

THE SUNDAY TIMES OF INDIA, MARCH 10, 1996

Hooked by the book

In what appears to be a revival of a decades-old tradition, more and more Indian film-makers are looking at literature for inspiration for their films. Nandini Bhaskaran talks to some of them.

It's been a Hollywood mainstay since the early 1900s. From D W Griffith's 1915 epic, *The Birth of a Nation*, based on a novel, *The Clansman*, to the regular remakes of classics like *The Great Gatsby* to Merchant-Ivory's genteel adaptations of E M Forster's many novels to the current, hugely successful *Sense and Sensibility*, based on Jane Austen's voice of sweet reasonableness in the novel, films have been based on books and gone on unfailingly to win Academy Awards.

If it's the age of the Book in Hollywood, with studios prospecting zealously for new titles on the bestseller lists, the reliance on the novel or short story in films in India has always been steady: the many films and television serials which have been based on Saratchandra Chatterjee's novels, for instance, or Ramu Kariyat's *Chemmeen*, adapted from Thakazhi Sivashankara Pillai's novel, or R K Narayan's *Guide* and *Malgudi Days* which were adapted into a commercial film and an endearing television series respectively. Recently, Ismail Merchant debuted as director with *Muhafiz*, Merchant-Ivory's adaptation of Anita Desai's novel, *In Custody*. It's also reported that Vikram Seth's magnum opus, *A Suitable Boy* is being made into a television series in the UK.

With the release in the city this week of Dev Benegal's film, *English, August : An Indian Story*, based on the novel by Upamanyu Chatterjee, and with Star TV having bought the rights of the film, it seems that the lure of a good book and the challenge of adaptation are perennial, and each screenplay writer and film-maker attempts in his own way to mine literature to "transform" it into cinema, a medium with its own parameters.

"Transform" is a word that Shyam Benegal uses frequently to explain the "leap that has to be made when converting a literary work into a cinematic experience". Adapting in a way that the film merely "illustrates" the book is the lesser way, he remarks, sitting in his office in Tardeo, the walls bearing posters of the many films he has based on novels, such as *Bhumika* (based on a Marathi novel, *Sangte Aika*), *Mandi* (based on a story by S Ghulam Abbas), *Junoon* (Ruskin Bond's story *A Fight of Pigeons*), *Bharat Ek Khoj* (the popular television series based on Nehru's *Discovery of India*) and *Suraj Ka Saaatwan Ghoda* (a novel by Dharmvir Bharati).

"The illustrative way is when the film tries to convey the literary experience of the work. But why must you do what a book does best? One must provide what film is best at, which is creating a cinematic experience within a give time framework".

Cinematic time may sometimes call for fleshing out a story, such as *Mandi*, which was "barely five-six pages long" or Rusking Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons*, which was about the same length, and on which *Junoon* was based.

"In *Junoon*," says Shashi Kapoor who played the charismatic Pathan in it, "Benegal made the viewer smell the period."

At other times, adaptation is the art of abridging, of containing a novel with its many climaxes, its "riverine quality", as Shyam Benegal puts it. "How does one gather those strands?"

Rohinton Mistry's novel, *Such a Long Journey*, for instance, has a linear enough narrative, says screenwriter Sooni Taraporewala, who has written the screenplay for the film, which is to be produced by the Canada-based Paul Stephens, and will be directed by Waris Hussein. "But the narrative does meander. There are many sections that go into the past lives of each character. I tried to retain a balance between getting the plot moving and keeping alive the Parsi milieu that the author is describing."

Mistry's novel has as its central character Gustad Noble, a bank employee and the still, small voice of reason at Khodadad building where he's lived many years. A life of normality is shattered when his daughter falls ill, the son turns rebellious and Gustad is sucked unwittingly into a quagmire of complicity. "It's a long journey" back to everything he held dear.

"One of the problems was that in the first draft of my script the plot didn't start till Page 30," says Taraporewala, who has written over 12 screenplays, including the award-winning *Salaam Bombay* and *Mississippi Masala*, directed by Mira Nair. "I'd kept the original structure of the book, which was a flashback of Gustad thinking of his friend Jimmy Billimoria, who has disappeared. But Waris felt it would work better if we had the character there in the present before having him disappear. And I think it's better now after we changed it".

Not all films however shine after radical restructuring, or what American reviewers have called the 1990s "Disneyisation" of classics, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, starring Demi Moore, which renders the work a superficial exercise in wish-fulfillment.

"I think it's a cliché that's become fact in film circles that to do justice to an adaptation, one should not be faithful to the book, says Taraporewala, differing. "The two media are different. For me, adaptation is an act of translation rather than invention. One has to change the structure a bit, but I wouldn't make radical departures if I thought it was a good book. It's really a question of finding the essence of the book and of the characters and conveying it."

In achieving this, the first impression he carries of a book are very important to Dev Benegal, director of English, August who co-wrote the screenplay with the author. "They are never with a film in mind initially." Upamanyu Chatterjee's novel about the angst and anomie of a St. Stephen's College-educated IAS Officer, shunted out on a posting in Madna, a small hot town - "the hottest in India" - posed its own problems, says Dev Benegal, such as interpreting the many voices in the novel and its fragmented time scheme. "We've made changes in the film, as in the character of Mandy, Agastya's friend, who is really an amalgam of many people in the book that are extensions of what Agastya would become. Or the decision to not have Agastya sport a beard, as he does in the book. Or the dialogue: I kept rewriting it. Dialogue that's meant to be read on a printed page often sounds wrong when spoken out."

Dev Benegal is now co-scripting another screenplay, this time with Kiran Nagarkar - Ravan and Eddie, based on Nagarkar's novel of the same name. Satirical, funny and unselfconsciously tragic, the novel is set between 1947 and '60 in a Mumbai chawl. "One of the problems we're battling with is the fact that the book is set in an antenna-free Mumbai," says Nagarkar, who writes in both Marathi and English. "The mind-set of the people has not been exposed to television: whether we like it or not, we'll have to rework everything."

The novel, which traces the childhood and growth into adolescence of two boys, whose lives are yoked together by circumstance, is a race of a read, punctuated by little asides, such as on the Hindi film industry and water shortage, "which act like breaks in the narrative force and give a lateral depth to it. The war over water is a very visual element in the book," Nagarkar grants, but adds in his exacting way, "we have to decide whether we are using it just because it's a social comment I'm making. The situation must dictate whether what's required is understatement or going over-board." The novel is full of ellipses, complexity, humour and irony and Nagarkar hopes that they will be able to capture it all in the film.

It will be a while yet perhaps before words and images are linked by the Indian film industry as lucratively as they have been in the West, but there's no denying that each medium offers its own separate pleasures, to be savoured without making the inevitable comparisons.