

Local To Global Representation: The Study of Female Characters in Sacred Games

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Abstract

This research paper explores the transformation and representation of female characters in Vikram Chandra's novel *Sacred Games* (2006) and its Netflix adaptation. Through a close textual and visual analysis, the paper examines how females are portrayed within the socio-cultural contexts of both the novel and the global OTT platform. It highlights the tension between local identities and global storytelling frameworks, arguing that the Netflix adaptation recasts Indian women to resonate with international audiences, sometimes at the cost of cultural specificity. The paper critically engages with this tension, suggesting that such cinematic recasting can obscure the socio-cultural intricacies embedded in the source material. This paper investigates the representation of female characters in Vikram Chandra's novel *Sacred Games* (2006) and analyzes how these portrayals are transformed in the Netflix adaptation. The study highlights how the women characters reflect facets of 'Indianness' through their cultural, social, and gendered identities. By comparing the novel and its screen adaptation, this paper examines what is retained, altered, or omitted and how these choices affect the narrative of Indianness on global media.

Keywords: Indianness, OTT, Screen adaptations, Netflix.

Introduction

Adaptation is the process of transforming a work from one medium into another, often requiring changes in structure, style, or content to suit the new form. According to Linda Hutcheon, "An adaptation is not a copy; it is a creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging" (Hutcheon 8). Reimagining the core of the original work within the limitations and possibilities of a new medium is necessary when adapting a story from page to screen; it goes beyond just translating words into images. It emphasizes on how a successful screen adaptation frequently diverges from the original work in order to effectively convey the main ideas in a way that works as a film. Character development, narrative pacing, and visual symbolism, for example, frequently need to be adjusted to match the rhythm and language of the movie. In this way, adaptation becomes an act of authorship in itself, where fidelity is rated by the emotional truth and vision integrity rather than by replication. This paper provides a framework to reveal intertextuality in Indian culture. However, As Raval notes, "intertextuality is a double-edged sword. On one hand, it opens up interesting avenues and layers for analysis of multiple connections...On the other, however, it threatens to make irrelevant the very categorization of a text as an adaptation – because every text reworks earlier texts to some degree, every text is an adaptation." (Raval 73) Therefore, this analysis occupies the awareness of its pitfalls.

“Film adaptations of literary texts have a long and rich history. In an adaptation, a literary work such as a novel, a play, a short-story or a poem is transferred into a new medium, such as a painting, a movie, etc. It is a kind of a translation of a literary work. The recreation of any work has the same idea but presented differently in another form. i.e. media.” (Jadeja and Trivedi 230) The adaptation of literature into visual media is a longstanding practice, but the emergence of global streaming platforms like Netflix has profoundly reshaped how Indian narratives are represented and consumed. Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2006), adapted into a Netflix series in 2018 under the direction of Vikramaditya Motwane and Anurag Kashyap, demonstrated this shift. The novel intricately situates its characters—particularly its women—within the framework of India's socio-political and cultural milieu. However, the screen adaptation reimagines these women to appeal to a wider, transnational audience. This paper examines the transformation of four central female characters—Jojo Mascarenas, Anjali Mathur, Kanta Bai, and Subhadra—to explore how their transitions from page to screen reflect evolving notions of Indian womanhood in the context of global media representation.

Adapting Indian literature for OTT platforms often involves rectifying the portrayal of characters, especially those of women, to align with global storytelling expectations. In the original novel, Chandra presents subtle exploration of women negotiating complex spaces shaped by violence, power, intimacy, and societal roles. These characters are deeply rooted in culturally specific experiences that speak to the realities of modern Indian life. In contrast, the Netflix adaptation selectively retains these elements while reframing others through a globally agreeable. This paper critically analyses how the representation of these women shifts in the process, focusing on their association with ‘Indianness’ in terms of visual narratives, moral positioning, and cultural identity, thereby offering insights into the broader connection of translating Indian literary femininity into global screen narratives.

Objectives

- To analyse the portrayal of female characters with reference to its screen adaptations.
- To explore the interaction of Local content to global medium.
- To evaluate the impact of regional content on OTT platforms.

Page to screen analysis of female characters in *Sacred Games*

The screen adaptation of female characters in *Sacred Games* reveals how women play her role from Vikram Chandra's novel to the OTT series on Netflix. They preserve and transform their roles to suit a new visual global medium. The novel offers psychological depth and cultural context through introspective narratives. However, the series reimagines these women through visual prompts, dialogues, and performance, frequently enhancing their narrative presence. Characters like Jojo, Anjali, Kanta Bai, and Subhadra are reshaped with cinematic necessity, yet they retain their cultural specificity. There are other characters like Zoya Mirza who is an actress, Shalini Katekar- Katekar's wife, Megha- Sartaj's ex-wife, Kamala Pandey etc. They all play minor roles in novel as well as series. This shift from text to screen brings new dimensions to their identities, intensifying their thematic roles in exploring power, trauma, and resistance within an Indian, however universally relatable framework.

Jojo Mascarenas

Jojo Mascarenas, a Goan Catholic woman in *Sacred Games*, embodies the conflicted space of modern Indian womanhood—outwardly assertive yet inwardly scarred by trauma. In both the novel and its screen

adaptation, she navigates the murky overlap between Mumbai's entertainment industry and criminal underworld, serving as both a talent scout and a facilitator of exploitation. Her character reflects the reality of many urban Indian women who must balance survival, guilt, and resistance within patriarchal systems. In the novel, Jojo confesses her abuse and trauma in a very blunt manner, which is actually painful in terms. When she said, *"My sister's husband brought me to the city. He told me I would be a star. He fucked me, Ganesh. Then he passed me on to his friends"* (Chandra, 489). However, in the series Jojo reveals to Gaitonde, *"He said he'd make me a star. Then he used me. Passed me on to others"* ("Apasmara", 0:14:25). This moment of wicked nobility is followed by an anger against male dominated society and her psychological suffering. She said, *"I hate men. I hate them because they've made suffering the duty of women. I hate them for pretending to care. For what they do to us. For what they did to me"* (Chandra 490). In the screen adaptation she tells Gaitonde, *"I hate men. They pretend to care, but they make us suffer. They think it's our job to endure"* ("sarama", 0:27:04). These statements defined her the emotional and psychological scars of Jojo that shaped her identity. These scenes are filled with serious lighting and close-up shots, emphasizing her helplessness and repressed rage. The adaptation expands with her backstory, exploring childhood abuse and her complicated emotional ties with Gaitonde. It also helps to reframe her character for broader global sympathy and understanding. Eventually, Jojo serves as a powerful symbol of the wounded yet stable Indian woman, live her life through exploitation with dignity and complexity.

Anjali Mathur

Anjali Mathur in *Sacred Games* represents the changing face of Indian womanhood within state institutions—professional, principled, and politically aware. As a senior RAW officer and a Sikh, her identity symbolises both contemporary gender empowerment and historical legacies of resistance. In the novel, her commitment to discovering state corruption. Her character also shows institutional satisfaction and her mentorship under Yadav emphasizes the importance of female networks and her bold behaviour within patriarchal structures. Her introduction accurately defines the traditional gender rules *"She had a round face, smooth, fair skin. There was no sindoor in her hair, but women no longer signalled their happily married state..."* (Chandra 74). The screen adaptation on Netflix, led by Radhika Apte, maintains her professional integrity and pivots toward a more emotionally resonant portrayal, highlighting her personal weakness and familial separation. Her death is dramatised, shifting the thematic focus from systemic critique to personal sacrifice, in line with global streaming narratives that highlight character-driven tension. Despite this narrative, Anjali remains a powerful figure—her moral clarity, assertive existence, and emotional depiction and truth-seeking personality. Through her, the series captures the complex intersection of national duty, gendered expectations, and cultural belonging, marking her as both a local symbol of 'nari shakti' and a globally relatable symbol of the professional woman that navigates power in this male dominated society.

Kanta Bai

Kanta Bai is a distinctive and compelling portrayal of an elderly Indian woman who lives in the gray area between the informal and criminal economies in *Sacred Games*. (2006) She is resilient and deeply embedded in the working-class ethos of the districts of Mumbai. Her personality remarks and commanding presence immediately establish her authority in the narrative. She asserts her authority when she tells Gaitonde, *"If I wanted to harm you, that big ghoda in your pants wouldn't save you"* (Chandra 57), which

defines gendered norms. In screen adaptation it has been presented with her Marathi-accent she scolded Gaitonde, “*Agar main tujhe marna chahti, toh tera ghoda bhi nahi bacha pata*” (“Atapi Vatapi”, 0:15:00). This boldness carries into her interpersonal dealings, especially when she disarms him with unexpected familiarity and said, “*Ganesh Gaitonde, you are the wildest gambler I have ever met. And you’re not good at teen-patti? How can that be? But I’ll teach you*” (Chandra 113). Her character reappeared on Netflix series mirrors the same fearlessness and authority of her literary self, while visual cues like her plain cotton saree and cluttered basti surroundings reinforce her authenticity and rootedness.

Subhadra

Subhadra, a poignant portrayal of traditional Indian ladies, offers a moment of love, peace, and moral stability in Ganesh Gaitonde's increasingly violent world in *Sacred Games* (2006). As evidenced by flashbacks, she is not just a romantic figure but also a cultural representation of emotional stability and morals at home. She enters Gaitonde's life through her maternal presence, modest attire, and kind manner. In both the book and the Netflix adaptation, she is portrayed as a devoted wife who performs standard caring tasks like cooking, cleaning, and offering quiet companionship. Her influence temporarily saves Gaitonde, giving him emotional well-being and compassion. However, her tragic death, while defending her child, underscores the culturally significant trope of maternal sacrifice, marking the beginning of Gaitonde's irreversible moral degradation. Subhadra's silence resembles mythological figures like Sita or Savitri, whose strength stems from resilience rather than disobedience. Her disappearance ultimately symbolizes Gaitonde's life's collapse, demonstrating the psychological and spiritual devastation caused by the loss of the feminine moral compass. Kamala Pandey is a minor character who is an air hostess and victim of domestic violence. Her husband suspects her and assaults her, that leads to the intervention of police. Her profession is a representation of her independence, yet the suffering she goes through at home demonstrates the persistence of patriarchal rule. The contrast between her public-facing career and private trauma reveals the tension many Indian women face between liberty and societal expectation.

The Netflix adaptation of *Sacred Games* (2018) deliberately recasts its female characters to adhere to global storytelling conventions, emphasizing romantic relationships, emotional nuance, and visually dramatic journeys. This narrative is recreated with some adjustments which serves to enhance viewer engagement across diverse audiences but simultaneously undermines the cultural and political specificities that were incorporated into the original text. In reimagining Indian womanhood through a global feminist framework, the series often abstracts these characters from their rooted socio-cultural realities, selecting instead for representations that resonate with international viewers. This transformation reflects a broader trend in global media adaptations, where local narratives are modified to fit transnational tastes—frequently at the cost of nuance and authenticity.

Local to Global representation with reference to its Thematic implications

The presentation of female characters in *Sacred Games* (2006) offers a complex progression from regional cultural identities to universally relatable portrayals, that contain the intricacies of Indian womanhood within a more expansive thematic framework. Characters such as Subhadra, Jojo Mascarenas, Kanta Bai, and Anjali Mathur exemplify different aspects of femininity shaped by India's socio-cultural contexts, while simultaneously engaging with universal concerns including systemic patriarchy, moral conflict, gendered trauma, and emotional resilience. Subhadra, representing the archetypal Indian homemaker

steeped in tradition, silence, and self-sacrifice, she also reflects the global literary character of the moral feminine anchor, whose absence sends the male protagonist into chaos.

Jojo, a Goan Catholic woman navigating the moral ambiguities of Mumbai's entertainment-crime nexus, embodies the psychological toll of survival in patriarchal systems, evoking parallels with global discourses on female trauma and complicity. Kanta Bai is the quintessential grassroots matriarch whose influence, while subtle, embodies perseverance and leadership—qualities that are identifiable in crime stories around the world but are distinguished here by uniquely Indian language and visual characteristics. Anjali Mathur is the perfect example of a contemporary Indian female, Sikh and senior intelligence officer who is independent, professional, and morally upright. Her journey from institutional involvement to martyrdom highlights the theme of how idealistic actors, particularly women, are frequently consumed by national structures. These characters not only ground *Sacred Games* (2018) in its local milieu but also extend its thematic reach to global audiences. Their stories offer a compelling reflection on the relationship between gender, power, and cultural identity, showing how unique female experiences—despite being influenced by local particularities—resonate with more universal human issues, thereby enhancing the series' global narrative significance.

Conclusion

Thus, the adaptation of *Sacred Games*' female characters from page to screen exemplifies a broader cultural harmony between local authenticity and global appeal. Jojo Mascarenas, Anjali Mathur, Kanta Bai, and Subhadra each depict distinct aspects of Indian women that are impacted by their class, religion, and the sociopolitical context. Vikram Chandra's novel gives these women complex complexity inside a distinctively Indian narrative framework, yet the Netflix version reshapes these women's identities to appeal to a worldwide audience by emphasizing emotional accessibility, visual symbolism, and thematic universality. The culturally specific meanings of Indian stories are partly diminished, despite the fact that this alteration successfully expands their audience.

It is imperative to strike a balance between telling Indian women's tales authentically and adapting them to fit a transnational narrative pattern when portraying them on global platforms is necessary. As local voices are both amplified and reinterpreted within a global media system, the adaptation of *Sacred Games* (2018) ultimately shows how narrative is evolving in the age of streaming platforms.

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