

---

Research Papers

---



**TRANSPOSING NOVELS INTO FILMS WHILE CONVERTING A COLD, BLACK & WHITE PRINTED PAGE  
INTO COLOURFUL CELLULOID : SOME CONSIDERATIONS IN THE FILM ADAPTATIONS AS  
AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN CINEMA AND LITERATURE**

Dr. Ankush Dattatraya Bandal

---

**Abstract**

*“All the world is a stage” wrote William Shakespeare in one of his plays entitled The Merchant of Venice; but if, by chance, he had been alive in the 21st century instead of the sixteenth, he might very well wanted to amend the line to refer to film making instead of the theatre. It would certainly be an appropriate change of metaphor, for it is the celluloid image-in the cinema and on the television-that seems increasingly to control and dominate our lives today.*

---

There has been a huge growth of film adaptations all these years and the interaction between literature and film adaptation of literary texts has also been at its highest. Therefore, it would be useful to take into account the historical perspective of film adaptation.

On 28th Dec. 1895 Louis Lumiere showed the first film in the basement of Indian Room Grand Café in Paris. He showed 12 films, each of one-minute duration. Films were based on simple human activities of people coming out of factory taking a breakfast, father and mother, friends chatting together, and three express trains rushing through a railway cutting. The audiences who watched the miracle were, perhaps, more fascinated than the modern spectators who look at the digital images from Star Wars or Terminato III on the Silver Screen at Cinemaxes or any of the Multiplexes in the cities today.

**Why Adaptations are needed?**

From the beginning of Hollywood, the greatest

film producing set up in the world, literature has always established as a proven base for the production of films. Hollywood turned to literature as the source which could be utilized for film and therefore they took to practice of translating books to films. D.W. Griffith, the first greatest artist, the man who gave shape to the distinctive film language for the first time, based his movies on poems, plays, short stories and novels. He adapted Tennyson in 'Enoch Arden', Browning in 'Pippa Passes', Thomas Hood in 'The Song of the Shirt', Jack London in 'The Call of the Wild' and Dickens in the 'Cricket on the Heath'. Though Griffith has been looked upon as the father of the adaptation, the pioneers in the field of adaptation were the Italian filmmakers who considered literature worth converting into films as early as 1920. That was the year when George Melies filmed his A Trip to the Moon which had its origin in a Jules Vern's novel which was also made into a film by Melies bearing the same title.

In recent times, however, the literary text is gaining importance day by day because the literary text is being converted into the medium of the film through adaptations and secondly, the filmmaker has become the critic in its real sense through his/her interaction with the society. The filmmaker enjoys certain advantageous position due to the handling of the most powerful medium entitled “cinema”. Though film is generally considered as a means of entertainment only, time has come now when there has to be some serious thinking and in-depth consideration on the part of the academics and intellectuals. Talented and creative filmmakers and directors like Eisenstein, Godard, Renoir, Antonioni, Fellini, Kurosawa, Ray, Coppola, Polanski, Benegal and Adoor have successfully established the film as a narrative medium. The ever-increasing narrative range of the film medium amazes the observers because a majority of films prove to be adaptations. The adaptations have always held a privileged place in the film industry and at the Academy Awards it's the adaptation more than any other kind of film on which the industry relies completely. Joy Gould Boyum makes the point when she says :

“Take almost any year in fact, since a list of the movies which have either won or at least been nominated for Best Picture sounds startlingly like a library catalogue : The Way of All Flesh, All Quiet on the Western Front, Mutiny on the Bounty, Arrowsmith, A Farewell to Arms, David Copperfield, The Informer, A Midsummer Night Dream, Pygmalion. The Grapes of Warth, The Magnificent Ambersons. For Whom the Bell Tolls, The Ox-Bow Incident, Hamlet, Henry V, Washington Square), King Solomon's Mines, A Place in the Sun (from Dreiser's An American Tragedy), Ivanhoe, From Here to Eternity, A Street Car Named Desire, The Rose, Tattoo, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Room at the Top, Elmer Gantry, Sons and Lovers, To Kill A Mocking Bird, Beckett, Zorba die Greek, Dr. Zbivago, Romeo and Juliet, Tom Jones, a Clockwork Orange, Barry Lyndon, One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Apocalypse Now (inspires by Conrad's Heart of Darkness), Tess, Sophie's Choice and so on..... What is more, since the industry approval implicit in these awards not only reflects a given film “quality” but also its popularity the latter being one of Hollywood's crucial yard sticks of the former.” (Boyum : 1985 : 5)

Detracting and regretting voices

When there are supporters to adaptation who justify the practice in the industry, there are

moviegoers, academic theorists and critics as well as creative writers who have raised their voices against adaptation. Hollywood is used to taking works of fiction in other forms and converting them into film and this is to be regretted because this hampers the growth of the talented writers. Secondly, screen-play writers can't give assurance about the literary quality of the screenplays. Dudley Nichols, the best known Hollywood screen writer, regrets for the adaptation practice and says that a talented writer does not feel encouraged to write directly for the screen. This is to be regretted because the screenplay might easily become a fascinating new form of literature, provided the studio heads acquire sufficient taste to recognize and devise literary quality.

Yet there are and there will continue to be written screenplays of quality and sincerity. There is another circumstance which makes it difficult for the screenplay to be enjoyed as a literary form in itself : it is not and never can be a finished product. It is a step in the process of film-making though it is a completely new thing is which the screen writer has already converted the works on a piece of paper to visuals and images on his mental screen. Still, screenplays are not complete works in themselves : they are blueprints of projected films. Many factors may have intervened to make the finished film different from the designed illusion, for better or worse. But at the same time, the screenwriters who desire to write an original story have no readers outside the shooting floor. If the story proposes to make a serious statement beyond mere entertainment, it will seem off the beaten track and the writer will very likely meet opposition. It is for this reason alone that so few stories of any account 'originate' within Hollywood. Ingmar Bergman, the leading director in Sweden, raises his detracting voice when he says through the article 'Film Has Nothing To Do With Literature.' (Bergeman : 1960 : XV) “Film has nothing to do with literature : the character and substance of the two are forms to do with the receptive process of it. The written word is read and assimilated by conscious act the will in alliance with the intellect: little by little is affects the imagination and the emotions. The process is different with a motion picture. When we experience a film, we consciously prime ourselves for illusion. Putting aside will and intellect, we make way for it in our imagination. The sequence of picture plays directly on our feeling..... we should avoid making films out of books. The irrational dimension of its existence is often

untranslatable into visual terms-and it in turn, destroys the special irrational dimensions of the film. If, despite this, we wish to translate something literary into film terms, we must make an infinite number of complicated adjustments which often bear little or no fruit in proportion to the effort expended."

There was Vachel Lindsay who argued against the film medium's uniqueness. Virginia Woolf Likewise expressed the view that the 'alliance' between cinema and literature was 'unnatural' and 'disastrous' to both forms. Of course these are the reactions during the days of silent film. During the thirties and forties, reviewing the period in his essay 'The Evolution of Language of Cinema' Andre Bazin could go so far as to declare, 'the filmmaker..... is at last the equal of the novelist.' Exactly during the same period Slavko Vorkapich, the film teacher defined the distinctive qualities of literature and an ideal film and the quality of conveying images through the following statement in his essay "...those people who deny that here can be any connection between the scenario and literature. Literature they seem to regard as something godforsaken and superannuated compounded of correct grammar and high-sounding Ciceronian phrases. Such a conception reveals the feebleness of their sensibility. If you ask me to give you the most distinctive quality of good writing, I would give it to you in this one word : VISUAL. Reduce the art of writing to its fundamentals and you come to this single aim : to convey images by means of words. But to convey images to make the mind see. To project onto that inner screen of the brain a moving picture of objects and events, events and objects moving towards a balance and reconciliation of a more than usual state of emotions with more than usual order that is the definition of a good literature – of the achievement of a very good poet-from Homer and Shakespeare to James Joyce or Ernest Hemingway. It is also a definition of the ideal film." (Mac Cann : 1966 : 170).

Though literature and film aim at certain communicative expression and are almost on a par, acts of adaptation bring out the categorical claims for the superiority of one of the two art forms. Films adaptation is always placed at the inferior position in comparison with the source novel. Indian film directors have perhaps reversed the order of position of high claim through their films : Amol Palekar's film Banagarwadee based on Vainktesh Madgulkar's novel, and the film kairee based on G.A. Kulkarni's short story are the

excellent examples of the films enjoying grand success even more than the original novel or the short story on which the films have been based respectively. Same is the case of the short story converted into a Marathi film entitled 'Shwaas.' 'Natarang' is an excellent example of a successful film in Marathi which is made out a comparatively less popular novel.

#### **What is Adaptation?**

Adapting something means changing it, altering it, modifying it, deconstructing it for the purpose of preparing a screenplay. It also means cutting and simplifying.

Adaptation or the filmed novel is a specific genre in which a film is either based on a poem or a short story or a play or a novel. In the filmed novel, literature and cinema both overlap. In spite of the obvious similarities there are certain hidden differences that startle the filmmakers and the critics. These differences between the novel and the film are in the form of certain distinguishing traits of both the mediums of expression. The novel is conceptual and discursive in form while the film is perpetual and presentational in form. The novel is a linguistic medium, the film is essentially visual (as music and dialogue reinforce the images and can be subsidiary lines in the total film composition). The governing conventions of each medium are also conditioned by different modes of production. The novel is supported by a small, literate circle and is produced by a single person 'the novelist.' The film, on the other hand, is supported by masses and produced by a group of artists called 'the production crew' & is restricted by certain cinematic conventions. One discovers, therefore, in the film version of the novel an inevitable desertion of 'novelistic elements'. As a result, the characteristic contents of language in the form of tropes are converted into the images of physical reality.

As far as adaptations are concerned it has been observed right from the beginning that second-rate novels make very good movies while great works of prose have produced films that have tumbled. The Variety Books of Movie Lists, edited by Spencer Beck, comments on the indecisive nature of the successful film adaptation thus :

"The cinema learned quite early on that basing films on established material from another medium provided a pre-sold quality that often cushioned a picture's financial risks. And while films often stumbled with great works of literature, it sometimes scaled great heights with lesser work of prose." (Beek : Ibid : 174).



It should be noted that the success or the failure of a film made out of a novel doesn't depend on certain set principles of adaptation or a proven formula of adaptation. As a result it remains a difficult to transpose a great novel into an equally great film. Basically the form and content create great hurdles in the process of transposition. No filmmakers can guarantee the success of the film adaptation in spite of his/her expertise in the field of making the film adaptations enjoy certain sense of uncertainty as far as the box-office considerations are bound to evaluate the success.

Film critics and cinema aficionados are quite curious about this illusive nature of the adaptations. Simon John makes the point when he writes, "Nonetheless it remains true that great novels and stories make such sovereign use of their form- indeed, to a large extent, are their form.....It follows then, the greater the fiction, i.e. the more its form and content are indissoluble, the greater the loss incurred by transposition. Here however, film comes through with another possibility: it can turn a mediocre novel or a story into a fine movie, precisely because what the writer may have been able to outline and adumbrate only in his prose, the filmmaker can flesh out and make filmically exciting by finding cinematic equivalents or better-than-equivalents with learning us frustrated or indignant over the verbal beauties than equivalents without learning us frustrated or indignant over the verbal beauties that have been jettisoned....." (John: 19170L25).

It should not be assumed that the worse is the book, the better will be the film version. Adaptation process here is not just the process of transposition or transfer but it ends up with the translation of the source material into the new and versatile medium. In this context it should be remembered that the great filmmaker remains to be more faithful to the film medium in which he has mastery. Hence the reputed filmmakers will not want to adapt anything pre-existent will want to establish in and with the medium, unhampered by any considerations of fidelity to anything but his own cinematic intellect. And this can be an answer to the question asked while redefining the relationship between literature and film-The question is : should an adaptation be necessarily a lesser form because it lacks originality in its mainframe and must it mean that the filmmaker has no scope to display his genius? Gold Boyum hits the nail on the head when she says.... "The rhetoric of fiction is simply not the rhetoric of film, and it's in finding analogous strategies whereby the

one achieves the effect of the other that the greatest challenge of adaptation lies" (Boyum : 1989 : Ibid : 81).

An intelligent filmmaker has to exert very greatly to put his/her mark over the film in question. He has to decide upon the mode of adaptation befitting to the kind of film he tries to make out of the source novel. He has to honour the conventions of the cinema and perhaps neglect or wink at the niceties of the novel. Actually in the process of filmmaking the filmmaker does not convert the novel into a new form at his disposal. He even doesn't rely on the novel as a whole or novel in toto. There is every possibility that the film director might be completely unaware of the novel itself. The director may use just the paraphrase of the source-novel or even a one-page synopsis of the base novel. What he adapts is mere skeleton-like synopsis which is his interpretation of that novel. Here the film maker merely treats the novel as a raw material and ultimately creates his unique structure. That is why a comparative study which begins by finding resemblances in the source-novel and the film adaptation ends by proclaiming their differences. So finally there is no necessary correspondence seen between the excellence of a novel and the quality of the film in which the novel is transfigured in the process of adaptation. Under this situation it is quite natural that most of the novelists grumble about the lack of fidelity shown to their most revered novels.

Hemingway and R.K. Narayan are very good examples of dis-satisfied novelists who did register their protest against those makers of film who blasphemously butchered their beautiful novels bluntly.

The most fascinating and compelling statement about the war has been made by Hemingway through his novel 'A Farewell to Arms'. Hemingway and Hollywood have had a special love-hate relationship even since 1932. The novelists have every reason to feel disillusioned about the way the film industry failed to capture both spirit and the letter of their writing. The film adaptation of 'For Whom the Bell Tolls' scrupulously avoided every political implication in the novel, and 'To Have and Have Not' retained so little of his original story that Warner Brothers renamed the film six years later without deviating from the thematic design or narrative structure of the novel. Ever since 1932 when the first film was made by Paramount, based on his war classic-A Farewell to Arms, Hemingway was very upset not only at the refashioning of his novel along the lines

of the popular screen romance but screening two endings of the film : one in which Catherine dies in childbirth as in the novel, and another in which he survives to suggest the happy ending. It is quite interesting to note why Frank Borzage, the director of the film, resorted to popular box office gimmicks in spite of resentment expressed by Hemingway for altering the ending. He felt that Paramount may have bought the film rights, but they had no business to interfere with some of the important scenes which were integral to the overall thematic design of the book. The film adaptation, based on Hemingway's novel, is not a faithful cinematic rendition of the original and whenever films are taken seriously, A Farewell to Arms consistently appears as one of the industry's biggest screenplay disasters. In case of Hemingway, some of Hollywood's reputed directors like Howard Hawks, Frank Borzage, Henry King, Joris Ivens, Sam Wood, Michael Curtiz, Don Siegel and David O Selznick, who were involved in shaping his fiction into film have all bungled the film endings by not preserving the thematic intent of Hemingway's original work. Such deviations and mutilations are bound to happen if the filmmaker, while adapting a novel to the movie medium, depends on the cinematic paraphrase of the source novel. The resulting film in the form of the adapted film can never be a replica of the source novel from which it is derived. B. Gopal Rao, through his article entitled 'Cinematic Adaptation of Hemingway's A Farewell to Arms : The Problem of Ending', has thrown a new light on the problem of fidelity. Philip D Jene also holds the film director to be responsible to both his medium as well as the source text. Philip D Jene refers to the double responsibility of the film director, the responsibility to the film medium as well as the source text. He states..... "To say that a faithful rendition of a work of fiction on the screen should preserve the essential spirit and overall thematic design of the original story is not to imply that the personal style of the film director is not important to the artistic success of a film. But most of the Hollywood directors violate the principle of 'fidelity to the text', and instead adapt the novel to the exigencies of the story which they are filming. The film director is ultimately responsible for the overall quality and artistic unity of a motion picture and more so because that he must be responsible to something : the original text" (Jene : 1980 : 143).

The integration of literature and film as complementary media helps one to appreciate both the media in relative terms. Bernard Dick, a noted film scholar who has written extensively on the relationship between fiction and films, observes that the directors who bring the work of the great writer to the screen deal with the help of images with what the original author did with words. Hemingway was bitterly disappointed at the film endings of his work, and also due to the reason that the screen adaptations could not capture the inward significance and subtle quality of his prose. It is true that none of the Hollywood directors could reveal Hemingway's awesome lyrical power on the screen, and the lesson that all of them learnt in making those films is that "the printed page is woefully deceptive." Perhaps, Hemingway requires a talented director to find powerful visual equivalents for his remarkable prose to be transfigured into an 'excellent film'. There are certain examples in the Film History where not only endings of the novel were changed but even the tone and spirit of the novel were altered by the makers of the film. Norman T Carrington in his Notes on Chosen English Texts (1962) declared "adaptations from one literary medium into another generally involve radical changes in structure : it may thus be worth mentioning that Animal farm has been adapted for both radio and film. It was first broadcast in the then quite new Third Program of the BBC in Jan 1947....The film of Animal Farm aroused great interest. It was a Associated British Pathe Louis de Rochemont Production, in Technicolor and in 'cartoon' form. John Halias and Joy Batchelor drew and directed the film in collaboration. Maurici Denham 'supplied' all the animals' voices, and once again, a narrator was used. The film was on 'unfixed release' in 1955, which meant in effect, that it was not put into general circulation, its run depending entirely on public interest and support. It must, however, be mentioned that the film entirely altered the ending of the original novel by giving the story a happy ending, in which the animals of the world united against Napoleon in a second revolution, and expelled him. It will be clear from a reading of these Notes that this represents a complete reversal of the Orwell's thesis".

While there are several instances in which a work of art has been butchered by insensitive and unprincipled filmmakers, there is no dearth of filmmakers who have done full justice to the spirit of the original work. The film versions of Joseph Conrad's Lord Jim and that of Albert Camus's The

Oustider are the examples that come immediately to mind as instances of the latter kind of films.

Before the actual shooting of the film R.K. Narayan was greatly shocked to know about the mutilations done to his novel. the Malgudi setting which had intimate relationship with its theme and treatment, was changed by the makers of film and all the geographical ethos was completely lost. This had done a serious damage to the film. A Great film director Satyajit Ray, while acknowledging the importance of malgudi settings, has expressed his inability to think of moving outside Malgudi and capturing the tone and atmosphere of the novel.

Finalization of the screenplay was another serious jolt to R K Narayan, the novelist. Within no time he began to realize that the film which was going to be made would have little resemblance to what he had written in his novel. Narrating the entire experience, Narayan writes... “The cooperation of many persons was needed in the course of the film making a production executive canvassed the bookshops in Bombay, cornering all the available copies at any price. He could usually be seen going about with a bundle of books under his arm. I was making on copy of the book; it was as if he were studying it for a doctoral thesis. Not until I had a chance to read his “treatment” did I understand what all penciling meant : he had been marking off passages and portions that were to be avoided in the film” (Jene : 1980 : Ibid : 54) R.K. Narayan's remark throws light on the relationship between the novelist and the film Director, Narayan continues.....“The screenplay was finally presented to me with great flourish and expression of fraternal sentiments.... By now a bewildering number of hands were behind the scenes, at laboratories, workshops, editing rooms and so forth. It was impossible to keep tack of what was going on, or get hold of any one with a final say. Soon I trained myself to give up all attempts to connect the film with a book of which I happened to be the author” (Jene : 1980 : Ibid). By insisting on Malgudi as the location for shooting-Malgudi as south India in costume, tone and contents, R.K. Narayan had raised a significant issue about the aesthetics of the novel as well as of filmmaking because devoid of its authentic flavour and its credibility. It is true that certain settings in certain novels settings in certain novels become a part and parcel of the novel itself. Mere thought of removing the setting or milieu disturbs one. Can any one even dream of taking away wessex from Hardy's novel? in selecting some other location

and by avoiding Malgudi as the location for having mere optical effects as for them Malgudi could be where they wanted to place it-in Kashmir, Rajastan. Bombay, Delhi, even Ceylon. The filmmakers had some different considerations and those considerations disturbed the novelist in R. K. Narayan. He had to encounter similar experiences with regard to the interpretation of characters. The characters in the film were drastically changed. It can be concluded that R. K. Narayan, the creative writer had every right to feel annoyed and humiliated at the tinkering and tempering done to his novel by the so called 'creative' filmmakers! R. K. Narayan case raised an important issue :

Is 'fidelity to the text' the only litmus test of an ideal adaptation? Those who love literature in its varied forms have to come forward and answer the million dollar question IS FIDELITY TO THE TEXT THE ONLY LITMUS TEST OF AN IDEAL ADAPTATION? I think the issue raised needs prime consideration in the present scenario where adaptation has almost become an accepted practice in the film industry. I hope the film critics, cinema aficionados and students as well as teachers would probe deep into the issue in order to show their regarding literature in its various forms.

#### **Bibliography**

Boyum, Joy Gould. Double Exposure: Fiction into Film. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989

Ingmar, Bergman. Article: Film Has Nothing To Do with Literature: 1960

MacCan, Richard Dyer. Film: A Montage of Theories. New York : E.P. Dutton & Co. Inc., 1966

Beck, J. Spencer. Verify & Book of Movie Lists. Great Briton : Hamlyn, 1994.

Simon, John. Movies into Film. A Detta Book, 1970

Jene, Philips D. Hemingway and Film. New York : Frederik Unger, 1980