

Film Adaptations - A Comparative Study Of *Devdas*: Novel & The Movie

- Dr. Sandhya Tiwari

Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Palamuru University P.G. College,
Mahabubnagar-509001.

Abstract

There are screen versions of most popular books that have managed to retain their essence. Some producers have successfully introduced the original texts to new audiences in far off regions and different cultures. A few movies have glorified the sublime subject scaling it to the wavelength of masses. Hard work and commitment are invested by the entire cast and crew to achieve such stints in screen adaptations. Factors such as plot, setting, screenplay, dialogues, acting, direction etc. are crucial but retaining the spirit of the author – heart of the book-is utmost importance for the success of a screen adaptation. There are instances where a book was popular but its screen adaptation turned out to be disastrous. And other times a great book that was ill-fated to rest dusted in racks comes to limelight by its screen adaptations. In this article a comparative study of *Devdas* – Novel and Film Adaptation is presented with critical perspectives.

Introduction

According to Oxford English Dictionary the word *Adaptation* has multiple meanings and applications, most of which are related to the process of change and transfer to suit an alternative purpose, function, or environment; the alteration of one thing to suit another. In a media context, adaptation is defined as:

An altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., (now esp.) one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source.(1)

This definition is acceptable; nevertheless it is not in complete harmony with the contemporary media studies related theories. It is incompatible with contemporary theories of media adaptation as they have moved beyond the ‘simplicity’ of conversions from literature to films. When the content is not derived from one single source and an identifiable author but from multiple entities and media corporations, the relevance of the definition and meaning of the word is ought to change. In order to accommodate the relevance of contemporary notions of adaptation the biological meaning/sense of the word **adaptation** seems appropriate.

A process of change or modification by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment or ecological niche, or a part of an organism to its biological function, either through phenotypic change in an individual or (esp.) through an evolutionary process effecting change through successive generations. (2)

Film Adaptations

In the history of humans there is a long 'history' of adapting texts into various forms. Historical events and oral narratives were the inspiration for paintings, sculptures, plays etc. that have later taken the form of a novel. Movie/cinematic/graphic adaptations of literary and theatrical texts are an age old forms. But there were many challenges in the form of conflicts. It is worthwhile to note Leo Tolstoy considered a film "a direct attack on the methods of literary art"(3), whereas according to Virginia Woolf cinema and literary adaptations in particular, were responsible for the moral decline and vulgarization of modern society, invoking the biological in her description of cinema as a "parasite" and literature as its "prey" (4). However, film adaptation has come to stay despite the scepticism exhibited by eminent writers and thinkers alike.

Film adaptation is making a movie based on a written work, in whole or in part, into a feature film. In simple words it is a type of transfer of information or a derivative work. A common form of film adaptation is the use of a novel as the basis of a feature film. Some great works that were adapted as movies are *Great Expectations*, *The Age Of Innocence*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Godfather*, *American Psycho*, *The Silence Of The Lambs*, *The Big Sleep*, *The Prime Of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Gone Girl*, *The Colour Purple*, *Atonement*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Jurassic Park*, *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* etc.

As we notice mostly film adaptations are based on popular books. But there are instances where insightful producers take calculated risk in making a movie on a less popular, next to impossible book/s. This has become possible owing to the multidimensional high-tech multimedia and graphic infrastructure and collaborations. For instance, imagining a film adaptation of *Life of Pi* – a boy on a raft with none but a tiger! – was a nightmare. Contrary to the belief of many that *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel was unfilmable – Ang Lee managed it marvellously. He not only made a movie but won the most coveted film appreciation in the form of an Oscar for Best Director and Mychael Danna won one for Best Original Score.

A text can not only survive the shift from one form to another, but it can also thrive in ways not previously possible in the original form (5).

Devdas- Novel

Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's tragic tale of Devdas is adapted into movies many times. The book that is based on a true story was elevated to an epitome of love. The word Devdas has become synonymous with a passionate, intense love that does not see fruition. The novel opens on a scorching summer day with Devdas, the son of a Zamindar sitting in the classroom of the village school while other children are playing under a nearby huge banyan tree. Devdas was denied permission to go out of the classroom and join his friends in the recess time because once he goes out he seldom comes back. He had ill habits and played like a vagrant. He likes to smoke hooka in the bamboo grove, fish in the pond and wander forever the whole day. In all these activities, Parbati often accompanies him. Parbati is the daughter of his neighbor. Slowly and gradually an affectionate bond develops between them. But Devdas' unruly behavior worries his father and therefore he is sent to Calcutta to pursue his studies. Many years later, Devdas returns to his village as a handsome young man with a fashionable life style. Parbati's grandma thinks of a marriage between

Devdas and Parbati, but this proposal is rejected outright by Devdas' parents on the ground of difference in social status of both the families. Desperate but hopeful that her childhood friend will not let her go to some other man, Parbati stealthily goes to his room in the midnight hours and proposes to him to marry her. But unable to face parental opposition, Devdas could not assure her of his love. Next day he talks to his father but gets a very rude response. Frustrated he goes to Calcutta and writes a letter to Parbati expressing his regret and inability to marry her. He also tells her that he had never thought of marrying her. But after posting this letter to Parbati he realizes his love for Parbati, rushes back to his village, meets Parbati, apologizes and expresses his love for her along with his desire to marry her. But Parbati blurts at him and says that she has no faith in him now. She also tells her that she is going to marry a wealthy, wise, calm and religious man. Thus she rejects him ruthlessly and goes away to marry some other person leaving Devdas alone. Due to Devdas' indecision and Parbati's arrogance, the story takes a tragic turn in their lives.

Now a long spell of suffering starts for both of them. Parbati gets married to an elderly widower Mr. Bhubanmohan Choudhury, who behaves more as a father than as a husband. Devdas goes to Calcutta where he comes in contact with Mr. Chunnilal who drags him into the world of alcohol. Although in the beginning he abhors it, but slowly and gradually he becomes an addict and also enters into a relationship with a courtesan named Chandramukhi. To come out of his sorrow and frustration he drowns himself in alcohol and sexual orgy with Chandramukhi but it all proves futile because the thought of Parbati relentlessly haunts him. The novel comes to an end when on the point of death Devdas sets out on a painful journey in a bullock-cart towards the house of Parbati whom he had promised to meet once before his death. Finally he reaches his destination but it is well past midnight and moreover he has lost his voice. The cart-man not knowing what to do lays a makeshift bed on the stone platform below a peepal tree and shifts Devdas on it. On his death bed Devdas struggles to live for few hours, tears roll down his cheeks and finally he closes his eyes forever.

Thus addicted to alcohol and prostitution, Devdas ruins his life. He remained a failure and unheroic all his life, but for Parbati he was a paragon among mankind despite all these shortcomings in his life. Chandramukhi too finds him infinitely charming and says that there isn't a woman on earth who would deny herself the heaven of his company. Sheila Vesuna, while explaining Devdas' appeal about the novel and the film, says, "Men see an extension of themselves in this tragedy king, while women long to be loved by men like him- which is why, perhaps, Devdas is the most filmed character in the Indian film industry." (6). Film historian B.D. Garga also says, "Devdas is a tragic anti-hero, torn by inner conflict and a driving passion. There is no heroic dimension to his character. What moves us are his weaknesses, his humanness which comes across sharply in his relationship with his family, with Chandramukhi and Dharamdas, his faithful servant. (7)

Devdas- Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Movie

Now let us have a look at Sanjay Lila Bhansali's movie. The film was made with a budget of 50 crore, screened at Cannes Film Festival and officially nominated for Oscar award. In this paper my purpose is only to make a comparative study of the movie and the

novel. Bhansali seems to take liberty with the original story. Perhaps, he intended to make the movie appealing to the masses, retaining the original Bengali ethos and ambience. He makes his intention clear when he says: "I had to make the film differently from the way P. C. Barua and Bimal Roy had made it. They struck very close to the novel. The researcher assumes that a director should have the liberty of interpreting a novel the way he wants to...I am very convinced about the few liberties I have taken. The soul of Devdas remains the same and the storyline remains the same. So I don't think it should really offend audiences." (8)

It is true that film making is a different art altogether and while making a movie based on a novel a director has to make certain modifications and create his own structure and transform verbal into visual. But in doing so he must try to be as faithful to the original story as possible even though at places he can do some transformations as well as alterations without affecting the spirit of the original work of art. But on watching the movie we see that Bhansali makes so many changes and incorporates so many new motifs into the story line that many sensitive readers of Saratchandra's "Devdas" would find it difficult to agree with the changes made in the movie version. In the novel we see that the first twenty-five pages of the book deal with the childhood of Parvati and Devdas. Occasionally they quarrel and fight with each other but always like to remain together. Generally Devdas remained authoritative but affectionate, generous and forgiving too. Parvati is submissive but at times arrogant and obstinate. Their claim on each other is taken for granted and this continues till the end. But in the movie this very important period and the making of this relationship is completely missing. It starts with Devdas returning from Oxford after ten years. When he meets Parvati, they get engaged in an unconvincing fashion. Their love-talk appears to be a synthetic statement of love for each other devoid of any feelings unlike how it is portrayed in the novel. In the novel, we observe that when they meet each other after prolonged separation they feel very shy and speak very few words. Restrained but affectionate, they behave in a very natural and spontaneous way.

Bhansali's characters speak and sing to the viewer and that very opulence smothers the intensity of Saratchandra Chatterjee's emotional tragedy.

In the movie, Devdas and Parvati's love for each other is unambiguously affirmed and declared, but their love fails to consummate in marriage not because of Devdas' indecision, but due to fierce parental opposition. The social status of both the families holds the centre stage in this affair. Devdas is disinherited by her parents because of the scheming of his sister-in-law where as Parvati's villainous son-in-law reveals her relation with Devdas to her husband. The most remarkable as well as conspicuous deviation of Bhansali's Devdas from Saratchandra's Devdas is that in the movie Parvati and Chandramukhi meet and dance together. But in the novel they never meet each other.

The test of a good adaptation is one which achieves repetition without replication, – rather than being a mere a copy which sheds its Benjaminian aura (9), the adaptation both evokes and is amplified by a user's experience of the original, while also taking on distinct qualities of its own. A successful adaptation balances "the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty." (10)

In the movie Devdas and Chunnilal are pictured as classmates and friends of Oxford whereas in the novel we see that there is a considerable age gap between the two. We also observe that Chunnilal has been living in Calcutta since long and has been unsuccessful in clearing his B.A. examination for the 8th time. It is he who initiates Devdas into drinking and the courtesans. But it is presented in an empathetic manner in the movie. Devdas' insisting on a pandit to perform his own last rites does not match his character in the novel.

In the novel, Saratchandra has painted his characters very minutely and with a rare insight. Regrettably, his nuanced characterization is conspicuous by its absence in Bhansali's movie. Even a man like Bhuvan Choudhury is painted sympathetically by the novelist. A feeling of respect comes when one day he holds Parvati's face in his hands, gazes on it for a long time and says that he did not do the right thing with her by marrying her because his house is not the right place for her. But the movie of Bhansali completely misses such nice scenes. Even in the last tragic scene the slow moving bullock-cart has been replaced by a rather fast moving horse-drawn coach. In the novel, the anxiety of Devdas mounts with the slow speed of the bullock-cart. He desperately requests the cart man to make it quick which mirrors his anguished conscience. On the other hand in the movie we are shown a grand palatial building where the men and women are busy making preparations to welcome Devdas who is coming home after a gap of ten years. The whole scene focuses more on the glittering expensive set rather than on pure human emotions. To conclude, I would like to say that Bhansali has taken considerable liberties in making movie of a classic work of art. He has distorted the motifs and the characters in his own way to suit his purpose without caring for the spirit of the novel.

Conclusion

Like a biological organism that thrives in its new environment if it is conducive, successful adaptations also depend on many factors. At times the adaptation may be a great hit but the literati who have consumed the spirit of SaratchandraChaterjee's captured love intensity may not prefer the former.

References

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Adaptation", accessed September 23 2018, <http://www.oed.com>
2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "adaptation", accessed September 23 2018, <http://www.oed.com>
3. Robert Stam, "Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation", in *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*, ed. Robert Stam & Alessandra Raengo, (USA, UK, and Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 4.
4. Cartmell & Whelehan, *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema*, 41; Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 3.
5. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 32.
6. Sheila Vesuna "The Eternal Lover: Will Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas lure Masses?" *The Week*, July 2002, P.66
7. Sheila Vesuna "The Eternal Lover: Will Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Devdas lure Masses?" *The Week*, July 2002, P.68
8. Ravi Ranjan: *The tale of Consuming Passion Retold*, *Rashtriya Sahara*, July 2002, P.78

9. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 223-5; Hutcheon, A *Theory of Adaptation*, 4, 173.
10. Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 173