

Journey of *The Blue Umbrella* from Text to Screen: Signposts Missed, Milestones Achieved

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Abstract: *The Blue Umbrella* is a 1980 Indian novel written by Ruskin Bond. It was adapted in 2005 into a Hindi film by the same name by director Vishal Bhardwaj. The film went on to win the National Film Award in the Best Children's Film category. Bhardwaj has a reputation for making adaptations of Shakespearean plays earlier. The novel and the movie revolve around the perils of lusting for an object at the cost of human relationships. Both introduce the audience/ reader to the values embedded in the small hill town culture. The theme is relevant in the current materialistic world and the narrative appeals to the young audience due to its engagement with children. A blue umbrella triggers a conflict between a small village girl Binya and a tea stall owner Ram Bharose (Nand Kishore Khatri in the movie) that culminates into both being enlightened. The movie is a dramatic rendition of this quiet mountainous tale. With its song and dance sequence and heightened action, the film not only lends a visual form to the textual narrative, it reimagines the narrative by adding many cliffhanger moments. Bond's long signature descriptions of nature are replaced by dramatic encounters and conversations. Rather than evaluating the film through the lens of fidelity, this paper reads Bhardwaj's adaptation as a creative reinterpretation shaped by the demands and affordances of the cinematic medium. It aims to bring out the filmmaker's cinematic vision and his productive bending of the source text concluding that the film functions as an autonomous work of art while remaining in dialogue with its literary origin.

Keywords: Film; Adaptation; Drama; Interpretation; Cinematic Vision; Nature

Introduction

The paper explores the relation between the original text of *The Blue Umbrella* and its cinematic adaptation with the same title by Vishal Bharadwaj. It goes on to examine the accomplishments of the film through a comparative analysis of the both using the tools and terminology introduced by one of the leading adaptation theorists, Linda Hutcheon. According to Linda Hutcheon, an adaptation can be “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation or salvaging or an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (Hutcheon 8).

Adaptation theory has evolved over the years. The current trends in adaptation theory exhibit a move away from rigid fidelity criticism towards more nuanced and interdisciplinary approaches. Preeti Oza explains, “Adaptation theories question the idea of faithfulness and the hierarchical relationship between literature and film... They illustrate that adaptations are not subordinate to the original material, but rather a means of promoting and revitalizing it within a different framework.” In the field of film studies, scholars have increasingly recognised the value of intertextuality, medium specificity, cultural context, and audience reception in analyzing adaptations. This shift reflects a broader trend in film studies towards acknowledging the linkages of texts and contexts.

Still the makers of adapted works face a huge dilemma. Vineet Pal succinctly puts it, "If an adaptation maintains fidelity to the original, it is criticized for being unimaginative. Contrarily, if it seeks to interpret the literary text or add a new twist, it is criticized for fiddling with the original" (Pal 134). This tension forms the critical backdrop of the present study, which approaches Bharadwaj's *The Blue Umbrella* not as a derivative work but as a re-envisioning shaped by cinematic form.

Adapting a Novel into a Film

Literary adaptations have been integral to cinema since its inception, with numerous classics – from *Pride and Prejudice* to *Devdas*—finding renewed life on screen. The motivation for adaptation often lies in the popularity and cultural resonance of a text, but the shift in medium introduces significant

challenges. Differences in narrative structure, pacing, and character development require filmmakers to condense, modify, or extrapolate elements of the source text. Cinema operates through an independent idiom. As Virginia Woolf observes, “cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression in words” (Woolf 309). This shift from verbal narration to visual storytelling enables filmmakers to externalize inner states through image, sound, performance, and rhythm. Thoughts must be translated into dialogue, gesture, music, and mise-en-scène, resulting in meanings that are not equivalent but analogous to those of the literary text. As Linda Hutcheon argues adaptation is not a process of direct translation but of reinterpretation, Jean Mitry similarly notes, “It would take on another meaning, open onto different perspectives, because the means of expression in being different would express different things -- not the same things in different ways” (Mitry 1). The adapted film thus emerges as a new text, shaped as much by the director’s vision and audience reception as by the original narrative.

The Film vs The Novel

Ruskin Bond’s novella *The Blue Umbrella* is set in small hill town of Garhwal. It is a short, simple tale that ends in profound wisdom. At the centre of the text is a blue-coloured umbrella that a young village girl of ten happens to possess. Ostensibly a children’s story, the novella is a critique of the reigning obsession with materialistic possession of objects and advocates humanity over materialism. The film *The Blue Umbrella* is a product of Bharadwaj’s cinematic vision. His film won the National Film Award for the Best Children’s Film. He is quite an adaptation expert as his Shakespearean trilogy has won accolades. He has successfully transposed the texts written in the Western context into Eastern settings and many of them are set in small towns exuding regional flavour. Originally a music composer, his films are conspicuous because of their musical score.

Bharadwaj’s *The Blue Umbrella* is many shades different from the novella despite retaining the author’s message. While fidelity critics may object to the film’s departures from the novella, the adaptation preserves the spirit of the original while articulating it through spectacle, characterization, and dramatic pacing. The adaptor can be “faithful to the spirit; he expresses similar ideas and

analogous sentiments, but arrives at them by slant routes” (Mitry 4). Though story is the common denominator across different media and genres, each medium deals with that story in formally different ways and through different modes of engagement including narration, performance, or interaction.

Characterisation

Bharadwaj is obsessed with dark characters as seen in his films but even his dark characters have a silver lining. He carves out the character of the tea stall owner in great detail even rechristening him as Nand Kishore Khatri. The film opens with Nand Kishore listening to a fortune telling machine. Played by Pankaj Kapur, the character endears himself to the audience immediately. His obsession with money and riches instantly becomes evident. He is an unscrupulous character who undergoes transformation eventually. “If we loathe him at one point, we sympathize with him at another” (Sasi). Nand Kishore overshadows Binya in the film as far as the depth of character and Kapur’s prowess as an actor are concerned. “The film has been successful in developing the characters from seeds to plants.” (Toppo 28). Khatri emerges as the most carved out and interesting character. As a miserly shopkeeper reluctant to shell out money, pickle lover and usurper of children’s treasures, he stands out and leaves an impact on the audience. In addition, Kapur perfectly copies the body language of the hill people and adopts hill dialect and accent in the film. His use of the suffix “by chance” adds humour to the situations.

Binya’s brother Bijju is quite grown up unlike the text that shows Bijju as two years older than Binya. His sinewy built and passion for wrestling is an addition. Many minor characters have been introduced to show the dynamics of a village. The introduction of the village chief and his son complete the picture. In fact, Bharadwaj creates a whole village with the help of an introductory song and lends rhythm and deeper meaning to external action.

Symbolism–Images and Music

The narrative literature belongs to the realm of imagination and the reader is delicately lead forward by words. A film adaptation deals with direct visual and aural perceptions. This section focuses on

Bhardwaj's cinematic strategies. Bharadwaj makes an excellent use of contrast between light and darkness and in seasonal landscapes. Pawan Toppo says the conspiracies and the darkest of desires surface during night and have been picturised thus. The jubilation of rare discoveries, celebration of festivals, rush of tourists are bathed in the daylight. This is not the case with the text which has its curves but they are different from the film. The film brilliantly shows Binya's state of mind when her umbrella is stolen. Binya's perception of Khatri as Ravana, visualized through the effigy's multiple heads, externalizes her fear and sense of betrayal. "The fond moments that both Binya and Nandu share with their respective umbrellas are captured through still Polaroid images, asserting it as a highly photographable object" (Sasi). Film sound can be used to connect inner and outer states in subtle and less explicit ways than do images. Rightly so, music is an integral narrative component of the movie which gives it an edge over the text. The characters invariably break into songs. The recurring music of the song "Neeli aasmani chchattri" lends a thematic unity to the film while evoking emotional responses from the audience.

Plot

The narrative structure/ plot is substantially changed in the film to suit the needs of the medium and to expand the short storyline. The introduction, conflict and conclusion got a little protracted in the film. There's a lot of detailing, extrapolation, suspense, dramatization and exaggeration of events in the film. Binya, the protagonist, is seen calling out to her cows when the novel opens. Bond immediately establishes the season, vegetation and the terrain with his effortless narration. The text foregrounds simple rustic way of life, humble desires of village folk, children's dreams and working of their minds. On the other hand, the film opens with Nand Kishore Khatri absorbed in the dream of making millions as he has tuned in to a future telling machine. The focus shifts from Binya's pastoral world to Khatri's dream of wealth, instantly foregrounding desire as a motivating force.

Immediately after introducing Binya and her elder brother Bijju, the author sets up the stage for Binya's encounter with a party of picknickers from the city. However, Binya of the movie is face to face with a group of foreign tourists supposedly from Japan. She is so mesmerised by the bright blue

umbrella belonging to them that she exchanges her sacred amulet for the umbrella. The umbrella is introduced as a surreal object looking like a patch of the blue sky mounted on a stick. “The movie introduces this umbrella very differently from the book, in fact more dramatic, as the umbrella’s descent is shown in a subverted form not through Binya’s eyes but the umbrella’s point of view as it descends. It sees the world it is landing into and the awestruck eyes of Binya, and then the camera shifts to Binya’s point of view and shows the blue umbrella” (Toppo 22). This technique foregrounds its agency within the narrative. The umbrella becomes a rage in the village. Binya carries it everywhere she goes. It is hailed as Binya’s superpower that saves her from snakes and other adversaries. Bharadwaj reworked the script a lot by deleting or altering many incidents. The sequence of the umbrella’s fall into a gorge and Binya’s struggle to retrieve it is missing. The film dramatizes a number of other incidents, offers a lot of cliffhanger moments and is more spectacular and happening than a sleepy mountainous tale.

Ram Bharosa aka Nand Kishore, like children and other villagers, covets the umbrella. But he oversteps and conspires to possess it. When he fails to buy it from Binya despite repeated attempts, he plans to steal it. He engages his helper Raja Ram to do the job. This part is full of suspense and audience are kept in the dark about the culprit. However, the short novella quickly jumps to the climax and the resolution. In the novel, Raja Ram runs away with Binya’s umbrella while she is collecting porcupine quills in the forest glade during the monsoon. But Bijju catches hold of him and snatches the umbrella after a long struggle. On discovering Ram Bharosa’s involvement in the theft, people boycott him in the text and its adaptation. The villagers neither visit his tea stall nor interact with him. Then follows a long autumn of repentance. The execution of this part is heart rending in the film as Bharadwaj uses the white winter landscape to depict Khatri’s plight and loneliness. It becomes an externalization of Khatri’s moral isolation, using visual space rather than narration to convey repentance.

Binya witnesses his downfall and is silently pained by it. In the climax, she leaves the umbrella at his doorstep and despite Ram Bharosa’s pleadings refuses to take it back. This climactic gesture

reverses their moral positions. In relinquishing possession, Binya demonstrates ethical maturity and enlightenment. “In that moment, it belonged to both of them” (Bond 75). Bond’s comment that “there was nothing between her and the bright blue sky” points towards the elevation of Binya to a goddess. Ram Bharosa makes the umbrella a permanent feature of his shop for everyone to use that signifies his transformation and redemption. As a token of gratitude, he gifts a necklace of bear claw to Binya. The film follows the rhythm of seasons – summer for introduction, monsoon for the discovery of guilt and autumn and winter for retribution. The film’s seasonal rhythm echoes Bond’s structure, rendering the adaptation “palimpsestuous” in Hutcheon’s sense.

Contextualising the narrative

Bharadwaj creates the appropriate mis-en-scene, in this case, a whole village humming with activity to make the storyline convincing and racy. He contextualises the incidents successfully and pays attention to small details. The sources of entertainment in small villages like devotional nights, singing of religious hymns, fairs and wrestling matches are the brainchild of the filmmaker. Bharadwaj creates a microcosm of village inhabited by characters like a teacher, a priest, a barber, a postman and so on. Occupations like pickling, dyeing are integral to the theme and dialogues in the local dialect steal the scene. When Raja Ram asks Ram Bharosa in the text what use an umbrella was to him, he replies; “Of what use is a poppy in a cornfield? Of what use is a rainbow?” (Bond 54) The audience are thrilled when the same thought is expressed in the movie by Nand Kishore in a hill dialect with a deliberate slip of tongue. He even wonders if he had a past life connection with the umbrella. Bharadwaj’s art lies in this imaginative extension of the conversation which hardly occupies any space in the text.

Conclusion

The Blue Umbrella is a case of intermediate adaptation as the text is sufficiently recognizable from the movie. The umbrella itself functions as a symbolic character in both media, binding text and film together. The cinematic medium enables the story, which was accessible to only a limited number of English knowing readers, to reach the masses and immortalises the text in the process. Bharadwaj

successfully transposes a story, a half-an-hour read, into a film that engages an audience for two and a half hours. Besides, it adds a third dimension to the narrative by contextualising the incidents and extensively using the local colour. Bharadwaj uses sound and visuals, play of light and shade and a carnivalesque presentation in the service of his cinematic storytelling. What the film sacrifices in terms of some incidents and linear plot, it gains in character depth, emotional resonance and contextual richness. Both Bond and Bhardwaj emerge as masters of their respective crafts. Film critic Sasi sums up the milestones achieved by the film. “So, today with almost all my memories around the literary work erased, I refer to *The Blue Umbrella* as a solid cinematic feat” (Sasi). One can see a certain blossoming of the literary text in the hands of the filmmaker. The film ends up becoming an autonomous cultural product, at once relatable and aesthetically appealing.

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