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Fiction and Adaptation: a Comparative Study of *The Blue Umbrella* in Print and Celluloid

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Abstract:

The Blue Umbrella tells the story of Binya, a ten year old girl and her umbrella. Through the story, Ruskin Bond revisits the essence of the Bhagvad Gita and the Holy Bible. Greed, jealousy, hatred, and kindness play equal roles in the story to bring the point across to children. In 2005, *The Blue Umbrella* was adapted by Vishal Bharadwaj into a film of the same name which won the National Film Award for Best Children's Film. With its breathtaking visuals and acting, it was a critical success and gained accolades.

In spite of all the success, the question arises- is the film a faithful adaptation? Are all the actors true to their characters? Has not the plot been tampered in trying to make the film a critical success? Have the sequence of events been represented in all their appropriateness? Have all the characters been given equal space and dimension, as in the novel? Has the film been successful in creating the similar wavelength of aesthetic distance as in the novel? Most importantly, does the film retain the tone of the message that Ruskin Bond wanted to convey through his story?

With a comparative analysis of the text and the film, this paper aims to answer these questions through the application of Narrative Techniques under the genre of Adaptation Studies.

Keywords: *Children's Film, Adaptation Studies, Comparative Study, Narrative Techniques, Aesthetic Distance*

From the early days of film criticism, the problem of cinematic adaptation of novels have been largely discussed and debated. The answer to the question of the fidelity of the filmic adaptation to the original text, mostly, finds the film to be an inferior copy of its literary counterpart. Ruskin Bond's novel, *The Blue Umbrella* tells the story of Binya, a ten year old girl and her umbrella. The novel depicts all the shades of emotions that children are familiar with. These emotions range from innocence to greed, from simplicity to jealousy, and from obsession to forgiveness. In 2005, the novel *The Blue Umbrella* was adapted by Vishal Bharadwaj into a film of the same name which won the National Film Award for Best Children's Film. With its breathtaking visuals and acting, it became a critical success and gained accolades. As a novel, the story was popular among children for years, and as a film also it gained attention of audience and critics. In spite of all the success, the question arises- is the film a faithful adaptation? Have all the characters been given equal space and dimension, as in the novel? Are all the actors true to their characters? Have the sequence of events been represented in all their appropriateness? Has the film been successful in creating the similar wavelength of aesthetic distance as in the novel? And most importantly, does the film retain the tone of the message that Ruskin Bond wanted to convey through his story?

This gives us an opportunity to make a comparative study between the novel and the film, and find out how successful or unsuccessful the adaptation is from critical and creative points of view. Thus, with a comparative analysis of the text and the film, this paper aims to analyze the aforementioned issues through the application of narrative techniques under the genre of Adaptation Studies. Have all the characters been given equal space and dimension, as in the novel? When we compare the characterisation part of the novel with the film, we find a contrastive change in the way characters have been presented in the film.

In the novel, Bijju was two years older to Binya, ["Binya was two years younger than her brother" (Bond 1992)] where as in the film; Bijju is around twenty years older than Binya. In the novel the visitors were from the Indian planes who were speaking the same language as that of Binya. ["They were holiday-makers from the plains. The women were dressed in bright saris, the men wore light summer shirts, and the children had pretty new clothes" (Bond 1992)]. However, in the film the visitors were from Japan, which bears a postcolonial undertone. In the novel Binya was wearing a leopard's claw ["it's a tiger's claw, said the man beside her" (Bond 1992)] but in the film it has been presented as a bear's claw. In the novel, Rajaram, the attendant of Nandu, appears in the middle of the story, whereas he is present from the beginning in the film. The character of the 'fortune teller' has been added to the film to give the plot a more convincing touch- the way he says, "Angrezi mein bhi jhooth bolta hai koi!" (Bharadwaj 2005) (Does anyone tell lie in English!), makes us aware of the innocence of the rural people. The village characters like Mukhia, and his son are some additions to the plot.

In the novel, Binya is the protagonist of the story whereas the protagonist has been changed in case of the film. Ram Bharosa, who has been renamed as Nandakishore Khatri (Nandu) is the protagonist of the film around whom the story revolves. The change of the protagonist gives us the scope of comparison between Ruskin Bond and Vishal Bharadwaj's perception towards literature.

Bond's stories are mostly centred on child protagonists and carry positivity; whereas Bharadwaj prefers negative shades. We can very well find it from his other films like *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, *Makdee*, *Kaminey*, and *Ishqiya* etc. The fascination for the dark makes him take Ram Bharosa (Nandu), and not Binya, as the protagonist the story to give his film a shady and tragic effect. Bharadwaj's flirting with the original plot, gives the film a more realistic approach as Jean Mitry puts it, adaptation "is a matter of passing from one form to another, a matter of transportation, of reconstruction" (Mitry 1971). Thus, Bharadwaj's additions serve as flesh to give the story better form and structure in order to carry the message to the audience.

The next question that needs to be answered is that - Are all the actors true to their characters? David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, while elaborating on characterisation write, "Two kinds of agency, then, contribute to characterization. The first is a matter of the doings of actual agents. The second is depicted or represented agency, which need not resemble the first kind in many respects" (Bordwell 1996). Here they speak about the difference between the characterisation in the primary source, and the creative product which is inspired from the primary source. Though the characterisations do not resemble to what they were in the novel, they are successful in carrying forward the story. So the answer would be, 'yes' all the actors are true to their characters. With Bharadwaj's direction, the characters seem to burst out of the screen and interact with our inner cords. Their expressions, dialogues, colloquiality, and simplicity make us laugh, cry, and live with them. The way Pankaj Kapoor projects human emotions of greed, obsession, regret, and repentance are noteworthy. Shreya sharma's portrayal of Binya is equally powerful. Paramjit Singh Kakran's role as Rajaram, Dolly Ahluwalia's part as Lilavati, Deepak Dobriyal's scenes as the fortuneteller, Samrat Mukerji's role as Bijju and Rajesh Sharma's role as the policeman are praiseworthy.

Have the sequence of events been represented with all their appropriateness? In order to find a suitable answer to this question we need to have a look at these lines of Jean Mitry where, while speaking on adaptation he writes, "Yet it is clear that to transpose a work from one mode of expression to another, to 'adapt' it, is to assume the equivalence of what is signified despite the difference of the significations; we might as well try to square the circle" (Mitry 1971). In the aforementioned lines, Mitry clearly says how difficult it is to transpose a work from one form to another. Generally in a work of adaptation, it becomes difficult for the adaptor to retain the same sequence of events as in the novel. No adaptation can be accurate in terms of representation of events, because when the story is presented in a different form, it has to stick to certain criteria of visual expression, which makes the story gain its own shape. The sequence of the story as presented in the novel remains the back bone of the screenplay; however, while representing it in the form of celluloid, Bharadwaj adds more meat to it thereby bringing in some basic changes in the sequence of events. This makes the film more logical, appropriate and acceptable for the audience. Most of the times after visualising a story on screen, we realise that the novel was better organised, still film adaptors get to differ in their creative ways while shaping their stories.

Every adaptor faces the dilemma of either being faithful to the letter or to the spirit. In the first case, He follows the procedure of the novelist step-by-step so that the chains of circumstance are exactly the same. But by expressing such facts visually, the adaptor is inevitably led either to signify something altogether different from the novel or to distort the sense determined by the original literary expression which alone confirms to the thought of the author (Mitry 1971). In the second case, He is faithful to the spirit; he expresses similar ideas and analogous sentiments, but arrives at them by slant routes. He inevitably disrupts the novelist's continuity; he transfers the 'givens', the circumstances, the characters - and arrives, once again, at a clear case of treason (Mitry 1971). Therefore the adaptor is left with two options. Either to follow the story step by step and include nothing foreign to it or to rethink the subject (Mitry 1971) and make a work of art using the original story as a point of departure (Mitry 1971).

In the film, *The Blue Umbrella*, Vishal Bharadwaj has not followed the exact narrative structure of the novel. He has mixed up the events and presented them in a sequence that gives the story a more convincing approach on the celluloid. He has made several additions to the plot, thereby making the story more coherent. Therefore, the sequence of events looks more structured in the film. One can cite some examples from the novel and the film for reference:

The novel starts with Binya, herding the cows; whereas the film starts with the fortuneteller's robot predicting the future of Nandu. After Binya gets the umbrella from the picnickers, several significant parts of the novel like 'the umbrella fall' and 'the umbrella chase' episodes straight away get deleted in the film which are replaced with the elaborations of other scenes like 'the school master', 'the snake' and 'the Ravan Podi' episodes. We find a substantial transformation in the plot when Bharadwaj deletes 'the umbrella theft' and 'Biju-Ramram fight' episodes and elaborates more on the characterisation of Nandakishore Khatri, his abandonment from the village, and again his acceptance, and again his final excommunication.

There have been several changes in presentation of the sequence of events. The deletion and addition of several important episodes in the beginning and end of the story affects the sequence. Bharadwaj's deletion of 'the umbrella fall' episode leaves the film bereft of the charm of Bonds fluid narration like -

And while she slept, a wind sprang up. It came quietly, swishing gently through the trees, humming softly. Then it was joined by other random gusts, bustling over the top of the mountains. The trees shook their heads and came to life. The wind fanned Binya's cheeks. The umbrella stirred on the grass (Bond 1992).

One can say that Bharadwaj has failed to present the sequence of events as presented in the novel, in the similar order of appearance in the film. One can also say that, Bharadwaj has tried to creatively differ from the novel in order to present the same story because when one sees the film after reading the novel, one in no way finds the additions and representations of the events inappropriate.

The next question that needs to be answered is - has the film been successful in creating the similar wavelength of aesthetic distance as in the novel? To find the answer to this question, one need to have a look at what Hans Robert Jauss said on aesthetic distance -

Drawing heavily on the writings of the Russian Formalists, Jauss contends that the artistic character of a work can be determined 'by the kind and the degree of its influence on a presupposed audience'. Aesthetic distance, defined as the difference or separation

between the horizon of expectations and the work or as the 'change of horizons' (Horizontwandel), can be measured by the 'spectrum of the audience's reaction and criticism's judgements'" (Holub 1984).

Whenever we read a story, see a film, or visualise a performance in the theatre, we connect with the story. The connection is determined by the aesthetic distance that is drawn between us and the characters. The closer the gap between a viewer's conscious reality and the fictional reality, the lesser is the aesthetic distance, and the more successful is the art of representation. A story attends the state of supreme significance, when it makes the audience feel one with the story and its characters.

In the film, *The Blue Umbrella*, Bharadwaj has been successful in reducing the aesthetic distance to the minimum with power packed performances and enthralling visual effects. The presentation of the story on screen transcends the viewer to the heights of oneness with the story and its characters. One can take the picturization of the songs, the snowfall sequences, or the heart warming performances of Pankaj Kapoor and Shreya Sharma for instance.

The next question which needs to be answered is - does the film retain the tone of the message that Ruskin Bond wanted to convey through his story? Every story carries a message with it, which it wants to convey to its target audience. In case of the novel, *The Blue Umbrella*, the target audience were children; therefore, Bond has written the story with messages that children can understand and relate to. But while adapting any work of literature into a film, at times the message gets distorted. It happens so because of the series of mutations that takes place in the process of film making at all the creative levels, starting from scripting, to narrating, to shooting, to editing – in every stage there are chances of message distortion.

The process of message flow remains undisturbed only when the number of channels through which it gets transferred is limited. In the film, *The Blue Umbrella*, however, the case is different. The messages which Bond wanted to convey through his writing not just remains intact but also get aided with the visual effects, music and direction of Bharadwaj. The first message that Bond wanted to convey through his writing was the simplicity, and accepting attitude of children of which elders are bereft of. The following lines from the novel tells us how simple and genuine children are-

Most people consoled themselves by saying that Binya's pretty umbrella wouldn't keep out the rain, if it rained heavily; that it would shrivel in the sun, if the sun was fierce; that it would collapse in wind, if the wind was strong; that it would attract lightning, if lightning fell near it; and that it would prove unlucky, if there was any ill-luck going about. Secretly, everyone admired it. / Unlike the adults, the children didn't have to pretend. They were full of praise for the umbrella (Bond 1992).

Bharadwaj aptly presents these in the scenes of the film, where children enjoy the charm of the silk umbrella, while singing and dancing with it.

In the novel, *The Blue Umbrella*, Bond incorporates the feelings of love and affection for nature in the minds of children. He has set his story amidst natural surroundings, and has personified nature, thereby making it more approachable and acceptable for children. Bond writes, "She walked home through the darkening glade, singing of the stars; and the trees stood still and listened to her, and the mountains were glad" (Bond 1992). Bharadwaj leaves no stone unturned in capturing the bounty of nature with his camera. Binya's connection with nature is explicitly filmed amidst mountains, trees, rain, animals, sky, etc.

Through his story Bond has very simply yet symbolically, stated the conflict of 'Good Vs. Bad'. Nandu's fall from his position stands biblical by nature. It symbolically represents the fall of man (Nandu) from the Garden of Eden (the village) due to greed. In the village all the people live together just as a perfect Eden. The blue umbrella is the object of desire (the apple). Ramram acts like the serpent, and prompts Nandu (Rambharosha) to commit the sin of stealing. After committing that sin, Nandu (Rambharosha) falls before his fellow villagers and is banished from the village (Eden). Only the forgiveness of Binya (God) redeems him back to the heavenly Eden (village) (Suri). Bond has very aptly taken the Biblical insight into his story by framing it with simple and identifiable characters with whom the audience can relate to.

One also finds the message of *The Bhagvad Gītā* inherent in the story. In the chapter 4, text 7 and 8 of *The Bhagvad Gītā*, Lord Krishna says to Arjuna-

*Yadā yadā hi dharmasya glānirbhavati bāharata
Abhyūtthana madharmasya tadātmānam śrjāmyaham ॥7॥ (Debroy 2005).
Paritrāṇāya sādhanām vināsāya ca duṣkṛtām
Dharma samsthāpanārthāya sambhavāmi yuge yuge॥8॥ (Debroy 2005).*

Which means-

Whenever dharma declines and the purpose
of life is forgotten, I manifest myself on earth.

I am born in every age to protect the good,

to destroy evil, and to re establish dharma. (Easwaran 2007)

For the protection of good, destruction of the wicked, and establishment of righteousness, just like Lord Krishna, Binya is present in this story-

She shook her head and said, "You keep it. I don't need it anymore." "But it's such a pretty umbrella!" protested Ram Bharosha. "It's the best umbrella in the village." "I know," said Binya. "But an umbrella isn't everything." And she left the old man holding the umbrella, and went tripping down the road, and there was nothing between her and the bright blue sky (Bond 1992).

The way Binya becomes one with the sky, symbolises her nearness to God. Binya is one with God, the moment she gives away the umbrella, teaching all of us that - the virtue of giving and sharing undoes a lot of negativity, thereby making us closer to God. These were the messages that Bond conveyed through his novel. These have been presented in the film of Bharadwaj in a more transparent and acceptable manner.

Thus, in the conclusion we will try to answer the final question that sums up the entire discussion. Is the film a faithful adaptation? To find the answer we need to understand the following three words in relation to cinematic adaptation- 'Successful', 'Beautiful', and 'Faithful'. Success of an adaptation is determined by its critical and commercial success. Beauty of a work of adaptation is determined from the aesthetic organisation of the story, visual aesthetics, and the aesthetic distance drawn between the 'spectator' and the 'character'. And faithfulness of an adaptation is determined by - the degree of its fidelity to the 'letter' and to the 'spirit.'

The Blue Umbrella is a successful adaptation as it has been critically acclaimed with the National Award, and has been successful at film festivals. It is a beautiful adaptation, as it has been able to minimize the aesthetic distance and present aesthetically palpable visuals in an artistically organised plot. The change in characterisation and sequence of events makes the film unfaithful to the 'letter.' However, the successful presentation of the story on a larger canvas keeping the soul intact makes it faithful to the 'spirit.'

The film has been successful in developing the characters from 'seeds to plants.' It has been able to germinate good human values in the hearts of the audience by transforming them into connoisseurs of art. The novel derives its strength from Ruskin Bond's lucid yet sweeping narration, and the film derives its strength from Vishal Bharadwaj's majestic craftsmanship in the realm of storytelling and direction. Thus, the film with the inspiration of Bond's pen and Bharadwaj's camera is not only a faithful adaptation but also a successful and a beautiful one!

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