

Literary Essay

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Can Cinema Survive Without Literature?

Literature and Cinema

In 1897, in the Preface to his novel “The Nigger of Narcissus” Joseph Conrad writes: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel -- it is, before all, to make you see”. This, in a way sounds the key-note of this topic. Both, literature – especially novels and drama – and cinema tries to make their audience ‘see’, and then hear and understand. Both present a visual for him to comprehend.

But this visual is presented in different ways. The medium by which the novelist and the film-director writes, are different. While the novelist uses a pen or a key-board, the director uses the camera. Naturally, there will be a difference in expression in these two genres. The language, in other words, of literature differs considerably from the language of cinema. This has been neatly presented by Satyajit Ray in his film “Home and World” based on the novel by Rabindranath Tagore with the same name. Tagore, at the end of the story writes that Nikhil who went out to quell a riot had been grievously wounded in the head and it is difficult to predict whether he would survive the assault. We can almost visualise Nikhil lying on the back of the horse that is bringing him home, wounded and unconscious. Hearing this Bimola feels that this has happened as a retribution against the sin of having an extra-marital affair with Sandip. She began this autobiography of hers with: “I had walked through fire. Whatever was combustible in me had been reduced to ashes. What has been left back is immortal”. Ray, on the other hand does not use words to portray the scene. He makes his camera ‘tell’ the story. Mastarmoshai comes and informs Bimola that Nikhil has been wounded. After this three cut shots rapidly substitute the previous one: Bimola dishevelled but with the vermilion mark of marriage on the parting of her hair; Bimola in the same attire but without the vermilion mark; Bimola dressed as a widow. The rapid movement of three frozen shots bring out Ray’s ‘reading’ of the novel and present Bimola’s widowhood as the fatal consequence of the sin committed by her. Thus, both Tagore and Ray have ‘written’ “The Home and the World” with their separate pens and have produced aesthetic satisfaction in the minds of the audience.

The relationship between literature and cinema is complex and baffling. It is true that a great many blockbusters are born on the table of the director and script-writer. The story has not come from the pen of any literary artist and the film did quite well among the audience. A random selection of Indian films like “Sholay” or “Bahubali” or “DilwaleDulhania le Jayenge” or “Three Idiots” would prove our point. All these films just mentioned are chart-toppers on their own days. But none of them can claim any parentage in any literary effort. These films lend credence to the argument that cinema, especially the popular variety can remain alive and kicking even when it is not based on literature.

On the other hand great films are produced when literature and cinema have joined hands. “Godfather” or the “Harry Potter series” which are also runaway hits on the celluloid and are taken from the pens of the novelists – Mario Puzo and J. K. Rowling. So has been the case with CheGuevera’s *The Motorcycle Diaries*. Therefore to opine on one end of the scale is simply not possible.

It is also seen that both literature and cinema share a symbiotic relationship and help one another to grow. They certainly impact one another. This is seen in the drawings of the characters in Satyajit Ray’s Feluda series. After *Sonar Kella* was filmed the pictures of Feluda and Lalmohan Babuin his subsequent books certainly resembled Soumitra Chatterjee and Santosh Dutta. The stories too became more cinematic. Before that in *Feludar Goyendagiri*, and *Badsahi Angti*, and other three novels Feluda and Topshe looked

slightly different in the drawings presented in the books. The stories too appealed more to imagination and thrived on the power of detection. But after the filming of *Sonar Kella*, adventures of Feluda started becoming more and more like the comic strip by Hergé: *The Adventures of Tintin* – full of incidents which are more visually appealing than introspective. The same can be said about the Harry Potter series. We notice that the game of Quidditch disappeared from the novel after the third book. In the fifth book the game was played but Harry could not participate in it because he was given detention by Professor Umbridge in her office. This is because the producers of the film, Warner Brothers, requested Rowling not to include the game in subsequent stories because of the difficulty in filming it.

It is also claimed that cinema gives a new lease of life to literature. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* or *A Tale of Two Cities*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* certainly live outside class-rooms because of the films which are based on them. Gurinder Chaddha for example, in his "Bride and Prejudice" has presented the story in a modern context and ignited a controversy that has rekindled interest on the early 19th century novel.

But the same cannot be said about the plays of Shakespeare which are still produced on stage and therefore qualify as 'alive'. A few examples of this may be useful. Michael Radford directed *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare's most controversial play in 2008. Not only did he shorten the play to a manageable cinematic length but he also tried to look at the Semitic problem in a new light. In Venice of 16th century the Jews were denied an opportunity of practising any vocation of their choice. Hence usury was their compulsion. But Shakespeare's treatment of Shylock and Radford's obvious sympathy for him enlivens not the play but the debate on the play. The same can be said of Vishal Bharadwaj's reinterpretation of *Macbeth* [Maqbool] and *Hamlet* [Haider]. Vishal squarely blames Lady Macbeth for Macbeth's downfall while a reading of the Shakespearean play throws up interesting alternatives.

Therefore, literature and cinema interpenetrates each other and creates new narratives to ponder upon. The tropes mix and merge, stand apart like flag-pole at times – always challenging and always teasing us to consider a new look at read texts or tempt us to read those literary pieces which have eluded our notice till then.