

Bond and Bhardwaj: Critical Analysis of Ruskin Bond's Novella, 'Susanna's Seven Husbands' and Short Story 'The Blue Umbrella' and their Film Adaptations 'Saat Khoon Maaf' and 'The Blue Umbrella' by Vishal Bhardwaj.

Karishma Sanghavi, Dr Shalini R Sinha*

Kishinchand Chellaran College

***Correspondence Author**

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ABSTRACT

Fiction and Films are two different media that involve different approaches. A novel that is successful may not be adapted into a successful film and sometimes a film adaptation turns out better than the original novel or story. This paper attempts to critically analyse Ruskin Bond's novella, *Susanna's Seven Husbands* and its film adaption directed by Vishal Bhardwaj - *7 Khoon Maaf*, starring Priyanka Chopra as the female lead as well as Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella* and its film adaptation of the same name by Vishal Bhardwaj starring Pankaj Kapur and Shreya Sharma. Although *Susanna's Seven Husbands* was moderately known, Vishal Bhardwaj's film adaptation had a limited box-office run but gained visibility through its star-studded cast. The short story *The Blue Umbrella* and its adaptation were critically acclaimed and won several awards but did not perform at the box office. This paper focuses on the plot elements, the characterisations and the narrative aspects of both the texts and the film adaptations and compares them. The emphasis is on the portrayal of the characters. An author writes for a limited audience while a film's audience is humongous. This too can add or detract from the film.

Keywords: Adaptation, Ruskin Bond, Vishal Bhardwaj, approaches, complexities.

Adaptation is a complex process that brings together literature and film, compelling producers to convert written words into engaging visual content and uphold thematic integrity. The different media necessitates the use of employing techniques that make the content suitable for the medium as well as its audience. This paper aims to critically analyse Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptations of Bond's *Susanna's Seven Husbands* and *The Blue Umbrella*, tracing the role of film techniques in developing the shape of the story, character and the impact of themes. The research aims to make use of adaptation theories of Linda Hutcheon, Linda Seger and David Bordwell to determine the degree to which Bhardwaj stays true to or departs from Bond's original work. This paper aims to address the following research questions: (1) In which ways does Bhardwaj's adaptation reinterpret the narrative and characters of Bond's original works? (2) Which cinematic techniques are employed to align with or contrast Bond's themes? The methodology consists of comparative textual and visual analysis framed within adaptation theory. This study argues that the directorial decisions of Bhardwaj, such as dramatization, expanded subplots and integration with music, strengthen and distort the nature of Bond's narratives, illustrating the conflict between literary adaptations and cinematic independence in film adaptation.

According to David Bordwell's calculation given in his book *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, a 300-page novel should take around five hours if the book is transcribed word by word with all the elements in it. That is, each page of the book would take up a minute of the film. The filmmakers need to edit the original work to suit their allotted time of two or two and a half hours.

Linda Seger in the introduction of her book *The Art of Adaptation: Turning Fact and Fiction into Film* lists a set of guidelines for filmmakers. "The first job of the adaptor will be to figure out how to fit the original

material into different time parameters.” (Seger 2) Often, the filmmaker or the screenwriter chooses to condense the beginning and/or the end of the original story. This condensing also involves cutting down a lot of material, subplots, themes, characters and even combining characters. All this is done to find a dramatic story line with an equally dramatic beginning, middle and end.

Seger further explains the importance of making the content commercial. “A best-selling book might be read by a million readers or perhaps four to eight million if it’s one of the biggest sellers... but if only five million people go to watch a film, it will be considered as a failure... Films and television shows need to satisfy the masses to make a profit.” (Seger 5) The first step towards making a good commercial film is strengthening the story line and making it one that can engage the audience from the beginning to the end.

Secondly, the film needs to have a main character that is likable and relatable. The audience likes to cheer for the protagonist and having a sympathetic character becomes important to appeal to the masses. Moreover, ambiguous characters are not always received well by the audience as they don’t know who to root for.

As mentioned earlier, endings of adaptations are often condensed. This is done because the audience, more often than not, loves happy endings. While Seger talks about the American audience, the fact remains the same for the Indian audience too. (Pandey 5)

Adapting from a short story or a novella brings about a different challenge. The story is often oversimplified and has very few subplots to create the drama needed for the film. In this case, there is a need to expand the subplots and storyline and sometimes extends to even creating additional characters to fit the two-hour time frame that creators aim to achieve.

According to Linda Hutcheon, film adaptations hold the dual responsibility of adapting another work and making it an autonomous creation (Praveen 2018). The major risk associated with the motivation to adapt for a wider audience is that more responsibility is placed on the adapters to make the 'substitute' experience "as good as, or better than (even if different from) that of reading original works”, Praveen cites Wober and Hutcheon. Praveen further talks about the expectations that the audience has from the adaptation, Audiences will experience an adaptation as any other work if they are unaware of the adapted text. Adapters may struggle to show all the source text on screen due to time, space, mode, and media constraints and expect the audience to fill in the gaps. The audience's ability to fill in gaps in the adaptation depends on their knowledge of the adapted text. Unknowing audiences have expectations and demands, but without prior knowledge, they greet a film version as a new film, not an adaptation. “Hutcheon (2006) questions whether the novels become the ‘derivative and belated’ works as they are experienced ‘second and secondarily’. She affirms that for unknowing audiences, adaptations have an inversion of sacrosanct elements like priority and originality”. (Praveen 2018)

“Celebrity status of the director or stars is also an important element of its reception context.” (Praveen 2018). Praveen gives the example of Oprah Winfrey starring in Jonathan Demme’s 1998 film adaptation of Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. This paper also briefly explores the choice taken by the renowned director, Vishal Bhardwaj, to cast beloved actors and stars in his adaption, ‘*Saat Khoon Maaf*’ and how the celebrity status of the actors impacted the film positively while compared to ‘*The Blue Umbrella*’, which was made with exceptional actors that were not well known to the audience.

This theoretical framework can be used to analyse the subject at hand, Ruskin Bond’s novella ‘*Susanna’s Seven Husbands*’ and its film adaptation Vishal Bhardwaj’s ‘*Saat Khoon Maaf*’ and understand what techniques have been used by the filmmakers to deliver the final movie to the audience.

In the barest of forms, Vishal Bhardwaj has stayed true to the plot. Both the works – the novella and the film - revolve around the central figure Susanna Anne-Marie Johannes, a woman who finds herself in marriages that are bound to fail several times —six times, to be exact. However, adapting a 67-page novella into a 2 and half hour-long movie definitely needs a lot of expansion in the story.

The novella begins with a tranquil scene where the narrator, Arun, observes a black widow spider, describing its movements. The story then transitions into a flashback of the narrator remembering his first encounter with

Susanna, thus very clearly establishing an analogy between the black widow spider and the protagonist Susanna. This beginning works well for a written piece as it builds enough suspense but a lot more is required for a film to catch its viewers' attention. The movie – Saat Khoon Maaf - begins with a very dishevelled and aged Priyanka Chopra, with tears in her eyes, holding a gun to her head and pulling the trigger. A gunshot is heard and is met with visuals of blood splattering on the wall making the audience think that she has taken her life. However, the black widow spider analogy is deliberately left out here, making the protagonist an ambiguous character for the viewer. After the title card, the movie shifts to the narrator, Arun, in a forensic lab. Bhardwaj takes complete advantage of his visual medium to set the scene. The scene only has the noise of the rain in the background and Priyanka's scream as she pulls the trigger. In fact, the first dialogue of the movie comes in at 2 minutes and 29 seconds, forcing the audience to pay very close attention to the visuals of the scene.

The film very often departs from Bond's narrative to create a more visually captivating sequence. This can be seen in the depiction of the fourth husband, Signor Eduardo Romero, is a diplomat at a South American embassy. The novella shows Susanna's direct involvement in the death, but she is not convicted. The film expands the narrative significantly, transforming the South American Diplomat into a Russian spy, Nicolai Vronsky. Its heavily dramatized confrontation sequence evokes a horror-film aesthetic, with the Spy forced to go into a well that housed Susanna's pet snakes and left there to be found the next morning.

Similarly, while the novella's last chapter "Love Me, Love My Mobile" introduces the last husband, Mr. Sammy Das, who is deeply attached to his cell phone. The film heavily condenses the story, with the final act focusing on Susanna, who is about to take her life. Dr. Modhusudhon Tarafdar, played by Naseeruddin Shah, rescues Susanna and marries her, with a hidden motive to acquire her wealth. The film connects back to the opening shot, revealing Susanna's motives.

The film makes drastic changes to the ending, with Susanna regretting her actions. The filmmakers try to give Susanna a redeeming quality by showing her accepting Jesus as her "seventh husband." The song sequence "Yeshu" serves as a background score to a montage of her crimes, with Susanna confessing her sins to the church father, played by Ruskin Bond. Susanna is portrayed as a morally grey character who takes extreme steps to escape situations, she indirectly puts herself in.

The central character is expanded to make her seem more complex in the film. The novella's Susanna is portrayed as a confident, bold, and unapologetic woman, while the film's character is portrayed as a timid and submissive wife. She changes her name and even her religion for her husbands (Sultana for Wasiullah Khan and Anna for Nikolai Vronsky). She tries taking her life twice in the film to show how distraught the events have made her. However, at the same time, she keeps bringing each of her husbands to his end.

Vishal Bhardwaj's musical background acts as a boon to the film. The film has about forty minutes of songs complimenting the story. Each of the subplots has its background score. All the songs also show Susanna's emotions during the time. Some of the songs like "Darling" and "Bekaaran" gained popularity before the release of the film, helping the film gain visibility.

Table 1: Comparative analysis of Susanna's Seven Husbands and Saat Khoon Maaf

Element	Novella (Ruskin Bond)	Film (Bhardwaj - Saat Khoon Maaf)
Opening	Narrator observes a black widow spider	Susanna attempts suicide; no spider metaphor
Protagonist	Confident, bold, unapologetic	Emotionally fragile, converts for husbands
Narrator (Arun)	External observer	Poor servant child close to Susanna
Ending	Open-ended, dark humor	Redemptive, confessional with religious overtones
Tone	Subtle, mysterious	Dramatic, stylized, psychological
Music	Not present	Prominent – film has 40 minutes of songs
Visual Techniques	N/A	Horror aesthetic, slow-motion, color symbolism

While Saat Khoon Maaf adapts a darker, adult-themed novella, *The Blue Umbrella* poses a different challenge—transforming a simple children’s tale into an engaging visual narrative. *The Blue Umbrella* is a short story by Ruskin Bond that Vishal Bhardwaj has adapted into a film titled by the same name. The story is about a simple, village life set in Garhwal area of Himachal. In 27 pages, Ruskin Bond brings to life the whole village with an inanimate object; the Blue Umbrella, as its central character.

The beginning of the story introduces the protagonist, a nine- or ten-year-old girl, Binya. The reader gets to know about her life in great detail. This is also when the reader learns how Binya acquires the Blue Umbrella. Bhardwaj expands the story to make it more about the village instead of about Binya. The film starts with the tea seller, Nandkishor (Ram Bharosa in the book) listening to a ‘future prediction’ on a radio immediately followed by a song focussed on all the children in the village. The song introduces all the important characters in the story while also giving a context of the setting of the film.

While Bond quickly establishes Binya and the Umbrella as the central characters of the story, Bhardwaj introduces the Umbrella to the story after almost 15 minutes of setting up all the other aspects. He brings each of the characters to life with their idiosyncrasies and special qualities. The filmmakers also make the Umbrella, very beautiful and unique, in the Japanese style, unlike anything anyone from the village would have ever seen.

Ruskin Bond brings out the main conflict of the story - Ram Bharosa and his employee Rajaram plotting to steal the Umbrella, while Bhardwaj dramatizes this part to a great extent showing the school teacher and his wife arguing about the umbrella and the wife demanding that her husband get it for her, like Lady Macbeth inciting Macbeth to act. In fact, initially, when Nandkishor’s employee suggests stealing the umbrella, Nandkishor reprimands him, saying stealing is a sin. Bhardwaj shows the seed being sown and the protagonist being gradually tempted to sin.

Bhardwaj dramatizes the main conflict to a great extent. The audience, like Binya, does not know what happened to the Umbrella. The camera angle changes and the world is seen from her point of view, making it easier for the audience to relate to the little girl. She thinks that it is Nandkishor who stole the Umbrella and gets the police to search his house only to find nothing. Soon after, Nandkishor gets his beautiful red umbrella and people start admiring it. Binya treats this as a detective mission and finds out that it is her Umbrella that Nandkishor has got dyed. The denouement is quite dramatic when it starts raining and the dye drips away slowly in front of the whole village revealing the blue umbrella.

Bond’s story ends with people boycotting Ram Bharosa’s shop for stealing and Binya forgiving him on seeing his miserable condition. She gives Ram Bharosa the umbrella while he gives her a bear claw in exchange and they part as unlikely friends. Bhardwaj however shows an elongated sequence, where everyone in the village boycotts Nandkishor’s shop, kids run away on seeing him and all his old friends start calling him names, to the extent that a wedding procession is paused just because he tries to be a part of it. Sympathy is evoked for Nandkishor played by Pankaj Kapur. He embodies the character perfectly; however, the extended scenes contribute to a melodramatic tone that, while emotionally resonant, may detract from the narrative’s simplicity as intended in Bond’s original, with this sequence taking up almost 20% of the screen time.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of *The Blue Umbrella* (short story vs film)

Element	Short Story (Ruskin Bond)	Film (Bhardwaj - <i>The Blue Umbrella</i>)
Setting	Focus on Binya & umbrella	Emphasis on village life, ensemble
Introduction	Binya acquires umbrella early	Umbrella appears ~15 mins into film
Conflict	Ram Bharosa steals the umbrella	Nandkishor manipulated, more dramatized
Theft Revelation	Quiet narrative twist	Dramatic dye-dripping reveal in public
Tone	Simple, light moral tone	Melodramatic, cinematic suspense
Music	Not included	Rich instrumental background & songs
Redemption	Binya forgives Ram Bharosa	Public humiliation precedes redemption
Cinematography	N/A	Focus on landscape, childlike POV shots

In both films, music is a very strong element. Vishal Bhardwaj has composed the music and uses a lot of instrumental tracks to complement the emotional graph.

Vishal Bhardwaj follows a number of adaptation techniques. He tries to justify misdeeds by giving the protagonists a back story and making the audience sympathetic to them. He changes the story line to make it suitable for the visual medium and seeks to provide happy endings. The introduction to the novella, written by Bhardwaj, reveals his decision to change the ending of the novella, “*Ruskin Saab* gave me three alternate endings for the novella, but Matthew and I found a fourth one when we sat down to write the adaptation.” (*Susanna’s Seven Husbands*, 2011) Bhardwaj makes the husbands more outright unpleasant, which makes Susanna more appealing in comparison. Arun too becomes a member of the servant class, a poor boy on whom Susanna “*Saaheb*” bestows immense kindness. To some extent, this was a practical consideration – Bhardwaj needed to make his *sutradhaar* an active part of the story rather than someone whose life intersected with Susanna at random intervals - but it also serves the purpose of thickly emphasising her compassionate side, which was done in a few quick lines in the novella. (“She was kind to children and animals...kind even to odd creatures and freaks like the dwarf”)

Both the films were acclaimed by critics around the world. Times of India, called it “a whole new cinematic experience.” 7 Khoon Maaf won praise for its performance. Priyanka Chopra’s performance is described as displaying “exquisite command over a complex character that is definitely a first in Indian cinema.” (7 Khoon Maaf Movie Review {3.5/5}: Critic Review of 7 Khoon Maaf by Times of India) She was nominated for ten awards for her performance in the film. (“7 Khoon Maaf (2011)”) The Blue Umbrella won the National Award for Best Children’s Film in 2006. Both actors were nominated for five awards for their performances (“The Blue Umbrella (2005)”).

Unfortunately, none of these techniques helped the films garner box office success. For Saat Khoon Maaf, Bhardwaj spent a lot of his efforts in making it a star-laden film, which helped the film draw a lot of attention towards it before the release. He cast all popular actors like Priyanka Chopra, Neil Nitin Mukesh, John Abraham etc. in the film. In fact, the most appreciated performance came from Naseeruddin Shah who was on screen for less than 4 minutes. Priyanka Chopra excelled as a young Susanna, but as the character matured and became more ruthless, the distinction between Susanna and Priyanka became more pronounced. The film being rated as an ‘Adults only’ film further decreased the audience strength. On the other hand, Bhardwaj selects exceptional actors for The Blue Umbrella, yet its ‘children’s film’ label discouraged adult audiences. Though Bhardwaj kept the length of the film short, its melodramatic scenes made it feel stretched and boring.

Ruskin Bond is a celebrated writer, but adapting his stories for the screen is challenging. Bhardwaj's versatility as a filmmaker is evident in the critical acclaim his adaptations have received. The characters of both the plots come from opposite ends of the spectrum. The bold, sensual Susanna and her series of murders on the one hand as compared to the young, innocent Binya and her Umbrella in a simple, rural setting, could not be as different from each other as possible. Ruskin Bond’s creative genius and fertile imagination have put great power in his pen. Similarly, Bhardwaj gets much of it right in his screen adaptations. Susanna’s Seven Husbands is written lucidly and is a compelling, mysterious story, while Saat Khoon Maaf is gripping but at times implausible and stereotypical. The novella portrays a dark humour that is missing in the film. Similarly, the mysterious aura of the book is lost in the film. Bhardwaj is more concerned about the film’s star power. However, it is overall a good attempt to dramatize a complex plot.

The Blue Umbrella is a simply told heartening story that speaks of simplicity and ethics and encapsulates the idyllic life in a mountain village. It is a children’s story which is told with humour. Bhardwaj scores in keeping the film adaptation also simple and well-narrated. The film’s cinematography is laudable with the Garhwali mountainside captured beautifully on camera. Bhardwaj also adds to the cinematography with uplifting music and meaningful song lyrics. He has the knack for getting child actors to deliver their best performances and also has a consummate actor like Pankaj Kapur to make the story realistic. Though it’s a children’s film, yet the simplicity of the narrative and the lesson of living an ethical life are told surely and strongly.

Table 3: Adaptation Strategies employed by filmmakers

Strategy	Description	Examples from Films
Expansion	Addition of subplots and characters to fill runtime	Spy subplot in Saat Khoon Maaf; village ensemble in The Blue Umbrella
Dramatization	Enhancing conflict for visual appeal	Snake well scene in Saat Khoon Maaf; public humiliation and shaming in The Blue Umbrella
Character Sympathy	Giving protagonists redeeming qualities	Susanna's confession; Nandkishor's public punishment
Narrative Shift	Changing the narrator's role	Arun becomes emotionally involved servant
Star Casting	Use of celebrity actors for wider appeal	Priyanka Chopra, Naseeruddin Shah in Saat Khoon Maaf; Pankaj Kapur in The Blue Umbrella
Musical Integration	Use of music to reflect emotional tone	Songs like "Darling"; background score for umbrella scenes

Though numbers and commercial business matter, yet Bhardwaj leads from the front in adapting literature into films and teaches filmmaking is an art that must first be studied properly before a filmmaker attempts it. Bhardwaj's takes on Ruskin Bond's *Susanna's Seven Husbands* and *The Blue Umbrella* demonstrate how cinema can reimagine literature to meet the needs of alternative audiences and filmic formats. Far from seeking fidelity, Bhardwaj employs cinematic means such as music, casting, and visual narrative to reinvent the emotional and thematic shapes of Bond's texts. These takes point to the artistic tensions between maintaining literary intent and creating a self-contained cinematic work. In so doing, they highlight the process of adaptation as dialogue, rather than replication, one that honours both the director's vision and the requirements of a new medium.

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