

## The Blue Umbrella as an Adaptation: A Comparative Study between Fiction and Film

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### Abstract

Ruskin bond's novella, the blue umbrella is a story of ten years old girl Binya and her umbrella. The novella *The Blue Umbrella* is an exploration of basic human desires, yet it fulfills its journey through a simplistic discourse, deeply poignant. As Jean Mitry puts in the "Remarks on the Problem of Cinematic Adaptation" that adaptation "is a matter of passing from one form to another, a matter of transportation, of reconstruction" (Mitry 1971). While adapting any work of literature into a film, there always remain some possibilities of the distortion of message. 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 novella was adapted into a film of the same name by VishalBhardwaj. As a novella, the story was popular among children for years, and as a film also it gained attention of audience and critics. But still the question arises- how far the film is faithful adaptation, all the characters are given same space or not, the message of the novella distorted or not etc. In this paper we will try to find out answer of those questions along with the aesthetics of film making like style, tone, structure, metaphor, symbol etc.

Keywords: Adaptation, Aesthetics of Film Making, Mise-en-scene, Narrative Technique.

Ruskin Bond, the veteran Indian writer of British decent has enriched the oeuvre of Indian writing in English by his innumerable short stories and novellas. As a writer Bond claims that he was so haunted by the hills of Himalayas. He has beautifully woven the simple life with incidents that occupy the people of this region. Apart from being included in the school curriculum Ruskin Bond's works have also inspired films. *The Room on the Roof* (1956) which was his maiden work was adapted into a BBC – produced TV Series. His historical novella, *A Flight of Pigeons* (1978) was adapted into a Hindi film called *Junoon* (1978) produced by Shashi Kapoor and directed by Shyam Benegal. His short story, *Susanna's Seven Husbands* was adapted into a movie called *Saat Khoon Maaf* (2011), by Vishal Bhardwaj which had Priyanka Chopra in the lead. He has mastered the challenging art of adaptation by adapting the famous Shakespearean tragedies (*Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*) in the present Indian scenario [(*Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), *Haider* (2014)]. But it was his novella, *The Blue Umbrella* when adapted into a movie by Vishal Bhardwaj that won the National Award for the best children's film along with public appreciation.

In the process of film making the director's interpretation of the text i.e. his response, his translation of it on screen and the audience's reception of it show the richness of the two media and the possibilities arising out of it. Thus the perception of an "audience" is opposed to the understanding of a "reader" working on Double Articulation. In film studies the meaning lies in reading through images, camera movement, acoustics, dialogues and performance, as the director as interpreter translates metaphorical language to the screen. And in cases of adaptation the translation happens not just in the two media but also in the semiotic shift from the cultural milieu of one to be appropriated to the cultural and language milieu of the other. The film thus becomes a discourse by operating with these codes of moving photographic image, recorded sound, recorded noise, written materials; these

combine to form a narrative. This makes cinema a metaphorical language and the combination of these codes.

The novella *The Blue Umbrella* is an exploration of basic human desires, yet it fulfills its journey through a simplistic discourse, deeply poignant. This movie based on the novella of the same name by Ruskin Bond draws before the eyes all that the book conjures. Unlike the book which opens with Binya the movie opens with Khatri, the Ram Bharosa of the book. The movie spends a good fifteen minutes establishing the various characters and girding them in the text. It helps the spectators, through a neutral focalization, to familiarize themselves with the characters and the simplistic nature and setting which form the *mis - en - scene*. The children, their laughter, their songs all paint a beautiful *mis - en - scene*.

Then there intervenes in this tableau the object and the epitome of pulchritude which would lend turbulence to this locality. A foreign object brought in by foreigners; the blue umbrella. The movie introduces this umbrella very differently from the book, in fact more dramatic, as the umbrella descends 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.

Once the umbrella is introduced in the biosphere everything changes. The focalization shifts to the village people primarily Khatri, where his binoculars signify that which he seeks or that which is distant and he can't have. The umbrella is a signifier of everything that these villagers can't have and envy. The Headmaster's wife, Khatri, the barber and the elderly all form a leitmotif of unfulfilled desires. The children, on the contrary, rejoice and appreciate the umbrella. As it is aptly said in the book, "Unlike the adults, the children didn't have to pretend (Bond 19920)." There are motifs of the bear claw which signify the cultural and societal girding which Binya breaks free from by bartering it for the flamboyant blue

umbrella. Just so that the umbrella is not only an object of beauty but utility the line from the book , “just testing it” is elucidated in the movie through a series of sequences and spliced scenes where Binya spreads joy by sharing her umbrella and of course the rain which splatters joy yet destruction and chaos. These inserts are strung into the narrative with songs.

The movie uses lighting to showcase the difference in the petty human vices of envy and jealousy and even coveting and the pristine joys of childhood. The headmaster’s wife and Khatri are always shown inside their homes in pitch darkness where they covet and scheme for the umbrella as contrasted with the happy moments which take place outside in complete sunshine.



Figure1.Khatri

2. The Headmaster’s Wife

And finally winter descends on Khatri as he lies in decadence after losing face. Each moment of the book is lived with scenic beauty and great music and imagery and motifs of sky blueness, and the simple yet deep novella is turned into a scenic gaze into a slice of humanity.

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, "Angrezimeinbhijhoothboltahaikoi!" (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 NandakishoreKhatri (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 VishalBharadwaj's perception towards literature.

Bond's stories are mainly concerned with child protagonists and carry positivity; whereas Bharadwaj in his films, highlighted negative shades of human life. It's very much evident his other films like *Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, *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" (Mitry1971). Thus, Bharadwaj's additions serve as flesh to give the story better form and structure in order to carry the message to the audience.

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 visualizing a story on screen, we realize that the novel was better organized, still film adaptors get to differ in their creative ways while shaping their stories.

In the film *The Blue Umbrella*, VishalBharadwaj 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 screen. 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 RavanPodi' 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 NandakishoreKhatri, 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.

We 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. On the other hand, we can also say that, Bharadwaj has tried to creatively differ from the novella in order to present the same

story because when one sees the film after reading the novella, one in no way finds the additions and representations of the events inappropriate.

Whenever we read a story, see a film, or visualize 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 heartwarming performances of PankajKapoor and Shreya Sharma for instance.

In case of the novel, *The Blue Umbrella*, the target audiences 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.

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 novella 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....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.

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. She shook her head and said, “You keep it. I don’t need it anymore”. “But it’s such a pretty umbrella!” protested Ram Bharosa. “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, symbolizes 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, even from the very first scene where the “fortune teller” says, “ You are a very kind hearted human being. You sacrifice your desire for the happiness of other people. You remain in pain in order to bring

the smile on a stranger's lips..." (Bhardwaj 2007) This is applicable for Binya. And the film remarkably ends with the same excerpts. The Khatri Stall changes into Chhatri stall.

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 organization 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 organized plot. The change in characterization 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 novella derives its strength from Ruskin Bond's lucid yet sweeping narration, and the film derives its strength from VishalBharadwaj'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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