

A Comparative Study of Cinematic Texts vis-à-vis the Literary Texts

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Abstract

Literature and cinema have always been vibrant mediums for expression. Their touching and moving appeal has made them popular across regions and time periods. However, despite their wide appeal, both literature and cinema are two different forms of art with varying audience and requirements. This paper aims to uphold a comparison between literature as a medium of communication and cinema as a medium of portrayal. The study takes into account few case studies to highlight the differences in the same text in relevance to the medium they are in. It also attempts to analyze the various techniques used in the two media to reach out to the audience or readers and tries to find out the effects and differences of the cinematic text and literary texts. The paper also briefly looks into the concepts of adaptation from one media to the other and highlights the benefits and drawbacks of both the media. Finally, the paper takes up a study of the influence of literature and cinema over one another, concluding with a comparison of their popularity across time and space.

Keywords: Cinema, Literature, Mediums for Artistic Creativity

Art, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is any “creative activity resulting in the production of paintings, drawings, or sculpture” and includes in its folds “the various branches of creative activity, such as painting, music, literature, and dance.” This makes both literature and cinema two vibrant mediums for portraying artistic creativity.

Literature has spanned relatively longer centuries in the world, with texts still surviving from the period of classical antiquity and read immensely even today. There are also records of “The Classic of Poetry (or Shijing)” as the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, comprising 305 works by anonymous authors dating from the 11th to 7th centuries BC. Cinema, though a more recent innovation, has garnered widespread popularity from across the world within in a short period. From the public screening of ten of Lumière brothers' short films in Paris on 28 December 1895, generally regarded as the breakthrough of projected cinematographic motion pictures, cinema has managed to advance itself remarkably in a short duration. The popularity of the cinematic media may be attributed to its mass appeal, which brings in diverse population from across the globe to enjoy the pleasure of the cinematic experience. Literature in comparison, gained its momentum only after the industrial innovations in print culture, prior to which literature largely remained performative in the form of plays for public entertainment or as oral epic traditions. Even after the birth of the print media, literature only remained limited to the educated and literate classes, thus garnering a divide in the population. However, cinema being a uniting experience, has brought into its folds people of all cultures and ages together. In fact, this dynamic nature of cinema has unfolded an interdisciplinary nature between literature and cinema which have increased the scope for mutual interaction between the two throughout the years. Today, the interaction between the two media is such that cinema draws its scripts from literature and literature gets influenced by cinema.

As history has shown, every new invention in the world is often greeted with suspicion and scepticism, and cinema had witnessed the same in its formative period. Literary critics and writers were initially immense sceptical of cinema and especially cinematic adaptations of literary work. This can be compared to “Plato’s horror over the invention of writing in the fear that it would destroy the art of memory” or the scepticism about photography ruining the art of painting in the recent times, as suggested by Deborah Cartmell in her essay 100+ Years of Adaptations, or Adaptation as the Art Form of Democracy. From the earliest days of cinema in nineteenth-century Europe, adaptation from diverse resources has been a ubiquitous practice of filmmaking either because cinema lacked ample resources to create new stories or

to attain a sense of trust and popularity among the masses. Therefore, it is no wonder that cinema has often been attacked for lacking originality and adapting literary texts into a cinematic experience. However, it is noteworthy that both cinema and literature are two different media which necessitates different approaches to analyze their texts.

A film adaptation, in the simplest terms, is the transfer of a work or story, in whole or in part, to a feature film. Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* defines adaptation as “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art”. While literature involves only the author as its sole artist, cinema engages an entire industry of artists to produce a film. The author of a literary text has immense freedom in shaping up his/ her work with the result of his/ her own imagination or facts. But the production of a film involves a range of artists such as the director, the actors, the music producers, costume designers, the editors and others with the directors’ gaze becoming the dominant gaze of the camera according to auteur theory. However, this view has been contested by Shelley Cobb who states in her essay *Film Authorship and Adaptation*, that adaptation never considers the director’s role as an author of the film and in contradiction, screen writers have struggles to hold a place in the debates about authorship in film studies. Hence, it is only wise to accept the alterations and modifications in the literary text once it is adapted to the visual media as every artist has his/ her own individual perspectives shaping up the cinematic text. For, example when an author writes of a tree by a riverside, his/her imagination of the tree might not match with director’s reading of the tree. While the author’s tree might be an oak tree during the daytime, the director might read it as a coconut tree at night. This can be explained in terms of New Criticism school in literary theory, which grants the reader the central role in the art of reading and thereby, the director, screenwriters and others definitely become crucial in moulding the literary text according to their reading and understanding. As Roland Barthes explains the term writerly texts, the readers who are the makers of the cinema who employ their own reading into the cinematic art and thus become the creators of a cinematic work quite naturally as readers.

Thus, not only there is a difference in the meanings expressed by words in a literary text which is then modified and adapted to the cinematic text, but there is also the problem of the availability of spaces in real life matching to the writer’s imaginative space. This is to point out that even with all the detailed description of a place by the author, it is very difficult to find a matching space in the real world by the filmmakers, in the case of which the cinema artists are left with no other option but to satisfy with whatever resources they have.

A cinematic text is also limited by the constraints of time. The author enjoys the freedom of going incessantly with his/her imaginative capabilities but a film is time-bound and cost-expensive. It involves numerous artists, sets, shooting locations, cameras, and a whole lot of other systems which add up to the costs and hamper the free flow of creativity. While the writes can write whatever whenever and wherever he/she chooses to with only his/her mental faculty as his/her aid and tool, every tiny shot of a film involves an interaction and cooperation of lights, sound and action which is greatly time consuming and expensive on resources. A film thus, cannot include everything and anything but only combine a series of selected shots to represent the writer’s work. In short, while the literary text can be read as the writer’s fluid creativity, the cinematic text can be said to be a near-reality selection and representation of the reader’s reading of the literary text.

Of course, while cinematic texts may face constraints in portrayals, they have their own advantages as well. For example, films can show in a short duration what the text takes a number of days to unravel to the reader. Films speak through symbols. So while the author may have to describe a place or situation over a number of pages, one shot is enough to speak in a film. For instance, in the novel ‘Ice Candy Man’ by Bapsi Sidhwa, she goes on to narrate the incidents of communal violence of the Indian Partition in great detail. However, very short shots of fires and slogans at night are enough to speak out of the same to the audience in Deepa Mehta’s adaptation of Sidhwa’s novel, *Earth*. Colours play a very significant role

in films. While bright settings and colours are used to denote positive atmospheres; dull, sombre, dark backgrounds often represent the disturbing moments in a literary text. For instance, Amrita Pritam's novella *Pinjar* directed to its cinematic adaptation by the same name by director, Dr Chandraprakash Dwivedi, uses bright colours, lights, music and dance to represent the happy atmosphere of merriment and peace before the partition of India in the year 1947. The film also uses dark and monochromatic colours to represent the chaos and disturbing scenario of post-partition India and Pakistan. The united sense of the pre-partition situation is well portrayed through the clear skies, bright sunshine, green fields and crops while the barrenness and sadness post-partition is represented through brazen nature, dark insecure nights, and empty fields. The making of a film thus, require a series of symbols and shots, which speak through a language of connotations. The shots are then put together by a technique called montage, which is a technique in film theory for editing, by which a series of short shots are edited into a sequence to condense space, time, and information.

Although literature and cinema interact with each other in their own way, a single text can be moulded in two completely different ways and give rise to two different readings of the same text. For example, while Amrita Pritam's *Pinjar* is essentially a tale of a young girl who is kidnapped for communal revenge and forced into a life of devastation and estrangement from her family; the film *Pinjar* focuses more on the communal violence in the era of partition rather than the lives of the women who face the brunt of communal hatred and are central to Pritam's text. Many critics have lashed at Dwivedi stating his adaptation to be communally inclined. While the Hindus and Sikhs have blamed Dwivedi's *Pinjar* to be propaganda to favour the Muslims, the Muslim community on the other hand found it degrading to their culture and identity. Thus, although the text remains the same, the readings become quite flexible according to the medium they are in.

Similarly, Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *Ice Candy Man* is a bildungsroman of the young Lenny in the backdrop of the communal hatred between the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during partition with the Parsee community offering humanitarian service to the violated women. However, Deepa Mehta's *Earth*, a cinematic version of the same novel diverts significantly from the communal issue and builds up on the love triangle among Ayah, Hassan and the Ice Candy Man. Moreover, the Mehta's film ends abruptly with the Hindu Ayah being dragged out of Lenny's house by the Muslim agitators, thus ending her story in a mask of ambiguity while Sidhwa's novel ends on a positive note of hope as Ayah is sent back to her family to be reunited.

Adaptations, despite building up from the skeletons of literary texts, have also been charged of propagating inauthentic information. As many critics have complained, the movie *Shakespeare in Love* refuses to engage with any suggestion that Shakespeare might have been bisexual. Similarly, as Deborah Cartmell argues, there is a problematic transfer of Austen's voice to Elizabeth Bennett in one of the adaptations of the novel *Pride and Prejudice*. Further, the novel *Pride and Prejudice* has been explained as the concealed autobiography in Austen's biopic of 2007, *Becoming Jane* which is in deviance to the scholarly works done on Austen through the years. This becomes an issue of concern as the popularity of films over books is far greater due to its more close-to-life visual motion pictures, its short duration and the cultural attraction through songs and dance, thereby also posing the risk of misleading the public or presenting inappropriate information. As G.K. Chesterton points out, therein lay the dangers of "historical falsehood being popularized through film. A false film might be refuted in a hundred books, without much affecting the million dupes who had never read the books but only seen the film." However, the cinematic media is celebrated for its egalitarian nature which makes it easily available to the elites and general masses and the educated and uneducated people alike. It also remains a highly popular medium of instruction for the children or illiterate people who can easily grasp the motion pictures in contrast to the written world of literature.

Thus, adaptations are not entirely without problems. Yet, they have been very crucial in introducing a large number of people to the world of literature. The immense popularity of the Harry Potter series, Game of Thrones, or even the mainstream movies drawing their scripts from popular novels, speaks volumes about the influence of cinema on general lives. In fact, the craze of the cinematic text is such that they transcend from the virtual media to the popular cultures of material consumerism. This has resulted in specific merchandise and soundtracks being marketed widely based on popular films and series based on novels or otherwise. A survey conducted among scores of people and children who proudly display their Harry Potter arte facts has the potential to reveal a large of people who might not have ever been acquainted with the series of the novel but have watched the movies based on the same multiple times. Indeed such is the pace of the modern world, that seldom people find the time or luxury to immerse in the pleasure of reading the literary texts and hence take recourse to the short and crisp cinematic adaptations to partake the pleasure of the same.

To conclude, both literature and cinema are two different mediums for artistic creativity and although the cinematic texts might not be able to do justice to the works of literary genius, the differences are only realistic in terms of the variance of factors that work to shape up the two. While both literature and cinema have their own sets of advantages and limitations, nonetheless, their mutual interaction is immensely crucial in the propagation of ideas and reaching out to the general masses in the form of entertainment. Although, the general trend of print media being adapted to films largely remains, there have also been reverse cases where new works of literature have begun to be influenced by films.

The two forms of art have also facilitated intercultural, inter-regional and inter-temporal interactions. For example, Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet is perhaps one of the most common examples of cinematic adaptation all over the world. These adaptations, given their shape by different filmmakers ranging from different parts of the world, reflect the times in which they were made in addition to portraying the geographical and socio-cultural differences. To cite an instance, Baz Luhrman's 1996 film Romeo + Juliet, which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, is a modern-day adaptation of the play and engages in an inter-temporal exchange. That is to say that Shakespeare's sixteenth century play reveals the social and religious institutions of his time along with the courtesies, gestures and approved behaviours and languages of communication in the sixteenth century. Luhrman's film, on the other hand, diverts significantly in its representation of time and portrays a 20th century Romeo who rides a car and is seen in modern-day costumes of jeans and shirts. It marks the differences of attitudes, attires, social behaviours, etiquettes, social liberation and other aspects between the two time periods- the sixteenth century of Shakespeare and the 20th century of Luhrman's time. In two other instances of the Marathi film Sairat or its Bollywood remake Dhadak, there is a cross-cultural adaptation of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. In the two movies, the European culture of Romeo and Juliet's time is replaced with the modern-day Indian culture to highlight the similarities in the two time frames. Such adaptations of older works of literature remain popular and realistic to the audience even today because they reveal how societies have remained similar in their attitudes of social sanction and punishment even over centuries, despite the advancements in learning or technology. This realistic appeal of both literature and cinema bind the readers and audiences together in a uniting force to introspect the hypocrisies and idiosyncrasies of their societies.

Together, literature and cinema have not only been able to highlight social issues and make attempts to bring about a change in perspectives but they have also transcended boundaries to blend into the lives of ordinary people, which is the sole beauty and also the purpose of art. Cinema and literature, thus, forces people to come together and ponder and act upon issues which largely remain neglected or hushed in societies. They is a realistic mirroring of societies which aim to draw attention to issues that make individuals suffer yet remain unchanged as parts of the customs and traditions that have been passed down by generations. While influencing each other, literature and cinema has also influenced the thoughts

of people and brought about many positive changes in the social sphere. As works of art, both literature and cinema has marked their places in immortality and have fuelled life into each other. Hence, it is no wonder that these works of art has managed to flourish and will continue to flourish in all times to come.

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About Author:

Karabi Barman is a postgraduate in English from the prestigious Hindu College, University of Delhi. She is keenly interested in research and has made significant contributions to the field of literary research by successfully presenting papers at national and international level seminars and webinars. Her key areas of interest in research are feminism, psychoanalysis, and detective fiction reflected by her papers entitled "Tracing Bengali Detective Fiction: Satyajit Ray's Feluda" at the Seminar on Detective Fiction organised by Miranda House, University of Delhi in the year 2018 and "Transgression in Women's Writings" at the international webinar by Bharaticollege, University of Delhi, held on 26th-27th May 2020. She has also successfully completed a research internship on Assamese Literature under Professor Liza Das at IIT Guwahati in the year 2016. Furthermore, she has also contributed a critical essay entitled "The Victims of Abuse and Misogyny in Crime Fiction: Women in Arthur Conan Doyle's 'The Hound of Baskervilles' and 'A Study in Scarlet'" in an anthology of critical essays edited by Debayan Deb Barman titled Critical Essays On English and Bengali Detective Fiction, which is scheduled to be published by Lexington Books soon. Karabi also takes an active interest in writing poetry and prose fiction, which has been published in various school and college newsletters and magazines and in an anthology titled Fantasy Chase.