

READING FILMS AND BINGE-WATCHING BOOKS: A STUDY OF LITERARY ADAPTATIONS IN INDIAN FILM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Literature has always been an integral part of Indian Cinema. Right from Mythological texts to short stories of Rabindranath Tagore or Novellas of Premchand and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. Directors like Satyajit Ray, Shyam Benegal, and Vijay Anand have all taken to the novels to create some of their biggest hit films. Even the first film ever made in Indian Cinema – Raja Harishchandra--was created using a legend mentioned in the Indian ancient texts. In the last few decades, the adaptation of literary texts has emerged as the most appealing trend in the Indian Film industry but is it actually creating successful movies from books? What are the key factors to remember when choosing a book for adaptation? This Paper intends to study and comment on the current trend of book adaptations in the Indian film industry and various styles of adaptations based on fidelity to the original text.

Keywords: Film, Literature, Studio, Fidelity, Directors, Authors, Adaptation, Original Text.

Introduction

Don't Judge a Book by its Film!!

This is something that is often said when a movie based on a book is released anywhere around the world. Actually, the opposite is true. When a movie is based on a bestseller or any literary work, the studio and the filmmakers are wanting to encash the popularity of the book. The film is judged according to the book it's based on and in some way manages to provide a bigger audience for the film. So those who have not read the book, want to take the easy way out and watch the film. And those who have read the book are eager to see the tangible form of the story and characters they visualized in their own mind while reading the book.

Literature was the first and probably the most primitive form of entertainment. Right from the ancient carvings inside the primitive man's cave to the first book ever printed on woodblocks, we have always found a way to record our history and stories in written form. Cinema emerged much later as a medium of entertainment. Since the time it was first made, it has always drawn inspiration from history and literary texts.

"The book is a film that takes place in the mind of the reader. That's why we go to movies and say, "Oh, the book is better."

Paulo Coelho has truly said what goes on in the minds of the audience after watching a film adapted from a book. A reader will always expect the characters from the book to come alive and an onscreen adaptation makes that expectation a reality. The film is then the next logical step of the novel. The images of the book are taken and transformed into real-world tangibles that a person feels like they can touch. It is a romantic notion. Yet a movie can do much more than a Novel, it is able to express more and in various ways and not less than literature because of a wider set of tools. Since it is not only working with words but also with images and sounds. But already the idea is completely inadequate that adaptation is the presentation of a literary text line by line, word by word.

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Literature Adaptation Trend in Bollywood

Being a writer in the current film industry is tough and demanding. The biggest demand is to follow western patterns usually. As the 2017 Oscar list came out, there was a sudden realization that Hollywood is looking at all kinds of Literature to create content for Films and Digital media both. All the 2017 Oscar nominations were inspired by or based on books/ plays or short stories.

Hence began Bollywood's obsession with finding the best book that can be adapted. The current brief in most of the Media houses and Studios is to hire people who read a lot and eventually give them the task of finding a book that can be easily adapted for the Indian audience. Yet while Bollywood was able to successfully adapt a lot of literature into films in the period of the 1960s – 70s, most of its attempts at adaptation have been hit and miss in the past two decades.

So what are the factors on which one can select a story that is apt to be made into a film?

How do we decide whether a film would be a good or a bad adaptation of a particular novel?

This brings us to the Adaptation studies. The most important factor that is always a hot topic for discussion in terms of any adaptation is Fidelity.

Adaptation Studies & Fidelity

"Indeed, there's an old (and sexist) line that says translations are like wives: they can be faithful but not beautiful or beautiful but not faithful, never both. That is, literal translations may be more accurate, but relatively free ones are likely to be more attractive and engaging to readers of the second language." (DAVID L. KRANZ, 2008)

Fidelity will always be defined as the degree of faithfulness to the original text. The original text is the Novel and faithfulness or its relative degree will be observed with the corresponding novel.

Fidelity in its most obvious terms is the plot, characters, setting, themes, and events of a story and whether or not a film version is able to portray those elements in a way that is true to the way they are presented in the written version.

Here I would like to stress a point mentioned earlier, the more popular the book the better chances of it getting picked up by the Studios for making a film out of it. The audience will accept or reject it based on the fact that how close was what they saw on screen to what they read on the pages of that book. Unfortunately, their vision doesn't coincide with the filmmaker's vision of the same book/film.

Adaptation is the translation of a novel so that it fits a new destination, a new target, or a new audience. This supposed role of adaptation makes critics eager to continually discuss the degree to which a film is faithful to the literary work. Whereas in literature the reader fills in the blanks himself, imagining the space and the characters, cinema provides the audience with ready-made characters, in blood and flesh, and a definite outline of space. Adaptations may make understanding an already-read novel easier. The characters are alive and tangible as well as the whole context.

Adaptations are not aimed at making young people more interested in reading books. In fact, the opposite of this is true in most cases. People are interested to watch adaptations of the books already read or those who don't read at all are just waiting for a film to be made so that they never have to pick up the book at all.

Watching an adaptation doesn't make people read the book. Adaptations can also sometimes inhibit the imagination because everything is shown on screen.

But the debate continues whether complete fidelity in adaptation is truly the best way or not.

Hence arises the need for categorizing the various forms of Adaptation.

Author Geoffrey Wagner distinguishes three main types of adaptation: transposition, analogy, and commentary. (Helman, 1996)

- **Transposition** means plainly bringing the novel to the screen. This kind of adaptation can be watched as if the audience goes through the pages of the respective novel, not noticing any differences.
- **Commentary** means an adaptation where the original material is changed to some extent by the author's deliberate intention.
- **Analogy** is a major departure from the literary text, resulting in a completely different piece of art.

For instance in Indian cinema, *Devdas* can be categorized into all these three categories. Mostly thought of as autobiographical, the author Sharat Chandra was ashamed of this novel back when it was published and thought of it as a juvenile emotionless story.

Even in its most basic form, *Devdas*' storyline has remained largely consistent, which scarcely explains why people continue to find it fascinating. Let's have a look at the story of the original text.

Childhood playmates *Devdas* and *Parvati* (affectionately known as *Paro*) confess their love right before *Devdas* is sent away to Calcutta (or, in the most recent rendition, England) for his schooling.

Devdas is the bad son of the wealthy brahmin *Zamindar*. After the young couple is reunited, *Parvati*'s family tries to arrange for her to marry *Devdas*, but the latter's father forbids the wedding. Unfortunately, *Paro*'s family is of lower caste. In response to the girl's family's insult, they promptly arrange for her marriage to a wealthy widower with grown children.

Despite having been promised to someone else, *Parvati* risks her reputation by approaching *Devdas* in the middle of the night and pleading with him to spare her from a loveless union; the feeble-minded, indecisive *Devdas* hesitates and decides that he cannot challenge his family and tradition. This is one of the story's now-famous set pieces. However, he is upset with his choice, so when his worldly college friend *Chunnilal* leads him to a brothel, he returns to Calcutta and tries to drown his sorrows in alcohol and the seductive urban demi-monde.

There he meets *Chandramukhi*, a dancing courtesan who falls in love with the dejected young man who pays but asks for nothing in return. The narrative is driven to its bleak end by three crucial incidents: *Devdas* writing an untrue letter, telling *Paro* he doesn't love her like a lover. He tries to stop it from reaching *Paro* but it's too late. Second, he hits *Paro* on the head right before her wedding day, so that he can "mark" her as his own, every time she sees her beautiful face, she is reminded not of her beauty but her beloved *Deva*. And lastly, when he is insolent even after trying to drink himself to oblivion, he decides to ride in trains aimlessly all across India, eventually landing up at her doorstep just before he is about to die.

The ending is iconic and imprinted in most Indian viewers' minds – As he dies almost at *Paro*'s doorstep, she finds out it's not a stranger dying right outside her home, but her very own *Devdas*. The irony of fate never even lets her reunite with her love even after his death. The *Zamindar* orders to shut the door before *Paro* takes the *Zamindar*'s "respect outside the doorstep" of the opulent house.

Devdas (Roy, 1955) was a classic case of **Transposition** from the original Bengali text, as the director followed the childhood journey and almost painted a line-by-line picture of the original text with his scenes.

Whereas ***Devdas (Bhansali, 2002)*** was a perfect example of **Commentary** as he added a few bits of his own which never existed in the original novel. He added a lot of peripheral characters as well. Like *Devdas*' grandmother, *Paro*'s mother-in-law and an evil son-in-law who eventually reveals her secret meeting with *Chandramukhi*. Effectively stopping all of her movement outside the haveli as ordered by the *Zamindar* himself. The most controversial addition was the fated meeting between *Paro* and *Chandramukhi*. *Bhansali* faced a lot of criticism for the same, nonetheless the dance number where they both dance together made history in the world of Indian Cinema. Instantly making his film a commercial success.

Then came ***DevD (Kashyap, 2009)*** which was a completely different contemporary version of *Devdas*, where the director only chose to keep the basic character traits of the characters and change the whole milieu and setting of the main plot. This was a classic example of **Analogy** from the original text. According to the director, there is a *Devdas* to be found in any and every youth who falls in love. *Kashyap* managed to portray a starkly different but relevant world of the younger generation. He tackled multiple issues like drug abuse, the matter of consent even in the scarred profession of prostitution, and eventually gave a happy ending to the melancholic tale of *Devdas*, when *Dev* the wayward youth decides to sober up and fix his life while continuing to be with *Chanda (Chandramukhi)*.

A film based on a novel can also sometimes tend to just become a critical essay that stresses the main theme of the novel. The film adaptation chooses some plotlines and excludes others, depending mostly on the director of the film.

It can focus on some specific character or area of the book and elaborate on it or shorten the same while indulging in some characters' whimsical details. These changes can make it even better than the original text and hence enhance the novel. But also it can completely work the opposite way.

In the old days, movies were frequently inspired by or conceived from the classics. Since then it had become a popular trend for authors to consider the screen rights for their work before getting published. So much so that at one point of time, Chetan Bhagat emerged as an author whose books are already written like screenplays.

And as the trend becomes a common norm in the film industry, we see more and more films based on books performing below average.

The problem being the filmmaker/ Director as well as the Studios don't know how to choose from the available literature for assured success. They are struggling to find some understanding of what needs to be analyzed before deciding to make a film on that particular piece of literature.

Taking into account the same example where we saw the three different ways of adapting a book – Devdas

Devdas (1955) was adapted like a Transposition and turned out to be a superhit for that time.

Devdas (2002) was adapted like a Commentary. The director added some new characters, and new pivotal incidents between Paro and Chandramukhi, giving it an iconic backdrop with opulence and history. It was critically acclaimed and awarded many national as well as international awards.

But Dev.D was a complete Analogy where the contemporary youth just had names similar to the original character and broadly followed similar character traits but nothing more. The theme was followed and yet a different message was delivered through the film. The film has merit on its own and connected with the youth but couldn't be a family entertainer as the other adaptations of Devdas and that impacted its box office collection. Youth were prohibited by law to watch the film unless they were an Adult technically. The film was given an Adult certificate by the censor board which impacted its profitability as well.

Fidelity in its most obvious terms is the plot, characters, setting, themes, and events of a story and whether or not a film version is able to portray those elements in a way that is true to the way they are presented in the written version.

McFarlane also observed that Any given film version is able only to aim at reproducing the filmmaker's reading of the original and to hope that it will coincide with that of many other readers/viewers.

"The fact that one author finds "boringly faithful" a film which another sees as having only "a tenuous relation" to the original while yet another finds it "too faithful" suggests that there is no clear consensus about what "faithful" means in this discourse. Faithful to what" (McFarlane, 1996)?

What should the adaptation be faithful to?

"Adaptations are condemned as unfaithful because critics read only one way – from novel to film – and find that the film has made changes. But if one reads in both directions – from novel to film and then from film back to novel – one often finds the alleged infidelities clearly in the text" (Elliot, 2003)

Some critics insist on the Fidelity criteria and hence they underline the fact that the filmmaker has a different perception of what the critic saw himself. But it is impossible sometimes to talk about fidelity because two readers of the same book may not see the same thing. The adaptation issue has been revoked by a lot of authors because of the same reason.

My study of these three adaptations of Devdas as well as other 7 adapted movies in India has raised one very important point that in Indian films, relatability to the audience is more important than fidelity to the original book. Film audience is bigger than the book audience, so it's important to appeal to the viewers more than the readers.

Conclusion

Here are a few factors that need to be kept in mind when taking a decision to adapt a book into a film.

- Is the adaptation a straight or a loose interpretation of the novel?
- Can the adaptation stand alone, or is it necessary to have read the novel to understand the film?
- Does the adaptation capture the novel's formal elements: the theme, characterization, style, tone, and plot of the novel?
- Is the adaptation a quality film in its own right?

- When the screenwriter and/or director changes any of the formal elements of the novel, is the overall message retained?
 - What are the factors that have been changed/altere from the original story by the director in order to create a relatable film? whether that was a successful adaptation or not?
 - Is the youth inclined to watch literature adaptations nowadays?
- Book adaptations for a film can be a growing trend but relatability to the audience will always need to be the first criterion to select a book for adaptation.

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