

Pages to Frames: The Enduring Influence of Russian Literature in Indian Cinema

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Russian Literature: An Overview

Russian literature holds a profound and enduring influence over Indian cinema, shaping the narrative landscape and providing rich source material for filmmakers. This influence can be traced back to the early 20th century when Russian literature began to make its presence felt in India. Although these books reflected a limited awareness of Indian cinema and its possible role in the global media from the perspectives of cross-cultural analysis and innovations in filmmaking processes, they served as a gateway to introduce Indian filmmakers to the vast and diverse world of Russian literature. As Indian filmmakers delved deeper into this literary treasure trove, they realized the immense potential that Russian literature held in terms of storytelling, themes, and character development.

Source: Brian Larkin's study of Indian cinema and its Nigerian audiences allows us to see that the fate of Korean popular culture in India has parallels with the influence of Russian literature in Indian cinema. Russian literature has had a profound impact on Indian cinema, serving as a source of inspiration for storytelling, themes, and character development.ⁱ Indian cinema has wholeheartedly embraced Russian literature, incorporating its themes, characters, and narratives into the fabric of Indian films. The enduring influence of Russian literature in Indian cinema can be seen in the seamless integration of its themes, characters, and narratives into the fabric of Indian films across various genres and languages. From romantic dramas to epic historical sagas, Russian literature has provided Indian filmmakers with a wealth of material to adapt and reimagine on the big screen. Moreover, the influence of Russian literature extends beyond just the adaptation of specific works. It has permeated the storytelling techniques and aesthetic sensibilities of Indian filmmakers, shaping their approach to narrative construction and visual presentation. Russian literature has not only served as a source of inspiration for Indian filmmakers, but it has also played a significant role in shaping the way Indian cinema is perceived and appreciated globally.

Key Russian Literary Works in Indian Cinema

The Dostoevsky's theme

Consider the themes of existentialism that permeate Russian literature, particularly in the works of Dostoevsky. His exploration of the human psyche, the battle between good and evil, and the moral dilemmas faced by his characters find curious parallels in Hindi cinema. Films like "Deewar" and "Sholay" delve into the moral ambiguity of their protagonists, grappling with questions of right and wrong. The internal conflicts mirror the torment of Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov in "Crime and Punishment." Ramesh Saigal's "Phir Subha Hogi" (1958) was inspired by Crime and Punishment.ⁱⁱ The film starred Raj Kapoor and Mala Sinha in lead roles. It told the story of Ram, a self-respecting impoverished law student who had to pawn his belongings to save his dignity. He resorted to crime to save his beloved Sohni but ended up

committing a murder. However, an innocent guy gets implicated for the murder. The police play on Ram's conscience to confess to the crime. On the last day of the court judgment, Ram confesses to the crime, and saves the innocent from the gallows. He is sentenced to three years in jail. Sohni promises to wait for his release so that they can get married.

Mera Naam Joker (1970) Directed by Raj Kapoor, this film incorporates elements from Fyodor Dostoevsky's "The Idiot" in the characterization of the protagonist, Raju. Mani Kaul made two films based on Dostoevsky's stories. In 1991, he made Nazar, based on Dostoevsky's short story, The Meek One. The film was produced by the National Film Development Corporation of India (NFDC). It starred Kaul's daughter Shambhavi Kaul, Shekhar Kapur, and Surekha Sikri. ⁱⁱⁱThe Meek One, also called as A Gentle Creature, is one of Fyodor Dostoevsky's lesser-known works but is a purely Dostoevskian story, displaying themes common throughout his larger works. Like Crime and Punishment, The Meek One also begins in a pawnshop. The narrator is a pawnbroker, and he observes an impoverished teenage girl come into his shop on a regular basis. The pawnbroker finds out that the girl is an orphan, and that her abusive aunts are determined to marry her off to an obese shopkeeper who wanted a mother for his kids. The narrator finds himself making an offer, which the girl accepts as being the lesser of two evils. They get married, but are unhappy in their marriage. The girl commits suicide and the narrator does not know why, and tries to understand the reasons. Mani Kaul also made Idiot (Ahamaq), based on Dostoevsky's novel, The Idiot.^{iv} The book is based on Prince Lev Myshkin. He is not an idiot per se, but so called as he is an unfailingly good man in a world that is selfish. The central plot revolves around a love triangle between Prince Myshkin, Aglaia Ivanovna and Nastasya Filipovna. The book underscores the contrast between its characters' various qualities. Kaul's Idiot was first released as a four-part television mini-series on Doordarshan channel in 1991, and despite it being released at the New York Film Festival in 1992, it was never commercially released. Idiot starred Ayub Khan-Din and Shah Rukh Khan.^v

Dostoevsky's short story, White Nights, a lonely and dreamy protagonist in St. Petersburg meets Nastenka, a woman who waits for her lost lover on a bridge during the summer "white nights." They form a close but ultimately platonic bond as the protagonist falls deeply in love with her. When Nastenka's lover returns, she leaves the protagonist, leaving him heartbroken and alone. The story poignantly explores themes of loneliness, unrequited love, and the transient nature of human connections during the enchanting white nights of the city. White Nights has also been adapted into many Indian films. Shivam Nair's Ahista Ahista (2006) Sanjay Leela Bhansali's "Saawariya" (2007) based on White Nights. Imtiaz Ali's Jab We Met (2007) though plot is same but ending takes a turn when Geet marries Aditya instead of Anshuman. Awaara (1951) influenced by Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment," this Raj Kapoor-starrer delves into the moral and psychological dilemmas faced by the protagonist. The Gambler (1995) directed by Dayal Nihalani, this film is based on Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella "The Gambler" Alexei Ivanovich, a tutor in a Russian aristocrat's household, becomes entangled in a world of gambling addiction and love for Polina, the employer's stepdaughter. As he spirals deeper into his obsession with roulette, he faces financial ruin and moral degradation. Ultimately, Alexei's fortunes and emotions fluctuate wildly, reflecting the chaotic nature of his life, and he must confront his self-destructive impulses. The novella explores themes of addiction, love, and the human propensity for self-sabotage and its consequences.

The Pushkin's theme

The enduring influence of Russian literature in Indian cinema is evident in the incorporation of Pushkin's themes, which have shaped the narratives, aesthetics, and cultural references in several films. Pushkin's

incorporation of folklore and fantastical elements in works like "Ruslan and Ludmila" has influenced fantasy and folklore-based films. His ability to blend reality with the magical has been a source of inspiration for filmmakers creating enchanting worlds. Ruslan Mumtaz (1967) This Malayalam film, directed by K. S. Sethumadhavan, is an adaptation of Pushkin's "Ruslan and Ludmila." It tells the story of a young man's quest to rescue his beloved princess. Saudagar (1973) directed by Sudhendu Roy, this Bollywood film is a loose adaptation of Pushkin's narrative poem "Ruslan and Ludmila." The film combines elements of fantasy and romance, much like Pushkin's original work. Ruslaan (2009) This Hindi film, directed by Mohan Sharma, is a more direct adaptation of Pushkin's "Ruslan and Ludmila." It modernizes the classic story and sets it in a contemporary Indian context. Shatranj Ke Khilari (1977) directed by Satyajit Ray, this film is based on the short story "Shatranj Ke Khiladi" by Premchand, but Premchand's story was inspired by a work of Russian literature, "The Chess Players" by Pushkin. The film explores the theme of obsession with leisure and games. Devdas (1955, 2002, 2009) Alexander Pushkin's novel in verses "Evgeni Onegin" influenced the character of Devdas in Indian cinema.

Alexander Pushkin's historical narratives, such as "Boris Godunov" and "The Captain's Daughter," have not been as widely adapted in Indian cinema as in Russian or European cinema, his themes of historical events, romanticism, and societal change have occasionally inspired Indian filmmakers. Chandralekha (1948) This Tamil film directed by S. S. Vasan is set in a historical context and features a princess and her romantic interests. While it doesn't directly adapt Pushkin's works, it incorporates elements of historical drama and romance that are reminiscent of his storytelling style. Uttama Villain (2015) Directed by Ramesh Aravind, this Tamil film explores the life of an aging actor who has portrayed a historical character on stage. While not a direct adaptation of Pushkin's works, it deals with themes of performance and identity, which can be seen in Pushkin's writings.

The Tolstoy's theme

Leo Tolstoy's works, particularly his novels, have had a notable impact on Indian cinema. Indian filmmakers have adapted some of his literary masterpieces into films or drawn inspiration from his stories and themes. Here are a few examples:

Tolstoy's philosophical writings, particularly his ideas on non-violence and simple living, have influenced Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi. While not direct adaptations, Gandhi's philosophy and life have been the subject of numerous Indian films, including "Gandhi" (1982) and "Lage Raho Munna Bhai" (2006). Anna Karenina (1877) the most famous adaptation of Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina" in Indian cinema is the 1965 film "Guide," directed by Vijay Anand and starring Dev Anand and Waheeda Rehman. Raju (played by Dev Anand) is a tourist guide who becomes enchanted by Rosie Marco (played by Waheeda Rehman), a dancer trapped in a loveless marriage. Raju helps Rosie realize her dream of becoming a successful dancer, but their unconventional relationship faces societal disapproval and legal troubles. As the story unfolds, it delves into themes of love, sacrifice, and self-discovery, ultimately leading to a powerful and emotional climax. The film is known for its exploration of complex relationships and societal norms. While not a direct adaptation, "Guide" draws parallels to the story of Anna Karenina in its exploration of a woman's struggles in a conservative society.

Resurrection (1899) the 2007 Indian film "Awarapan," directed by Mohit Suri, draws inspiration from Tolstoy's novel "Resurrection." Shivam (Emraan Hashmi), a hitman for a criminal gang in Hong Kong, finds himself questioning his violent lifestyle when he falls in love with Aaliyah (Shriya Saran), an innocent woman. This unexpected romance sparks a desire for redemption as Shivam seeks to leave his

criminal past behind. However, he faces betrayal and life-threatening challenges, forcing him to confront his inner demons and make difficult choices. "Awarapan" explores themes of love, redemption, and the struggle to break free from a life of crime.

War and Peace (1869) While there hasn't been a direct adaptation of "War and Peace" in Indian cinema, the themes of war, love, and societal change explored in the novel have influenced many Indian historical epics and war dramas, such as "Mughal-e-Azam" and "Border." Tolstoy's ideas on spirituality, morality, and the human condition have also indirectly influenced Indian cinema by shaping the philosophical underpinnings of various Indian films. While there may not be a plethora of direct adaptations of Tolstoy's works in Indian cinema, his themes and ideas continue to resonate with filmmakers and audiences alike, contributing to the richness of storytelling in Indian films.

The Chekhov's theme

Anton Chekhov's short stories and plays have influenced Indian cinema in various ways. Indian filmmakers have adapted his works, drawn inspiration from his storytelling techniques, and incorporated Chekhovian themes into their movies. Here are some notable examples of Chekhov's influence in Indian cinema:

Ottaal (English: The Trap) is a 2015 Indian Malayalam film directed by Jayaraj, an adaptation of the short story "Vanka" by Russian author Anton Chekhov. Vanka, a young orphaned boy apprenticed to a cruel cobbler, writes a heartfelt letter to his grandfather in the village, pleading for rescue. He shares his longing for a better life in the village, but the story ends with the poignant realization that his plea may never reach his grandfather.

Kasba (English: The Town) is a 1991 Indian drama film written and directed by Kumar Shahani. It is based on the short story "In the Ravine" by the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. The movie is an important work in the Indian Parallel Cinema movement which started in the early 1970s. It is one of the last films to be part of the movement as it died out by the early 1990s.^{vi}

"Leela" (2002) this Hindi film directed by Somnath Sen draws inspiration from Chekhov's "The Seagull." "Leela" reinterprets the themes and character dynamics of "The Seagull" in an Indian context. It explores the world of theatre and the struggles of artists, much like Chekhov's play. The film delves into the lives and relationships of its characters, highlighting the complexities of love, rejection, and artistic ambition.

"Ponmudi" (2010), directed by Hariharan, a Malayalam film that draws inspiration from Anton Chekhov's short story "The Darling" (also known as "Darling" or "Dushechka" in Russian). Chekhov's original story follows the life of a woman named Olenka, who becomes deeply influenced by the men she loves. In "Ponmudi," the film adapts Chekhov's themes and narrative elements, focusing on the life of its central character, Ponmudi, who experiences the influence of various men in her life. The film likely incorporates elements of Chekhov's storytelling style and themes while adapting the narrative to suit its cultural and cinematic context. While these examples showcase the influence of Chekhov's storytelling and themes in Indian cinema, it's important to note that Indian filmmakers often blend Chekhov's ideas with their unique cultural contexts, creating a distinct cinematic experience that resonates with Indian audiences while honouring Chekhov's legacy.

Conclusion

The emotional depth and intricacy of Russian literature's characters have also left their fingerprints on Hindi films. The brooding heroes and enigmatic heroines, often portrayed with layers of complexity and

moral ambiguity, owe a debt to the intricate character studies of Russian literature. The character of Devdas, immortalized in multiple Hindi adaptations, bears the unmistakable imprint of Russian literary heroes.

The impact of Russian literature on Indian cinema is significant, with its themes, characters, and narratives being seamlessly integrated into a wide range of films across various genres and languages. Russian literary classics such as Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace" and Fyodor Dostoevsky's "Crime and Punishment" are often referenced or adapted in Indian films, serving as a source of inspiration for storytelling, themes, and character development. These works have not only provided Indian filmmakers with rich source material, but have also influenced the way narratives are constructed and presented on screen. The enduring influence of Russian literature in Indian cinema can be seen in the seamless integration of its themes, characters, and narratives into the fabric of Indian films across multiple genres and languages. Moreover, Russian literature has contributed to the aesthetic sensibilities of Indian filmmakers, shaping their approach to visual storytelling and presentation. Russian literature has left a lasting impact on Indian cinema, extending beyond just the adaptation of specific literary works. It has shaped the narrative construction, thematic exploration, and visual presentation in Indian films.

The enduring influence of Russian literature in Indian cinema can be seen in the seamless integration of its themes, characters, and narratives into the fabric of Indian films. In the realm of storytelling, whether through literature, cinema, or the simple act of sharing experiences over bowls of soup, we find the threads that connect us all. It's these threads that make life's unpredictability a tapestry of rich experiences and surprising connections – a tapestry where the influence of Russian literature on Hindi films becomes not just a curiosity but a testament to the enduring power of artistic expression. So, who knows what tomorrow might bring? A film, a story, or a super-epic adventure yet to be written – it's all part of the unfolding narrative of our lives. ^{vii}

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