

Filming The Guide – A Comparison Of RK Narayan’s Guide And Dev Anand’s Guide

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“There is nothing new under the sun Watson, it has all been done before”, claims Sherlock Holmes, the famous detective of our childhood fame, to his friend Watson. Whether or not one agrees with him, it is indubitable that it holds true for adaptations of novels, and other literary forms into film. Hollywood has been doing it since ages and Bollywood was never to be left behind. There have been several adaptations of novels into films in India e.g. the hugely successful *Slumdog Millionaire* based on the novel *Q & A* by Vikas Swarup, *Three Idiots* which was loosely based on Chetan Bhagat’s *Five Point Someone*, and the recent *Kai Po Che* again based on *Chetan Bhagat’s The three mistakes of my life*.

The adaptation of films have generally tended to follow a basic pattern: Literary forms which cater to serious literary sensibilities like Premchand’s short story *Shatranj kay khiladi* adapted into a eponymous movie by Satyajit Ray, and *Chokher Bali* – a novel by Tagore turned into a movie of the same name directed by Rituparna Ghosh, have traditionally been the domain of the art house cinema. Popular Bollywood has largely relied on commercial fiction like *Q and A* or *Three Idiots* for its adaptations. There is however a movie that does not fit this dichotomy perfectly. RK Narayan’s classic *The Guide* interpreted as *Guide* by Navketan Studios owned by Dev Anand in collaboration with his brothers. The movie presents the first occasion of a serious literary work in English being converted into a typical mainstream Bollywood movie. The adaptation is unique, though since it holds the double distinction of having elicited a detailed judgment by the author, Narayan as well as Dev Anand who served in the dual capacity of the leading man and co-producer. While Narayan launches into a ferocious tirade against the adaptation in an essay titled ‘*The Misguided Guide*’, Dev Anand defended the adaptation (albeit indirectly) in his autobiography: *Romancing with Life*. This paper attempts to summarize both viewpoints to arrive at some definitive conclusion regarding the adaptation.

Naryanan commences by narrating the events preceding his sanction to the adaptation. He recalls the receipt of a letter from Dev Anand dispatched from Los Angeles. The letter spelled the proposal of adapting the novel into the film. The tone was not quite formal yet polite, including and a touch of self-depreciation completed the effect of affability. It promised that the film would remain faithful to the spirit and tone of the original. The letter exhibited an eagerness and urgency that foregrounded the actor’s reverence for the author and the work. Pleased and flattered by this offer, Narayan confirmed a meeting at his residence in Madras to discuss the offer. Dev Anand flies to Indian and drives to Narayan’s house where the deal gets through.

Narayan claims he asked only for a nominal price for the rights of the movie, as he felt sure that in the event of the film's success, the profits would be shared with him. The contract was signed and the following months were spent press conferences held in plush hotels. At every press conference Anand promised the movie would be a 'pure' Indian movie with Indian setting although it was aimed at an international audience. To that effect the movie would be shot in an unprecedented colour and wide screen, a first for Indian cinema.

The famed American writer Pearl Buck for writing the screenplay, and a reputed American director Tad Danielewski was handed the directorial role. The atmosphere thus created was one of extreme cordiality, pleasantness and optimism that pleased Narayan no end. But to his dismay Narayan soon found that events took a different turn. He soon found that the pompous director reveled in evolving fantastic interpretations of the novel's characters during tiring monologues. So the hero was firmly recast as a day dreamer prone to impulses leaving Narayan no chance to acquiesce or refute, with the tag question: Am I not right, closing all possibilities of argument.

Narayan proceeds next to the 300 mile expedition undertaken by the film-makers to acquaint themselves with the landscape of the novel. Guided by Narayan, the team observes carefully the flight of steps on the banks of Cauvery that figured prominently in the novel. Next the team drove to the tiny pilgrim town of Nanjagund where they carefully noticed the pilgrim population bathing in the sacred waters of Kabini, and the shops selling cheap sweets and toys. They trekked to the nearby forests, hills and dusty villages till they reached the base of Gopalswami Hills. A five mile uphill drive brought them to the summit where they saw the original 'Peak House' that inspired the Peak House of the novel. The House is a fifty year old bungalow with a glassed verandah that afforded a view of the wildlife at night. They observed the foot tracks that wound through the underground, and led to a decrepit temple whose immense timber doors serve as an emblem of its antiquity. The purpose of this visit, in the eyes of Narayan and ostensibly the other crew was to identify the locations as they occur in the novel to preserve the authenticity of the novel's milieu. Narayan had been under the impression that the spots identified by him would be used as the locations in which the film is set. He claims to have been encouraged by the sympathetic and enthusiastic response of the film executives who set upon planning the shooting with such ease that Narayan is prompted to remark, "film executives, it seemed to me, could solve mankind's problems on a global scale with the causal confidence of demi-Gods, if only they could take time off their illusory pursuits and notice the serious aspects of existence."

Narayan proceeds next to the saga of desertion. The filmmakers suddenly adopted an ominous silence for many weeks that portended the betrayal. Suddenly, he got wind of the news that the film makers were busy scouting the exotic locations in North India. Alarmed beyond measure, he highlighted his concerns at the next meeting held at Bombay. He claims to have argued vociferously that his novels were set in Malgudi - a south Indian town albeit an imaginary one - yet completely South Indian in texture and tone. Jaipur and Udaipur are as far from Malgudi as chalk from cheese, for want of a better idiom. Much to his chagrin, the argument was buried in a reiteration of irrelevant statements like it is a great privilege for the movie makers to work on his

book. Another excuse offered was that since the movie was being shot in wide screen east man colour, it demanded a spectacular spectacle absent in the dreary lanes of south India. His observation that spectacle was entirely absent in the story, was silenced by a laughable counter-observation that since Malgudi was a fictitious city anyway, the author couldn't be sure of its exact location. Stunned by this epistemological charge, Narayan could only rely on authorial authenticity and intentionality observing that he would be the most qualified person to locate it since he had constructed it painstakingly in his novels over a span of three decades.

The location of Malgudi for the film makers was not a constant one. Rather it varied across various picturesque spaces like the Valley of Kashmir, the desert of Rajasthan, the crowded Bombay to the faraway Ceylon. To Narayan this appears to be a cruel desecration of his novel. He is reminded of the internationally renowned director - Satyajit Ray, who he met once at Calcutta. Ray had expressed his admiration for the novel: *The Guide*, but regretted that he could not translate Narayan's work into film. The novel was too steeped in south Indian imagery that couldn't be replicated by the Bengali Ray. Here were filmmakers who were no match to his genius, taking liberties that Ray had been loath to tread. Noting Narayan's stiff resistance, the director adopted a bizarre route. He omitted the name Malgudi, and every allusion to it altogether from the narrative. This was a minor victory for Narayan though rather undesirable. The American director conceded that the exotic locations would not be congruent with the sedate locales of Malgudi. To remedy this disparity, he chose to omit every mention of Malgudi altogether. Naturally this hardly endears him to Narayan who masks his displeasure in the observation that the director "fell afoul of everyone who uttered that sound".

Noticing the author's discontent and foreseeing his resistance to sanction consent, the director resorts to omitting the name Malgudi and every allusion to it altogether from the narrative. As Narayan persists with his charge, he achieves a minor victory albeit a rather undesirable one. The American director yields to the charge of tinkering with the natural milieu of the novel and decides to omit any mention of Malgudi altogether. Such an omission, in the director's opinion, will naturally negate Narayan's assertion of the locations not corresponding to Malgudi. This hardly endears him to the author who masks his displeasure in the observation that. It is interesting to note here that the word used is sound rather than a word. The preference to singular rather than plural sounds as the utterance Malgudi would entail (/ma:lgudi/: one long vowel, two short vowels and three consonants), is brushed off as a monosyllabic sound – a reductive pejorative exclamation. The implication thereof is that Malgudi –which occupies the place of a major character in Naryanan's stories has been relegated to just a sound. In other words the director utterly failed to realize the significance of Malgudi in shaping up the narrative and attributed a mobility and mutability to it that transmogrified it into a bare syllable – a paradoxical construction in more ways than one. This singularity dwarfed the scale of the construct since it became a hesitant blur rather than a focused well drawn out panorama. It has been reduced to just a passing sound – an insinuation of a something sinister since the director falls 'afoul' – a strong

pejorative term indicative not only of strong displeasure but suggestive of greater escalation in conflict, of everyone who dares taunt him with the utterance of this sound.

This Freudian slip is foregrounded again in the ensuing paragraph where the author's brother – the famous cartoonist of Times of India fame- RK Laxman rakes up the subject at a dinner held at his house. Malgudi, he dares to venture, signifies a little town shaded by peculiar local characteristics and its own brand of dhoti and jibba wearing populace. Besides, it is the very peculiarity or lack of it that is exploited by Raju. He constructs remarkable histories out of thin air as he attributes remarkable archaeological value to unremarkable landscapes. Anything and everything can be a historical relic in the expert hands of Raju guide. The director is not convinced, but increasingly grows fidgety and angry that leads Narayan to fear a disruption in dinner. He puts his foot down and insists that sticking to the authentic Malgudi model would be appropriate for a black and white festival film – a euphemism for a documentary that caters to a specific audience, rather than a full scale commercial venture. A film set in an uninteresting locale like Malgudi not suit a mega release across the planned two thousand theatres in America. This threat virtually ends the argument as the international projection of the film was a strong motivating factor for Narayan to put up with the visual translation of his work. Keeping with the cosmopolitan tone, the film is shot at various important landmarks over the country like the US Embassy building in New Delhi, Elephanta Caves, Parliament house and Ashoka Hotel etc. this, though is in direct contrast to the ingenious Raju of the novel, who creates imaginary histories around unimportant landscapes.

Narayan continues to pick holes in the director's treatment of the novel. His next grouse is against the portrayal of the heroine trained in classical style of Bharatnatyam. This is a luxury unavailable to the small town dancer in the novel who could only have dreamt of such highbrow art. The dancer in the novel is a practitioner of no high art but a synthetic dance form that combines entertainment with a natural flexibility of the body. However the film makers decide it is woefully inadequate, and engage a renowned dance director along with a troupe of hundred or more dancers at a great expense. Consequently, the heroine is attired in fancy, and art is morphed into just another gimmick to please the eye. Narayan notes that Buck had engaged in a meticulous study of the novel, and earmarked passages for omission and dramatization. When the final script is ready, Narayan is dumbfounded: certain passages crucial to the narrative have been omitted. His protests are stonewalled by Buck's claim that script only exteriorized the interpretations inherent in the book. Narayan was unlikely to be persuaded by this vague claim, so the screenwriter tries another stratagem: he could provide 'two hundred reasons' why the selective approach was undertaken. Narayan is still unconvinced, but is placated somewhat by the assurance that the script is yet only draft, and the relevant changes could be incorporated into the final draft. But the promise remains only a promise, as the final script only exhibits some cosmetic changes. By that time, however it is too late as work on the movie has already begun. Several scenes have already been shot, and the allied works were in motion too.

But the greatest shock is yet in store for the director insists upon a symbolic scene in which two tigers must destroy each other over a spotted deer, in order to convey some crude symbolism. Despite many entreaties, the orientalist director would not be dissuaded. The scene is enacted with great difficulty albeit with a leopard and a deer. The greatest distortion however occurs in the character of Marco – the archaeologist husband of Rosie, the female protagonist in the novel. In the novel, Rosie throws her lot with Raju, as Marco has neither time nor any inclination to love her, or encourage her dancing ambitions. Raju astutely realizes this emotional void, and exploits it to his own gain. In the movie however the scenario is modified. Marco is presented as an alcoholic womanizer, and so Rosie's affections for Raju are presented as a consequence of Marco's vices. Narayan is also miffed at the distortion of the ending. In the novel it is unclear whether rain clouds have actually gathered in the sky, or is it a hallucination of the starved eyes? This ironic touch is mitigated in the movie, as it rains to end the drought.

In his revealing autobiography, *Romancing with Life* Dev Anand devotes one whole chapter to *Guide*. This is not surprising considering *Guide* was one of the biggest hits of Anand's career, and an iconic film in its own right. He muses on the various challenges faced by the movie before it saw the light of the day (or theatre), and the consequences it had on his career. Anand reveals that the film was actually intended to be shot in two versions: i) an English version for an American audience directed by Tad Danielewski ii) The Hindi version directed by Chetan Anand. The 120 minute film was actually shown at Cannes in 2007, forty seven years after it was made. The idea however proved to be a fractious one, as the production teams clashed over various things including positioning of camera. It was Vijay Anand – the younger brother of Anand, who resolved the issue. It was decided that the English version would be shot first, and the hindi version directed by Vijay afterwards. In hindsight it proved to be a good decision.

The journey however was still a hazardous one. Other than the production team, most people were convinced the movie would prove to be a debacle. Obituaries were kept ready, and many in the film industry predicted Dev Anand had signed his epitaph. The colossal failure would surely end Anand's career. The investment was huge, and Anand had staked everything for the movie. He could ill afford failure. In the '60's a woman abandoning her husband to live with her paramour was such a taboo that it was thought inconceivable that the audiences would accept such a movie. Nonetheless the production cast went ahead with the movie. Another obstacle came by way of the censor board. The censor board had received a representation that the movie promoted obscenity and was detrimental to public moral health. The production staff decided to invite the Minister of Broadcasting: Indira Gandhi to a special screening of the movie. She arrived with a special entourage and sat at the back of the room. During the screening she displayed no reaction that would betray her impressions. After the screening ended, she assured the producers that the movie would be receive the censor approval. Another special screening was held for a select audience chosen from the 'who is who' of the society. The screening however passed in a glum silence that was far from encouraging. Later a well-wisher of the brothers called them, and announced though the movie was well made it would not appeal to the

audience. The initial response after the release appeared to correspond to the prediction. But gradually the interest peaked, and the movie developed into a blockbuster.

It now remains to judge which of the two viewpoints can be adjudged as correct. Narayan's grouses appear to be an academician's complaint that fail to see the larger context. The translation of a textual medium into a visual medium involves an alteration of semiotic codes. A novel can't be dramatized in its entirety, as Narayan expects. The adaptation is bound to omit certain passages, and emphasize others. A director of the caliber of Danielewski ought to be trusted more with the intricacies of movie making. Narayan's suggestion that the movie ought to have been shot in the locales of south India is impractical too. A commercial movie relies heavily on spectacle, and to suggest that it should be dispensed with betrays a lack of understanding the nuances of film-making.

The alteration in the character of Marco also appears justified. The movie was apriority a gamble as it sought to portray a taboo in mainstream cinema. Art cinema had yet not acquired the momentum it acquired in 70's. The movie producers risked their reputation and finances on such a risky venture, and they were justified in their attempts to lessen the risk. The average Indian consciousness couldn't be expected to understand the subtleties of literary irony. It is also important to realize that in the 60's the audience was patriarchal to the core. The idea of a woman expressing her sexuality would hardly go well with the audience. The audiences that decide the fate of a movie is hardly comprised of progressive intellectuals. The sensibilities of the audiences needed to be placated. The only way to execute it was to create a villain out of Marco, and a saintly sympathizer out of the hero. Any other construction would have invited trouble. Narayan's criticism of the ending also appears unjustified. It is not possible to translate the ambiguity of the novel into the movie. The visual element demanded that the film demonstrate either of the two options: the rain is a hallucination or it actually rains. Considering the audience's love for dramatic, the former option isn't worthwhile. The ending must also be seen in the context of the formula film where the hero is invested with all heroic qualities, and the villain all the negative traits. It wasn't possible in such a scenario to opt for a delusional hero, and thus indicate that his fasting went in vain. An Indian audience could hardly be expected to appreciate such irony.

We can conclude therefore that the movie *Guide* is a well-constructed adaptation of the novel. Though it incorporates several changes in its narrative, the changes are a product of constraint placed by the genre rather than a flawed understanding of the novel, as Narayan suggests.

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