

English August: Novel and The Film

A Comparative Study

Paper Submission: 18/06/2020, Date of Acceptance: 29/06/2020, Date of Publication: 30/06/2020

Abstract

All forms of literature are not equally amenable to cinematic treatment. Drama and epic can be more easily adapted for the purpose of making films. Because film lays emphasis on visual or physical appearances for example persons, places and actions. That's why first films were made of epics, plays and novels. Novel is primarily meant for reading. It contains its own theatre that is why a novel has been called a pocket theatre.

Keywords: Abridgement, Trance, Nauseating, Photographed, Indianization, Unprecedented.

Introduction

All forms of literature are not equally amenable to cinematic treatment. Drama and epic can be more easily adapted for the purpose of making films. Because film lays emphasis on visual or physical appearances for example, persons, places actions. That's why first films were made of epics, plays and novels.

Novel is primarily meant for reading. It contains its own theatre that is why a novel has been called a pocket theatre. The novel leaves much to the imagination of the reader. He can visualize the scene in his mind, whereas the film depicts almost every thing that can be visually presented. That is why a novel is made into a film, it requires a lot of editing, abridgement. Much that is not capable of physical presentation or depiction, is left out or edited. The dialogues have to be made more dramatic and effective, 'The scenes have to be made visually more appealing. Hence *Pride and Prejudice* is the most dramatic of 'Jane Austen's novel was the first to be made into a film.¹ Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* was among the earliest to be filmed because it was melodramatic full of thrill and sensation. Most great novelists have strong visual imagination. Fielding's kinship with painter Hogarth is well-known, though they worked in different media. It is a collaboration between two artists of equal stature and ability. Leon Edel² in his essay 'Novel and Camera', says, "Novelists have sought - almost from the first to become a camera, and not a static instrument but one possessing the movement through space and time which the motion picture camera has achieved in our century'. We follow 'Balzac' moving into his subject from the city into the street from the street into the house and we tread hard on his heels as he takes us from room to room. We feel as if that massive realist Balzac had a prevision of the cinema — wherever we turn in the 19th century we can see novelists cultivating the camera-eye and the camera movement."

'Thomas Hardy' may be called a cinematic novelist because he anticipated 'film' not that he was influenced by it. Like Balzac he also had a prevision of the cinematic technique to come. He conceives his novels from on 'enormous height' and earthly creatures appear as tiny-beings. Seen from this height man appears a tiny, insignificant creature like the meanest insects on the obscurest leaf. Mrs Yeobright in the *Return of the Native* looks like a mere parasite of the heath fretting the surface as a moth frets a garment. Sometimes he wields a telescope, sometimes a microscope. Here is a microscopic view as we see in a modern film channel Discovery "The month of March arrived, and the heath showed its first faint signs of awakening from winter trance. The awakening was almost feline in its stealthiness. The pool outside Eustacia's dwelling, which seemed as dead and desolate, — would gradually disclose a state of great animation, when silently watched. A timid animal world had come to life for the season. Little tadpoles and efts began to bubble up to the water,



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toads made noises like very young ducks, bumblebees blew hither and thither." It shows Hardy's faithful and microscopic description of the puny stir of resurrection of nature in the spring season.

A Passage to India has been studied as a political novel, and as a metaphysical novel. As a political novel it is a passage of an English man, a member of the British ruling class to the colonial India, and his attempt to understand the political aspirations of the subject people the Hindus and Muslims. As a metaphysical novel it is an attempt to know 'the real India' the mysterious of India the strange land and its people. In this sense. The Malabar caves the are at the heart of the novel and its echoes confound the foreigners.

In the same way *English August* is an anglophile Indian's passage to rural India, and the second level, Sen's discovery of himself. Born in an aristocratic family and educated in Darjeeling and Calcutta Sen feels like a fallen Adam, an alien world He finds its the food nauseating, heat and oppressive, mosquitoes aggressive, water undrinkable unless it is boiled. The native language in-comprehensible and his Hindi is not good enough. So he is an alien in Madna. Though an I.A.S. officer he is not interested in his job. He feels placed and isolated, and is reluctant to undergo the training The novel records his impressions of the officers like collector and superintendent of Police and their offices, during the year of his apprenticeship. Like a picturesque novel it records Sen's impressions as he moves from the Collector to the Superintendent of Police of Madna and comes across other officers of the District. This aspect of the novel is more amenable to cinematic treatment because the places and persons, their actions and events are described in the novel with great accuracy and vividness. A film is meant to be seen. Only those aspects of the novel are taken by the film-maker which can be easily photographed and effectively presented on the screen to impress the viewer. To Agastya Sen who had never seen the ugliness and poverty. Madna appears a strange place. His first view of Madna is. when he rides in a jeep to meet the Collector. The jeep almost ran over a child defecating beside the road. On his left was some kind of bond with thick green water and the heads of contented buffalo, scores of people sitting on their haunches smoking, wandering, gazing at anything moving or at other people most were in white dhoti-kurta and Gandhi cap.

The Collectorate was a one-story building. Its corridors had benches and more people. Sen is led to Chidambaram, Reader to collector. When the collector comes, he is led to him. The collector is a short, fat man, hectoring at subordinate, the District Supply Officer. Then there is a graphic description of the babus. "The denizens of the collectorate, ageing, with soft faces, that hadn't seen much sunlight. They all were pail shirts and loose pants. Their shirt-pockets bulged outrageously with pens and spectacle cases. Most smelt nice, of some very Indian perfume or scented hair oil or paan. They could withstand, anything like placid buffaloes. He is surprized at their "lambent dullness" other -details of the building' cows

sheltering in the corridor. They passed the wild connubis and the pond. Children jumped from one buffalo to another. 'When it rains the cattle comp in the corridors of the collectorate. The same thing used to happen is Azamganj.' Srivastava tells Sen. It was here that Sen was to be initiated into the secrets of Indian Administrative Service. "India is a land of sublime and fascinating contradictions where the Himalayas of the soul arise out of dung and dance hand in hand with phallus of Shiv. ["E.A. p 208.] In Madna's tehsil Marihandi, too, there is the same poverty and filth

A visit to Baha Ramanna Rehabilitation Home- for nymphomaniacs or prostitutes is an important episode in the novel with cinematic potential.

Some snippets of the Indian scenes with cinematic potential are :

- (i) "State transport bus - Madna to Jompanna, "A green and yellow state Transport bus at the mouth of the station; passengers on its roof, tying down their luggage at their own risk. The board read, Madna to Jampanna. Dispirated faces behind the window bars. A woman was being sick at one window. He watched her white vomit crawl down the side of the bus. Some one called his name. It was Mohan smiling and walking towards him. The whole seen clicked into focus." [Eng. Aug. p. 179]
- (ii) The scene of children being let down into 45 feet deep well for bringing up muddy water can be a good film shot "Women were tying them to ropes and letting them into the well after a while the ropes were bringing up buckets. He went closer. ——— mythic punishment." [E.A. page 255]
- (iii) A glimpse of visit to Gopark Temple on the way he sees a statue of Gandhi and the walls of the old fort built by a tribal king after whom the town is named Gopark Temple, of Shiva, built in the tenth century, was like the famous Khajuraho Temple. "Its serrated walls were covered with carved sexy sculptures, couples having sex in impossible positions, with intricately carved figures of different sizes, all of whom seemed to be having a good time." [E.A., p. 127]
- (iv) Dance of Tribals constitutes another memorable episode in the novel. The women danced, arm in arm in one row, a slow monotonous shuffle to a single arhythmic drum, one step forward, two steps back, always one step forward, two steps back. He watched them, an orange sheen on black skin, shy smiles at one another, faces turned to their felt and he dreaded their innocence, for it was dangerous so tempting to corrupt. The lights of two tankers were seen in the distance they dance up with drunken yells of joy. [E.A. p. 263]
- (v) The novel also provides character sketches which can be of great help to the film maker;
 - (a) "A sikh entered, fat and powerful in tight jeans and a T shirt stretched across his huge firm chest. He looked around murderously with mean red eyes. A small beaked nose, thin lips, thin beard."

(b) Mr. Bazaz, the District Development officer, was very tall and worryingly thin, with large woebegone eyes and receding chin as though his progenitors had been a female spaniel and Don Quixote.

Indianization of bureaucracy and development of the country are the two ; major themes of *English August : An Indian Story*. It has been made in to a major film. Agastya Sen as an L.A.S. officer is being trained for the job, of bringing about the development of rural town - Madna, and the ameliorating the lot of its people. He is being initiated into the secrets of administrative service. After ten months, he is posted as B.D.O. By now he has learnt enough to face the people and give them vague assurances of doing something to solve their problems. Mr. Bajaj the District Development Officer warns him of the dangers and problems that wait for him at Jompanna. "Effective administration really means, meeting the people and showing them that the Collector and the Superintendent of Police of a district are not uppity and high - handed, but like meeting them. This is India an independent country and not the Raj. We are servants of the people. A hooligan offered Kumar a paan, which he stuffed into his mouth. Harm you look the English type." [E.A. page 23] He had been advised by Mr. Kumar.

The theme of the development is the major aspect of the novel. Sen's posting for two months as the B.D.O. of Jompanna is the climax of the *Indian story*. His visit to Chipanathi tests his mettle as an L.A.S. officer. At the centre of Jompanna was the tribal village of Chipanathi which was the heart of the Naxalitse area and quite dangerous. As B.D.O. he deals firmly with the babus, and *sub-dues the Sabhapati [Block Pramukh] who misused the official jeep meant for the B.D.O. and also kept the one water tanker for his personal use. He also spurs the lethargic engineer to act promptly to bring immediately the tanker full of water from Jompanna to Chipanathi.*

On the second level *English August* reveals the inner life of Sen, his homesickness, his memories and fantasies. His homesickness is aptly prefigured in Tamsie's poem inscribed on the back of the painting that hung on the wall of Circuit House.

"Away from my old life and my spouse"
So many days at this circuit house,
Away from Goa, my dear home,
On office work I have to roam."

In Madna, Sen pines his girl, friend Neera with whom he had passed his evenings pleasantly in Calcutta discussing literature and virginity. He has her photograph and takes it out when he feels miserable. Towards the end of the novel he feels sad if not heart broken when he reads her letter informing him that she has married a journalist and lost her virginity. This inner life of dream and fantasy and his vacillation between remaining in the administrative service or resigning it, often agitates him. He feels like Prufrock in his inability to put the overwhelming question. "It seemed that his reason could never answer, the *overwhelming questions*, or grasp the special providence in the fall of a sparrow - that pair of ragged claws scuttling over the floors of silent seas."

The inner life of Sen is like the unsung song of Prufrock. He doesn't know what he wants. This buried life of dreams and fantasies, meditation and vacillation can be revealed better in the novel than in the film. The novelist's resources are greater, he can suggest by similes, metaphors and references to literary works, to the well - informed readers more than the film. In this respect the novel is superior to the film. It can communicate the vacillation of Sen between the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius and the Gospel of Karma preached in the *Gita* by Lord Krishna, He had brought the *'Meditations* with him and he was given a copy of the *Gita* by Govind Same in Madna. Sen is inclined to believe what the Roman Emperor had said, though he knew that he was lying ; "Today I have got myself out of all my perplexities, or rather, I have got the perplexities out of myself—. He smiled at the page, and thought. He lied, but he lied so well this sad Roman who had also looked for happiness—" [288]

English August published in 1988, was made into a film by Dev Benegal in 1994. It was distributed in India by Twentieth Century Fox. The film runs for 2 hours. It was a major success at Indian box office. The film version of Upamanyu Chatterjee's best-seller novel was a fine film, a truthful adaptation. It was a brave attempt and a groundbreaking work. It won several prizes in the International film festivals in 1984 and 1995.

1. Best first film Gilberto Solares Award festival des 3 continents Nantes 1994.
2. Special Jury Award 12th International Film Festival Torino Italy 1994.
3. Silver Montgoifiere festival des 3 continents Nantes 1994.
4. Best film National Awards India 1995.

Amita Malik, says that *English August* [film] gave her the most unalloyed joy and delight. She considers it a delectable vignette on contemporary India, backed by Senegal's wry humour and outstanding technical control.²

Gautam Patel admired it for its comic delights and aesthetic pleasures, and found it a profoundly disturbing film. "The scenes and lines that keep coming back unexpectedly and unwantedly are not the funny ones, but the ones that sear and tear."

To Dr. Michael Koetz *English August* was the first funny Indian film he had ever seen. He considered Dev Senegal one of the real discoveries of the festival.³ Shozo Ichiyama says, "In his first feature film, Benegal has managed to humorously portray a character that most likely is unprecedented in Indian movies. As a result this movie, while comical, also serves to shatter all preconceived notions associated with Indian films. It is a ground-breaking work, heralding the arrival of a new generation in Indian cinema."⁴

A balanced appraisal of the comparative merits and demerits of the novel and the film calls for a thorough knowledge of the book as well as the movie. Most of the film-critics who have hailed it as heralding the arrival of a new generation English movies on Indian life are not equally well-versed with the text. Hence their praise of it must be taken with a

pinch of salt. It is true that the film, captures excellently the wry humour, the white lies of the 28 year old, that he is married, that his wife is suffering from an incurable disease, his supercilious attitude towards the officers with whom he is attached during his apprenticeship, and his Puckish pranks played on his mentor, the competent Collector, when he steals the key of his official jeep just for the fun of it, and his indifference to the ugly realities of life. It is also true that the film shows accurately the little done and great deal undone, to alleviate the poverty of the God-forsaken people of Madna by the lethargic, Indianized and corrupt bureaucracy.

Conclusion

In author's opinion the film, inspite of its manifold merits, has not been able to portray the inner life of Agastya Sen, the self-deprecating hero given to drinking, marijuana-smoking, masturbation and sexual fantasies. The sub-merged life of this modern Lotos-eater, the Prufrockian hero is hard to portray in a film, though Ruhel Bose has done his best in the film. I am in perfect agreement with M. Madhu's appraisal of the film and the novel. *"English August"* released in 1994 was the first Indian movie in English. This brave effort and its relative success paved the way for many such

movies later in the 90s. The movie is rather a faithful adaptation of the book, but nowhere as brilliant as the book itself. See the movie after reading the brilliant book."⁵

Endnotes

1. *There have been several film adaptations of 'Pride and Prejudice'. The earliest was a 1940 version. Its Hindi version 'Trisimr was one of the earliest serials on Doordarshan. [SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA JANUARY, 29.2012 Page 6]*
2. *Novel and Camera, 'The Theory of the Novel'ed by John Halperin [New York, 1974] page. 177.*
3. *The Return of the Native, pages 224, 225.*
4. *Amita Malik: Sunday Statesman, January 29,1994.*
5. *Dr. michael Koetz; Director, Mannheim film festival, 1994.*
6. *Shozo Ichiyama, Tokyo International film festival 1995.*
7. *Books from India tales that edify, amuse - The Boston Globe [page 6,7] M.Mdhu-Chennai, India 21 November 2001.*