



Novels vs. Films: An Analysis of *The Namesake*, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* and “Kai Po Che!”

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Ages ago, writing used was done through woodcut graphic art. Much later, printing was invented bringing about a transformation in written communication. Similarly, with the coming-up of photography, painting as an Art form was replaced or rather transformed. In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction”, Walter Benjamin remarks: “In principle, the work of art has always been reproducible.”(60). With the advancement in the technology, Art has been recreated and redefined. In the present scenario, Art is reproduced in the form of films where stories from various popular books are compiled into films and are projected on huge screens to entertain as well as enlighten the masses.

The shift or transition from writing to film-making as an Art form will be dealt in depth and detail in this research paper on **Novels vs. Films**. Though the journey is from books to films but the title signifies a clash between the two. This is mainly because once a novel or a short story is adapted into a film; it leaves a choice to its audience to either watch the movie or read the printed work or, do both. This indirectly raises the argument whether reading a book is preferable to watching a film or vice versa. At this point it must be remembered that print and visual are two separate Medias communicating to its respective audience. Therefore, making such a comparison between the two is practically not sound. However, in accordance with the trend of modern times, it is seen that when art is actually reproduced in the form of a film, it is seen to have greater impact.

Benjamin claimed that new forms of art, including some forms of Hollywood film, are capable of having an active effect on the political thinking of the working class, of a kind which is excluded by ‘autonomous art’ from the great bourgeois traditions. He arrived at this claim via the idea that the media of communication in a society affect the way in which people order their perceptions. A world in which books are central will, for example, be experienced differently from the one in which film is dominant. (193)

Currently in India, it wouldn’t be wrong to say that films have dominated all the Medias and is reaching out to a very high percentage of the masses. If novels are

converted into movies then people would chose or opt for watching rather than reading. Watching movies is much easier and interesting to the masses because it does not require much effort. Seeing is also less laborious than reading. The brain is required only to absorb the visuals in order to understand, whereas reading requires concentration and ability to interpret the writer's written words which are almost uniform in sight as compared to the moving visuals on the big screen. This definitely poses the issue of readership; but films are probably not trying to hamper it. In fact, it may widen the scope of reading as the book may gain much popularity and solidarity on the screens. Film covers a wider range than the print media as there are people in the society who cannot afford a novel and some of them cannot even read. A film is for a lay man, who can be literate or illiterate, rich or poor, or even visually challenged. It also doesn't demand any literary or technical knowledge from the part of the spectators.

Considering Jhumpa Lahiri's debut novel *The Namesake* (2003) and Chetan Bhagat's best seller *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* (2008) as the primary texts along with the films "the Namesake" (2006) by Mira Nair and Abhishek Kapoor's "Kai Po Che!" (2013), the paper makes a comparative study thereby, gives an insight over the issue of 'aura' when such books are reproduced in the form of big blockbusters. Benjamin's essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction" and Stuart Hall's "Encoding/Decoding" has formed the theoretical framework for the study. Benjamin has argued over the loss of 'aura' in his essay in the light of such recreated art works. On the contrary, Hall examines the relationship between the encoded message and the decoded message in his work. These ideas are taken up in the latter half of the paper.

Just as creative writing is accepted as an Art form; Filmmaking is also an Art work. Writing employs literary devices and skills; Films involve a host of technicalities in terms of Cinematography, Editing, etc. But when a film maker selects a novel in order to make a film, his/her perceptions may or may not match with the writer's intentions. This can be clear in the analyses of the novel *The Namesake* and the movie based on it and retaining the same title as well also, *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* and the corresponding film "Kai Po Che!" A comparative study of both of these texts will postulate two different dimensions or perspectives of the act of the translating a novel to a film. A book is a writer's imagination; whereas a film, when reproduced, portrays the filmmaker's reading of that book. As specified before, his/her reading may or may not be similar to the writer's ideology. The movie "The Namesake" is the replica of the novel *The Namesake*; while "Kai Po Che!" differs in many ways from the original writing of *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*.

Before discussing the similarities and the differences between the film and the novel *The Namesake*, let us first glance at the storyline in brief:

“[The story] brings to fore many of the issues that Indians, settled in the promising land of opportunities, face in America. The narrative revolves around the difficulties faced by a couple in a different country- the clash of cultures, the relationship between parents and children, the generation gap, identity problems, etc.”(69).

The story unfolds the diasporic experiences of its characters.

Jhumpa Lahiri takes on the literary and narrative route to put forth her story. The novel is set over a time period when many Indians started migrating to America or London for better educational as well as job opportunities. *The Namesake* deals with the identity crisis and the cultural trauma experienced by both: the first and the second generation of immigrants in the host country America. Firstly, let us trace the diasporic experiences of Ashima, Gogol’s mother and first generation immigrant. She was born and brought-up in India and after getting married to Ashoke Ganguly, she goes to the new land of America. There she experiences the vast difference between her culture and the culture of the new homeland. She faces numerous difficulties in assimilating with new American culture. At times, there was loneliness, nostalgia, alienation for instance to battle with; when Ashoke went to work she finds herself all alone at home. The lack of sound around her is almost deafening. She realized that life is so individualistic there. Frequently, she feels like going back to India, but that isn’t possible. But when Gogol is born, she tells Ashoke that she wants her children to be brought-up in India; but Ashoke convinces her by saying that their future resides here in America. Here they can become whatever they want to. So, for the sake of her children’s future, she decides to settle there. But by staying there for so long, she abides by her Indian values and culture though, she never imposes her values and traditions on her children. But by the atmosphere that she creates and maintains at home, the children are aware that their culture is different. Gogol and Sania are free to live their own lives on their own terms because this is what American culture is all about. Being a first generation immigrant Ashima experiences Diaspora; but she adheres to the American ways of living. Though she does not change herself in terms of her dressing, behavior, mannerisms, customs and traditions; she still accepts the existing American culture. She also has the memories of her Indian soil. She has an origin to return to. But she is well aware that by enforcing the Indian culture on her children she will ruin their future. So, she gives them the freedom, the liberty, the space to accommodate with the American culture and be its part. Throughout the novel, the readers can very well notice that Ashima never intervenes in her children’s lives. She never restricts them from doing anything. She is always there with them as their guide. She’s there as their support but not to dominate. Unlike the typical Indian mother figure, Jhumpa Lahiri dissects from this perspective and portrays an altogether new image of an Indian mother at American soil.

In the film “The Namesake”, Mira Nair displays the character of Ashima so beautifully that the viewers can identify with her struggles. The screen spacing of

Ashima is less when compared to that of Gogol. This is because Jhumpa Lahiri's focus is on the second generation of immigrants; Gogol becomes the center of attraction in the film. But Lahiri manages to describe Ashima's emotions and experiences in such depth and detail that probably is because it may be difficult yet challenging for a filmmaker to convert all the pages of a novel into a 3-hour movie. Therefore, Nair portrays the persona of Ashima in a nutshell. While adapting a novel into a film, the director plays a significant role as he/she has to pick and choose the scenes that need to be projected and also eliminate some of the minor incidents that are present in the story. This has to be done due to the time limit. Nair does attempt to throw a light on the character of Ashima through the scenes that are projected on screen and hence, adds voice to her silence which Lahiri has presented so well in the book.

The feeling of in betweenness is encapsulated well through the character of Gogol Ganguly, who constantly struggles to accommodate with the American culture. Gogol is born and brought-up in America but its culture is completely different from his home culture. At home, the second generation of immigrants is supposed to follow the Indian tradition, customs, rituals, mannerisms, etc and when they are with their friends they are supposed to adapt with the current trends of America. This dilemma of identity is well crafted through the life experiences of Gogol, who represents the second generation immigrant in the novel. Gogol was a name given by his father Ashoke because he was fascinated by the Russian author Nikolai Gogol of 'Overcoat' very much. In childhood, Gogol likes his name i.e. at least he is fine with his name; but later, in an effort to accommodate with the American culture, he changes his name to Nikhil. For his family members, however he is still Gogol. By changing his name, he tries to assimilate with the American culture and slowly, moves away from his family. His family is Indian. So, whenever he's at home, he has to be like an Indian son Gogol. With his friends, he's Nikhil, an American, who likes to drink, go around with girls, have an affair, etc. Thus, he constructs two identities of himself - one is an Indian identity of 'Gogol' and another is an American identity of 'Nikhil' which later becomes 'Nick'. In order to merge with the American culture, he maintains relationships with white American women. But he hides this fact from his parents because he has to live out the role of Gogol, who has Indian values for them. This is portrayed in the movie *The Namesake* – when Nikhil with his girlfriend Maxine are suppose to go to his home, he tells her that his parents won't appreciate their touching and kissing each other. This scene clearly depicts the identity crisis that Nikhil faces, after changing his name. Nikhil by staying away from home he feels that it will be easy for him to blend into the American culture completely.

Later, his identity crisis intensifies after his father's death and also after breaking-up with Maxine. His mother Ashima comes to know about his relationship and break-up. She insists that he should meet Moushmi, a Bengali girl. Gogol starts admiring her and then marries her. But after his marriage he comes to know that his

wife has an affair with another man and they later divorce each other. This is the time when he reads *The Overcoat* by Russian author Gogol. “Reading of “Overcoat” can symbolize Nikhil’s transparency to his name Gogol. An ‘overcoat’ is used to cover the body; here Gogol is being covered under the ‘overcoat of Nikhil.”(39). He realizes that so far he was covering his old identity by taking up a new identity of Nikhil. He understands the essence and the significance that his name has. In the movie, towards the end when his mother asks, ‘Are you fine?’ he says, ‘Yes. Now I am free.’ This is because till now he was struggling to accept a new culture which does not actually accommodate colored people. At the same time, he was ignoring his Indian culture because he felt embarrassed in front of his friends. Until this moment he was belonging nowhere. But now he has accepted the reality.

A novel has to provide a vision through words. So, it becomes highly descriptive. Based on these descriptions, the readers are able to create a visual imagination of their own. Arundhati Chatterjee comments over Jhumpa Lahiri’s style of writing:

“The character portrayals are so realistic that we seem to frown and smile along with them, feeling their confusion and despair in some lingering nostalgic moments, re-living along with them... It is therefore Lahiri’s extraordinary gift of erasing boundaries between character and audience that fascinates us most.” (114).

While reading Lahiri’s work, readers can identify with her characters’ emotions and feelings. When Mira Nair adapts the novel into the visual medium of a Film, the actors have to enact these characters... This is misleading on the part of the spectators as interpreted by Benjamin that the audience’s connection with the actor is actually the identification with the camera. While watching a film, the viewers identifies with the actors and not the characters of the story. According to Walter Benjamin, an actor’s performance on screen is compiled in bits and pieces and presented to the public by the skills of an editor. The role of the spectators is passive while observing a film as compared to the role of the reader which is very much active. This is mainly because the readers construct their visual imagination as they get along with the narrative. Thus, they are constantly involved and engaged in formulating these visuals in their minds as they read the text. On the contrary, a film spoon feeds its audience by just presenting a script.

Further, the experience that a reader undergoes by reading a novel is totally different from that of a spectator who watches a film. For example, the readers of the novel *The Namesake*, will sympathize with the character of Ashima to a great extent whereas, the viewers of the film will empathize with Gogol as he’s is the hero and films are usually hero-centric. This also brings up the issue that films generally project someone’s vision in the form of a narrator or a protagonist. In comparison, a novel is open-ended because there are usually as many narrators and protagonists as

there are characters. The readers are set free to comprehend the narrative from anyone's perspective. Therefore, the movie "The Namesake" was Nair's vision of Lahiri's novel.

Along with the camera angles and close-up shots which capture the expressions and the reactions of the actors, the background score and the songs play an equally important role in portraying the storyline. With its aid, a story can move in quick succession without using the dialogues and communicate the message effectively to its audience. In the novel, when Gogol transforms himself to Nikhil, he maintains relationships with many white American women in order to assimilate with their lifestyle and culture. Lahiri has elaborated over each relationship by describing the names of those women. Nair, in the film, opts an easy technical way of visualizing these scenes. She adds the background score and displays certain images of Gogol sleeping with white women thereby communicating the same message in few minutes. Here, the audience plays a vital role in deciphering the meaning. The facial expressions, body language, gestures, etc count while enacting a particular character in a film; whereas in a book, everything is transcribed into dialogues and words.

Apart from the obvious and subtle differences that exist between a film and a novel; there are few similarities that needs to be highlighted. Almost all the major incidents such as: the Ganguly family visiting India, Nikhil and Maxine's relationship as well as the break-up, Gogol's father's death, Gogol's marriage to Moushmi, Moushmi's extramarital affair, their divorce, the symbolic interpretation of 'Overcoat' when Gogol reads it, etc. are reproduced and depicted with great care by Nair in her film. The title remains unchanged as the whole story revolves around the names or the identities of the characters. The narrative unfolds itself by the label *The Namesake* which serves the purpose. Another similarity is that both- Lahiri and Nair provide the same depiction of the character of Sonia, Gogol's younger sister. In both the film as well as the novel, one finds that Sania, who changed her name from Sonali to Sona to Sania, did not have much difficulty in assimilating into the mainstream American culture. Also at the same time, she valued her family and their Indian culture. She could easily strike a balance between the two identities.

Thus, Mira Nair showcased her filmmaking talent to the globe through "The Namesake". "Art *presents* the truth; it does not, that is to say, represent or, in some way, stand in place of it. It is, rather, like an *ikon*, a channel or a window through which to have access to what is universal and transcendent." (Rush 49). Using film as a medium, Nair has simply broadcasted the reality of issues related to diaspora. Without making any changes to the script, she has exposed the after effects of migration on screens. But while considering "Kai Po Che!" and *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, we see an altogether diverse angle to the act of reproduction in art.

Since there are major differences between the script of the film and the novel, it would be convenient first to understand the storyline and the setting of the book and

the film. The names of characters and their characterizations remain the same in the film as specified in the book. As the plot is set in the beautiful city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, the book and the film cover the unforgettable memory of Gujarat earthquake that occurred on January 26, 2000. The story is of three best friend- Govind, Ishant and Omi. The three youngsters hire a stationary shop at a Temple town in Ahmedabad with financial aid of Omi's uncle Bitoo Mama. Apart from the shop, Omi assists his uncle in his political uprisings, Ishant provides cricket training to the kids and Govind teaches mathematics to Ishant's sister Vidya. The craze that Indians have over cricket is highlighted time and again in the story by projecting couple of cricket matches on TV sets. In India, Cricket is treated as a religion and majority of the Indians are found glued to their television sets whenever India is playing the game. This aspect is reflected in the film as well.

As their business start booming, the three of them plan to invest some amount in order to own another shop at a new mall. But due to the major earthquake, that building where they had invested their money collapses and they lose their money. This is the first mistake that is mentioned in the book. Steadily they begin to recover the heavy loss. Later on, the three of them get trapped in Hindu-Muslim differences through a small kid, Ali. Ishant trains Ali as he is capable of becoming a good cricketer. But Ali's father is into politics and his party stands against Omi's uncle's party. So, Omi is very critical about Ali because he's a Muslim boy and Bitoo Mama would never appreciate this. Ishant looks deep into Ali's breathing problem and trains him according to his caliber. He also finds out that Ali has the God gifted talent of hitting big shots and so, he takes up his responsibility in order to make his name in cricket.

“Art is rationality that criticizes rationality without withdrawing from it.”(139). Though Abhishek Kapoor's “Kai Po Che!” is an adaptation of Chetan Bhagat's *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*, the film undergoes many variations. Bhagat's hero is Govind, the capable businessman; whereas Kapoor projects Ishant, the cricketer as the central character in the film. The standpoints of both the narratives diverge and this affects the flow of the rest of the narrative and also, raises the issue of aura, which will be dealt further. The book has a first person narrator whereas in the film there's no narrator. The book speaks about the three mistakes that Govind commits in his life but the movie revolves over the friendship of these three friends and covers some major landmarks of Gujarat. Another subtle change can be seen regarding the trip. In the text, the three friends first go to Goa when they start earning some profit and later, they head to Australia for a major purpose. But the film only shows their Goa trip. Further, the title of the film is “Kai Po Che!” which is a Gujarati phrase uttered while flying a kite, and not “*The 3 Mistakes of My Life*”. The first two mistakes are similar in the film as in the novel. Though the limelight is on Ishant in the film, the second mistake committed by Govind as per the novel is the relationship with Vidya, who is Govind's best friend's (i.e. Ishant's) sister. Govind's

guilt and shame is captured in the book. The third mistake i.e. Govind gets late just by a second or two in protecting Ali because of which Ali's wrist is injured badly. Still Ali stays safe in the novel as well as in the film; He takes time to heal according to the book. This is not at all depicted in the movie. Ali remains absolutely fit and fine in the film. This is where Abhishek Kapoor dissects from the original climax and brings in a major turning point in the script.

Further, the concept of Gujarati food is eliminated from the film. There is a lot of description about the famous dishes of Ahmedabad in the novel. But in the film, "Raas Garba", the folk dance of Gujarat is projected, which is not touched upon in the novel at all. It is in the climax where one can trace the major transition. According to the book, Omi, who earlier was against Ali due to his Muslim identity, starts to his favor him towards the end and also fights against his own uncle for Ali's future. He sacrifices his life for Ali while protecting the child from his uncle during the riots. But in the film, Omi sticks to his earlier angst and he aspires to kill Ali in order to take revenge of his uncle's death. Ishant and Govind protect Ali from their own friend Omi. But Omi out of frustration and anger kills his friend Ishant accidentally.

Ishant gets to know about Govind and his sister's relationship just before the riot begins. This creates personal rift between the two close friends. This is highlighted in the book as well as in the movie. But moving towards the anti-climax, there is a transformation again. As per the novel, Omi dies and so, Ishant and Govind are the two owners of their shop; but due to the rift, they divide the shop into two parts and handle their respective divisions of books and sports item. Vidya is sent to Mumbai for higher studies. Ishant takes care of Ali as he loses his own family in the riots and later on the two friends come together again when Govind attempts to commit suicide. In the movie, after Ishant's death, Omi goes to jail for ten years. The story takes a leap of ten years when Govind picks-up Omi from prison and they go to see Ali playing for India's under-14 team. Govind and Vidya are married and they have a son whose name is Ishant. They also own another big shop at mall, which was Ishant's dream. Ishant's dreams become their friends' destiny after his death in the film. Hence, "Kai Po Che!" turns out to be Kapoor's reading, interpretation as well as molding of Bhagat's *The 3 Mistakes of My Life*.

After analyzing both the texts and applying Stuart Hall's ideology perpetrated his essay "Encoding/Decoding", *The Namesake* holds the 'Dominant-Hegemonic position' as termed by Hall as the encoder's message becomes the decoder's interpretation. Nair reads Lahiri's book and projects her words on screen. But "Kai Po Che!" turns to be an 'Oppositional code' as the encoded message of *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* stand in contrast to the decoded reading of Abhishek Kapoor. Though Kapoor retains the background and the plot, but the entire crux of the story is lost when he brings-in a major change in the climax. This raises the issue of 'aura'. According to Walter Benjamin "To follow with eye - while resting on a summer afternoon - a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow on the beholder is

to breathe the aura of those mountains, of that branch.” (63). ‘Aura’ is what one personally feels and experiences at that moment. So, a reader while reading a book will go through the journey through his/her eyes; but an observer of a film will go through those set of emotions that his/her actors experience. Therefore, a reader’s experience will never synchronize with a viewer as the pleasure that a reader receives while reading will not be the same when he/she will watch the same script on big screen. But if a viewer observes the film without reading the book, then, for him that film and its story will cast the ‘aura’ as he/she will not have the same fun while reading.

Further as per Hall’s essay, a writer encodes his/her ideology in words through a novel or a short story; a reader decodes the written words based on his/her own life experiences. Similarly, a filmmaker encodes those words i.e. book in a film and leaves up to the audience to decipher its meaning.

“The codes of encoding and decoding may not be perfectly symmetrical. The degrees of symmetry - that is, the degrees of ‘understanding’ and ‘misunderstanding’ in the communicative exchange – depend on the degrees of symmetry/asymmetry (relations of equivalence) established between the positions of the ‘personifications’, encoder-producer and decoder-receiver.” (480).

An encoder codifies the message in the form of a film or a book with a motive or a purpose of reaching out to the public, thereby communicating and entertaining the masses. He/ She display his/ her own skills using the art form that suits his or her purpose/motive.

Film, as a latest art form, has gained momentum when scripts or ideas are borrowed from the novels and converted into movies. This formula has become a current trend of the filmmakers as it has attracted the masses worldwide. Books fascinate and inspire them to put it on the screens. Plenty of recent Hindis films are based on the adaptations of such great and successful books as: *Hamlet*, *Great Expectations*, *2 States*, *Mumbai Fables*, etc. The film “*Ramleela*” by Sanjay Leela Bhansali was an adaptation of the evergreen romantic epic *Romeo and Juliet*. Though the film doesn’t copy the original script; it connects to the current scenario of romance. From this, it is evident that Films as an art form will communicate on literary basis. This will encourage and motivate the audience to read the original text. Films will raise that curiosity about the book in the minds of the viewers. Once, books were popular; now, films are celebrating their success. Films are covering those strata of the society where books are not reachable. It is a good to see that local works are getting global and vice-versa.

While biopics were recognized as the latest trend, several filmmakers are treading an unconventional route by taking inspiration from well-known literary works... Vikas Bahl, the co-producer of [Bombay Velvet] film says,

“It’s tougher to pick up a piece of literature because when people read a book, they have an image, which varies from person to person. But, when a director picks it up, he puts his own imagination on to the screen. The idea should be to fill the gap between the filmmaker’s and reader’s image.” (02)

“Bombay Velvet” is inspired by Gyan Prakash’s *Mumbai Fables* that captures the transformation of Mumbai in to a metropolitan city in the 1960s. Similarly, *Fitoor* movie took inspiration from Charles Dickens novel *Great Expectations*, *Haidar* film was influenced by Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and, the movie *2 States* was based on Chetan Bhagat’s best seller *2 States*. Film makers do alter certain parts of the story while making a film to connect to their audience. They definitely take the story line, the characters and the central idea from the novels but they make additions and subtractions based on the current scenario of the society so that the audience can relate to it. For instance, the movie *Great Expectations* has many different versions as it’s made by different film makers at different time periods. One of the versions is even based on American culture instead of British. This movie was released in 1998 where the central male character’s name was also changed from Pip to Finn. The Hindi movie influenced by the same novel *Fitoor* (2016) directed by Abhishek Kapoor reflects Indian culture. The names of all characters are not the same as in the novel and neither the plot. It is an Indian perspective of *Great Expectations*.

Conclusion:

In this dichotomy of Novels vs. Films, neither books win nor films. Both are ways or means or forms of art that are produced and reproduced with the viewer or reader in mind. Books may inspire to be converted into a film in the future. Both have the same agenda to cater to the masses. Both have their own charm and essence. Novels and Films belong to different Medias and so, they will exist in future as well.

An Abstract:

The research paper focuses on issue of films taking inspiration from novels to reach the masses. For this, a comparative analysis of the novel and the film *The Namesake* is made along with the novel *The 3 Mistakes of My Life* and film “Kai Po Che!” The paper discusses the common points that are present in the novel and the film and also brings light on the differences that are found due to the difference in the medium of communication chosen by the author and the director. How one medium becomes a resource for another will be interesting to see in the future as well.

Keywords:

Diasporic: feeling of loneliness in a new place new culture.

In Betweenness: a sense of belonging nowhere; stuck in between.

Diaspora: a person whose homeland is different and he/ she stays in a new land for a specific purpose.

Raas Garba: a gujarati folk dance performed by forming circle by a group of people.

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