



# From “Kabuliwala” to “Bioscopewala”: Adapting Tagore into a modern day cinema

Rituparna Mitra

Research Scholar, North Eastern Hill University, Tura, Meghalaya

Email- [ritupml23@gmail.com](mailto:ritupml23@gmail.com)

Received: 19 Mar 2025; Received in revised form: 18 Apr 2025; Accepted: 24 Apr 2025; Available online: 30 Apr 2025

©2025 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open-access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

**Abstract** — *Stories have the power to cut through the barriers of culture, language and time. But not all writers survive the challenges and threats posited by the constantly evolving dynamics of time and all that it encompasses. Some stories wither and fade away like flowers during winter. Only a few are retained in the memories of readers and viewers alike- as stories can be narrated in both the audio-visual form (such as cinema) or in printed manuscripts. Such tales continue to rejoice people even decades after their conceptualization and execution. Rabindranath Tagore is a writer of such many tales which never cease to take readers by surprise irrespective of the age they belong to. In this paper, I shall be focusing on one of his short-stories titled “Kabuliwala” and its screenplay adaptation “Bioscopewala” with undue emphasis upon all those elements that have been remodelled and refashioned to fit a modern day story better. This, in turn, would facilitate a multi-layered understanding of the genius that Tagore was which makes him relevant even to date. This paper shall also seek to explore the possible causes triggering so many movie adaptations of popular novels and stories.*



**Keywords**— *adaptation, culture, language, modern, screenplay.*

India has been a land of story-tellers since time immemorial. Whether in painting, or in pottery making, or songs and anecdotes, stories permeate every aspect of an individual's life living in this diverse land of art and culture. The thirst for both narrating as well as listening to stories might've reduced in the present times yet it would be a long time till it dies out completely. Consequently, this land has also birthed prolific writers who have restored belief in the power of storytelling whenever the need arose. The pluralistic nature of this country along with the fundamental desire to tell a tale to the truest of intentions and merit has resulted in the publication of uncountable books in an abundance of languages.

There've been many awe-striking writers who greatly contributed significantly towards shaping the literary scenario of India even after India had achieved her independence. Out of them, one name that can never be forgotten is Rabindranath Tagore. Any discussion on the

Indian literary panorama is incomplete without giving Tagore his due. Tagore had don multiple hats in his lifetime- a poet, a dramatist, a visionary, a philosopher, a patriot and a humanitarian. But succumbing to a fate similar to many other eminent literary figures, Tagore was subjected to the kind of acclamation and praise that is befitting to the merit and genius that he is several years succeeding his death. In one of his interviews given to a renowned Bollywood veteran Gulzar commented upon how it took a thousand years for the stories of Tagore to surpass the confining walls of Shantiniketan. He indebted his joy and love for writing to Tagore reminiscing on how it was one of the latter's stories that opened the doors of literature for him at a young age.

What adds to the brilliance of Tagore is a kind of simplicity in which all his stories are ensconced. He doesn't talk of the extra-ordinary or grand things. Neither his language is bombarded with an unnecessary dosage of

ostentatiousness. He writes simple stories of people who are rooted in a reality of the most humble of natures. This trait enables discussion on Tagore as a Romantic writer as well. Wordsworth, the father of Romanticism, outlined the necessity of bringing literature closer to the commonplace and the mundane to make it more realistic and relatable. In "Preface to Lyrical Ballads" -which is hailed as the Romantic manifesto- Wordsworth outlines his poetic vision in clear and simple terms sparking a huge debate in the literary world. Expounding upon his vision he states "how the principle objects" of poetry was "to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them throughout, as far as possible, in a selection of language really used by men."

Tagore's poetic inspiration is not in complete digression to that of the viewpoint established by Wordsworth. In *Galpaguchchha*, Tagore attributes the innumerable visits he undertook to villages as well as the consequent exposition to rural life those visits facilitated to be the impetus of his countless short-stories. Although he doesn't call himself a Romantic for his writing differed in both quality, tone as well as content from that of Bankimchandra-who was perceived as an emblem of Romanticism during his active years of writing- yet his love for the rural atmosphere when studied under the borrowed lenses of Wordsworth's philosophy paves the path for a Romantic approach in relation to his writings. One interesting thing that is to be noted here, is Tagore's fascination towards the "other" world. The concept of "other" is very popular in literature courtesy to the struggle for independence on a global scale after years of slavery that the British empire had subjected almost the entire world to.

The "other" was used by the British in a derogatory manner to draw a sharp and unmistakable line of contrast between themselves viz the colonizer and the colonized. And such a practice of judging all who are different as less than fully human is called *othering*, and it divides the world between 'us' (the 'civilized') and 'them' (the 'others', the 'savages') (Tyson 401). And it was upon the British to bring necessary reforms to educate and civilize the "other". Prior to the colonial era, the "other" reclaimed their identity through the medium of literature. The "other" in the modern times can also be used to draw attention towards an artificial/man-made world consisting of machines, weaponry and other scientific inventions and exploits. Under this definition of "other", genres such as science-fiction gain a whole new perspective. As such stories primarily seek to explore "the abnormal, non-human or less-than-human behavior" (Vidalepp 26). This kind of othering has been the point of focus in Satyajit Ray's "Anukul" that was adapted into a movie bearing the similar title by acclaimed director Sujoy Ghosh.

The concept of "other" has also been a constant space of exploration in Tagore's world. A wide array of his short-stories/dramas ranging from "Kabuliwala" to "Chandalika" have focused upon the gap created by a society that can be best categorized under the binary forces of have(s) and have not(s). Such a gap is academically referred to as "other". Tagore emphasizes upon feelings of void, yearning and suffering as pointers to this gap. "Chandalika" is a musical play in two acts featuring an untouchable girl named Prakriti and seeks to explore the gap created by caste based discrimination in a Hindu society. Prakriti yearns for a Buddhist monk who had once sought water from her to quench his thirst. This yearning combined with the thirst that brings the monk at Prakriti's doorstep symbolizes a deep-seated yearning which every victim of caste based discrimination experiences and wishes to break free of.

"Kabuliwala", on the other hand, probes an inquisitive inquiry into gaps/fissures caused by estrangement (both voluntary as well as involuntary) from one's homeland and everything else it stands for. Written in the year 1892, "Kabuliwala" is the story of Rahmat- the titular character-who comes to Calcutta every year to see dry fruits from Kabul. Rahmat comes across little Minnie (the daughter of the narrator) one fine morning and seems to work past the reserved demeanour with natural charm and is able to befriend her easily. Rahmat meets Minnie several years later on the day of her wedding and the latter is unable to recognize him. Her father takes pity on the Kabuliwala who has spent many years in prison owing to a string of ill-fortuned events and gives him some money so that he could return to his homeland.

Rahmat's story is that of dispersion and dislocation from his ancestral home (Kabul) to that of a foreign land (Calcutta). Although he made the transition voluntarily for economic reasons, he had no control over the time spent in his chosen foreign territory owing to the circumstances he had fallen prey to. On Minnie's wedding day, Rehmat realizes the gap that was created by the cruel hands of time between himself and his daughter. His daughter was around the same age as Minnie which makes Rehmat ponder over many painful questions. Minnie's total lack of recognition triggers fear inside him. He is now made aware of the possibility that his little Parbati might also act in a nonchalant manner upon meeting him following his prolonged absence from her life. His situation is not entirely different from people who suffer from cultural divorce from their native land after having spent many years in an alien land. They neither belong here nor there. What he experiences in those moments succeeding the stings of rejection from Minnie is an insurmountable amount of grief resulting from a complete dislocation from culture and everything it encompasses. The realization that he is a mere intruder in a house of

celebration dawns upon him and he collapses upon its weight.

*Cultural bereavement* of such nature can lead to severe mental trauma in a person. Schreiber mentions the significance of culture in discussing ideas pertaining to grief by referring to a particular case report of *bereavement* in an Ethiopian female refugee. He highlights how “her symptoms of grief were complicated by her inability to perform her culturally sanctioned purification rituals because of her relocation. Compounding her problem, she was erroneously diagnosed at various times due to the use of Western derived diagnostic criteria and a lack of appreciation of the cultural differences in the presentation of grief by clinicians”.

The story ends on a note of a possible future reconciliation between Rehmat and Parbati without digging deep into the psyche of Rehmat. Taking advantage of being a full-length movie “Bioscopewala” picks up this unutilized element following Rehmat’s (enacted beautifully by Danny Denzongpa) release from prison. Rendering an appropriate usage of creative liberty, the script makes necessary adjustments to be remodelled into a modern day story. Bhattacharya speaks of all such creative liberties taken by different directors while adapting Tagore for a cinematic experience in his book titled “Tagore’s Vision of Cinema: Aesthetic and Cultural Reflections”. Bhattacharya talks at length on Tagore’s role in shaping up the modern cinematic experience. He also sheds light on how certain aspects have always to be adjusted for the transition into moving pictures (viz cinema) as opposed to print media (viz books).

The concept of adaptation is not a novel one and dates back to the times of the origin of moving pictures. From Chaucer to Shakespeare, and Stephen King to Ian Fleming, all have been translated and transcribed into movies at some point or other. And there are several factors triggering adaptations of a story from one medium( such as books) to another (preferably a novel). Some of these factors are listed below:

- a) An inability to read or understand the language in which the book was written.
- b) Dyslexia: a kind of disability which renders an individual incapable of reading.
- c) A total lack of interest in reading

Under the presence of all above listed factors, movies become the only medium through which stories can be circulated widely among people obliterating boundaries of language, culture and vested interests and aptitudes. However, adaptations are subjected to a diversified range of criticism based on how well the stories could be moulded to suit a specific atmosphere. Renowned Indian filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj was able to model Shakespeare into a

rustic Indian backdrop in his famous Shakespearean trilogy comprising of *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014). This aforementioned trilogy has garnered praises from **The Times of India**, **The Guardian**, **The New York Times**, alike. On the other hand, the report drafted by The New York Times called ‘**The Color Purple by Steven Spielberg**’ highlights how the characters fail to resemble Miss Walker despite being richly decorated.

Such disparities in criticism are common across borders and make the entire business of adapting books into movies a tricky one. When the 2015 best-seller “The Girl on the Train” by Paula Hawkins was made into a Bollywood flick starring Parineeti Chopra, it received the worst kind of criticism possible from both critics as well as regular cinema goers. Bluestone had designed a specific term called *fidelity* to discuss this very phenomenon in which a certain group of people is more inclined towards one form as opposed to the other and vice versa. In this regard, a cartoon once featured in **The New Yorker** is worth mentioning. It featured two goats consuming a stack of film cans. They seem to be engaged in a conversation in which one opines to be liking the book better. The word “fidelity” itself points towards a sense of loyalty; perhaps a sense of moral obligation a reader feels towards the book that came before the movie.

Despite the risk involved, the practice of adapting art from one form to another remains a popular practice till date. Many of Tagore’s dramas and plays have also been tailored into movies. Some of his familiar works that have been adapted into movies are *Gora*, *Ghore Baire*, *Chokher Bali*, etc. From fervent nationalism to love and betrayal, these stories have explored every human emotion known to mankind. And because of the universal appeal of emotions such stories could be very well adapted into movies dating even to the modern period. Seasoned directors such as Satyajit ray, Ritupono Ghosh have had managed to adapt these stories to situations aligning with the taste and appetite of the cinema goers of their age without altering or tampering with those very sensibilities and sensitivities which lied at the very core of such stories; shaping and moulding them into timeless masterpieces.

And it is this particular quality of remaining true to the original in terms of both ingenuity of emotions and depth of character which adds to the success of “Bioscopewala” as a paper to screen adaptation alongside such aforementioned movies . On meditated observation, the real intention of the movie seems to emerge out of an inquisitive string of what if(s). Due to their nature of construction w.r.t length and space constraints short-stories often end on a note of incompleteness raising a plethora of questions and “Bioscopewala” utilizes artistic liberty and unparalleled

imagination to explore the life of Rehmat Khan following his release from prison.

In “Bioscopewala” Minnie (played by Geetanjali Thapa) is shown to be suffering from a state of divorce where she lacks a genuine connect with her own father and this turmoil is brought out poignantly in an informal get together following her father’s death (played by Adil Hussain) where everyone is encouraged to speak a few words in the loving memory of the deceased. Minnie is shown to be struggling as the acute understanding of how little is known by her in relation to her own father strikes her like a blue from the thunder bolt. Minnie is reluctant to say anything; she is extremely unsure about everything. She struggles like many other children who find it extremely difficult to forge emotional bonds with their parents owing to factors such as generational gap, difference in attitude, lack of common interests, etc. Minnie is as lost as the freshly released Bioscopewala a.k.a Rehmat Khan who has lost all his memories and doesn’t know what to make of his newfound freedom.

As mentioned earlier, “Bioscopewala” fiddles around with a stream of innovative ideas and doesn’t borrow entirely from the text by Tagore. The influence of the original story is unmissable but the screenplay incorporates sufficient variations to give it a modern touch. The role of the bioscope in the movie is an original idea and acts as a symbol of that very modern world in which movies are the most favored way to tell a story. Unlike the Rehmat Khan of “Kabuliwala” Danny’s interest lies in movies which makes him carry around his colorful world on his shoulders through a bioscope. Due to political turmoil in his ancestral home, Kabul, he is to take refuge in India. He connects with Minnie through the help of his bioscope and takes her on a tour to a different world every time they interact.

This *bioscopewala* shares an uncanny resemblance with the *kahaniwala* in the 2015 Imtiaz Ali directed “Tamasha”. His role is of utmost importance in Ved’s (played by Ranbir Kapoor) life as he taps into Ved’s unseen potential and brings out the true artist that thrives to create. The *kahaniwala* is Ved’s muse; his inspiration to mount the stage and make it his own. Minnie, in a manner somewhat similar to Ved, later chooses a camera as her device of choice to tell the kind of stories she is interested in. From bioscope to camera, and through fiction to reality “Bioscopewala” creates an enthralling tale that strikes a chord with every cinephile who prefers a profound cinematic experience over unnecessary glamour that comes with certain cliché storylines Bollywood seems to flourish on.

The political turmoil in Afghanistan is also captured effectively without any unnecessary melancholy and

heightened sensationalism that Bollywood has shown a penchant for at repeated intervals of time. The exact reason for Rehman’s migration from his Afghani homeland is the sharp disdain demonstrated towards cinema as shown in one of the scenes where Rehman’s bioscope is shattered into pieces mercilessly. The vandalized camera can be interpreted also in terms of a collapse of that very era to which Rehmat belonged. The current times belong to Minnie who uses her camera—a symbol of the modern age against which the movie is set to tell real stories of people across borders, culture and religion. It is up to Minnie now to reconcile Rehmat to whatever modicum of sanity can be achieved at his age.

Despite being a commercial failure, “Bioscopewala” shouldn’t be discarded entirely as it evokes emotions most *masala* movies fail to address and portray in a sensible and sensitive manner. It is brilliant not only in terms of storytelling but also in terms of its captivating cinematography. For any cinephile advocating for quality over quantity “Bioscopewala” is bound to be a one of a kind experience. It upholds the integral values of Tagore’s writing both in terms of characterization as well as evocation of humane emotions and feelings.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Bhattacharya, R. (2010). *Tagore’s Vision of Cinema: Aesthetics and Cultural Reflections*. Routledge.
- [2] “Bioscopewala.” Directed by Deb Medhekar, Fox Star Studios, 2018 (India). *Disney+Hotstar*, <https://www.hotstar.com/in/movies/Bioscopewala/1000216122/watch>.
- [3] Bluestone, George. *Novels into film*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1957.
- [4] Chatterjee, A (2013). Rabindranath Tagore and the Cinema: Adaptations and Appropriations. *Indian Literature*, 57 (2). 74-85
- [5] Chaudhari, Sukanta, ed. (2010) *Rabindranath Tagore, Selected Short Stories*. New Delhi: OUP.
- [6] Desai, Rahul. “ Bioscopewala Movie Review: A Thoughtful Adaptation of Rabindranath Tagore’s Short Story”. *Film Companion*, 25 May 2018. [https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/bioscopewala-movie-review-geetanjali-thapa-danny-denzongpa-kabuliwala-rahul-desai#google\\_vignette](https://www.filmcompanion.in/reviews/bioscopewala-movie-review-geetanjali-thapa-danny-denzongpa-kabuliwala-rahul-desai#google_vignette)
- [7] “Gulzar and his Poetry!| The Anupam Kher Show|” YouTube, 5 December 2024, [https://youtu.be?slGU9Kunlgz?si=SICSOT9b2\\_IM\\_Cla](https://youtu.be?slGU9Kunlgz?si=SICSOT9b2_IM_Cla)
- [8] Matthew, Abin. “Why Do People Choose Watching Adaptations of English Literature Over Reading It?” *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*. Vol- 8, Issue-3, May-June, 2023. Pp. 160-64.
- [9] Schreiber S. Migration, traumatic bereavement and transcultural aspects of psychological healing: loss and grief of a refugee woman from Begameder county in Ethiopia. *Br*

- J Med Psychol. 1995;68(Pt. 2):135–42. doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8341.1995.tb01820.x. [DOI]
- [10] Tagore, Rabindranath. *Selected Short Stories*. Ed. by Sukanta Chaudhuri. Oxford University Press and Visva Bharati. 2000
- [11] Tyson, L. (2015). *Critical theory today: A user-friendly guide* (3rd ed.) London, U.K: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- [12] Viidalepp, A. (2020): Representations of robots in Science Fiction Film Narratives as Signifiers of Human Identity. *Információs Társadalom* (4):19-36.
- [13] Wordsworth, William. “Preface to Lyrical Ballads”. In *Lyrical Ballads, with a few Other Poems*. Oxford University Press, 2008.