

Romantic Realism in Selected Novels of Chetan Bhagat and Their Bollywood Film Adaptations

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Abstract

The present research paper examines the representation of romantic realism in selected novels of Chetan Bhagat and analyses its transformation in their Bollywood film adaptations. Chetan Bhagat's fiction has gained critical attention for portraying love as an experience rooted in middle-class realities, social negotiation, and emotional pragmatism rather than idealized fantasy. By selecting Five Point Someone, 2 States, and Half Girlfriend along with their cinematic adaptations 3 Idiots, 2 States, and Half Girlfriend, this study explores how literary romantic realism is reshaped through cinematic language, narrative compression, and popular aesthetics. Employing adaptation theory and cultural studies as its theoretical framework, the paper investigates narrative restructuring, characterization, ideological shifts, and cinematic techniques. The study argues that while the novels foreground realistic emotional struggles shaped by education, class, language, and family expectations, Bollywood adaptations tend to amplify romance through melodrama, music, and visual spectacle to cater to mass audiences. The research contributes to contemporary adaptation studies by highlighting the negotiation between literary realism and popular cinema in modern Indian culture.

Keywords: Romantic Realism, Chetan Bhagat, Bollywood Cinema, Film Adaptation, Indian English Fiction

Introduction

The adaptation of literary texts into films has become a prominent area of inquiry within literary and cultural studies. In the Indian context, the increasing adaptation of English-language novels into Bollywood cinema reflects both the growing readership of popular fiction and the expanding influence of mass media. Among contemporary Indian English novelists, Chetan Bhagat occupies a distinctive position for his portrayal of urban and semi-urban youth, middle-class aspirations, and emotionally grounded romantic relationships.

Bhagat's novels depict romance as a lived experience shaped by academic pressure, career anxiety, linguistic limitations, cultural difference, and family intervention. This narrative approach may be described as romantic realism, where love is neither escapist nor heroic but embedded in everyday social realities. When these narratives are adapted into films, they undergo transformation due to cinematic conventions, commercial imperatives, and audience expectations. This paper seeks to examine how romantic realism in Bhagat's novels is retained, modified, or diluted in their Bollywood adaptations

Review of Literature

Adaptation studies has developed into a significant interdisciplinary field that examines the complex relationship between literary texts and their cinematic representations. Early scholarship in this area was largely concerned with the notion of fidelity, evaluating film adaptations based on their faithfulness to the source text. Over time, this approach has been critiqued for its restrictive nature, leading to a broader understanding of adaptation as a creative and interpretative process rather than a mere act of replication. Contemporary theorists emphasize that adaptation involves transformation, reinterpretation, and re-contextualization shaped by medium, audience, and cultural conditions.

Linda Hutcheon conceptualizes adaptation as both a product and a process, arguing that adaptations should be understood as independent works that engage in a dialogic relationship with their source texts. According to her, adaptation entails reinterpretation across different media, historical contexts, and cultural frameworks, allowing narratives to acquire new meanings. Similarly, Robert Stam challenges fidelity-based criticism by foregrounding intertextuality and ideological negotiation. He asserts that cinematic adaptations interact with multiple discourses, including social, political, and cultural forces, thereby reshaping literary narratives for new audiences.

Critical scholarship on Chetan Bhagat's fiction has primarily examined his contribution to contemporary Indian English popular literature. Researchers have explored themes such as youth culture, globalization, consumerism, and the aspirations of India's expanding middle class. Bhagat's novels have been widely discussed for their accessible language, realistic settings, and focus on institutions such as engineering colleges,

corporate workplaces, and family structures. Scholars argue that his portrayal of romantic relationships reflects everyday emotional struggles shaped by class differences, educational pressure, linguistic limitations, and cultural expectations, which explains the widespread popularity of his work among young Indian readers. Studies focusing on the cinematic adaptations of Bhagat's novels have largely addressed issues of commercialization, narrative modification, and ideological restructuring. Researchers have observed that Bollywood adaptations often alter narrative emphasis to accommodate popular cinematic conventions, including melodrama, musical sequences, and visual spectacle. These studies highlight how films tend to simplify complex emotional and social realities in order to appeal to a broader audience. However, existing research largely treats romance as a secondary or incidental theme rather than a central analytical category. Despite the growing body of literature on both adaptation theory and Chetan Bhagat's works, there remains a noticeable gap in scholarship regarding the concept of romantic realism. Limited attention has been paid to how realistic representations of love in Bhagat's novels are negotiated, intensified, or transformed in their film adaptations. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining romantic realism as a distinct thematic and narrative framework and by analysing its cinematic translation within Bollywood's popular film culture.

Research Questions

1. How is romantic realism represented in the selected novels of Chetan Bhagat?
2. What narrative and thematic changes occur during the adaptation of these novels into Bollywood films?
3. How do cinematic techniques influence the portrayal of romantic relationships?
4. To what extent do Bollywood adaptations retain or transform the realistic elements of romance present in the source texts?

Hypotheses

1. Romantic realism in Chetan Bhagat's novels is significantly transformed in Bollywood adaptations through melodramatic and visual intensification.
2. Cinematic adaptations prioritize mass appeal over narrative realism while retaining the core emotional themes of the novels.
3. The transition from novel to film results in ideological shifts that reflect popular cinematic conventions.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To analyse the portrayal of romantic realism in selected novels of Chetan Bhagat.
2. To examine the cinematic strategies employed in their Bollywood adaptations.
3. To compare narrative structure, characterization, and thematic emphasis across literary and cinematic texts.
4. To explore the cultural and ideological implications of adapting realistic romantic narratives into popular cinema.

Research Methodology

The primary sources for the study consist of three selected novels by Chetan Bhagat—Five Point Someone, 2 States, and Half Girlfriend—and their corresponding Bollywood film adaptations, namely 3 Idiots, 2 States, and Half Girlfriend. These texts have been selected due to their popularity, cultural relevance, and direct adaptation into mainstream Hindi cinema, making them suitable case studies for analysing romantic realism and its cinematic translation.

The secondary sources include scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical essays related to adaptation studies, literary realism, popular fiction, and Indian cinema. Theoretical insights from adaptation theorists such as Linda Hutcheon and Robert Stam provide the conceptual framework for understanding adaptation as a process of reinterpretation rather than mere replication. Critical works on Bollywood cinema and Indian English fiction further support the analytical perspective of the study.

The analysis is conducted through close textual and cinematic reading, focusing on key aspects such as narrative structure, character construction, thematic emphasis, and modes of representation. In the literary texts, attention is given to narrative voice, emotional realism, and socio-cultural contexts shaping romantic relationships. In the cinematic adaptations, the study examines visual storytelling techniques, performance, music, editing, and mise-en-scène to understand how literary realism is modified or intensified for mass audiences.

A comparative framework is employed to identify similarities and differences between the novels and their film adaptations. This comparison highlights shifts in narrative focus, characterization, ideological positioning, and emotional intensity. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding how commercial considerations, audience expectations, and cinematic conventions influence the adaptation process.

By combining literary analysis with film studies, this methodological approach ensures a balanced and comprehensive examination of romantic realism across media.

Adaptation Techniques and Challenges

The process of adapting a novel into a cinematic text requires a complex reworking of narrative form, aesthetic expression, and ideological emphasis. One of the primary techniques involved is narrative condensation, as the expansive temporal and psychological scope of a novel must be compressed into a limited screen duration. As a result, subplots are often reduced or merged, and character arcs are selectively emphasized to maintain narrative coherence within the cinematic framework.

Another significant technique is visual reinterpretation. Novels rely heavily on descriptive language and internal monologues to convey character psychology and emotional depth. In film adaptations, these internal dimensions are translated into visual and performative elements such as facial expressions, body language, mise-en-scène, and symbolic imagery. Dialogue is often modified or newly created to externalize thoughts that remain implicit in the literary text. Music and background scores further function as narrative devices, guiding emotional response and reinforcing romantic intensity in ways that differ from textual narration.

Cinematography and editing also play a crucial role in shaping the adapted narrative. Close-up shots, lighting, camera movement, and montage techniques are employed to heighten emotional engagement and romantic appeal. These cinematic strategies often reframe realistic situations into visually appealing moments, thereby altering the tone of the original narrative.

Despite these techniques, adaptation poses several challenges, particularly in maintaining the balance between realism and commercial viability. Chetan Bhagat's novels are rooted in emotional authenticity and social plausibility, presenting romance as a negotiated experience shaped by class, language, and familial expectations. Bollywood cinema, however, operates within conventions that prioritize melodrama, visual spectacle, and emotionally heightened resolutions. This tension frequently results in the softening of realistic conflict and the romanticization of struggle to meet audience expectations.

Additionally, factors such as time limitations, market demands, censorship norms, and the diverse composition of film audiences further influence adaptation choices. Consequently, the cinematic versions often reflect a negotiated form of realism—one that retains the emotional core of the original text while reshaping it to align with the aesthetics and economics of popular cinema.

Comparative Analysis

Five Point Someone and 3 Idiots

In *Five Point Someone*, romantic relationships remain marginal to the central concerns of friendship, academic pressure, and institutional rigidity within an Indian engineering college. The novel presents romance in a restrained and realistic manner, reflecting the emotional uncertainties and limited personal freedom experienced by students in a competitive academic environment. Love is portrayed as an extension of everyday campus life rather than as an idealized or transformative force.

The film adaptation *3 Idiots* significantly reconfigures this narrative emphasis. While it retains the backdrop of academic struggle and friendship, the film reshapes the story into an inspirational and motivational narrative aimed at a wider audience. Romantic elements are expanded through heightened emotional expression, carefully crafted dialogues, and visual symbolism. This shift results in a more optimistic and emotionally charged portrayal of romance, aligning the narrative with mainstream Bollywood conventions. Consequently, the subtle realism of the novel gives way to a cinematic vision that prioritizes emotional uplift and mass appeal.

2 States and 2 States

Among the selected adaptations, *2 States* demonstrates the closest alignment with its literary source. The novel offers a realistic account of an intercultural romantic relationship, emphasizing negotiation, compromise, and familial involvement rather than dramatic rebellion. Romance is depicted as a process shaped by social customs, regional identities, and parental authority, thereby reflecting lived social realities in contemporary India.

The film adaptation largely preserves these thematic concerns, maintaining the novel's focus on cultural difference and familial mediation. However, cinematic techniques such as elaborate wedding sequences, emotionally charged background music, and visually expressive performances are employed to enhance dramatic impact. These additions do not fundamentally alter the narrative but intensify emotional engagement. As a result, the adaptation achieves a balance between realism and cinematic embellishment, illustrating how popular cinema can retain narrative authenticity while appealing to broader audiences.

Half Girlfriend and Half Girlfriend—*Half Girlfriend* presents romantic realism through the lens of class inequality and linguistic insecurity. The novel foregrounds the protagonist's struggle with English language



proficiency and social confidence, situating romance within broader issues of aspiration, self-worth, and social mobility. Love is portrayed as fragile and uncertain, shaped by unequal power relations and emotional vulnerability.

In the film adaptation, these realistic concerns are visually dramatized and emotionally amplified. Music, scenic locations, and prolonged emotional sequences are used to intensify romantic longing and personal suffering. While the film retains the central themes of class difference and emotional conflict, it reframes them through melodramatic expression. This transformation shifts the narrative away from understated realism towards a more emotionally charged cinematic experience, reinforcing popular expectations of romantic storytelling in Bollywood.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrates that romantic realism in Chetan Bhagat's novels undergoes significant modification during their transition from page to screen. While the literary texts portray romance as an experience embedded in everyday social constraints—such as education, class, language, and family—Bollywood adaptations tend to amplify emotional intensity through melodrama, visual spectacle, and musical expression. This process does not entirely discard the realistic foundations of the novels; rather, it reshapes them to suit the narrative and commercial demands of popular cinema.

The comparative analysis reveals that cinematic adaptations negotiate between realism and mass appeal, often privileging emotional resonance over narrative restraint. This transformation highlights the dynamic relationship between literature and cinema in contemporary India, where storytelling is continuously reconfigured across media. The study reaffirms the relevance of adaptation studies as a critical framework for understanding how modern Indian narratives evolve in response to changing cultural, aesthetic, and audience expectations.

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