



**Moving from a Textual to Visual Medium: Transposition of
Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella* to the Cinematic Canvas**

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Abstract

Intertextuality, which emphasizes the interaction of various works of art, is associated with adaptation studies. According to comparative literature scholar James Naremore, modern life's nerve center is remaking. Additionally, based on the interpretation of the original source material, remaking brings out ideological and aesthetic beliefs. According to the intertextuality school of thought, the novel always comes before the movie, but a consumer is more likely to see the movie first. However, the novel and the movie complement one another visually and aesthetically due to the components they contain. The study attempts to explore how Vishal Bharadwaj's adaptation of Ruskin Bond's novella *The Blue Umbrella* differs from the original and how they stay connected. The paper will try to find aspects of film and literature that are not easily changeable while considering the convergence of these two art forms.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Adaptation, Convergence, Fidelity, Aesthetics

Introduction

The practice of filming novels dates back to the early stages of filmmaking. Some of the earliest film adaptations of stories and novels include Georges Melies' 1902 production of *A Trip to the Moon*, which took its inspiration from Jules Verne's novel *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), and DB Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), which was based on an Indian folktale. The advent of talkies continued to inspire adaptation and a more intuitive use of narrative. The beginning of the adaptation stirred a debate around novels and films, with many supporters on either side. DW Griffith, who directed *The Birth of a Nation* in 1915, made strong arguments for the film's cultural validity, but writers like Virginia Woolf complained about adaptations that betrayed the fidelity of the original, claiming that “the cinema fell upon its prey with immense rapacity, and



to the moment largely subsists on the body of its unfortunate victim. But the results are disastrous for both. The alliance is unnatural” (2).

The literature of adaptation gained visibility with George Bluestone’s book *Novels into Film* in 1957. Bluestone observes that “the film, then, making its appeal to the perceiving senses, is free to work with endless variations of physical reality” (20). This brings about “an inevitable abandonment of ‘novelistic’ elements,” and consequently, the “new creation has little resemblance to the original” (11). The early studio system was invariably guilty of making tacky adaptations that turned elegant texts into trite romantic comedies and adventure movies, intentionally abandoning most of the essence of the original.

However, it is easy to misinterpret the conflict between novel and film as entirely external, a struggle between rival forces. The conflict exists inside an average consumer’s mind too, because the act of adaptation naturally carries a dilemma. If an adaptation maintains fidelity to the original, it is criticized for being unimaginative. Contrarily, if it seeks to interpret the literary text or add a new twist, it is criticized for fiddling with the original. So what is the correct path forward? Undoubtedly, there is a demand for the adaptation of novels into films. Novels and films, though they are different forms, happen to be similar in some ways.

The scholar will be closely reading Ruskin Bond’s novella *The Blue Umbrella* and its cinematic expression in the film by Vishal Bharadwaj to understand the possibilities such creative endeavors have in redefining the conceptuality of literature vs. the perceptuality of film. This study aims to conduct a comparative analysis between the text and the film while also exploring the concept of adaptation and its fidelity.

Delineating the Art of Narrative in Bond’s Novella

Bond is among the few Indian writers who have delved deep into child psychology and taken childhood experiences as the essence and theme of many of his short stories and novellas. He weaves the entire spectrum of human instincts, such as desire, envy, greed, and compassion, into the narrative and presents a moving account of human passions in the novella *The Blue Umbrella*. The protagonist, Binya, is a feisty and kind-hearted girl who nurtures compassion for people but also harbors a possessive fondness for a non-life object, the “blue umbrella.” The story takes place in the village of Garhwal, which is home to people with basic needs and few material aspirations. In the absence of an official record of Binya’s birth, her mother remembers



that Binya was born around ten years ago, when the snow had fallen for hours on end and had reached up to the windows.

Binya, along with her brother and mother, leads a rustic and plain life, surrounded by rolling hills, terraced fields, and benevolent nature. A treasured possession, her leopard's claw, is known to ward off evil and is worn by her as she genuinely believes in its power to keep her safe from untoward incidents, unscrupulous people, and crafty spirits. An interesting development in the narrative occurs when she comes across a group of picnickers from the plains while looking for her cows, Neelu and Gori. Observing them from a distance, she is impressed by their accents, fancy clothes, and food that she hadn't seen anyone else have in the village. Ruskin Bond remarks poetically, "This was the first time Binya had seen such a small, dainty, colorful umbrella; and she fell in love with it" (7).

When the holidaymakers see her coming, they offer her food, assuming she is hungry. The exchange serves as an example of the patronizing attitude that urban residents display when dealing with people from rural areas. The picnickers mistakenly identify her leopard claw as a tiger claw and condescendingly assert that these individuals wear it as a means of warding off evil spirits. The author parodies people who try to flaunt half-baked knowledge of the region unfamiliar to them and consider rural people incapable of employing reason. An offer is made to buy her leopard's claw "Give her two or three rupees, she's sure to need the money" (Bond 8), but watching her hesitate and gaze at the blue umbrella instead, a bargain is made wherein the claw and the umbrella are exchanged to each other's satisfaction. The umbrella, though only an object, drives much of the plot and is described as "that patch of sky blue silk that could always be seen on the hillside" (Bond 9).

Everyone around her secretly wishes that her umbrella would shrivel in the sun, catch fire from lightning, or fly away in a breeze, because this is a typical human tendency to envy those who possess something special or uncommon. Contrary to the common envy of adults, children sincerely praise its beauty. Despite his status as an affluent individual, Ram Bharosa finds himself unable to acquire the object of his utmost desire, namely, the blue umbrella. This stimulates his ego, and his conversation with Rajaram, a juvenile individual who performs tasks on his behalf, demonstrates his captivation with the umbrella—"It's not the profit I'm after, wretch! It's the thing itself. It's the beauty of it!" (Bond 19).



Almost behaving irrationally, Ram Bharosa symbolizes human desires, which sometimes make adults react like impulsive kids who crave anything they set their eyes on. Failing to act like a village elder, Ram Bharosa gives into Rajaram's offer to get the umbrella for a measly sum of three rupees. Rajaram grabs the umbrella and flees while Binya is searching for porcupine quills, but not before Binya spots him. Following a chase, Binya and Bijju catch him, foiling the plan. Upon discovering Ram Bharosa's attempted theft of the umbrella, the villagers opt to ostracize him and cease purchasing goods from his establishment.

Binya, who has been witnessing the downfall of Ram Bharosa, introspects and wonders if she has been overly possessive of an object and decides to resolve the situation in which both she and Ram Bharosa find themselves. She visits Ram Bharosa's shop to buy sweets, and when he turns back to get them for her, she leaves her umbrella at the counter. Finally, he has the umbrella right in front of him, staring back at him in all its glory. Realizing the misery his greed has brought him, he decides to give it back to its rightful owner, Binya. Ram Bharosa "wasn't used to running, but he caught up with her, held out the umbrella saying, 'you forgot it—the umbrella!' In that moment, it belonged to both of them" (Bond 24).

Declaring that she didn't need the umbrella, Binya "went tripping down the road, and there was nothing between her and the bright blue sky" (Bond 25), experiencing a new-found freedom, which she felt had been lost in her foolish attraction towards the umbrella. Things take a turn for the better as Ram Bharosa manages to win back the trust of the villagers, and the umbrella, which had become an object of desire for many in the village, now lay for everyone to borrow.

The umbrella that Binya gave to Ram Bharosa is now available to a wider audience, which lessens the excessive longing that both people were feeling. Bond deftly tugs at readers' hearts by empathizing with all characters, despite their flaws and frailties, evoking a generous sense of compassion and relief. Creating a world where adults, with their pragmatism and experiences, fall headlong for an object—a frilly, blue umbrella—and contrasting this allure with a kid's instinctive obsession symbolizes a thin line that demarcates the sensibilities of adults and children.

Visual Depiction by Vishal Bharadwaj

A film director, screenwriter, producer, and music composer, Vishal Bharadwaj is one of the most literary filmmakers in India, with a flair for adaptations. His adaptation of Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella* won the National Award for Best Children's Film in 2005. The movie begins



with a magnificent shot of snow-covered mountains, accompanied by soulful background music. A kaleidoscope of colors and Binya's vitality bring a white snow-covered landscape to life. The next scene takes the audience to the Khatri tea stall, where Nandu is intently listening to a self-help broadcast on easy ways to become rich. Mistaking Bill Gates for a monument, he believes it must be near India Gate, which reveals his charming candor.



Figure 1. Still from Bharadwaj, *The Blue Umbrella* (2:32)

Pankaj Kapur's portrayal of the character assumes a rather significant role in the adaptation; his distinctive mannerisms and gestures add a spunk that Ram Bharosa, played by Ruskin Bond, was missing.

An adaptation brings together different elements of filmmaking, and a major one is music, which has helped Vishal Bharadwaj drive the narrative and explore the life and people of the village. The song “Aasmani Chhatri” shows Binya carrying the newly acquired umbrella across the village, twirling and twisting it with enthusiasm and energy. Binya’s brother is a local wrestler who is extremely fond of Binya. He also negotiates a deal between Nandu and a kid who had to pawn his binoculars for the money he owed Nandu. The movie's centerpiece, the blue umbrella, comes floating down from the sky, whose aerial movement has been portrayed realistically using the shaky camera. The close-ups of the umbrella impart a palpable visual delight to the viewer and a certain realness to the object itself.

A group of holidaymakers from Japan reach out to Binya and offer money and chocolates to get her leopard’s claw, but she is hesitant. Instead, she points towards the umbrella, indicating her willingness to part with the claw in lieu of the frilly, blue umbrella. Finally, in possession of the umbrella, she instantly feels joy abound in her but simultaneously a hint of guilt for giving away



her lucky charm. Bharadwaj used numerous binocular POVs to beautifully capture her bouncy steps and the sight of a blue umbrella against the lush, breathtaking views of the hills and village. Since getting the binoculars from Tikku, Nandu has had his eyes set on the umbrella. Getting off the bus in the middle of the street after seeing Binya with her umbrella under the waterfall, he offers her fifty rupees and a bunch of balloons to part with the umbrella, but in vain. She leaves, and Nandu, standing disappointed under the waterfall, lets the balloons go off in dejection. During the celebration of Dussehra, the effigy of Ravana is set ablaze, and Binya, in her sorrow over losing the umbrella, sees the face of Nandu instead of Ravana's, convinced that he, a vile man, has stolen her beloved umbrella. When Binya approaches the police, they search every inch of Nandu's store in response to her complaint, but the umbrella is still missing. Shamed by this incident, he pledges not to touch his favorite pickle until he is pronounced innocent. On receiving his umbrella, which he claims he ordered delivered from a town, it doesn't take much time to flaunt it. On enquiring further, it comes to light that the umbrella was stolen and subsequently dyed red. Nandu, as one of the judges of a wrestling match, is invited to deliver a speech during the award ceremony. Standing under the umbrella while it is raining, the scene underscores the irony between his words and actions as the umbrella begins to lose its acquired red color.

He is banished from the village, and buses don't make a stop at his tea shop anymore. Lonely and cold, his pitiable condition evokes empathy and forgiveness among the audience because he, like most others in the village, envied Binya's prized possession, but others got the chance to be on higher moral ground since he went one step further than the rest and stole it. The pathos come to the fore when he struggles to hide when a bear climbs atop his shop. When a procession of revelers passes by his shop, celebrating the marriage of the village chief's son, he joins them and begins to dance.



Figure 2. Still from Bharadwaj, *The Blue Umbrella* (1:21:09)



But others find it baffling and poke fun at him and leave him to his own devices, but Binya, dressed as Vaishno Devi, stays for a while, and the scene hints that soon his fortune will shine, courtesy of Binya's blessings. Feeling remorse for what she has inadvertently caused, she goes to Nandu's shop on the pretext of buying cookies, but leaves the umbrella intentionally at the counter. A feeling of hate overcomes Nandu, who takes the umbrella inside, throws it to the ground, kicks, and tries to burn it, believing it to cause him so much pain and suffering. He tries to return it to Binya, running after her, but she refuses by saying her catchphrase, "by chance," stating that it is his now. Another wide shot shows the snow-clad landscape, where two people, who were separated by their desire to own the umbrella, are now one with their conscience and compassion for each other. Things return to normal, with the faded red and blue umbrella lying outside Nandu's shop (renamed from Khatri Stall to Chhatri Stall) and people flocking to enjoy the salubrious weather and his tangy pickle.

Fiction and Adaptation: Comparative Analysis of the Text and the Film

As a novella, *The Blue Umbrella* remains popular among children, and as a film, it gained public recognition and critical acclaim, winning the National Film Award for Best Children's Film. Despite all the honors and success, a valid question arises—Has the film been a faithful adaptation, and more importantly, does the story retain the message Ruskin Bond wanted to convey? This lends an opportunity to attempt a comparative study of the novella and the film and explore the adaptation's success or lack thereof from creative and critical points of view. Examining the characterization part of the novel and the film, a palpable variance can be observed. Binya's brother was two years older than her, while in the movie, her brother is about 20 years older. Even the holidaymakers in the novel were from the Indian plains, while they happen to be Japanese tourists in the movie. The character Rajaram is present in the movie right from the beginning, but in the novel he appears midway. Deepak Dobriyal's character, who owns the robot, has been added to the film to give the plot a more comic touch. The next question that needs probing is—Are all characters faithful to their original versions? At first glance, an interrelation between how we view novels and their adaptations is not surprising. It is natural for readers to view characters in the novel as primary and their representations as secondary, but as portrayed in the film, characters stay true to their essence. Pankaj Kapur's acting skills brought Nandu to life, displaying emotions ranging from greed and obsession to repentance and disappointment effortlessly. Shreya Sharma's portrayal of Binya is noteworthy, bringing forth the naivete and charm of Bond's feisty character. Paramjit Singh Kakran's role



as Rajaram, Samrat Mukerji's role as Bijju, Dolly Ahluwalia's part as Lilavati, and Rajesh Sharma's role as the policeman have been portrayed with gusto. Probing the sequence of events, it is vital to consider the views of James Monaco, an American film critic who held that "both films and novels tell long stories with a wealth of detail, and they do it from the perspective of a narrator, who often interposes a resonant level of irony between the story and the observer" (68). The term 'aesthetic distance' refers to minimizing the gap between a viewer's conscious reality and the reality of fiction and is achieved when the reader or viewer is entirely engrossed in the creation. The term itself derives from an article by Edward Bullough published in 1912, where he writes, "Distance does not imply an impersonal, purely intellectually interested relation of such a kind. On the contrary, it describes a *personal* relationship, often highly emotionally coloured but *of a peculiar character*." In the film, Bharadwaj deftly steers the narrative to engage the audience while staying close to the essence of the novella, thereby minimizing the aesthetic distance with strong performances and well-knit storytelling. The cinematography captures the flora and the landscape and merges them to transcend the viewer to a feeling of oneness with natural and rustic vibes. Novels express themselves in words and films in image texts, and both use different devices to achieve an aesthetic effect. But do both forms manage to create the same effect? Ruskin Bond, through his novella, wishes to convey a message to its readers, largely children, about unbridled greed and its consequences. While adapting any work of literature into a film, the message tends to get transmuted at all creative levels, from scripting to shooting to editing. However, the message of the novella remains intact and is further enhanced with the visual effects, taut storytelling, and direction of Bharadwaj. Bond invokes a feeling of affection towards nature in the children through his impressive prose: "The rains set in, and the sun only made brief appearances. The hills turned a lush green. Ferns sprang up on walls and tree-trunks" (Bond 16). Bharadwaj, a master storyteller, captures the ceaseless beauty of nature with his camera and presents Binya's connection with nature by filming the terrain, animals, sky, trees, and village in all their glory and purity.

The Culmination of Bond's Pen and Bharadwaj's Camera

Bond's and Bharadwaj's works portray life in the hills and the intricate aspects of human nature with insight. An analysis of the film shows that visual components are essential for captivating the audience and enhancing its aesthetic appeal. Pankaj Kapur's depiction of Ram Bharosa in Bond's story brings a vivid realism to the character, who, alongside Binya, captures the audience's affection. Vishal Bharadwaj's skillful adaptation of text into film has prompted both



critics and film audiences to reconsider the compatibility of these two mediums for literary expression, despite objections from literature purists who perceive such adaptations as tacky and superfluous. Khalid Mohamed in his review of *Blue Umbrella*, writes that the movie “has its passages of charm, visual aplomb and performances that are as lively as an amusement park” (*Hindustan Times*, 10 August 2007). Despite the aesthetic distance, a remarkable accomplishment has been made in conveying the subtleties of storytelling through the film for those wishing to be engaged by emotionally moving narratives. The film incorporates many cinematic techniques to visually depict Bond's story, incorporating myths and legends to draw in the audience and evoke a bittersweet memory. The *Blue Umbrella* was a highly successful adaptation that gained critical acclaim, commercial success, and recognition at film festivals. The story is presented on a cinematic canvas with a creatively structured plot, a little aesthetic distance, and elegant images. Bond's endearing narration strengthens the novella, while Bharadwaj's superb craftsmanship and direction give the movie depth. The combination of rich literary elements with technological advances provides an extensive experience that values both the story and the characters. Bharadwaj adopts Bond's beautiful story about desire and sorrow and unfailingly evokes nostalgia for childhood through his movie.

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