

On Translation and Transition in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* on Screen: An Auteurist Study

Shah Ahmed^{1*}

Abstract

Though Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003) has received huge critical attention on its literary significance as well as its (mis)representation of the Bangladeshi community in Britain, Sara Gavron's 2007 film adaptation of the novel has not yet been given sufficient critical views. Commenting on the directorial role in the production of the adaptation, this article explores the translational, transitional and cinematic aspects of the adaptation. While recognising of the merits of Gavron's *Brick Lane*, it argues that the lack of auteurist innovation, technical competence and thematic connectivity – some basic theorems of auteur direction – divests the film of significant aesthetic accomplishment. Hence, identifying the adaptational and technical oversights in the adaptation, this article suggests some cinematically possible features the director could have used for a more commendable adaptation of the novel.

Keywords: Monica Ali; Sarah Gavron; *Brick Lane*; film translation; adaptational transitions; auteurism; directorial control

Introduction

Like the many critical studies of Monica Ali's (2003) debut novel *Brick Lane*, its film version, Sarah Gavron's debut feature *Brick Lane* (Gavron 2007), also calls for attention to the novel's adaptational and cinematic nuances. Since its publication, *Brick Lane* has received a significant number of both positive and negative appraisals involving postcolonial, feminist and diasporic issues. For non-South Asian critics who mostly interpret the novel from a feminist perspective, its key focuses include "claims to knowledge made in relation to migrant subjectivity as one of its concerns" (Poon, 2009, p. 426) and its predominant bent on a woman's "emancipation process culminating in the decision of staying in London" against the patriarchal strictures of the Bangladeshi diaspora community in East London (Monegato, 2009, p. 30). Particularly from cultural, religious and gender perspectives, another group of critics points to Ali's detachment from Bangladeshi cultural roots and criticizes her apparent "overgeneralisation and misrepresentation" of the community (Hasan, 2018, p. 63). Despite these critical concerns about the novel, its cinematic rendition has not garnered equal critical attention. The present article argues that there are several adaptational issues in Gavron's film including the director's adherence to, and transition from, its literary parent, cultural representation, musical improvisation and visual intertextuality against which the film can be examined to reveal its strengths and weaknesses as a film/ visual translation.

Since, like the novel, the film centres on a feminist story in which the protagonist Nazneen succeeds in preserving and securing her identity against the insidious domination of patriarchy, it can be regarded as a faithful, albeit condensed, adaptation. In spite of conceding a wider space for Nazneen to grow, the film compresses some useful themes and threads of the novel. Hence, the questions about the work of adaptation – whether the film translation bears the director's creative stamp, whether the directorial transitions are cinematically artistic and thematically organic, and if the film has attracted viewers and critics – require a critical assessment. Having two female

¹ ***Shah Ahmed.** Associate Professor, Chair, Department of English & Dean (acting) in the School of Arts and Social Sciences, Uttara University, Bangladesh.

writers involved significantly, Monica Ali as the novelist and Abi Morgan as the screenwriter,^{2/1} a feminist undercurrent came naturally to the film that Gavron has exploited. Nevertheless, considering the ordinary box-office returns^{3/2} and the paucity of critical investigation,^{4/3} it is obvious that the film is less than a critical and commercial success. It so happens that adaptation of a complex and critically successful novel like *Brick Lane* attracts curious cineastes who long to see its visual permutation. Besides, there was a fierce objection to the scene-making preparations of *Brick Lane* in the locale of Brick Lane raised by the Muslim community of Tower Hamlets, especially British Bangladeshis, who believe that Ali's novel represented a distorted version of the lifestyle of the community. This objection, ultimately occluding the shooting (Lea and Lewis, 2006), lent a *cause célèbre* to the production. Added to this is Salman Rushdie's (2006) scathing criticism of the protest and his support of the filming project. Despite these pre-production publicities, the film has failed to attract a wider audience and critics for reasons that deserve to be studied.

While not indifferent to the creditable aspects of *Brick Lane*'s adaptation, the article focuses on the inconsistencies in the film's translation, cinematography and music and explains how they are responsible for its modest reception. Since my critical stance relies heavily on the directorial role in the adaptation, I have chosen, for the theoretical premise of the discussion, the auteur theory endorsing the director's command in the entire production by which they can claim the authorship of the film. Because of the film's feminist undercurrent, the theoretical discussion will also overlap with feminist auteurism, a recent debate in the theory concerning whether female directors can equate auteur direction with their male counterparts. Hence, adaptational (de)merits, directorial faithfulness and deviations, and technical soundness, the parameters through which auteurism evaluates a film, will receive primacy in the discussion on Gavron's work. This study will endeavour to provide fresh perspectives on the film's re-evaluation by using newer theoretical lenses which will understandably identify scope for further research. In that respect, an understanding of the major issues addressed by auteurist criticism is of primary importance for subsequent analysis.

Auteur theory and Gavron's *Brick Lane*

Auteur theory or the theory of film authorship was first espoused by Alexandre Astruc (1923–2016), who stated, “Just as novelists use a pen to write, filmmakers, who should be considered their artistic counterparts and equals, use a camera” (1948, p. 17). This suggests that though literary authors and cinematic auteurs produce medium-different artworks, they are equivalent in artistic stature. Indeed, countering the traditional concept of film production involving a subtle interplay of a composite of specialized professionals such as writers, performers and cinematographers, Astruc's ideas introduce the concept of “auteur cinema,” that is, director-centric cinema. With the new shift of focus on the director as the sole author of a film and as important as a literary author, the director-critics of the French New Wave, most notably François

^{2/1} Bilge Ebiri's (2008) review “Flick Lane” clarifies that producers Alison Owen and Christopher Collins, and director Sarah Gavron primarily employed the Australian screenwriter Laura Jones. However, due to the problem of distance she was not finally included, and the Welsh screenwriter Abi Morgan was hired instead.

^{3/2} As per Internet Movie Database (IMDb) record, the film's revenue only amounts to the production budget.

^{4/3} Excepting a few rave, knee-jerk reviews, the only significant study of the film is Siri Mohammad-Roe's (2009) MA thesis from the University of Oslo. However, she does not comment on the adaptational, technical and narrative aspects of the film.

Truffaut, began to look for the theoretical reconfigurations and redefinitions of European cinema in the 1950s and 1960s.

For its worldwide familiarization, the auteur theory owes much to American film theorist Andrew Sarris who translated the French articles into English. In fact, it is Sarris who taxonomized the term “auteur theory” from Truffaut’s phrase “*la Politique des Auteurs*” (the theory of authors). His insistence on “the technical competence,” “distinguishable personality” and “interior meaning” of the director as “criterion of value” of a film (Sarris, 2008) further solidifies auteurism as the director-as-author theory. Thus, against the traditional collaborative process of filmmaking, auteurism establishes the director as the discrete creative force behind the films, which are distinguished by their distinctive style in plot conventions, dialogues, cinematography, motifs and symbols which constitute the cinematic language and establish a thematic unity in the film.

An adapted work, if seen against the auteurist criterion of value mentioned above, ultimately transpires as either distinguishable or insignificant or one in between the two. Hence, this article, based on the underpinnings of auteurism, asserts that despite some admirable aspects in Gavron’s *Brick Lane*, it is mainly due to the absence of creative direction that the film fails to attract wider spectatorship and receive comparable attention in academia. From a feminist epistemological standpoint that reasons out that knowledge and art production disadvantages women, a question of whether female directors, vis-a-vis their male counterparts, can exert the same “auteur quality” became a theoretical concern around the time *Brick Lane* was made (Hollinger, 2012, p. 231). Commenting on the male centrism in the Western film industry, Karen Hollinger states:

The failure to include women filmmakers in the pantheon of great directors in part is the result of the overwhelming male domination of the film industry, where the top grossing Hollywood films are almost all directed by men, and women are greatly restricted in terms of employment as executive producers, producers, writers, editors and cinematographers. (2012, p. 232)

As a female filmmaker, Gavron is perhaps aware of this gender discrimination in the history of cinema. Therefore, the discussion also contemplates how the directional process of *Brick Lane*, in which all major production segments are steered by female professionals, responds to the above feminist question in film studies.

Gavron’s *Brick Lane* as a film translation

Unlike their philological counterparts, celluloid translators enjoy far greater freedom given the medium specificities of the cinema. The task of linguistic translators takes in an *intramedial* transposition of a literary text in limited methods of translation such as literal translation, sense-for-sense translation, idiomatic translation and semantic translation, while cinematic translators mould an *intermedial* semblance of the source in their own (re)interpretation through (dialogic) images. Pointing to the latter’s relative freedom, Shah Ahmed maintains, “The undercurrents of film adaptation involve a certain amount of creative transgression and interpretation” (2021, p. 1). For example, in *Apocalypse Now* (1979), an applauded adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, Francis Ford Coppola shifts the novel’s European imperial culture to the background of the Vietnam War and uses Conrad’s primary themes to reveal the hypocrisy, frivolity and emptiness of the American war. These adaptations are often hailed as “the directors’ films” (Gallagher, 1989). Gavron’s *Brick Lane* can be evaluated based on whether she has remained as “the one creative mind or organizing principle” in the cinematic translation (Benshoff, 2016, p. 63).

It is true that the filmicity of a Dickensian novel like *Brick Lane* calls for a challenge for any director. From the praxis of screening such novels, my critical opinion is that Gavron could have adopted either of the following options: i) a choice of longer runtime (roughly 180 minutes) that would help preserve the useful themes and threads of the whole novel, or ii) a choice of average length (between 95 and 120 minutes) that would help focus on the central theme of a novel.^{5/4} In this respect, either of the following two famous *Hamlet* (1603) adaptations could be an imitable example for Gavron: i) Franco Zeffirelli's *Hamlet* (1990), which, abandoning the play's political trope, focuses a good deal on Hamlet's inner and family conflicts in an about two-hour runtime, or ii) Kenneth Branagh's *Hamlet* (1996), which preserves almost all significant aspects of the play in four hours. Instead, the director uses a condensed spectrum of 101 minutes that skeletonizes virtually the entire plot of the novel. I argue that this decision has contributed to the film's failure to make a fusion between the verbal and the visual. Instead, Gavron as the "organizing principle" could reify her own creative cuts along with circumvention of the novel's less important characters. In fact, a far improvised narrative reinforcing the novel's central issues, including the psychological, triangular and transgenerational conflicts, would bring forth a more relevant film on "the theme of the immigrant experience" that "has become a burgeoning sub-genre in both cinema and literature" (Abeel, 2008).

Despite the film's faithfulness to the novel's main focus where Nazneen accumulates her self-definition in the background of patriarchal construction of femininity, the film's plot accommodates almost all of the novel's major characters in miniature. Whereas Ali's novel employs sufficient space and time to get into elaborate, eloquent descriptions of locations and circumstances, in Gavron's work, such literary delicacies suffer a severe compression. Perhaps the dwarfing of the enormous roles played by Hasina and her series of letters is one of the most glaring examples. No matter how she compensates for tempering the epistolary narrative, which ornately represents (or often misrepresents) Bangladesh, the audience may strain to understand Nazneen's frequent references to the miserable sister and abrupt shifts in temporality due to the reduced contextual information. The choice of a longer runtime would generate a greater scope for incorporating this pivotal subplot that would lend the film considerable vibrancy.

To mull over the complex feminist and diasporic struggles of the Bangladesh community in the UK, Ali allocates multiple roles to multiple characters, in addition to the leading ones. The miniaturization of these characters has vitiated the film's artistic magnitude to a considerable extent. Again, dwarfing these characters' textual magnitude rendered them quite comical. Because of their comicality in the visual, Razia, Mrs. Islam, Karim, Dr. Azad and some rambling figures of the Bengal Tigers who crowd in on the screen do not receive adequate depth in their characters, depriving them of their personal histories within their larger communities. Thus, *Brick Lane* (the film) falls remarkably short of Seymour Chatman's concept of meaningful filmography: "the camera depicts, but does not describe" (1999, p. 440). That is, excessive focus on verbal description and relatively less on pictographic representation render, Chatman argues, a film far less aesthetic. Bereft of adequate biographic information and social connection, most of these figures seem to be drifting away a historically from the main course of events on screen. For instance, Dr. Azad, who has significant social and familial functions in the novel, has been shown *en passant* for only one scene. The pruning of this integral character, whose role in the novel can be fascinatingly compared to those of Dr. Rank in Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* (1879) and Dr. Grogan in John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), remains questionable.

^{5/4} In his famous article "The Thrill of Breaking the 120-Minute Barrier," American film critic Roger Ebert redefines the length of a film according to different genres.

On top of this, Gavron leaves out some important characters and events that tarnish the film's fictional integrity to a perceptible measure. Perhaps one of the most crucial absences in the film is Raqib, Nazneen-Chanu's first (male) child. Ali allows considerable space for Raqib's growth, illness and death through which Chanu and Nazneen's spousal relationship acquires a remarkable development. The absence of this infant, an instrumental character in the novel, deprives the audience a glimpse of the better side of the couple and affects the gravity of the overtones intended by several references to Raqib at some crucial moments in the film.

In the brief Bangladesh vignette,^{6/5} excepting the mere nonverbal activities of Nazneen's parents, other characters, particularly Banessa, the Gouripur midwife who contributes to picturing the novel's pre-Bangladesh Pakistani countryside, are completely eliminated. Moreover, the film dispenses with Ali's anecdotes of a graphic repertoire of Bangladeshi ethnic heterogeneity, which constitutes the diasporic nostalgia for Nazneen's homeland and diversifies the plot of the novel. The "one hundred and twenty years old" midwife with "one thousand babies" to her credit (Ali 2003, p. 8) and Tamizuddin Mizra Haque, a Bangladeshi barber with the regional setting of a salon and delicate humour as "the greatest repository of information in the entire village" (p. 315), would be valuable additions to geographical ethnicities if they were pictured in the film. In the novel, the tragic episode of the lunatic Mustafa tied to a tree to die as a punishment for kidnapping a village girl is frequently referred to in relation to Nazneen's childhood memories. Gavron could have entwined Nazneen's remorseful feelings for saving Mustafa's life with her critical experiences in the Tower Hamlets. It would not only point to her guilty conscience but also to the nuances of Bangladeshi village life.

The narrative ellipses found in the film have been far from an aesthetic synthesis in the adaptation. Soon after the exposition that crams many textual elements, notably Rupban's suicide incident rapidly followed by Nazneen's wedding, the audience encounters the adult Nazneen sauntering across the Tower Hamlets towards her apartment. Despite lacking in aesthetic and technical finesse, this fast-moving exposition enables the filmmakers to abridge the text. In fact, beginning from the textual events that occur in the eighth chapter of the novel, the film unequivocally prepares the audience to expect the film as a visual minimum of the story.

Considering a blanded focus on Nazneen and the dilution and omission of other characters, Gavron's venture becomes a pictorial summary of the novel. Even keeping her feminist concern intact, the filmmaker could add some more cinematic resilience, as well as artistic and thematic significance to the film if she would animate some other textual events that I will discuss in what follows. Moreover, Gavron could improvise some scenes in monochromatic light to inform the film of the spatiotemporal repercussion of the tragedy of 9/11, which the text mentions merely as a concurrent incident. A helicoid novel resonating with elements of psychological intricacies, romantic drama, ethnic identities, and political and racial undertones is unfeasible for a successful adaptation in the short duration chosen by the filmmakers. A look at the annals of the literary adaptation makes it clear that almost all adaptations of such large novels unravel in more or less a three-hour runtime. The adoption of a longer runtime would allow the filmmaker more space to reconcile her film with the narrative inextricability of the novel. Having thus commented on the directorial function in the translation, in the following section I will dissect the (un)critical transitions that Gavron makes in her work.

^{6/5} The scene takes place in a verisimilitude of Bangladeshi rural setting, but the entire film is produced in different parts of the UK. IMDb information of *Brick Lane* (2007).

Adaptational transitions in *Brick Lane*, the film

Auteur adaptations, as discussed earlier, in which directors inscribe their “distinguishable personality,” become equivalent with their literary antecedents and receive tremendous critical attention in adaptation studies. Creative directors, as Ryan Uytendewilligen maintains, carve out “a cinematic identity that radiates through their films which [may even] outshine their sources” (2019, p. 3). Because of this aspect of “outshining,” they are considered as “transcended figures” (Hollinger, 2012, p. 232) who improve upon the source’s plot, theme, culture and background as well as extemporize them with spatiotemporal dynamics through their own imaginative élan and creative exhilaration. For example, in adapting Rabindranath Tagore’s novel *Chokher Bali* (Constant Irritant; 1903), Rituparno Ghosh, an auteur director of Bengali cinema, manoeuvres the text’s publication year from 1903 to 1905 to set the film in the backdrop of Bengal Partition to reinterpret history through the visual medium. Although Gavron compacts Ali’s *Brick Lane*, she makes several transitions which constitute the creditable aspects of the film. An assessment of these adaptational departures, aesthetic or otherwise, will lead to a thorough appraisal of her authorship of the film. The most artistic transition Gavron introduces in her film is the narrative reconstruction of Ali’s third-person bildungsroman into a first-person cinematic one. Similar to Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations* (1861), Gavron’s *Brick Lane* starts with Nazneen’s reminiscence of her childhood from a certain point of her life in London. Aware of the shorter runtime in which the novel is to be transported, Gavron adopts a narrative technique of (Nazneen’s) flashbacks and voice-overs that help her to meaningfully compress the elaborate commentaries of the novel’s detached narrator. Commencing with Nazneen’s *a cappella* intonation of a nursery rhyme followed by a voice-over chronicle of her bucolic childhood, the beginning itself sets the mood of a serious film. In addition, the first scene capturing Nazneen and Hasina cavorting amidst the ceremonies of idyllic nature has really been an example of entertaining cinematography. In my opinion, this is an intriguing convergence with Steven Spielberg’s *The Color Purple* (1985) based on Alice Walker’s 1982 novel of the same title in which the story triggers with the two sisters Celie and Netie capering in vast, pristine nature.

The director also deserves appreciation for a handful of symbolic and technical transgressions. Throughout the novel, the family furniture is treated as “monstrous,” “ugly” and “black” in tandem with the conjugal awkwardness of the female characters. Similarly, in the short compass of the film, the furniture motif recurs as empty, shiny, aloof and pretentious. Notably, the ultimate realization of redundancy and disposal of this furniture deepens the precariousness of married life in a diasporic demography. Like furniture, the novelist treats clothing as “a serious thing” (Ali, 2003, p. 313) and as indicative of immigrants’ ethnic, religious identities, cultural isolation and exploitation of women’s labour – since all major female characters such as Nazneen, Razia and Hasina work for sweatshops. Gavron not only draws much of this sari-motif, albeit concisely, she also transcends Ali’s scope, especially in erotic concern. In Nazneen-Karim’s love-making scene, the camera focuses on the unknotting of Nazneen’s deep blue sari and the drawing of the deep red window curtains suggesting the ensuing intimacy, a directorial improvisation that helps Gavron eschew the Western cinema’s preoccupation with the scopophilic representation of women. It is intriguing to notice that the sari thus eroticized bears striking resemblance with that of R. K. Narayan’s 1958 novel *The Guide* where the same sort of illicit relationship between Raju and Rosie is suggested by the latter’s early-morning bath and spreading the wet sari in the sun to dry.

A few thematic and cinematographic novelties and the associated *mise-en-scènes*^{7/6} enrich the visual quality of the film. That the young Karim watches the outside world and its people through windows and curtains may symbolize the aloof and radical worldview of Karim and Karim-led Bengal Tigers. Karim's myopic worldview becomes evident when Chanu's questions on practical brotherhood and historical accounts of Bangladesh easily stupefy him. A scene in which the camera pans through a heavy rain drenching the earth, from a village pool full of water lilies to the whole of Gouripur, represents the flow of time that is washing away Rupban's memories and foreboding Nazneen's marriage (Gavron, 2007, 0:3:30). Quite differently from Ali's *Brick Lane*, the adaptation ends with Nazneen and her daughters lying supine on an icy surface while watching the plane above, which is perhaps carrying Chanu home (2007, 1:36:50). The longer *mise-en-scène* embodying an intoned nursery rhyme, icy yard and the blue sky with a looming cloud mystifies the family's future.

As the film progresses, we gradually see that instead of receiving letters from Hasina, Nazneen often reminisces and writes letters to her sister. Despite a scheme that circumvents the epistolary mode, it converts the adaptation into a passionate family drama corroborating its generic identity with romance. However, the transformation of Hasina into the epicentre of Nazneen's pastoral childhood, the rumination of which reinvigorates her in the troubled experiences of immigrant life, can be seen as Gavron's effort to compensate for the shrinkage of the epistolary episode. Although this minimization causes the film to lose the novel's diversification, breadth and depth, it accrues a subtle diasporic undertone from it. Whenever Nazneen faces a critical situation in life, she always reverts to her childhood nostalgia.

These innovations aside, not all changes can be considered perceptive since they do not make artistic reparations for the losses of the text on screen. Since a good novel-to-film transportation is essentially *quid pro quo* involving "an initial loss and a subsequent gain" (Gelder, 1999, p. 157), even one false note can spoil an otherwise well-orchestrated film. Regrettably, there are many such discrepancies in *Brick Lane*. Whereas Chanu's pedanticism, complex impulsiveness, earnest concern for family, characteristic volatility and other human flaws make him ultimately a convincing character that also credits the novelist with a polymorphic characterization, Gavron's treatment has transformed Chanu into merely an one-dimensional figure in the film: an irresponsible husband and a cruel father, who beats his daughters. The visual Chanu is, lamentably, a ranting and domineering bully in the family. To be precise, his essential features, as it appears, are only to ridicule his wife, daunt his daughter and embarrass the family. His oddities as a bumbling "bloody fool" are here only to enhance Nazneen's grace and growth (Gavron, 2007, 0:37:10). This transition may intensify a female-themed companionship, a feminist directorial concern apparent all through the film, but it does an enormous injustice to Chanu, rendering him somewhat irrelevant in the family/film.

^{7/6} A French term for the essential elements of a single scene such as sets, actors, costumes, background, props and lighting.

The musical score in the diegetic and non-diegetic form is an inseparable part of global cinema. Unlike a commercial film using music to enthrall the audience, an auteur film intermingles music in the organic unity of theme, plot and narrative. However, Gavron's film deals with music both gracefully and garishly. The first score, a lullaby – *dol dol doluni/ ranga mathar chiruni/ bor asbe ekhoni/ niye jabe tokhoni* (a girl swinging in the cradle with a colourful comb in her hair will be soon taken away by a bridegroom) – resonates well with child Nazneen's carefree life, interrupted by her bridegroom's sudden emergence. The fact that the film ends with the same intonation does not, however, credit the director. When Nazneen and her daughters apparently obtain freedom from paternal confines, the circular fatality of a girl, as indicated in the song, seems desultory. Another instance of musical disharmony is found when Chanu, overjoyed with a driving job, sings and hums a *Rabindra Sangeet* more than once: "*jodi tor dak shune keo na ase/ tobe ekla cholore*" (if no one responds to your call, you would rather find your way alone). In a jubilant mood in the prospect of going home *en famille*, Chanu's repeated singing of the song with an indication of a solitary struggle does not make meaningful sense. However, the same song would attain considerable significance if used towards the end of the film when Chanu is heading towards Bangladesh alone. Again, the recurrent Arabic song in the film without English subtitles may seem inappropriate since the film does not focus on Arabic people exclusively as the target audience.

As in the novel, Nazneen's mother Rupban commits suicide in the adaptation. The novel insinuates her terrible reality of life, particularly her husband's infidelity that arguably leads her to take her own life. To my surprise, the film removes this crucial background altogether and converts Hamid instead into a caring father who feels miserable at Nazneen's departure for her post-marital home and sympathizes with Hasina for the same reason (Gavron, 2007, 0:4:50). Hence, Rupban's suicide remains blatantly unsupported in the diegesis. The film also fails to maintain consistency in cinematography which generally supports the organic wholeness "in tandem with thematic illuminations" (Hodson, 2017, p. 52). Overemphasis on several *mise-en-scènes* and the lack of intentionality behind them weaken the aesthetic dimension of the film's visual aspect. For example, one of the vivid on-screen images displays several spread saris in the yard of Nazneen's village home (Gavron, 2007, 0:2:25). The conspicuous holes in the saris, a conventional sign of poverty, seems to be of no intention not only in relation to the novel, which does not highlight poverty as a crucial background of the story but also to the film, which does not further interlace these holes in the story's theme. One may compare this with the perforated sheet in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981), which adds to the thematic import in the novel.

Could the movie be better? An auteurist assessment

In addition to the limitations discussed while assessing the film as translation and its transitions, a few more crucial weaknesses and incongruities that mar the film's artistic mutation require criticism in evaluating Sarah Gavron's *Brick Lane*. In an attempt to point out some of them which the director was expected to be cautious about, I will also demonstrate some more textual particularities she could leverage for a better adaptation of the novel. An inherent weakness, a more crucial one regarding the authorial/auteurist control, is that instead of writing the film herself, Gavron has worked on Ali Morgan's screenplay. It is theoretically established that in a director-written script, the director can exert an overarching control, arguably the most important premise of the auteur direction (Sarris, 1981). As practice shows, auteur filmmakers work on their own script, which reinforces the claim of the director-author control in their adaptations which ultimately become their *own* films (Kael, 2008). Therefore, the absence of Gavron's "organizing principle" in the screenplay – the absence of a holistic fusion between the writing and the making

– can be attributed as one of the pivotal factors disrupting the film’s organic connectivity in characters, plot, theme, music and intertextuality that the paper has so far discussed.

If Gavron preserved in the visual the novel’s transnational and multicultural predicaments that are very significant in diasporic literature and cinema, the film would earn considerable praise as a diasporic film. Merely shown on screen, neither “the tattoo woman” nor her tattoos are made recognizable, whereas the “tattoo” per se is a great clue for a creative filmmaker to form a cinematic symbol for cultural pluralities (or ambiguities). In addition, a considerable focus on her and Mrs. Azad’s deracination from cultural roots and resulting dipsomania and detachment could heighten the pitiful experiences of a transnational cultural environments. Again, whereas Ali’s European photographer, engaged in capturing a family picture, is officious to capture Chanu’s family picture and curious to know the family’s identity and roots, Gavron’s photographer remains comparatively plain and indistinct. The photographer’s inability to (clearly) hear Chanu’s words and identify Bangladesh as a nation-state and his questions about Chanu’s “whereabouts” (Ali, 2003, p. 246) could be, if filmed, a robust adaptational edge concerning the theme of identity crisis in the diaspora. The camera’s faults and resultant futility of the photos that have “washed away the shape of things” and “the possibility of holding things together” (Ali, 2003, p. 246) could also be made a symbolic correlation to the eventual consequence of their relationships. Furthermore, focusing on the camera operation in the photography could be a spectacular example of meta-cinematic (after metafictional) self-reflexivity, a common feature of postmodern filmmaking.

By artisticizing the transgenerational tensions resiliently woven into the novel, the director could credibly claim the directorial authorship to a greater degree. Despite the novel’s abundant manifestation of cross-generational mobility, Gavron only focuses on Chanu-Shahana conflict and improvises another one between the first-generation Chanu and the second-generation representatives of the Bengal Tigers. Since inter-generational conflicts have been a common theme in diasporic novels and films such as Hanif Kureishi’s *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) and its 1993 BBC series, and Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Namesake* and its 2006 film adaptation, improvisation from Gavron’s side regarding these tensions is a logical anticipation. The novel’s vagueness about Nazneen’s generational identity – a first-generation as Chanu’s wife and a second-generation both in her shared passion for Karim and closeness with her daughters – would have a broader currency in diasporic studies if conveyed through the cinematic lens. For example, while deep in her *affaire de cœur* with Karim, the visualization of Nazneen’s inner conflicts in thought of her legal marriage and guilt comparing Karim’s age with that of her dead son Raqib who might have been Karim’s coeval at this time would reify this vagueness. By extension, two short separate scenes concentrating on Dr. Azad’s claustrophobic internality as opposed to the glitziness of his wife and daughter, and the implied agitations in Razia’s mind due to Tariq’s drug addiction in Ali’s *Brick Lane* would lend considerable diasporic space to the film.

Since auteur cinema fuses both intellectual and spectatorial concerns, complex intertextualities have been inseparable from auteur filmmaking. Apart from screenplay and music, directors can best wield their creative control through intertextuality, which has been one of the critical concerns in adaptation studies (Leitch 2017). One of Ali’s novel’s admirable aspects is its incorporation of numerous literary and historical references to both British and South Asian literary traditions. Though the film passingly refers to some authors – Geoffrey Chaucer, David Hume, William Makepeace Thackeray, the Brontë sisters, Thomas Hardy and Marcel Proust – due to the directorial indifference to creating the fitting contexts of the texts, the references seem perfunctory and unrelated. In a husband-wife *tête-à-tête*, Nazneen makes a meaningful reference to the TV screen showing a Hollywood classic, Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (1948), a story

bearing an interesting likeness to *Brick Lane*, especially concerning its triangularity and nostalgia (for the past and the homeland). Gavron crucially misses the opportunity to diversify her film by creating a cinematic link with *Casablanca*.

Conclusion

A film production employs several professionals in its constituent parts. Since it is the director who generally hires them and whose directional decision conclusively matters in the wholeness of the film, they bask in its success or incur its failure – a fact that probably prompts auteur theorists to confer the authorship upon the director. Appropriating this critical and theoretical stance, this paper has attributed the film *Brick Lane*'s positive and negative features to its maker Sarah Gavron. On top of the film's several aesthetic touches in narration, theme and mise-en-scène, Gavron's feminist-filmmaking telos probing into a woman's psychological terrain and her predicaments in various spheres of life attach her direction with feminist auteurism. Similar cinematic themes are also reflected in her other works, for instance, a conspicuous feminist strain she peruses in her films, such as *Suffragette* (2015) and *Rocks* (2019). However, seen from the broader concept of auteur direction, her *Brick Lane* appears as a conventional adaptation in which the director abides by the ontological paradigm of the source. Arguably, the film falls far short of the mark of a successful, commendable creative adaptation which capitalizes on artistic differences and the maker's novelty and ingenuity concerning the reinterpretation or "radical revisioning" of the originary narrative (Whelehan, 1999, p. 6). Likewise, the filmmaker, who never visited Bangladesh – at least no records testify it – smacks of cultural misrepresentation, which, as argued by Jinhee Choi and Mattias Frey (2014), disregards "cine-ethics," stipulating that the filmmaker should "bodily experience" the demography concerned and provide "its objective representation" in the film.

It is apparent that Ali's novel offers subtle resources – such as discrete ethnicities, multicultural pluralities, epistolary chronicle, transnational socio-political outlooks, transgenerational dichotomies and complex intertextualities – for a filmmaker to make an intricate film with nuanced interior facets. However, the lack of the director's sufficient creative vision, thematic consistency and technical proficiency prevent its wider significance from spectatorial and critical consideration. Hence, despite having the sparks of visual eminence and feminist-themed resilience, Gavron's adaptation cannot be taken as a successful adaptation due to the lack of a subtle funnelling of the novel's thematic and narrative threads. It cannot also be considered a flawless independent film due to its mundane characterization and vagueness about some issues, such as the suicide of Nazneen's mother, Raqib's death and inadequate information about Hasina and other significant characters. In addition to these lapses, one particular choice – sustaining almost the entire plot of the novel in a short span of 101 minutes – has been crucial. To put differently, in the shorter runtime that the filmmaker chose, the film would be far more convincing if it concentrated on the central theme of the novel. However, an adaptation of longer runtime would not only resolve this issue but also allow the director to make a multifaceted film with a wider canvas accommodating the novel's narrative intricacies.

Since the study evaluates the film from the perspective of auteurism, it does not focus on several other aspects of the film. Looking into Gavron's *Brick Lane* in comparison with other adaptations of diasporic novels such as Paul Mayeda Berges' adaptation of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's novel *The Mistress of Spices* (1997) and Mira Nair's adaptation of Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), or with diasporic films having original stories such as Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and Kennet Glenaan's *Yasmin* (2004) can be an academically valuable

and insightful study. The film's treatment the immigrants' religious, cultural and political experiences in the host country that abounds in the novel, but the director has excluded, may be of critical attention. Moreover, some of the points of this study – such as ethnic misrepresentation and orientalist attitude – can be topics for further exploration, which may be contrapuntal both to the film and its literary ancestor.

References

- Abeel, E. (2008). Indiewire Interview/*Brick Lane*: Director Sarah Gavron. *Indiewire*, June 18.
<https://www.indiewire.com/2008/06/indiewire-interview-brick-lane-director-sarah-gavron-72188/>
- Ahmed, S., Hasan, M. M., & Ramlan, W. N. M. (2020). Adaptation and Auteurism in South Asian Studies with Reference to Rabindranath Tagore's Works on Screen. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature* 14(1), 259-272.
<https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/ajell/article/view/1866>.
- Ahmed, S. (2021). *The Art of Transgression in Rabindranath Tagore's Works on Screen: An Auteurist Study* [Doctoral thesis, International Islamic University Malaysia].
- Ali, M. (2003). *Brick Lane*. London: Doubleday.
- Astruc, A. (1948). The Birth of a New Avant-Garde: La Camera-Style. In P. Graham (Ed.), *The New Wave* (pp. 17–23). New York: Doubleday.
- Benshoff, H. M. (2016). *Film and Television Analysis: An Introduction to Methods, Theories and Approaches*. New York: Routledge.
- Chatman, S. (1999). What Novels Can Do That Films Can't (and Vice Versa). In L. Braudy, & M. Cohen (Eds.), *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings* (pp. 435–451). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Choi, J., & Frey, M. (2014). Introduction. In J. Choi, & M. Frey (Eds.), *Cine-Ethics: Ethical Dimensions of Film Theory, Practice, and Spectatorship* (pp. 1–16). New York: Routledge.
- Ebiri, B. (2008). Flick Lane. *Bookforum*. <https://www.bookforum.com/print/1502/director-sarah-gavron-and-screenwriter-abi-morgan-streamline-monica-ali-s-sprawling-novel-brick-lane-into-a-focused-slice-of-life-film-2461>.
- Gallagher, J. A. (1989). *Film Directors on Directing*. Westport: Praeger Publishers.
- Gelder, K. (1999). Jane Campion and the Limits of Literary Cinema. In D. Cartmell, & I. Whelehan (Eds.), *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text* (pp. 157–171). New York: Routledge.
- Hasan, M. M. (2018). Transplanted Gender Norms and Their Limits in Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. *Asiatic: IIUM Journal of English Language and Literature*, 12(1), 59–77.
<https://journals.iium.edu.my/asiatic/index.php/ajell/article/view/1209>.
- Hodson, B. (2017). *The Elusive Auteur: The Question of Film Authorship Throughout the Age of Cinema*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers.
- Hollinger, K. (2012). *Feminist Film Studies*. New York: Routledge.
- Kael, P. (2008). Circles and Squares. In B. K. Grant (Ed.), *Auteurs and Authorship: A Film Reader* (pp. 46–54). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Lea, R., & Lewis, P. (2006). Insulted Residents and Traders Threaten to Halt Filming of Bestselling Novel *Brick Lane*. *The Guardian*, June 18.
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2006/jul/18/film.media>.
- Leitch, T. (2017). *Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Monegato, E. (2009). Brick Lane Patchwork. *Altre Modernità*, 1(3), 29–38.
doi: 10.13130/2035-7680/395.
- Poon, A. (2009). To Know What's What: Forms of Migrant Knowing in Monica

- Ali's *Brick Lane*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 45(4), 426–437. doi: 10.1080/17449850903273614.
- Rushdie, S. (2006). Brickbats Fly over *Brick Lane*. *The Guardian*, July 29. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jul/29/comment.letters>.
- Sarris, A. (2008). Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962. In P. Adams (Ed.), *Film Culture Reader*, 121–136. New York: Cooper Square Press.
- Uytendewilligen, R. (2019). What is Auteur Theory in Filmmaking? *Infocus Film School*. <https://infocusfilmschool.com/auteur-theory-director-filmmakers/>