

Book and Film - A Comparative study

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ABSTRACT

If one were to make a comparative study of the films made from novels in the Indian film industry, the proportion would be 1:100. In the Black and White era, quite a lot of films were made on the works of Sharat Chand Chattopadhyaya's novels. The first film that was adapted from English novel by the Hindi film industry was 'Guide' of R. K. Narayan which became a super hit.

Since soon after the invention of sound films, directors have been turning popular- and sometimes not so popular books into motion pictures. Certainly audience will argue as to the quality of one of these forms versus the other. However, when turning any piece of literature into a film, there are a number of distinct and unavoidable differences, no matter how the contributors may struggle to make the two forms as similar as possible.

What happens to novels when they are translated to the screen? What kind of things are lost and gained by those who see the film as a substitute for reading the book? Do the changes fall into discernible patterns which may provide insight into their effects upon audiences? Or are the changes merely form changes which reflect the influence of the medium but do not alter the ultimate message conveyed, the problems presented, or the insights provided?

These are the main points on which I will focus in my present paper with the special reference of 'The Namesake' by Jhumpa Lahiri and 'The Three Mistakes of My Life' by Chetan Bhagat

Since soon after the invention of the sound films, directors have been turning popular—and sometimes not so popular—books into motion pictures. Many a critique, either positive or negative, has been written about the editorializing done and the amount of creative license taken during the transition of these stories from print to the big screen. Certainly audience members will argue as to the quality of one of these forms versus the other, or whether there might be a better actor for some role than the particular one chosen by the Hollywood powers that be, or if the sound track either enhanced or distracted from the effect, or even if the plot was completely ruined and the movie was declared a colossal failure. However, when turning any piece of literature into a film, there are a number of distinct and unavoidable differences, no matter how the contributors may struggle to make the two forms as similar as possible.

Many novels are so successful that producers can not wait to adapt the story into a film. The majority of times, however, the original novel is much stronger than the movie because it is able to capture the emotions of each-other, all the symbols and meaningful events. Due to the novel's flexibility, readers are able to extend the use of their imagination. Details involving the characters and meanings related to objects and events are decisive factors which make the novel considerably better than the film. In addition, leaving out several aspects of the novel also limits the viewer's appreciation of the story.

This is a new trend for the industry and it is gaining prominence owing to the fact that everybody is now on the lookout for that elusive script that would set the box office on the fire. This is how the films are made in Hollywood and they are successful as well. But to expect the same to happen in the same vein in Hindi film industry as well could be too far-fetched. This is primarily owing to the fact that the films that are being made are from the novels written in English and their milieu is such in urbanity.

If one were to make a comparative analysis of the films being made from novels in Hollywood and in the Indian film industry, the proportion would be 1:100. In the Black and White era quite a lot of films were made on works of Sharat Chand Chattopadhyaya's novels, and particular reference could be made about PARINEETA and DEVDAS which were hits. In the initial stages the works from Hindi or regional writers were adapted into films and it was finding moderate success. The first film that was adapted from the English novel by the Hindi film industry was GUIDE of R.K.Narayan. However it raked a lot of controversy from the writer as it did not follow the story line and the screen adaptation was romanticized. After that there was a long hiatus before any English work by an Indian writer was adapted for Hindi film.

What happens to the novels when they are translated to the screen? What kind of things are lost and gained by those who see the film as a substitute for reading the book? Do the changes fall into discernible patterns which may provide insight into their effects upon audiences? Do the changes affect the material so vitally that our "popular culture" is of a different order of things from the traditional heritage of the intellectual? Or are the changes merely form changes which reflect the influence of the medium but do not alter the ultimate message conveyed, the problems presented, or the insights provided?

These are the questions which are endlessly debated by movie makers and movie goers, by defenders of the films and its attackers, by students of literature, of sociology, and of popular culture. The answers to them have too frequently been based upon highly impressionistic criteria, and broad generalization—covering the entire Hollywood output—have been expected on the basis of predispositions, of some one instance, or of the most recent experience, reassuring and disillusioning, with the filmic version of the favorite book.

Now with the novelty being demanded by the average viewer of the cinema and most of it being the English speaking audience who throng the multiplexes and are conversant with the story line as they have either read the novels and the viewers, and therefore provide an initial receptivity for the film on offer. It happened with ‘Namesake’ in India, but it could not hit the bulls eye, as the subject of Diaspora is still in its infancy in India.

Even then, it is a new experiment and it provides encouragement for the works especially those like Rag Darbari which is a roaring success, both as a novel and as a serial, to be adopted into a film. Script writing and good stories have come back into demand, it is just the question of widening the search for the writers, and look for them in the Indian literary traditions, and claiming a hit would never be a difficulty.

The story is in fact about the boy Gogol, the name of an eccentric Russian author. Gogol struggles to throw off the shackles of the name and what it implies...his Indianness, as Gogol is his father’s favorite author. Gogol’s rebellion becomes evident when he leaves home...with his various affairs for example and a disinclination to come home. He even starts to live with his white girlfriend who lives with her parents, and admires the western way of living. It is only when his father dies that the changes, and regrets the way he has behaved. It is very believable, the change in Gogol...how the shock of his father’s death brings him back to his roots.

In the movie it’s the relationship between Gogol’s parents, Ashima and Ashoke, that makes great impact. Ashima’s difficulty in adjusting (the movie opens with this), her loneliness and the growing love between husband and wife. It is very moving. May be it was because of the power of the actors (Tabu who plays Ashima and Irfan Khan who plays Ashoke) that these two characters make such an impact. But I also think that Mira Nair diverted from the book. For example, the movie does not show Gogol living with his girlfriend’s parents (just shows him spending a few days there)...but this incident is what tells us how completely Gogol has rejected his Indian identity. He prefers her parents to his. By Indian standards a boy living with the girl’s parents is mildly shocking. Even when Gogol is shown breaking up with his girl friend, it seems sudden, inexplicable. You can not leave a relationship of several years because your girl friend makes a few insensitive remarks!

In the book it is clear why Gogol leaves her. It is his realization that his girl friend is not really interested in his Indianness (this has been shown subtly before), and the fact that she wants him to be completely American...and can only grudgingly accept the differences of his parents. But at heart when he realizes that he is actually Gogol, not Nick that is when he decides to break up. He needs to find someone who understands Gogol. He does, but this doesn’t work out. Again, in the book, we understand why his wife (an American born Bengali girl, as confused

as him) falls in love with another man. Her being torn apart...trying to be a good Bengali wife by sacrificing a life and career in Paris, in the book this comes through very well, but not in the movie. Infidelity seems to be the main cause....the movie was simply unable to bring out the complexity of the novel. May be all movies can not do justice to the book from which they are made, and in my opinion, this movie is one of them. Though in itself the movie is worth a watch. It is a piece of art, and has some brilliant scenes. The only problem is that it pales in comparison to the book.

In her essay “Writing and Film”, the Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist Jhumpa Lahiri writes about the experience of seeing her novel “transposed” from paper to film. “Its essence remains, but it inhabits a different realm and must, like a transposed piece of music, conform to a different set of rules..... To have someone as devoted and as gifted as Mira reinvent my novel.....has been a humbling and thrilling passage.”¹

Nikhat Kazmi reviews the film in the entertainment supplement of ‘The Times of India’ March 24, 2007:

India is an idea that lives in the heart and the mind, rather than a land-locked territory; and India is a style of upbringing and attitude that transcends territory. Great performances, an iridescent canvas and a topical theme: ‘Namesake’ is Mira Nair’s tribute to her janambhumi.²

Novel and film are realistic and are capable enough to concentrate any person’s attention especially those who have lived long away from their native places. In fact, it is not the very story of the difficulties of an Indian emigrants but it is the universal saga of the modern life.

The film has 56 characters in all. The film revolves around its hero Gogol (Kal Penn). Other major characters are Ashima Ganguli (Irrfan Khan) and Moushumi Majumdar (Zuleikha Robinson) and so on. Jhumpa Lahiri also acted in this film as Aunt Jhumpa.

The traditional Indian as well as modern American costumes of two generations, pathetic note in music, and Indian classical music along with Western tinge is carefully handled in the film. Nair has used the flashback technique wisely and skillfully.

The novel and the film are different in terms of the structures, perception and the narrative. Hence no one can really judge the relevance of the novel or film. It may be necessary to deviate from the original story while transforming novels into films. Film adaptation of ‘The Namesake’ is not an exception to this.

Here are certain major deviations in the movie ‘The Namesake’ which are in fact the creation of the film producer:

1. The novel begins with Ashima Ganguli standing in the kitchen. She is at the verge of her first pregnancy. The film begins with a train accident which Ashoke faces.
2. The novel carefully gives us the description of the Montgomeries who were the first neighbours of the Gangulis in the United States. In the film such important event are omitted.
3. In the novel, Ashima sends letters to her relatives and friends. In the film, she sends the letters along with photographs.

4. The novel describes the Rice ceremony of Gogol. The film describes the Rice ceremony of Sonia.
5. The novel describes Gogol's relationship with Kim and Ruth. The film has omitted the important characters Kim and Ruth.
6. The novel describes premarital relations of Moushami with her boy friend Dimitri. The film has omitted the important character of Dimitri and instead given us the character of Pierre.
7. The events in the novel are concentrated in Cambridge, Boston, Yale, Hew York, Ohio, Hew Hampshire and some scenes are related to India. The film is only centered in an around New York and some scenes are related to India.
8. The novel ends with an event when we Find Gogol reading the short stories of Nikolai Gogol. The film ends with an important scene when we find Ashima practicing Indian classical vocal at Calcutta.

A frequent criticism of movie adaptations is that where the book allows us to participate in the creative process (using our imaginations to fill in the characters and settings; for instance), the film by its very nature makes everything explicit, closing the door on imagination. But I thought Nair's film was more satisfying than the novel precisely because these characters are presented to us in specific terms, we see them talking to each-other, and most importantly all this is done extremely well. The casting is near –perfect-- Irfan Khan (who is excellent), Tabu and Kal Penn bring immediacy to the characters of Ashoke, Ashima and Gogol that I sometimes missed in the book.

It is not out of place to mention Chetan Bhagat's 'Three Mistakes of my Life' and a movie entitled 'Kai Po Che' recently made based on the novel. The novel starts with Govind's narration of his life. He has two friends and it is described in detail the bonding of love among three friends though their interests are different. One is master of Maths, second is cricketer and the third one is the son of a priest but does not want to follow the tradition of the family. Finally they plan to start some work. After many options thought over, they decide to open a sports shop. But in the film, those emotions of friends for one-another are not picturized. The movie has to be completed in two hours therefore it is not possible to exhibit every minute detail of the novel. This reminds me my student life when we study the whole year and when we get a chance to perform and prove ourselves we have to cut and cut and brief the answer because of the limited time. And that makes us depressed many times to think that we could not put it properly. Here the important thing is that some points which we omit may be of less importance for us but for the examiner, those may be of great importance. So is the case with the director. He has to cut the novel short. There may be many things in his mind going on. He might be thinking that this kind of thing he has already shown in his previous movie and it depends on his own liking what he thinks more important to present. What will be new for the audience? What will attract the audience? And so on. And so are the characters. They also try to bring some changes in their acting so that they may not be called typed characters. When all these things mix together, they stir the soul of the novel. and sometimes the movie like 'Kai Po Che' results as 'kahan se kahan pahunche'.

Based on Chetan Bhagat's best seller 'The Three Mistakes of my Life', and set against the backdrop of the Gujrat's riots which happened a decade ago, the film revolves around three middle class small town men- Ishaan Bhatt (Sushant Singh Rajput), who under no circumstances, let their resolutions and ambitions fall by the wayside, but toil to turn their dreams into reality. Even though they leave no stone unturned to make it big, the situations in which they are trapped make their lives difficult.

The plot sees Govind, a young boy in Ahmadabad, dreaming of starting a business to garner popularity and monetary benefits. Interestingly Govind's aim soon becomes a common dream which both Ishaan and Omi are trying to chase. Since cricket is treated like religion in our country, they decide to start a training academy which can churn out India's next sporting superstars. While Govind's key goal remains to earn huge bucks, Ishaan fulfills his desire to train Ali (an exceptional batsman) and Omi gets to be with his best chums.

Chetan Bhagat gives a message to the youths that they should always try to do the job of their own interest. Of course, money is also an important factor to survive but with the earnings, they must continue the work of their own liking. And the three characters do it. The same thing, he has conveyed in his first novel 'Five Points Someone'. But the movie 'Kai Po Che' misses this spirit.

Chetan, as he was from IIM, Ahmadabad and closely associated with the city, so the novel is full with the essence of culture of Ahmadabad. Govind's narrative takes Chetan Bhagat through this picturesque, somnolent city where religion, cricket and politics dominate people's existence. Combined with that, is a crazy interest in poking noses in other people's business that ties the people of this town together. But this is missing in the movie and more emphasis is on the characters.

In a novel, what is going in the minds of the characters, how they take the things and how they react- these all are explained explicitly in words so we can make an actual image when in the movie actors express it by body language which is not adequate and secondly, it depends on the potential of the actor how much he can give it.

Of course, sometimes, there are unnecessary details like to give extra emphasis on Ali to make him International player. And because movie is second-hand product so the director has time to choose or omit these descriptions.

One major change that is found in the movie is the ending, that Ishaan dies and the child of Govind and Vidya takes his place, though in the novel Omi dies and Ishaan and Govind run their separate business on the clash of Ishaan's sister and it is only Omi's mother and Chetan himself who settle the matter.

In the novel, Govind points out his three mistakes-(1) his early decision to open a shop in Mall and invest a lot of money to it. (2) his affair with a friend's sister and (3) he fails to jut himself in time in front of Ali to save him from being attacked and Ali's wrist-the most crucial part for a cricketer is hit by a piercing trident and this is how it suits the title of the novel. But the movie as it is titled 'Kai Po Che' meaning victorious, so after many struggles and obstacles of earthquake, riots and love-affairs, they are united.

The love story between Govind and Vidya is way better described in the book. The character is also better described in the book. The movie did not give much importance to their relationship. Also, the Australia chapter has been taken out. In the book, Australia was actually the first time when Govind realized his love for Vidya and the way the book narrates it was mesmerizing.

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