

Reimagining the Social Novel: From *Gunahon Ka Devta* to *Milan* and *Chetna*

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The present paper explores cinematic adaptation as a complex process of cultural re-mediation by following the path of the critically acclaimed social novel of Dharmavir Bharati, *Gunahon ka Devta* (2000) to the two films based on it, namely: *Milan* (1967) and *Chetna* (1970). Beyond the conventional fidelity criticism, the paper argues that these movies are not merely adaptations of the novel but rather recreate the underlying disjunctions of the novel: e.g., disjunction between personal desire and social responsibility, disjunction between tradition and modernity to suit the changing commercial logic, their stars and their social-political fears of the respective times. The literature review by a comparative textual analysis shows that both these adaptations carry out a distinct cultural negotiation: the tragic, psychologically motivated social critique of the novel is translated into a myth, redemptive romance in each of them, which offers the escape of therapeutic value through the virtuous star characters of Sunil Dutt and Nutan. On the other hand, the transposition of the conflict in the gritty plane of the urban melodrama in *Chetna* turns it into a crisis of the modern sexual politics and of the urban contradiction of classes through the rebellious character of Rajesh Khanna. In the end, the paper maintains that the films can be used as a cultural barometer, to reveal how mainstream Hindi cinema is absorbing and domesticating the problematic moral ambiguities of the post-independence literary canon, and in the process transforming subtle psychological drama into mass-culture genres that appeal to the imaginations and fears of an emerging post-independent India.

Keywords: Adaptation Studies, Hindi Cinema, Bollywood, Dharmavir Bharati, Social Novel, *Gunahon Ka Devta*, *Milan*, *Chetna*, 1960s Cinema, 1970s Cinema.

Introduction: The Social Novel and the Cinematic Imperative

The work of Dharmavir Bharati titled *Guna hon ka Devta* (The God of Sin, 1949) takes a central place in the list of the modern Hindi literature. The novel, published only 2 years after India got its independence, is not just a tragic romance but an earthquake chronicle of existential shiver of a generation. It foreshadows the deep pain of a post-colonial elite of intellectual, finding themselves trapped between the two poles at 180 degrees of the same axis: the strict, hierarchical moralism of an already discredited Gandhian-Brahminical orthodoxy, and the on the one hand lure of, on the other, the alluring, but yet deeply disturbing, possibilities of Western-inspired modernity and individual agency. Set in the paradigmatic Indian metropolis of Allahabad, the city of Hindu tradition, nationalism, and scholarship, the story of Chander, the bright but poor student, and his

crisis, his devotional love to the daughter of his professor, Sudha, is a brilliant allegory. It transcends the boundaries of a mere love tale, to the complex study of *gunah* (sin), *tyag* (sacrifice), *kartavya* (duty) and the trampling, insurmountable burden of social *maryada* (propriety). Not to be found in the external melodrama, but in the deep-rooted internalisation of social conflict in the form of moral and psychological crisis, the lasting unmistakable appeal of the novel is, as scholar Mrinal Pande perceptively notes, embedded and encoded (Pande 45). The field where Chander fights is not the drawing rooms of society, but his own conscience where the call of tradition has been so deeply assimilated that it predetermines all the options which lead to his self-destructing decisions.

When this kind of venerated and psychological rich text is replicated into the vast, communal apparatus of popular Hindi film, there is an inherent and necessary change

that takes place. The fact that the space of the novel is a private, introspective one, whereas the space of the film is the one of the public, the senses, and the masses, represents not just a shift of medium, but a cultural translation. According to an adaptation theorist, Linda Hutcheon, adaptation can be understood as a long, conscious, declared revisit of a specific piece of art (Hutcheon xvi). This revisiting is by no means impartial or mere aesthetics, but, as it will be noted by one of the most prominent film scholars, Ravi S. Vasudevan, is instead guided and governed by what film scholar refers to as the cinematic apparatus, a complex of industrial convention, economic necessity, dominant star images, standard formulas of music and even genre norms, and the perceived preferences of the mass audience (Vasudevan "Politics" 33). The ambiguity of a novel is frequently made clear as a narrative; its interiority is brought out into dialogue and song; its social criticism is often watered down or repackaged to fit box-office reasoning and the current ideological tides.

This paper contends that the two highly popular Hindi film versions of this novel, namely, *Milan* (dir. Adurthi Subba Rao, 1967) and *Chetna* (dir. B.R. Chopra, 1970), are not versions, but revelations of the cultural makeover. They also serve as filmic prisms, bending the unique critique of the novel which occurs in these works into the formal prisms of the time, the thematic idioms, and stylistic prisms that prevail in each of them during their respective periods. Another sublimation of the tragic social determinism of the novel is accomplished by *Milan*, who comes in in the late 1960s, into a mythic, curative and

redemptive romance. It builds on the iconic, virtuous star personas of Sunil Dutt and Nutan, and uses the naturalistic, folk laced music of Laxmikant-Pyarelal to create a world where love is a spiritual fate that sweetly in fact overcomes instead of being stamped down by social barriers. As an impressive contrast, released at the beginning of the 1970s, *Chetna* shifts the conflict into the scale of urban, or social realist, angst. It capitalizes on the newly rebellious common man character of Rajesh Khanna and sends the narrative down the filthy morality tales of Bombay metropolis, thus turning a crisis of dharma into a crisis of modern sexual politics and a clash of classes. Through these two varied revisitations, this paper shall shed light on the active practice of the digestion and recycling of literary prestige by Hindi commercial cinema of the time, which transformed a subtle novel of moral paralysis into the plots that would speak to the new fantasies and fears of a new India.

Theoretical Framework: Adaptation as Cultural Metabolism

The scrutinising nature of the film versions as undertaken by *Milan* and *Chetna* requires that we utilize a theoretical apparatus that goes beyond the standard discourse of fidelity criticism the reductionist type of appraisal that evaluates adaptations based on the quality of their conformity to the source text (Hutcheon xvi). As an alternative to this, the current essay assumes a model of cultural metabolism as adaptation, where the filmic apparatus has the capacity to ingest, dismantle, and reintegrate literary matter into a consumable form to the masses, which is

incontrovertibly influenced by the specific nutrients and toxins that are particular to its historical environment. It is based on the concept of adaptation as a kind of revisiting by Linda Hutcheon, and the concept of cinematic apparatus of Ravi S. Vasudevan to suggest a more active, assimilative paradigm (Vasudevan, "Politics" 33). The "apparatus thus does not just serve the purposes of translation; it is involved in a metabolic process. The complex interstices of interiority and moral ambiguity of the novel are enzymatically torn to shreds by the demands of star personas, musical interludes, and genre conventions, and are then processed to simple carbohydrates of popular narrative.

This is ideological metabolic transmutation. As seen, Bharati novel presents a thick, in assimilable reproach against the social inertia of post-independence where the conscience of the protagonist is the major focus of conflict (Pande 45). The commercial Hindi film, however, has a different digestive system one that requires externalised conflict, binary morality, and, in the end, spectator pleasure. This plan of Milan can therefore be interpreted to mean an aesthetic detoxification. The movie is the metabolism of the toxins of the novel, i.e. social guilt, tragic compromise, through the organs of purification, myth, spiritual destiny. Excising Binti and making the conflict externalized are not narrative holes, but narrative metabolic imperatives, cutting out elements that would cause narrative dyspepsia in a 1960s viewer in need of romantic utopia (Raghavendra, 50-112). What comes out is a cleansed, remedial

romance to which emotional catharsis, not critical interrogation, is accorded.

However, Chetna represents more of a transmutation process, in which the comprising elements of the source material are not cut off but undergo chemical modification in response to an arising range of cultural anxieties. The dharma that is a subject of the novel does not get thrown away but is reworked into the urban, sexual morality basic metal. It is the change effected by the star figure of Rajesh Khanna a character who is alien to the original text, but is needed in the metabolic equation (Ganti 128). His appearance is an enzyme, as it connects the theme of duty in the novel to the novel substrate of the 1970s political classes and gender politics. The moving of Allahabad to Bombay is not a change of scenery but a reworking of the all-together metabolic milieu the cultured Petri dish of Brahminical academia into the acidic, frenetic broth of the metropolis, which radically results in the dynamics of reaction (Vitali 201). It results in an innovative product: a melodrama of irreversible modern loss that expresses fears of rootlessness and moral uncertainty in a fast-industrialising India (Kabir, "Melodrama" 78).

Therefore, at the angle of cultural metabolism, these adaptations can be perceived not as subordinate imitations or independent productions, but as vivid memoirs of the gastrointestinal of the Hindi film industry in two areas of departure. They reveal what the mass audience was and could not internalize, what nourishing aspects of social criticism were assimilable and what had to be

transformed into more familiar genres. It is this paradigm that allows us to evaluate *Milan* and *Chetna* in terms of their closeness to *Gunahon Ka Devta*, rather than as relevant cultural products, as products of the complex entity of popular cinema as it absorbed and digested the literary canon of its time.

***Milan* (1967): The Mythic Sublimation of Social Conflict**

The first and the most radical filmic translation of the text of Bharati is the 1967 film *Milan*, directed by Adurthi Subba Rao. This adaptation is a basic reconfiguration of the very foundation of the novel, a transformation that is driven by the commercial and ideological demands of the mainstream Hindi cinema. Produced by eliminating the central, heartrending struggle of the novel in a systematic way, Chander being forcibly married to the naive village girl Binti, which, as Ramousezi and Bharati observe, was the direct result of social pressure and a sense of own, internalised guilt (Bharati 15780): the on-screen coupleing of Sunil Dutt and Nutan became, in effect, a formula of idealised, soulful romance (Ramousezi 227). In lieu of it, there is the simpler, external, and ultimately reversible impediment of the heroine of the book Gopi (Sudha) having been previously married to a man lost at sea and presumed dead (Rao). This is a radical change in the story. Where the tragedy of the novel derives out of the active, guilty submission of the protagonist to social responsibility, an act that permanently ruins the lives of several individuals, the conflict of the film is rooted in an arbitrary outside destiny, unable to

implicate the lovers in any socially-induced moral agency (Lal 89).

As a result, the aesthetic of *Milan* is immersed into the idiom of the so-called devotional romance, the subgenre according to which the love is presented as the transcendental, presupposed union, the union resembling religious adoration (Gopal, Conjugations 112). This transition is highlighted by the glorified soundtrack. The classic song, Sawan Ks Mahina, filmed in the beautiful countryside, lacks the tortured, claustrophobic desire of Bharati in Chander but a glorious, naturalistic, and socially untied love (Dutt 2 -2). This is in line with film scholar M.K. Raghavendra who theorizes that the relocation of the story to the mythical sphere is in the case of *Milan*, where one sees that the story is transferred to the social world. The lovers are not victims of the society but of some arbitrary fate which turns out to be right in itself (Raghavendra 50: 112). The mythologisation ends in the climax of the film as Gopi finds her missing husband Mohan back not as a deserving member of society but as a blind, ascetic sage. His intentional, religious renunciation of his claim does not imply the defeat of social law but the miraculous overcoming of the societal law; the barrier is not successfully conquered but is broken through, spiritualizing the main unity as being divinely ordained (Rao).

This shift of social particulars to the universal maxims is further crystallised in the dialogue. Unlike the Chander of Bharati, whose inner monologues are impeccably characterized by certain social and psychological hopelessness, the characters of the book *Milan* tend to speak in eternal axioms. There is a certain point when

the grandfather of Gopi, Panditji, states, Prem dharma hai, vyavhaar nahin (Love is a religion, not a transaction) (Rao). This passage is a kind of key to the philosophy of the adaptation: it translates the complex, traumatic social exchange of central importance to the novel, which includes caste, class, and gendered roles, into a universal, epochal truth of spirituality. Thus, in adapting Gunahon -Ka -Devta, *Milan* does not free the poem, as it does into a catharsis, but rather embalms its social realism of corrosion into a final redemptive myth of the triumph of love. This reinstatement is exactly what the prevailing escapist, romantic idiom of early 1960s Bollywood had been trying to offer, a utopian solution to social contradictions through emotion and spectacle (Vasudevan, Melodramatic Public squared), thus, as the conservative solution that was entirely missing in the tragic denouement of the source novel.

Chetna (1970): Urban Transposition and Gritty Melodrama

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Comparative Analysis: Duty, Guilt, and Resolution

The role of the central figure Binti/Rukmani could be explored as a prism with the help of which it is possible to discuss the divergent paths of the film versions. In the first novel, Binti is introduced as an innocent victim, and this is the human price paid by the rules of patriarchy. Her heroic patience enhances the feelings of guilt in Chander. In comparison, *Milan* completely does not bring this character, which has removed the origin of tragic moral responsibility. Rukmani is a more outspoken possibly tragic character in Chetna; her pregnancy and need to be taken seriously bring in a gratuitous sexual touch that lacks in both the novel and *Milan*.

The ideological orientations of the films are also defined by the narration resolutions. *Milan* is capped with a miracle, spiritual denouement, which glorifies the mythical power of true affection. Chetna, on the other end, provides a despondent, morally ambiguous ending in which Rajesh, being filially obligated to Rukmani, has to observe the departure of Chetna. This conclusion distorts the tragic but, at the same time, socially essential ending of the novel, in which Chander lives an atoning life, and instead, it is replaced by the disruption that is the main characteristic of the contemporary existential crisis. According to the literary scholar Ananya Kabir, Chetna substitutes the tragic stability of this novel with the melodrama of the modern loss that cannot be reversed (Kabir, Melodrama 78).

Conclusion: Adaptation: A Cultural Barometer

The page-to-screen translation of the film, *Gunahon Ka Devta*, in 1967 and 1970 is an example of how the process of adaptation is a negotiation of culture. *Milan* and Chetna cannot be considered failed and/or successful imitations but instead, they are independent cultural products, which actively re-imagine the social novel in terms of their own cinematic and historical discursive practices. *Milan* filters the story through a mythic-romantic filter, and provides a sort of therapeutic escapism. Chetna directs it with the help of the new aesthetics of city realism and moral panic, making a warning story.

All these works, together, indicate the way mainstream Hindi cinema, as a hegemonic cultural form of discourse, addresses literary prestige. Instead of simply borrowing a story, it digests and remakes complex social and psychological criticism into the stories that will appeal to dominant commercial norms and the collective unconscious of its consumers. The analysis of such adaptations thus provides a twofold understanding: it throws light on the long-term echo of the text that bears the name Bharati, and it also throws light on the shifting priorities and idioms of the popular Hindi film as it moved through the turbulent decades after the independence.

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