

**Cinematic Adaptations of Literary Texts: Issues and Challenge**

The end of the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of cinema, a new art form which soon became popularly known as film, motion picture, or movie. In the recent decades, across the globe, cinema has been constantly interfacing with literature and life in a rapidly changing socio-cultural contexts. Cinema is also the medium with immense mass appeal. The most general notion of popular cinema being merely ‘an entertainment industry’ has observed radical changes over previous couple of decades all over the world.

**Introduction:**

Word ‘Cinema’ is derived from the French ‘cinématographe’ based partly on the Greek ‘Kinema’ originally meaning movement. So cinema is a word meaning moving picture. Word ‘Movie’ is a slang for a moving or motion picture. Film is the medium on which motion pictures are fixed. Thus, over a period of time these words have been popularly used for motion pictures.

For many centuries literature has remained as one of the most significant art-form of expression, but the scenario has been under transformation since the 20<sup>th</sup> century; and as a result cinema pervades as a universal art. Consequently, the present culture has quickly shifted from text based to visually-based. In other words, cinema is accessed by and interest of more number of people than literature. One of the prominent reasons is many people tend to have less time and limited desire to read a novel and opt to watch the same story on screen.

Since its beginning, every year number of films continue to derive from novels- classics as well as new ones. Whether Hollywood or Bollywood, the public lines up enthusiastically at the box office for films based on literary works which they have read or heard about. At the same time, there are film critics, authors, academic theorists, readers, spectators as well as creative artists who complain about the cinematic adaptations of literary works, especially novels, into films.

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Adaptations are found everywhere today: on the television and movie screen, on the musical and dramatic stage, on the Internet, in novels and comic books, in theme parks and video arcades. Adaptations are not new to our time. Shakespeare transferred his culture's stories from page to stage, Aeschylus and Racine and Goethe and da Ponte also retold familiar stories in new forms. Film series such as "The Lord of the Rings" and "Harry Potter" are very popular adaptations.

### Adaptation:

Adaptation is translations of a literary text into the language of film. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary explains the verb 'to adapt' as "make something suitable for a new use, situation, etc; modify (a text) for television, the stage etc." It explains the noun 'adaptation' as "action or process of adapting or being adapted". For film-critic like Morner adaptation is : "A re-rendering of a work originally written in one GENRE or medium into another genre or medium". Julie Sanders in *Adaptation and Appropriation*(2006) defines adaptation as a "specific process involving the transition from one genre to another: novel into film; drama into musical: the dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or the inverse process of making drama into prose narrative". As defined in Merriam-Webster, an "adaptation" is something (a movie, book, play etc.) that is changed so that it can be presented in another form or to make fit for a new use by modification.

Further, adaptations can be made from a various number of works of art such as paintings, poems, scriptures or even sculptures. Adaptations can be made from a variety of media into a variety of media or within one and the same like songs, ballets, operas and musicals. Thus, adaption is not limited to one art form only.

For more than last sixty years the issue of adaptation of literature into film has attracted critical attention. The making of film out of an earlier text is virtually as old as the machinery of cinema itself. According to critic Dudley Andrew, over half of all commercial films have come from

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literary originals. In 1979, theorist Morris Beja estimated that 30 percent of American film releases each year are adapted from novels and that more than three fourths of the top Academy Awards for “best picture” have gone to adaptations. Going beyond the numbers, the matter of fact is : practice of comparing literature and film raises deeper issues about literacy, contrasting media, and the purposes of art. The important questions that draws our attention are: what leads the spectator to watch an adaptation? And why does s/he feel attracted to watch it? Kranz and Mellerski opine in their work *In/Fidelity: Essays on Film Adaptation*(2008):

Part of the thrill of watching cinematic adaptations of canonical, famous, or bestselling literary works, we surmise, lies in witnessing how the personally remembered or culturally widespread understanding of those beloved artefacts is reproduced or transformed in the new medium(2).

Many critics conclude that apparently, there is also an educational reason for adapting literature into film; in this respect, film is a pedagogical medium that teaches the masses about their literary heritage. Thus, one can say that adaptation is significant for many reasons.

The exercise of adaptation is also popular in Indian cinema. In fact, the journey of Indian Cinema began with the films based on mythology like *Raja Harishchandra* or *Savitri*. Many Hindi films were later adapted from classic literature like *Shatranj ke Khiladi* written by Munshi Premchand, directed by iconic director Satyajit Ray who also directed films based on the famous works of Rabindranath Tagore. Another example is movie “Guide”. A romantic drama, starring Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman, film “Guide” is based on a popular novel by RK Narayan with the same name. In recent times many Indian novels have been adapted into Indian Cinema. For example, “Parineeta” and “Devdas”. These Bollywood films are based on a Bengali novels by Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay with the same titles. “Pinjar” is another movie based on Amrita Pritam’s novel *Pinjar*. *Train to Pakistan*, *Midnight’s Children*, *A Flight of Pigeons*, *In Custody*, *The Namesake*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Japanese Wife*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *The Mistress of Spices*, *Three Idiots* and *Two States*

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are some of the examples of well-known film adaptations derived from diverse literary sources like novels, plays, short stories or novellas by Indian English authors.

Makers of one of the biggest movie industry, Indian directors have not only adapted Indian novels, but they have adapted foreign literature into Hindi and regional cinema. Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* has been adapted not only into Hindi but also in Gujarati titled "Santu Rangili". Shakespeare's plays *Hamlet* and *Othello* have been adapted as "Haider" and "Omkaara" respectively. There are hundreds of such illustrations. The point is: since its rise cinema has adapted literature for many reasons.

Though a different medium of expression, cinema in general has accepted the challenge to portray the classical as well as contemporary literatures. Hence, the art of adaptation faces many issues and challenges.

Let us discuss some of these issues and challenges faced by a film maker during adaptation of a literary text.

#### Major Issues:

- The first issue is the amount of change and the type(s) of modification which are needed or being performed on the "original" work.
- Why one wants to do an adaptation, so the work could be brought to a broader audience. In the process, how the director and his team deal with a work of literature, because the adaptation can give "life" to the characters, give greater definition to the setting or locale of the story, and in the case of fantasy/science fiction, make the "impossible" possible. With nonfiction works, an adaptation can allow the audience to be transported through time to experience periods of history, become acquainted with historical figures, and gain a more personal understanding of events, situations, and cultures.

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- Film is a more sensory experience [color, sound, movement] than reading a book. Just because different senses are being stimulated does not automatically guarantee the adaptation will be a success. The audience comes with their own frame of reference, expectations, and bias. Books, artworks, films, and plays all lend themselves to being adapted, but just because they are capable of being adapted, does not necessarily mean they should be changed from their original form. In creating an adaptation something new and unique can be created, but at the same time something original and unique may forever be destroyed.

### Major Challenges:

One of the biggest challenges of adaptation is to convert a three hundred or four hundred page literary work, especially a novel, into half the size of screenplay. The screenplay writer tries to capture the essence and spirit of the story. S/he, then, determines the through-line and major sub-plot of the story and intentionally cuts everything else. Through-line means, WHO (protagonist) wants WHAT (goal), and WHO (antagonist) or WHAT (some other force) opposes him or her. This helps the writer or the director to pose the through-line as a question. The screenplay writer also attempts to take out excerpts or the most memorable parts of the literary work to be included in the screenplay. Everything that is not essential to the major plot is avoided deliberately. For example, in her novel, *The Namesake*, Jhumpa Lahiri gives a detailed description of the tragic story of Akaky Akakeyevich from “The Overcoat” which Ashoke likes a lot, but the film completely omits the story of Akaky Akakeyevich.

- The second challenge is the use of narrative voice or multiple voices in the making of a film. Many literary works, especially novels, are written in the first person narrative. Not many, but a few directors choose to use the technique of voiceovers for their films in order to remain faithful

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to the text. On the other hand, most of the directors avoid voiceover because audiences go to watch a MOTION (things moving about) PICTURE (story one can see). If they wanted to *hear* a story perhaps they would buy a book on tape. Hence, the old screenwriting saying, "Show, don't tell!" applies more to the screenplay for writing an adaptation.

- The third challenge is : characters in literary works are sometimes portrayed as engrossed in deep thoughts. The medium of writing, especially in novel, allows the author to give lengthy descriptions of such characters. Here, essential plot information is presented only in a character's thought or in the character's internal world like a monologue or soliloquy. For that, sometimes a screenwriter provides this character with a sounding board - another character- to which his/her thoughts can be voiced aloud. In this situation s/he either adapts an existing character from the original text or creates a new one. Many screen writers find out various ways to express the character's dilemma or internal world through action in the external world. For example, movie "Mrs. Dalloway" adapted from a novel by Virginia Woolf.

- The fourth challenge is: sometimes successful novels or plays contain thin storyline and rely for the most part on style and character to create an effect. In some cases, with the artful command of the language the prose writers maintain the readers' interest. Such can be never the case in screenwriting. Hence, instead of adapting such stories directly into a screenplay, the writer simply tags it as "story based upon". They use the brilliant background and characters created by the original author as a platform from which to launch a screenplay. For instance, Hindi film produced and directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, based on Fyodor Dostoevsky's short story "White Nights".

#### Conclusion:

Thus, literature and film can generate exciting and productive meaning where the relation among author, text, reader, screenplay writer and spectators is placed on equal terms. Both the

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mediums, though interdependent, have been serving their purpose independently. Between the two, adaptation works upon the governing principle of the 'exchange' mode. Adaptation of literature into films can be recognised as a meaningful art practice only when the two genres are understood and explained to function and interact with each other in the utmost capacity.

To sum up, The two different medium of expressions, literature and film, have been intertwined in a rich and complex relationship since the early days of cinema. That is because early cinema adopted narrative fiction as its starting point. As cinema and literature are both affected by mass production, their co-existence has steadily evolved into mutual dependence and competition. This interrelatedness proves that literature and cinema successfully complement and inspire each other. At the same time, both domains represent interdependent, equivalent and well-liked artistic creations.

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