersemiotic translation is evident—the written description becomes a fusion of image, sound, and gesture. Eco's semiotic reading identifies the veil, lighting, and bell as signs of sanctity, while Stam's adaptation theory interprets this as a creative expansion rather than a literal duplication.

The healing of the sick child is another turning point. On the page, the event is concise, serving mainly to strengthen the villagers' faith. In the film, Ray slows the pace, showing the mother's anxiety, the hesitant crowd, and the moment of contact as Doyamoyee touches the child's head. Devotional music swells, and the camera dwells on the changing expressions of the onlookers. Through Jakobson's lens, this is the translation of a plot point into a sensory and emotional

experience. Eco would note the touch as a symbolic act of divine blessing, while Stam would highlight Ray's deliberate choice to emphasise the psychology of collective belief.

Umaprasad's return from Calcutta reveals another layer of adaptation. The short story focuses on his rational objections to superstition; the film uses visual space and body language to underline emotional estrangement. Umaprasad enters the house as if it were unfamiliar territory, his wife elevated on a seat like an idol, worshippers gathered around her. This spatial separation communicates his sense of loss more powerfully than words. Eco's semiotic analysis would read the raised seat and ritual garb as markers of inaccessibility, while Stam's approach shows Ray privileging visual estrangement over lengthy dialogue.

The most significant divergence between text and film comes in the ending. The short story's conclusion is understated, suggesting Doyamoyee's mental collapse without prolonged description. Ray extends this into a haunting visual sequence: the house lies in silence, lamps flicker, and Doyamoyee wanders into the misty fields, her goddess attire still in place but her eyes vacant. No music accompanies the scene—only the natural sounds of crickets and wind—creating a hollow, almost unbearable sense of emptiness. Jakobson's model shows here how a minimal textual cue becomes an extended visual meditation on despair. Eco would read the empty fields as a sign of both release and abandonment, while Stam sees this as Ray's interpretative deepening of the source material's tragedy.

Through these scenes, it becomes clear that Ray's adaptation is not simply a question of staying "faithful" to the short story. Instead, it is an act of re-encoding meaning through a different sign system—transforming verbal narrative into a web of images, sounds, and silences that make the thematic core of *Devi*

more immediate, visceral, and psychologically rich.

Conclusion

This study set out to address a clear gap in Satyajit Ray scholarship: while critics have long explored his direction, aesthetics, politics, and even feminist portrayals, his films have rarely been studied through the lens of intersemiotic translation. *Devi* (1960), in particular, has been discussed in terms of its titular character, mise-en-scène, and themes of superstition and patriarchy, but almost never as an example of how meaning shifts when literature is translated into cinema.

By comparing Prabhat Kumar Mukhopadhyay's short story with Ray's adaptation, this study has shown how Ray reconfigures the narrative through image, sound, silence, and performance. The analysis of key scenes—Kalikinkar's dream, the healing of the sick child, Umaprasad's return, and Doyamoyee's breakdown—demonstrates that Ray does far more than reproduce the text: he transforms it into a layered cinematic experience. Jakobson's model helps explain the semiotic transfer, while Hutcheon's theory of adaptation reveals how Ray's creative choices engage broader cultural and historical meanings.

The originality of this research lies in shifting attention away from the familiar fidelity debate and political readings toward the underexplored process of intersemiotic translation. In doing so, it not only offers a fresh perspective on *Devi* but also contributes to adaptation studies by testing the strengths and limits of Jakobson's framework against Hutcheon's more expansive approach.

Ultimately, this study shows that *Devi* is not just a story retold but a story re-created through the unique grammar of cinema. By filling this critical gap, the research opens up new ways of

thinking about Ray's adaptations—and about film adaptation itself as a dynamic act of translation across sign systems.

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