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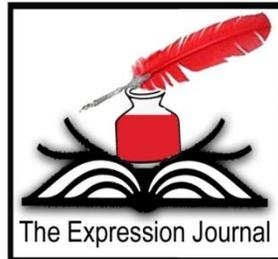
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VISUAL VERSIONS OF BOOKS: LITERARY CLASSICS VERSUS 70MM

Dr. Dipali Sharma Bhandari

Assistant Professor

SGGSJ Govt. Degree College, Paonta Sahib, HP

Email: dipalisbhandari@gmail.com

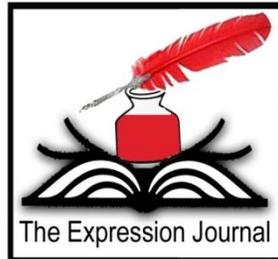
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Abstract

Filmmakers today are increasingly acquiring their storylines from literary works. While this brings a refreshing variety to the cinemagoer, the litterateur often cries foul because the movie has not been able to do justice to the book. The average moviegoer finds such a movie useful because it acquaints him with the outline of a book. Indeed, many a times, people pick a book after watching a movie based on the story. However, most of the times films based on books succeed only on one level, either with the cinemagoers or the literati. The paper tries to explore the reasons as to why the movies based on popular fiction only work on one level and at the same times tries to find out why the reading audience does not appreciate the 'quick-and-easy' visual version of the books they love.

Key-Words

Transcreation, Screen Adaptations, Litterateur vs. Moviegoer, Cinema and Society,
Literature and Cinema.

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Dr. Dipali Sharma Bhandari

Assistant Professor

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Ever since the beginning of cinema, filmmakers have tried to conceive newer uses to which it could be put. The movies have a great attraction for the average man because of their life-like quality. In the modern era, films have gradually replaced most of the other forms of entertainment. Like theatre it covers a varied range of topics for its subjects and themes and includes various cultural and folk elements in the form of musical performances, folk tales, dance forms and local customs, rituals and tradition. Since its inception, cinema has been mesmerizing the audience and its growing popularity has nearly blotted out the other forms of entertainment.

The films come closest to plays in their basic format, with the main difference being that plays are enacted in real time while the movie can be put together piece-by-piece by shooting in sections and finally editing them. The movie created thus is akin to the play in that it has all the essential components of a play as proposed by Aristotle; namely; plot, characters, diction, thought, spectacle and song according to Aristotle, Plot is of major importance in the success of a play, it is the soul of the tragedy. The concepts of tragedy as proposed by Aristotle are universal formulae of success for any play. By extension, this applies to films as well. One of the tricks for production of a successful film is a gripping screenplay. The audience loves a story well written and associate with the characters at emotional levels. In search of new storylines, filmmakers often look towards the archives of literature. This is why literary classics are often adapted for screen. The baffling question

is: Why do some of these adaptations work and the others flop? This paper attempts to analyze the reasons why a book which readers love either fails to set the box-office ringing or invites the wrath of litterateurs for unfaithfulness to the original.

The books adapted for screen are mostly chosen for their success as books. The logic that works here is that if readers loved it as a book, they will definitely love it as a movie. To a certain extent it is true. The unprecedented success of the Harry potter movie series closely followed the record-breaking success of the books of the series. In reverse, the Twilight books were popularized by the success of the first movie of the series. In Hindi literature too, *Devdas* has been immortalized by three different screen versions in three different eras. Timeless classics have been adapted for the silver screen. With the increasing popularity of television, Epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have been adapted for screen in episodic forms. The popular shows on television that have their roots in literature include Saraswatichandra, HarHarMahadev, Lapataganj, Taarak Mehta kaOoltahChashma and other biopics on Hindu gods Hanumaan, Ganesh, Krishna and various mother goddesses. In a way they have enriched the average person in his knowledge and vocabulary of these epics which form the root stock of our culture. Well researched adaptations of literary gems too, acquaint people with the landmarks in literature.

In the contemporary times, people generally do not have the time or inclination to settle down with a book. The preoccupation with internet and television has weaned a whole generation away from books. In a way, this has led to a strong decline in readership. Educationists are expressing concern over the diminishing numbers of readers. It is also a matter of concern that the coming generations may grow up to be entirely unacquainted with our classical and literary heritage. Various efforts are being made to impart the knowledge of our rich past to children to encourage reading habits among them. Formulating the scriptures into comic-book series, promotion of children's books and authors, organizing book fairs in school and establishment of mobile libraries are some of the steps being taken to inculcate and promote reading habits among children. Although these have had a positive impact, still there are clearly many more miles to go.

The parents of today do not have time to read out stories to their young and the nuclear family deprives the child of a chance to learn from grandparents and members of the extended family. With the majority of people opting for a small family and the busy

schedule of students, children do not get time to play games or interact with other children. Most of the children spend much of their time with television, PlayStations, mobile phones, i-pads, and internet. In an attempt to attract the children towards the wealth of literature, the concept of animated programmes for children was floated. The most popular of these programmes are based on tales from Ramayana, Mahabharata, as well as screen adaptations of the *Jungle Book*, tales from *Panchtantra* and Karadi tales. Full length movies have also been adapted from epics and books throughout the world. *The Time Machine*, *The Mysterious Island*, *The Count of Monte Christo*, *Arabian Nights* as also fairy tales like *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Rapunzel*, *The Little Mermaid* etc. are providing edutainment to the young children. The effort seems to have paid off to a great extent with the children.

However, the effort to replicate this formula with films for the grown up audience does not always work well. Books have been adapted for screen since long for the pleasure that a moving picture provides. When the Lumiere brothers first captured workers streaming out from a factory, people were intrigued by the 'moving' images. Since then films have been made for entertainment and educational purposes.

When a reader is reading a book, a movie is running on the screen of his mind. The readers go to cinema anticipating a movie which resonates with his 'internal movie'. However he witnesses an 'incomplete' version of the book when he goes to the cinema, which leaves him bitter. However a person who has not read the book goes to the same movie and feels happy that he has been spared the agony of grappling with a massive book for days. The difference in the response of the two types of viewers to the same movie is the major reason why some of them agree with the audience and not with the literary community.

When a book is adapted for the screen, the criterion for selection of the theme is usually the iconic status of the work or the director's instinct for a potentially successful storyline. However, many of these films do not get the anticipated success on the box office. If a screen version of the book is successful, the critics often charge it with infidelity to the text. In case of a book that has set records of success, the director has a lot to live up to. The adaptation of such a book for screen requires considerable 'pruning' work on the part of the director and the writer as it is not possible to include every detail from the text into the film. The director has to selectively incorporate the essential elements from the book omitting the details that are superfluous owing to time constraints. Apart from this, there are many other problems that the transcreator has to overcome.

The first problem that the writer faces is the difference in the medium. Since the films have a visual aspect, they leave nothing to the imagination. It expresses things explicitly and the audience does not consciously attempt to decipher the symbols employed by the filmmaker to convey his vision. By contrast, literature uses images in a different way and evokes mental images corresponding to the description. At times the literary works are allegorical in nature and any attempt to recreate them in any other medium may not be successful. A reading of the book evokes a different response than watching a movie. The book keeps playing at the back of our mind while we watch the movie. In addition, there is a loss of the aura that surrounds things while they are still inside our minds. As Keats very aptly puts 'Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter'. The moment a thing transcends the borders of imagination and enters the visual domain its mystique is dissipated to quite an extent. And sometimes the finished products do not match up to the expectations of the general audience who were looking forward to a certain movie with anticipation.

Another problem faced by the writer and director is to align the author's vision to fit in with their own vision. K. Chellappan, talking about translation, says:

Creation is thus a paradox: a deep inner language made outer...and this fundamental paradox is intensified in translation because here the translator has to externalize someone else's vision in some other medium in his own medium."(Chellappan153)

With a little modification this fits in with the dilemma faced by the writer- director. Very often we find authors complaining that the director/ writer 'mutilated' their book or 'did not do justice' with the plot and many more complaints like this. The plea of the director here is that he has to create a 'sellable' product. The screen version of *The Guide* deviates from R.K.Narayan's book in that it rains after Raju dies. In the book, the drought does not end with Raju's fast and death. The Indian audience, according to the director, would not accept the hero dying in vain, especially since he has repented so sincerely. This is why he 'tweaked' the end to make it acceptable to the audience. Understandably, the director cannot do justice to a writer's work unless he agrees with his philosophy and his vision: which are both products of the writer's psychological and cultural make up. Cultural contexts, too, influence the screenplay of a movie. What is acceptable to the people of one country may not be appropriate for another culture. This is why timeless classics like *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* had to be 'retouched' when they were being

adapted for their respective screen version in India; namely, Omkara, Maqbool, Haider and Ram Leela. The films were appreciated by the connoisseurs of literature and movies alike, but the fresh appeal of the works was mainly due to the directors' vision which was in line with the original writer although they did not follow the originals exactly. The success of these movies proves that movies based on literature, if treated in a just manner will be appreciated and also rake in a good collection at the box office. What is needed is an impartial assessment of the literary work and the target audience, editing for the final screenplay and fidelity to the author's vision.

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