

ILLUSTRATION: **MAHMUDA EMDAD**

ESSAY

Why we should let adaptations be adaptations

SHANJIDA NOWSHIN CHOWDHURY

From the moment it was first announced to its theatrical release, Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey* (2026) has sparked immense debate amongst fans and critics alike. While some have praised the film for its breathtaking cinematography and innovative use of filming techniques, others have criticised what they perceive as a lack of narrative depth and fidelity to the original source material. Amidst the flood of online opinions, one voice that stands above the rest is that of classics scholar, Emily Wilson, whose 2017 translation of Homer's epic is considered one of the most accessible versions of the poem for modern readers.

Wilson's critique, among other things, focuses largely on the lack of depth of the female characters and removal of certain scenes from the film that, according to her, were essential to the moral complexity of the original text and packed a particularly strong punch. While a lot of Wilson's criticism of the film holds true, one cannot help but wonder whether a true verdict on Nolan's film can ever be achieved if it is consistently being compared to its source material. With all this in mind, before we decide whether an adaptation has succeeded or failed, perhaps we must first allow these works to be what they were always meant to be: adaptations, not reproductions.

There are a few reasons why we should let adaptations be adaptations:

We tend to think of the "original text" as something set in stone: the first version of the text written by the author, or maybe even the first edition of a book published to readers. However, a quick look into literary history reveals that the idea of the original text is not stagnant, but something that is constantly in motion. Take Homer's *The Odyssey* for instance. Emerging in ancient Greece, the story of Odysseus's epic journey was passed down through oral tradition—sung, recited, acted out by many different people across generations before it was eventually written down for us to read. In this regard, the original text isn't one piece of writing written by a single person, but rather a story that has been shaped over the years by the many people who have heard it, carried it, and passed it on.

Even in a more modern context, where the first published work may be deemed as "the original", if ultimately tied to the author's intent, the original text can change depending on how the author chooses to look at their own work. J R R Tolkien for example, throughout his lifetime made several changes to *The Hobbit* (George Allen & Unwin, 1937) after its publication to help it better fit into the storylines he later set out in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954) trilogy. Other authors such as Christopher Castellani, Lindsay Ward, and JoDee Neathery among others have also expressed their interests in wanting to revise or edit their old work. This just goes to show that if the original text itself is prone to change, the same liberties can be extended to adaptations of those very texts.

With different modes of storytelling, there comes the need to evaluate how stories translate across different formats. Every adaptation by its nature is an interpretation where key decisions have to be made regarding what to preserve, what to discard, and what to alter. How exactly are these decisions made? More often than not, it comes down to what that particular story means to the person who is interpreting the text. If we are to look at both Wilson and Nolan's adaptations of *The Odyssey* for instance, it becomes increasingly clear that a personal connection to the text can often dictate what we deem to be most important about it.

Back in 2017, Emily Wilson was the first ever woman to publish a complete translation of *The Odyssey* from Greek to English. At that time, her translation received both acclaim and criticism due to its focus on a more contemporary understanding of the epic. Most notably, her focus on fleshing out female characters and describing Odysseus as a "complicated man" with moral ambiguity caused a stir among purists who believed that it was wrong to hold Homer's story and characters to modern standards of morality. Wilson's main line of defense at the time was that every translation is different as the translator inevitably interprets the text through their own cultural context, values, and understanding of the story.

Nolan's 'The Odyssey', while not above criticism, has undoubtedly helped introduce this timeless epic to a new generation of readers, a feat that even Wilson herself could not help but acknowledge in her otherwise strongly worded review of Nolan's film.

Applying this same logic to Nolan's *The Odyssey*, critiques regarding his storytelling choices can be tempered when considering that his adaptation focused largely on visual storytelling and therefore prioritises elements of the epic that can be communicated through imagery, spectacle, and performance, rather than through Homer's original narrative form or Wilson's focus on moral complexity.

We've established by now that interpretation lies at the heart of adaptation. The next question to then emerge from this discussion may ask, whose interpretation do we consider valid? In his famous essay "The Death of the Author" (*Aspen*, 1967), Ronald Barthes argues that once published, the meaning of a text is not solely in the hand of the writer, but the reader who may now choose to read and interpret the text beyond the realms of what the author originally intended. As such, in many ways the ownership of the text shifts from the author to the reader.

Considering this argument, one cannot claim that Nolan, or anyone else for that matter, has a responsibility to remain completely faithful to the text because the core idea of what the story itself is or means, does not exclusively belong to one person. As a reader, Nolan has the right to engage with *The Odyssey* and reimagine it in ways that make most sense to him. Even in the face of criticism from the author themselves—and in this case Wilson's criticism of Nolan's use of her translation as the main inspiration or source material for his film adaptation—it does not change the fact that Nolan's adaptation is valid in its own right. Ultimately, in adapting the text, Nolan is not simply reproducing, but interpreting the story through his own creative lens; a reading that does not suddenly become illegitimate simply because it does not align with what Wilson originally intended.

Lastly, and perhaps the most important reason we must let adaptations be adaptations is because without them so many classics may remain unknown to new generations. Think of how many people first picked up Shakespeare after watching Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), or how the film *Clueless* (1995), for an entire generation, became the gateway to reading Jane Austen. Adaptations help make classics more accessible to new audiences which in turn help them stay relevant even centuries after they are first released into the world.

Nolan's *The Odyssey*, while not above criticism, has undoubtedly helped introduce this timeless epic to a new generation of readers, a feat that even Wilson herself could not help but acknowledge in her otherwise strongly worded review of Nolan's film. Publishers Weekly reports that across all editions, the book sales of *The Odyssey* have gone up by 76% surrounding the film's release.

Ultimately, it is perhaps this excuse to return to beloved stories that we should be looking for in adaptations. *The Odyssey* has survived for as long as it has precisely because it had been told and retold for centuries upon end, catering to new generations of audiences. So, when it comes to adaptations, maybe it is time we stopped judging how accurately they are able to reproduce the past, but rather how well they can carry these stories on into the future.

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TRIBUTE

REMEMBERING
Humayun Azad, the feminist

SADMAN AHMED SIAM

Humayun Azad has been described by different adjectives: progressive, anti-traditionalist, and anti-establishment- at different times. But less discussed is his work on feminist literature in Bangladesh. He wrote one of the most accessible books on feminist literature in Bangla, *Nari* (Agamee Prakashani, 1992). Lesser known still is that he translated one of the most seminal books on feminist theory, *The Second Sex* (1949), by Simone de Beauvoir in Bangla, titled *Ditiyo Lingo*, that was published in 2001.

Azad was a radical feminist, and he made that clear in the opening sections of *Nari*. His chief enemy is patriarchy, which he shows operates across race, class, and political ideology. Throughout the book, he details how, from ancient mythology to modern literature, from cavemen to modern, even progressive men, patriarchy affects everything. He draws from Mary Wollstonecraft, Friedrich Engels, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Catharine A. MacKinnon, among others.

Azad was writing in a time when the two top leaders in the two largest political parties in Bangladesh were female, and both of them went on to become Prime Ministers. Despite it being hailed as a success in a conservative nation like Bangladesh, Azad was never convinced. Rather, he maintained that both of these leaders were deeply reactionary, and demanded the emancipation of all women, not only of the elite class. This reflects how universal and radical he wanted his feminist commitments to be.



ILLUSTRATION: **MAISHA SYEDA**

The novelist in his writings did not even spare one of his favourite poets. Through his deep knowledge of the Tagore canon, Azad exposes the deep misogyny lurking behind the romantic poetry of Rabindranath. He pinpoints how reactionary his thoughts on women were. Victorian misogyny was prevalent in Tagore's literature, and Tagore was also critical of women's liberation movements in his time, which Azad explores through Tagore's essays.

A subtle irony surfaces when Azad explores the criticism of Sigmund Freud and the concept of Envy in psychoanalytic literature. In his other works, Azad is quite celebratory of science and is a proponent of scientific optimism, a notable example being *Mohabissho* (Agami Prokashoni, 2000), among many others. But in Nari, he exposes how science can be affected by patriarchy, and it is not as universal as it claims to be. He maintains that the reason Freud was so successful in spreading his misogynistic conception of the world was that he wrapped it in a scientific fashion. Not all of these insights were his own, but it is important to note how the opponents of women's liberation still rely on different scientific arguments to support their position, without considering that the scientific endeavour in question might itself be a patriarchal production.

Probably an unusual but highly interesting focus of Azad is his attempt to discuss sex education, a subject still highly taboo in the Bangladeshi context. His description is brief, but the inclusion of such matters in *Nari* signals priority—he believes it is the duty of the state and society to teach young girls about their bodies and bodily autonomy. These are concepts we are still not comfortable with, even 35 years after the publication of the book, and probably this is part of the reason this aspect of Azad is less discussed.

Azad was not uncritical of the influence of patriarchy in his fellow progressives as well. He was conscious of the fact and demonstrated it through the example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau was one of the leading philosophers in the French Revolution, but despite claiming "Liberty, Equality and Fraternity" for all in theory, achieved them only for men in practice. In fact, Rousseau was not fond of liberty when it came to women despite being known as one of the forefathers of western liberalism. Progressive spheres, even in Azad's time, were not free of patriarchy, as they are not now, and to ensure justice, we must be wary of that as well.

But can Azad be free from his own criticism?

This is an excerpt. Read the full article on *The Daily Star* and Star Books and Literature websites.

Sadman Ahmed Siam, *as the name suggests, is indeed a sad man. Send him happy quotes at: siamahmed09944@gmail.com.*