CHAPTER 8

Adapting *The Kite Runner*: A Fidelity Project to Re-Imagine Afghan Aura

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Introduction

One of the tiresome debates within Adaptation Studies is fidelity, the faithfulness of the new work to the original literary source. This concept of fidelity—stemming from Translation Studies—is linked to typologies of equivalence which take an instrumental approach to language as communication of objective information. In this approach, equivalence is understood as 'fidelity', 'accuracy', 'correctness', 'adequacy', and 'correspondence' (Venuti 5), which results in target texts resembling the source texts in lexicon, grammar, and style in formal ways. On the other hand, a hermeneutic approach to language privileges function, which is the potential of a target text 'to release diverse effects' (Venuti 5), including meeting social, political, economic, and cultural agendas. That form and function are on polarizing ends is not new within Adaptation Studies, with 'fidelity' often dismissed entirely as retrograde. This chapter attempts to revisit the debate around fidelity to a stage adaptation of Khaled Hosseini's novel, *The Kite Runner*. Based on the performance at

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the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on 1 October 2014 in the UK and an interview with the adaptor Matthew Spangler, this chapter uses Walter Benjamin's concept of aura or 'getting closer to things' (9) to argue that Spangler's intention of adapting the original text intimately allows audiences to come closer to Afghan histories, cultures, and traditions—a politicized trope which, I would argue, is for the West 'to be good again' to Afghanistan, in the novel's own words.

Fidelity

In the early debates within Adaptation Studies, Robert Stam criticizes the fidelity discourse that often makes comparisons of films with novels. He vehemently argues: 'The standard rhetoric has often deployed an elegiac discourse of loss, lamenting what has been "lost" in the translation from novel to film' (Stam 3). Even though Stam is referring to film adaptations, these attitudes are also prevalent in stage adaptations. Instead of privileging the source text, Linda Hutcheon proposes an alternative theoretical perspective that sees adaptations as autonomous texts, what she calls a plural 'stereophony of echoes, citations, references' (6). Alongside other theorists (Bluestone 1957; McFarlane 1996; Cardwell 2007; Stam 2005), Hutcheon critiques the focus on comparative analyses that plagues Adaptation Studies, as if an adaptation's legitimacy is only defined by the authority of the 'original' text. Similarly, Julie Sanders adds that there are adaptations that have decisively moved away 'from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product', which she calls 'appropriation' (26). One attraction of adaptation, according to Joanne Tompkins, is its elasticity, its versatility in incorporating 'cultural translation and exchange, […] as well as the structural modifications that multimedia are increasingly making to the [theatre] form' (Tompkins x).

The above arguments illustrate the resistance of adaptation theorists to fidelity discourse, a strategic divorce from these debates to legitimize itself. But as J. D. Connor (2007) highlights, these decades of campaign against fidelity have failed; the more Adaptation Studies distances itself from fidelity, the more entangled it is in practice. Connor states that this phenomenon called 'fidelity reflex' is 'not the persistence of the discourse, but the persistent call for it to end' (ibid.). This is because laymen have persisted in raising fidelity questions, yet critics have 'persisted in attempts to silence that conversation of judgment' (ibid.). Connor suggests that 'once criticism is freed from fidelity discourses'

judgmental "bad conscience," it can only offer more of itself, endlessly' (ibid.). Prompted by this call for reconciliation, this chapter proposes that, instead of seeing these discourses as divisive, and consequently unproductive for adaptations, it is possible to revisit this and examine how 'fidelity' (equivalence) has contributed to 'effects' (function) in the case of *The Kite Runner*. The adaptor's attention to textual fidelity here causes the meanings around Afghanistan—and therefore cultural understandings—to increase without committing many artistic compromises. How this is done will be explored in the following sections.

'The Kite Runner' Performance

Published in 2003, Khaled Hosseini's debut novel became the New York Times bestseller within two years, with a current record of 21 million copies sold (Iqbal), which became the most visible cultural product and representation of Afghanistan since 9/11, arguably humanizing a land and her peoples that had so far been represented in images of terrorism and religious fundamentalism. *The Kite Runner*'s popularity is also evident as it has been adapted for screen (Forster),[1] stage (Spangler), and graphic novel (Celoni and Andolfo), bringing to life a poignant story of friendship and separation of two best friends from Kabul. While the 2007 film was nominated for an Oscar, grossing almost $75 million worldwide (Iqbal), this theatre production is Matthew Spangler's eleventh run on a world tour since 2009, an equally successful adaptation in a different medium. This section critically investigates the use of music, infusion of Dari language, and interjecting dialogues to create cultural 'effects' on stage, a function to not only inculcate a sense of wonder towards an unknown culture, but to also foster a strong connection towards the Afghan characters.

Music, Language, Dialogues

When the theatre doors of the newly refurbished Birmingham Repertory Theatre open, a musician on downstage left is already playing his tabla in soft rhythmic beats of South Asian music to welcome audiences as they file into take their seats. On the proscenium stage is a pair of gently inclined floors extending from the wings to the centre of the stage, where a large rectangular area is covered by a carpet (see Fig. 8.1). Here, the tabla rhythms allow audiences to soak in an ambience possibly

Fig. 8.1 The flying of kites in *The Kite Runner* (Source: Robert Day)

identical to Afghan musical sounds. Closer to the opening time, the drumming becomes louder and it suddenly appears as if the musician, Hanif Khan, has taken over the stage in his own virtuosic performance of rhythmic sounds. When the beats end to mark a transition to the beginning of the play, the audiences clapped vigorously—congratulating Khan's showmanship. Music, as explained in Spangler's script, performs three functions: to underscore moments, to convey transitions in time and tone, and to identify changes in location.

I would, however, add a fourth, that is to project an imagined authenticity of a foreign (Afghan) culture. Authenticity is not an unproblematic concept,[2] but to explain imagined authenticity as used in this chapter, I borrow Walter Benjamin's concept of 'aura', which has been defined as the 'appearance of magical or supernatural force arising from their uniqueness' (Robinson). Benjamin speaks about a 'supremely sensitive core in the art object' (Benjamin 7) that possesses a degree of vulnerability, which gives it its 'genuineness'. For example, a photograph is able to bring out aspects of the original that 'can only be accessed only by the lens […] and not by the human eye' (6). As such, a technological

reproduction 'makes it possible for the original to come closer to the person taking it in' (6). Arguably, the tabla drumbeats before the opening scene of *The Kite Runner* functioned to reproduce an Asian-style ambience in the theatre—beyond what the novel could produce—so that audiences would be 'getting closer to' (9) the unique cultural contexts of Afghanistan. This is the 'aura' of an imagined Afghan authenticity.

To enhance the Afghan 'aura', the extensive use of Dari language (the common language as spoken in Kabul) is heard very early in the play. In Act I, the first scene shows the adult Amir, the protagonist, receiving a phone call from a family friend (Rahim Khan) telling him that there is a way to be good again. Briefly, the San Francisco setting changes to Afghanistan with increased tempos from the tabla, now with a younger Amir and his best friend, Hassan, running and playing cowboys. They then deliver lines in Dari for a seemingly long period of time. One reviewer writes that the 'Farsi used by the two boys in the opening scene as they played and joked was perfectly understandable without the need for translation' (Harris). Like Harris, I was admittedly charmed by the foreign language. There is a feeling of 'Afghanness' in the atmosphere, an exceptional attempt by the theatre-makers in reproducing a historical time and place in Kabul through music, costume, and language—all of which, I argue, contribute to the believability and 'authenticity' of the fiction, reproducing, to a large extent, the aura of Afghanistan.

The most fascinating scene where instruments are used to create 'natural' sounds is the kite flying competition by Amir and Hassan. During the competition, the rhythmic tabla beats become more intense, signalling heightened tension and excitement. This is then layered with 'natural' sounds of wind. It is created by the ensemble holding wooden spools and rotating them on a swivel, which produced sounds identical to the howling and whistling of wind. Harris adds that the 'soundtrack of Afghan percussion and the whirling wind things […] operated by the cast members provided atmosphere and cultural authenticity'. This is shown in stark contrast to pieces of music played through the speakers when the scenes were set in San Francisco. Kool and the Gang's *Celebration* and Steve Miller Band's *Abracadabra* were two such examples. The artificiality of recorded American popular music provides a foil to the natural, 'authentic' Afghan soundscapes. It is the live music in the form of drumbeats, singing bowls, Schwirrbogen—and hidden singers underpinning the action—that gives this performance an ethnic feel. Walter Benjamin reminds us that the 'genuineness of a thing is the

quintessence of everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears' (7). When audiences have been co-opted to partake in the scene, we bear witness of Afghanistan's history unfold. This is possibly reinforced by Hosseini's semi-autobiographical experiences growing up in Kabul, so audiences become witnesses of an Afghan story, as one reviewer writes:

> Overall, this production brought to light a beautiful and harrowing relationship between Amir and Hassan and, combined with the stage's versatility, succeeded in bringing Hosseini's epic tale to the stage with vivacity and poignancy. (Britton)

The success of this production is largely due to the versatility of the soundscapes and live music, the diverse effects that adaptations can bring on a hermeneutic level to source texts like Hosseini's novel. Audiences become more acquainted with an Afghanistan they have not yet felt viscerally and understood aurally.

Text

How the dialogues and scenes are structured in the adaptation produce a similar effect, that is to provide immediacy to the action and therefore to the likeability of the Afghan characters on stage. Structurally, Spangler's script follows the same linear progression as Hosseini's novel.

Act I, set primarily in Kabul, documents Amir's significant moments and ends when Hassan and his father leave Baba's household due to an accusation of theft, while Act II primarily deals with Baba and Amir's life in San Francisco, as well as Amir's rescue of Hassan's orphaned son, Sohrab. The stage adaptation offers possibilities that the novel could not, such as the interjection of dialogue to interrupt the narrative voice. For example, in an early scene during Act I, Amir is describing to the audience the mud shack where Hassan was born. He goes on to explain how Hassan's mother had abandoned Hassan and so, both Amir and Hassan were nursed by the same woman. The narrator's lines are interrupted by lines from a dialogue when Hassan is playing tag with Amir, as shown below:

Amir: So my Baba hired the same woman who had nursed me to nurse Hassan. We fed from the same breasts. We took our first steps on the same lawn. And under the same roof, we spoke our first words. Mine was: Baba. His was:

Hassan: Amir!
Amir: My name.
Hassan: You're it. *(playing a game of tag)*

According to Harris, Amir 'slip[s] in and out of the action' while narrating his dilemma in a 'series of soliloquies'. Harris also notes that Spangler uses this method frequently as he '"love(s) the dexterity of that approach" which brings a "film aesthetic" to the stage'. I suggest that this 'film aesthetic' is the layering of two sets of time—real time and narrative time[3]—which allows for a permeability of actions. Added on to this complexity is Act II's introduction of historical time: the Soviet war in the 1970s and the Taliban rule in late 1990s, which Spangler interweaves delicately. The play ends exactly how the novel ends, with Amir running after a kite for Sohrab, just as Hassan had previously done for Amir. To this effect and extent, this foregrounds a methodological approach that begins to question the uses of 'fidelity' in adaptations—as evidenced by the following interview with Matthew Spangler.

The Process of Adaptation

In a *Birmingham Post* review of the performance, Fionnuala Bourke states that 'the play is so good as it is based on Khaled Hosseini's 2003 international best seller. But *replicating* such a complex story which spans a long period and crosses the globe cannot have been an easy feat' (Bourke, emphasis mine). The word 'replicating' implies a form of imitation, duplication, or reproduction of the original text by Hosseini, the source against which all other copies (or adaptations) are evaluated by theatre reviewers such as Bourke. But to Linda Hutcheon, there is a semantic distinction. She argues that an adaptation is 'repetition, but repetition without replication' (7). More precisely, Hutcheon states that an 'adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing' (9).

Hutcheon's distinction here is an important one in scholarship around adaptation, but in practice, theatre goers often succumb to comparing adaptations with the original. For instance, one other reviewer writes: 'Not having read the book, I can't comment on whether Spangler's adaptation is *faithful* to the original. But the play is a phenomenally powerful piece of theatre which for many people *will portray Afghanistan in a totally new light*' (Orme, emphasis mine). For

many reviewers, there is an automatic cognitive mapping of the adaptation to the source text, to assess its textual fidelity, to match the old with the new. In Orme's case above, there is no original text to compare with, so it allows for Spangler's adaptation to remain as a derivation, an independent piece of theatre that sheds 'a totally new light' on Afghanistan. I argue that the light shone on Afghanistan is framed by semi-autobiographical materials from Hosseini's childhood, including his own penchant for writing (like Amir in the book), the Soviet invasion, and his 'returning to Afghanistan after the rise of the Taliban' just like the protagonist, all of which point to a form of truth—and accuracy—of historical retelling. Even though Hutcheon argues that it makes little ontological sense 'to talk about adaptations as "historically accurate" or "historically inaccurate"' (Hutcheon 18), I contend that readers and audiences welcome historical accuracies in this case to counteract the version of 'Afghanistan' that had been perpetuated by news channels on the 'war on terror'. In other words, while the medium of stage adaptation can, potentially, be a point of departure for the adaptor, the choice to be historically 'truthful'—both in honour of Hosseini's semi-autobiography and to the other realities in Afghanistan—is an ethical one, even if there is some recognition that 'truth' is often multi-layered and contested.

Spangler is an experienced adaptor — he has adapted other award-winning plays including *Tortilla Curtain* (based on the novel by T.C. Boyle); *Paradise Hills* (based on the short stories by John Cheever); and *Albatross* (based on Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner)*; however, he found that in working on *The Kite Runner*, he had to engage in a different process as an adaptor. He spent about nine months reading, researching, and understanding Afghanistan. Spangler says in our interview:

> *In the case of Kite Runner*, I wanted to learn as much as I could about Afghan history and culture *before* I started adapting. Because it occurred to me that if I didn't know things about Afghan history and culture, I could make a mistake in adaptation, [like] take something out or leave something in, juxtapose two scenes that shouldn't really be juxtaposed, and create something that would be *culturally offensive*. And I may not even know that I'm doing it. (Spangler, emphasis mine)

To avoid being 'culturally offensive' is an important consideration here. In fact, Spangler had lengthy conversations with Hosseini's father-in-law

who was a university professor to clarify the accuracies about Afghan history. Weighing against an Afghan's perspective, Spangler was able to, in his words, 'triangulate' what he was reading and arrive at his own conclusions, for a period from November 2005 to July 2006 before he created the adaptation for the stage. He states that he wanted to know Afghan history and culture 'well enough that [he] felt he could sort of take a scalpel to Khaled's novel […] and reduce the likelihood that he would make something culturally offensive'. To a large extent, this echoes the 'historical fidelity' that Beekman and Callow advocate for, where they state: 'For historical references, it is inappropriate to make use of cultural substitutes, as this would violate the fundamental principle of historical fidelity' (Beekman and Callow, 203).

Beekman and Callow's work on Biblical translations, in contrast, stems from the conviction that 'the Christian faith is rooted in history' (Shuttleworth and Cowie 71). Because of that, they argue that objects, places, persons, animals, customs, beliefs, or activities that are part of a historical statement must be translated—or adapted, in our case—in a way that the 'same information is communicated […] as by the original statements' (35). In other words, historical fidelity is a strategy of 'not transplanting historical narratives into a target setting', of not violating the faith. Likewise, Walter Benjamin states that '[t]he uniqueness of the work of art is identical with its embeddedness in the context of tradition' (10). It is, therefore, necessary for a piece of art to reference its 'context of tradition', especially since tradition is 'alive' and 'extraordinarily changeable' (ibid.). For example, the Greeks viewed the statue of Venus as an object of worship, while medieval clerics saw it as an idol, but both groups of people were 'struck by […] its singularity or, to use another word, its aura' (10). Benjamin also states that the 'genuineness of a thing' includes 'everything about it since its creation that can be handed down, from its material duration to the historical witness that it bears' (7). Following these assertions, I argue that when Hosseini wrote *The Kite Runner*, it was his way of reproducing the Afghanistan that he knew of; this was the first adaptation of his own life experience. By doing this, the novel allowed his readers to get closer to things and experience the rich traditions and 'aura' of Afghanistan. Hosseini wanted 'to make Afghanistan *a more real place* rather than just a remote, war-afflicted nation' (Iqbal, emphasis mine), and to overturn the normative rhetoric of the media, as already argued. Consequently, for Matthew Spangler to research on Afghanistan for nine months before he started writing is a

deviation from his usual adaptation process. This suggests that his choice to subscribe to historical fidelity was a way of getting closer to the 'truth' of Afghan histories and cultures, so that when audiences watch his play, we could appreciate the Afghan 'aura' without violating Afghans' faith or culture, similar to Beekman et al's philosophy on Biblical translations. This also explains why Spangler wants his script to be true to the original text. I would further posit that Spangler's stage adaptation (as well as David Benioff's screen adaptation) is a reproduction of Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, which is another reproduction of Afghanistan's 'aura', real or imagined. That means Spangler's text is considered the second level of adaptation of 'Afghanistan'. So instead of seeing the 'aura' fade in Benjamin's argument, all these reproductions of Afghanistan—all of which kept the title unchanged—are reimagining this 'aura' through the complex retelling of dynamic relationships, kite-flying, *bacha bazi* (young Hazara boys exploited as dancers), and other customs that Western audiences and readers hardly know about.

Despite the ethical necessity to exercise fidelity to Hosseini's novel, this does not negate the fact that Spangler's emphasis is on creating good theatre. 'It doesn't do any good if you create a play that is very accurate to the text but doesn't work as theatre', Spangler asserts. 'You don't do the text any favours' (Spangler). In other words, the play has to be theatrically engaging in order to tell a good story. Spangler points out that *The Kite Runner* has a 'built-in advantage' because of Amir's first-person narrative voice. Since the narrator can be on stage telling the story, it allows Spangler to be both 'true to the text and create a workable piece of theatre' (ibid.), whereas other texts require more changes or are resistant to changes. Second, Spangler claims that 'the shape of the book follows the shape of a stage play' (ibid.): there is an inciting incident in the first act, the second act introduces new themes that resolve the themes from the first act, followed by a climatic scene at the end. Spangler admits, '*The Kite Runner* follows the form of what we in western theatre expect'. He adds: 'In a strange way, the closer I was to that book, I felt like the more it was working as a piece of theatre' (ibid.). Adaptation, in that sense, operated on two levels. For the adaptor to get close to Benjamin's 'aura' of Afghanistan, he had to abide by Beekman and Callow's 'historical fidelity', and, on the second level, he had to abide by Hosseini's novel because it worked structurally, and therefore theatrically, for the stage.

The third level of adaptation is more unique to Spangler's context. Because of his geographical proximity to Khaled Hosseini in the USA, Spangler's adaptation process involves liaising and collaborating directly with the author from the beginning, a privilege not many adaptors have when adapting texts (Zatlin), and a collaboration that could also be construed as artistically stifling (Logan). For Spangler, his collaboration with Hosseini was an integral part of his process. Spangler met up with the author in 2006 in Say Francisco Bay Area where they both live, and shared ideas with him. Spangler originally thought the adaptation would focus on a refugee story in the latter half of the novel. But the more Spangler involved himself in the story of the refugee character, the more he felt he had to include other sections, which eventually became the entire novel. Furthermore, many of the earlier drafts were vetted by Hosseini, whose comments 'were things in the book that he (Hosseini) would have wanted changed if he were to rewrite the book today' (Spangler). Seen in this light, Spangler's adaptation could be construed as a newer interpretation of *The Kite Runner* which he co-wrote with Hosseini. But the collaboration did not end there.

Hosseini was involved in the first production at San Jose State University, where Spangler directed it. When it was produced by the San Jose Repertory Theatre, Hosseini was present for many rehearsals. In all, Hosseini had an active part as 'artistic collaborator' in the stage adaptations from 2005 to 2009, a term Spangler coined for him, and a partnership that Spangler is most appreciative of. Spangler speaks about Hosseini's generosity and kindness—and how easy it was to work with him. Spangler also professes that '[*i]t's important to me that Khaled [Hosseini] likes the play*, and that he feels that it's a fair reflection of the book'. The implicit need for the novelist's approval here is, as I have argued earlier, an attempt to get closer to the 'aura' of Afghanistan in the bid to represent the narratives of Afghanistan to counter the media-fabricated versions of Afghanistan, and to avoid being 'culturally offensive'. To put it in back into the context of the play, I would argue that it is Spangler's attempt to find a 'way to be good again'—the line spoken by Rahim Khan at the beginning of the play to Amir—as one American practitioner's theatrical intervention to redeem the 'war on terror' waged on Afghan soil. This could explain why, of all his adaptation practices, Spangler felt the need to be historically and culturally faithful, to have nine months of research, to collaborate with Hosseini's father-in-law, and

finally, to gain Hosseini's approval. In an interview with the *Nottingham Post*, Hosseini praises Spangler's adaptation:

> I think it translates incredibly well. What I really love about the play is that so much of the book is preserved in it. You have freedoms with stage adaptations that you don't have with film. One large chunk of the book is the main character's Amir's internal monologue, […] In the play the lead actor can break from the action, turn to the audience and share his thoughts. (Hosseini in Wilson)

Furthermore, Spangler's view of *The Kite Runner* as an adaptation is an unfinished one. Even though the production at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre is its eleventh run globally, the script is undergoing constant revisions. Spangler says, 'I'm not publishing the script, because I like making changes to it for every production' (Spangler). In other words, his rewriting is possibly another attempt to get closer and closer to the 'aura' of Afghanistan—to be faithful to source text, culture, and history—while releasing the diverse effects of cultural understanding and appreciation for a gripping Afghan narrative. In fact, a *New York Times* reviewer of the novel states that Hosseini has 'give[n] us a vivid and engaging story that reminds us how long his people have been struggling to triumph over the forces of violence—forces that continue to threaten them even today' (Hower, 2003). For an adaptation to possess fidelity, then, is to prevent further disrepair and stereotyping of an Afghan nation, of an existing war narrative that demands a constant re-writing.

Notes

1. David Forster is the director of the film, but the screenplay is written by David Benioff.
2. See Helen Freshwater's 2012 discussion of authenticity where she acknowledges the avoidance of this term within theatre discourses.
3. See Ryan Claycomb's 2008 discussion on the intersections between real and narrative worlds in theatre.

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