

Evaluating the Literary Adaptation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's White Nights in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Saawariya

Dr Amartya Saha

Assistant Professor

Dept of Journalism and Mass Communication

New Alipore College, Kolkata

Abstract

Fyodor Dostoevsky's White Nights is one of the popular works of fiction across the world. The story is based in the set up of St Petersburg. Although originally published in 1848, the story has an amazing quality of finding context in today's world. The simplicity of the plot and the complex characters, make White Nights a riveting story of love that have many takers today. The work of literature has been adopted into multiple films in Russia and abroad. Celebrated Indian film maker Sanjay Leela Bhansali made a film called Saawariya which was based on White Nights. Although a commercial failure at the box office at its time of release in 2007, the film, its poetic approach to cinema marked the debut of Ranbir Kapoor and Sonam Kapoor, one of the finest actors of the Indian film industry today. Through the use of colourfully designed sets, songs, dance, beautiful cinematography, acting, lighting and other faculties required to produce a film, Bhansali made an apt presentation of White Nights on screen. The research paper through qualitative analysis of the themes, ideas, dialogues of both White Nights and Saawariya tries to evaluate the Literary adaptation on screen.

Keywords: Fyodor Dostoevsky, White Nights, Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Saawariya, Literary Adaptation

Introduction:

The history of Films based on literary work go a long way. From Shakespeare to Rabindranath Tagore, Chetan Bhagat to J K Rowling, the work of endless number of authors, both celebrated and relatively unknown, have been adopted and converted to films. The journey from script to screen is one that has been widely appreciated and criticized equally across the world. It is a challenge of a different kind. To transform the world of one medium into the complexities of another medium. Cinema utilizes the power of visuals, music, ambient sounds, dialogues, editing, art direction and acting to enhance the story that has been written through words in print. The director thus has a much bigger responsibility of giving shape to the imagination of the author. A written text or novel on the other hand has the potential of transforming into personalized fantasy space of the readers who imagine the story in their minds. Another challenge is the role of language in adaptation, cultural context and time frame. Fyodor Dostoevsky's White Nights is a story that got published in 1848 against the backdrop of St Petersburg, Russia. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Saawariya was made and released in 2007. The characters, their struggles, the plot of the story, the dialogues, the exchanges between the characters, their crisis, solutions should all align in a way that the modern day audience, who might have no idea the world of 1848, should be able to connect fully to it. Unless the audience connects with the story, the emotion the film is bound to fail. In 2007, when Saawariya released in theatres, it clashed with Om Shanti Om, a film that wasn't based on an adaptation but was powered by the biggest superstars of the country. As compared to this, Bhansali's film was launching a set of new faces, who had no previous work profile but their family lineage and promise of the director's craft. Saawariya failed to

create a mark at the box office. It was a commercial disaster in front of the contending film, but all the same the film was a poetic rendition of Dostoevsky's *White Nights* and tried to hold on to the plot or essence of the film. The research paper analyses the film from the perspective of the text penned by Dostoevsky.

The main objectives of the paper are as follows:

1. To evaluate the main themes and emotions of *White Nights* and compare them to that found in *Saanwariya*.
2. To study the important dialogues of *Saanwariya* and *White Nights* for their depiction of sweet romance and love.
3. To study the cinematic justice done by Bhansali in his rendition of the *White Nights*.

The methodology used for the research is qualitative one. Content analysis of the film and the novel are done to outline the main themes and concepts and then a detailed study is done of the dialogues to understand the depiction of emotions of the characters. These two analyses are done in the context of the cinematic rendition of the adaptation.

Review of Literature

Fyodor Dostoevsky's *White Nights* is considered to be an altruistic story of love, a form of love that is marked by sense of self-sacrifice instead of selfishness (Yousefvand and Tatari). The narrator's love is emerging out of deep sense of love, intimate feeling of belonging and sacrifice. According to Yousefvand and Tatari, the nature of love of the narrator and Nastenka can be visualized in the following way.

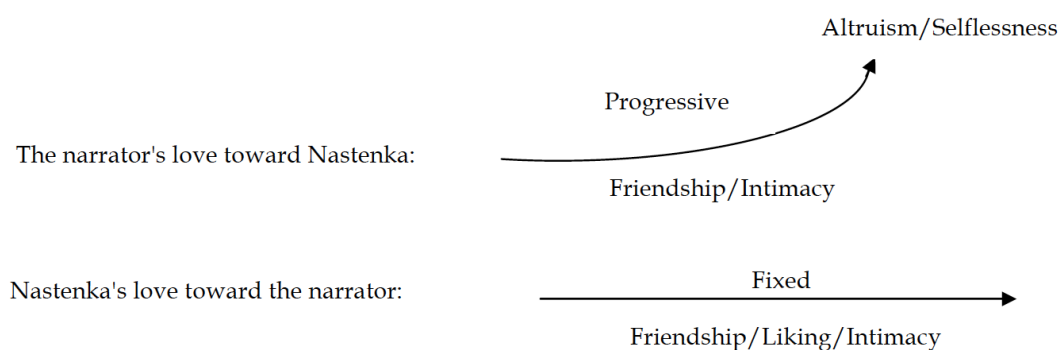


Figure is taken from <https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.4p.231>

White Nights is often seen as a kind of confession diary where the narrator reminisces the incidents that unfolded over four days in the story. The hero is one who calls himself a dreamer who is caught in whims and fancies of his dreamland (Rosenshield). Ronald Meyer, in her chapter in *Border Crossing: Russian Literature into Film* mentions that at least twelve films have been adopted from *White Nights* into films but apart from Russian films the non-Russian portrayals of Dostoevsky's *White Nights* do not stick to the idea of recreating time and space of the actual story (Meyer). As per Andrew Joe, the confined inner space in *White Nights* is an essential study. The narrator's fears, insecurities of being alone trickle into the relationship he sets with those around him. The narrator is caught up with his own interiorisation (Joe). Carol Apollonio Flath in his book, *Dostoevsky's Secrets: Reading Against the Grain*, captures the spirit of St Petersburg through the lines of Martin Buber, where it is said that the spirit is never just in the expression of 'I' but between the expression of I and Thou. He states that *White Nights* rightly plays out as a story of desire, in fact the

narrator is an embodiment of the unfulfilled desires of the lead character, Nastenka (Flath). Peterson in his work, says that the narrator's first impression and relationship with Nastenka is influenced by the narrator's internal conflicts, insecurity and past experiences. The lead character Nastenka is confined to her grandmother and strict regulations and the narrator who is otherwise free to roam the streets of St Petersburg is confined to his own solitude (Peterson).

Analysing the Themes and Concepts of White Nights

There is a profound sense of loneliness and a constant feeling of isolation and separation in both the lead characters of White Nights, the narrator and Nastenka. The Narrator who calls himself a dreamer and often asks questions like if Nastenka knew the actual meaning of being alone keeps reflecting this sense of loneliness in him. While describing himself he even calls himself as the one who has just managed to keep to himself. In fact before meeting Nastenka the narrator is shown as a loner and his profound loneliness is reflected in how he resonates with inanimate objects like houses and streets of Petersburg but not with actual people. The concept of innocent love is explored in the characters. The narrator finds solace in Nastenka and almost immediately like a ground perched with thirst for rain, falls in love with a stranger. His deep sense of connect with Nastenka seeing her cry is connected with his insecurity and loneliness. The narrator through his words expresses how he finds happiness in the make believe world of imaginations. While describing himself the narrator once explains that he often is seen wondering aimlessly without a purpose like a shadow. Nastenka and the narrator both are epitome of loneliness and are desperately seeking someone to hold on to. She already has an attachment, an aspiration a love interest, whose company she has been seeking for the past one year. Such is not the case with the narrator who connects Nastenka with what he had been seeking all lifelong. Nastenka is pretty confused in reciprocating what life throws at her. On one hand, the lack of a loved one, whom she has been waiting for makes her sad, on the contrary the presence of the narrator makes her happy, yet she is not going to accept it as an alternative to the unrequited love she suffers from. It is reflected in her dialogue, where she says that the narrator in a duration of two minutes has made her happy forever.

Although Nastenka sets one condition for the narrator at the start of their friendship, that he won't be able to fall in love with her, she acknowledges the true selfless love and longing that the narrator develops for her in no time. Breaking away from the sorry state of the narrator's mind she keeps on insisting that the days of loneliness for the narrator is over as she would be there with him forever. She then says something that is contradicting to its very core. She says that she loves the narrator because the narrator's feelings for her are God sent as he is not interested in her in a romantic way. The very next moment she confesses that she is 'vexed' that the narrator is not romantically swayed by her. While the narrator confesses that he is indeed a dreamer and his life is wrapped around the fancies and fantasies of his own thoughts and outlook, the same cannot be said about Nastenka. She is constantly torn in between the possibilities of what could be and what isn't. She compares the narrator and the love interest of her life and regrets that wish her love interest was like the narrator or was even as good as the narrator. But in the same breath she says that she clearly loves her love interest more than the narrator even though the reasons weigh heavily on the narrator's side. Vexed at the possibility that her love interest has forsaken her, she quickly acknowledges the love proposal of the narrator and dreams of setting up a forever happy life with him and then when her love interest returns she is quick to leave the narrator and give in to the fantasy world she had women for the past one year even though she knows that she is clearly hurting

the narrator and breaking his heart. But it is worth noting that they both are united by a clear emotion of longing, vacuum and a string of unfulfilled desires. That is what binds them together so adorably for the entire story till the last scene where they part.

Analysing the Reflections of White Nights in Bhansali's Saawariya

The lead characters of the movie are Raj and Sakina. The love interest is Imaan. There are additional characters like Gulab and Lilian Ji who are added to help pace out the film and help build the plot. The characters are all from different backgrounds. Imaan is a wonderer who works for the nation in some engagement that cannot be explained in great details. He plays the love interest of Sakina. He signifies a life of uncertainty and gloom which is reflected in his dialogues. His ending dialogue when he asks Sakina for marriage reflects that too. He asks, do you accept this life full of sadness with me? To which Sakina says, 'Qubool hai'. Some of the dialogues of the film a direct reflection of the book's lines. Eg the ending line where Sakina and Raj part like that of Nastenka and the narrator. In White Nights the narrator exclaims that a whole moment of happiness any day is comparable to a lifelong memory and a deep feeling for a man. In the film, the lead character Raj says, that you have loved me for a moment, that is enough for a whole life time. But the core concepts and themes found in the White Nights can be found in the film too. But unlike the set-up of White Nights in Petersberg, the film is set in a world of fantasy. It is reflected in the dialogues of character Gulab when she says that 'it's a city of dreams' which can be found in no map of the world. In later dialogues, Gulab compares Raj as an ideal lover one who is the dream of any woman. In fact, the set-up of the first meet of Raj and Sakina is similar to that of White Nights. They meet on a bridge by a small waterbody on a stormy night, Raj discovers that Sakina is crying and immediately connects with her and wishes to help her. It is similarly expressed in the story where the narrator's first impression of Nastenka is as a girl who carries a portion of darkness in her heart for she is absorbed in thoughts and is looking with undisturbed attention at the muddy water of the canal. The interaction between the characters Raj and Sakina are portrayed like a poetry through beautiful dialogues, one liners and songs. Each sequence of events is lead by a song. There is beautiful messaging through the dialogues.

Like the story, their interaction is marked with promises of friendship although it is clear that Raj is head over heels in love with Sakina and cannot think of anything else but her. The beautiful rendition of the song 'Jab se tere naina' expresses the innocent love story brewing in the mind of the character Raj. In fact, Raj goes a step ahead and tells his landlady Lillypops how much he loves Sakina. In between there are dialogues of wisdom by Gulab like 'one should not love someone so much that they start hating themselves someday' reflecting the futility of Raj falling in love with Sakina, one who is already mentally engaged to someone else. Raj and Sakina are shown differently, while Sakina is reserved, Raj is someone who wears his heart on his sleeves. But from the very start the friendly banter, discussions between Raj and Sakina show that they both complement each other well and enjoy each other's presence and energy. Like in White Nights Raj is a patient listener and listens to Sakina's backstory with utmost interest. She tells him about her father, their sad financial state, her love story with Imaan and how Imaan treated her. As a tool of filmmaking Bhansali uses beautiful imagery to depict the love story of Sakina and Imaan. Specially worth mentioning is the scene of realization where Sakina runs between carpets and shakes off gold dust from them realizing her new found love. Even the dream sequence of waking up together with Imaan while being tied up together with a pin like her grandmother used to do is beautiful. The colour sequence of blue, black, green and red is fascinating in the film. The

film maker uses these colours to create his world in the movie. The set of the film is made like a fantasy world and is clearly not a realistic world set up like that of *White Nights*. But the houses do reflect character like the special mention of houses in Dostoevsky's story. The separation sequences are made beautiful with the use of light and shadow and beautiful dialogues. There is a dialogue that says how God had just started writing Sakina and Imaan's story of love but immediately ran out of words 'achanak taqdeer ki laafz khatam ho gayi'. The sequence where Sakina is seen running up a staircase will remind audience of Bhansali's rendition of *Devdas*. The characters of the film *Saawariya* are projected in a more complex way than in *White Nights*.

Conclusion

The beauty of *White Nights* lies in the fact that although it is story published in 1848 it fits perfectly in a plot that was put together in 2007. In fact, not just that, the emotions that the characters go through, the loneliness, solitude, the feeling of unrequited love in the backdrop of an insecure human relationship and a world of expectations is apt fit today also for any film adaptation. The story is beautifully written and the film *Saawariya* adapted by Bhansali is a cinematic poetry, created and crafted using brilliant art direction, acting, lighting and camerawork. The attention to details ensures that the basic essence of the story, its dialogues, the tension between the lead characters is not lost while creating a niche in their own cinematic world. We must acknowledge that the film is a different medium and has a different engagement with the audience. It uses complicated methods and practices to tell the same story but differently. Sanjay Leela Bhansali tries to frame the story in an Indian avatar using Indian festivities like Eid, music, values, architecture and emotions. But somewhere down the line the art direction and the absurdity of the sequences and the fantasy set up takes it away from the realities of the world. The cinematography, art direction and lighting are timeless. The acting seems a bit lacking at times, due to relatively inexperienced debutant actors Ranbir Kapoor and Sonam Kapoor but their brilliance is unmistakable. Salman Khan's brooding presence as Imaan creates a complete contrast with Ranbir's childlike innocent lover image. The film might have lost out on its box office collection due to multiple factors, but the film stands out as an adaptation with a difference.

Works Cited

1. Flath, Carol Apollonio. "The Spirit of St Petersburg: *White Nights*." *Dostoevsky's Secrets: Reading Against the Grain*, Northwestern UP, 2009, pp. 27–32.
2. Joe, Andrew. "'Same Time, Same Place': Chronotope and Gender in Dostoevskii's *White Nights*." *BRILL eBooks*, 2007, pp. 43–62, doi:10.1163/9789401204262_004.
3. Meyer, Ronald. "Dostoevskii's 'White Nights': The Dreamer Goes Abroad." *Border Crossing: Russian Literature into Film*, Edinburgh UP, 2016, p. 41.
4. Peterson, Dale E. "Dostoevsky's *White Nights*: Memoir of a Petersburg Pathology." *Before They Were Titans*, Academic Studies Press, 2019, pp. 93–101.
5. Rosenshield, Gary. "Point of View and the Imagination in Dostoevskij's 'White Nights'." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 21, no. 2, Jan. 1977, p. 191, doi:10.2307/306699.
6. Yousefvand, Mohammad, and Hamid Tatari. "The Concept of Love in Dostoyevsky's *White Nights*." *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, vol. 4, no. 4, July 2015, doi:10.7575/aiac.ijalel.v.4n.4p.231.