

'Abhu Makrani', the short story is a really short 'short story'. It runs barely into 10 pages. The film 'Mirch Masala' runs approximately into 120 minutes or a little more. Now to develop a screenplay for a film this long from a short story is a daunting task. The filmmaker yet delivered a beautiful film that emanated culture, philosophy, a strong message about the feudal India and the feminine dynamism. This short story was first published in the year 1953. The story in itself is neither very strong nor does it convey any powerful messages.

The story begins with a lot of action and commotion. Gemi who is the female protagonist in the story comes running, gasping for breath and enters the premises of the so-called factory where she works on daily wages. This is a village of feudal India. The class system and patriarchy dominate this society. It seems that most men are content gossiping their time away and so women have taken up the burden of earning and caring for the families. For in this so-called factory where Gemi works, there work a handful other women too. The author provides no background as to where this young woman comes from. We don't know whether or not she is married. And in the story, she is apparently the only young woman working in the factory.

Gujarat is the largest producer of tobacco in the country. The setting of the story too is the tobacco factory owned by Jiwan sheth where these women labourers work.

The author beautifully describes the way these women look and their relationship with each other. To transliterate Chunilal Madia's words describing the women. 'These women were left in each other's company all day long. They tied scarves around their faces to stop the dust and fine tobacco particles from entering their mouths and noses.

These unwashed scarves that they wore day in and day out made their otherwise tender faces to appear ugly. The wind blew the dust around and it settled in their hair adding to the ugliness. These women who were not educated formally were still strongly in touch with their own realities and had strong ties with each other and that mattered more to them than anything else. The question of survival was immediate and had far greater concern than anything else and therefore the outer appearances meant nothing to these women.

The short story does convey to us some basic elements about the rural life in Saurashtra region of Gujarat. The protagonist of the story Abhu Makrani is described interestingly. Media tactfully informs the readers about the contemporary times in which he lived through the story. The movement of characters or things and the use of sound are aptly worded in the story.

Moving forward with the story, as Gemi enters the factory, Abhu Makrani, the caretaker of this factory and other women surround her as though they have sensed something malicious is about to happen. Soon enough the sentinels are heard banging at the door with the back end of their huge guns. They blurt out the order Subedar has sent. They ask Abhu to send the young woman outside. Abhu who has greyed his hair with many good and bad experiences all through his life is quick to understand what this entire episode means. He refuses to do so and pledges that the woman is safe as long he is alive. Here, we are not really told as to what could have transpired earlier that now causes the Subedar to make such an immoral demand. Though in the movie, these gaps have been aptly filled by the film maker.

As these dialogues unfold the story, we are presented with the varied happenings within the walls of that factory and also outside those walls. The Subedar finds it hard to swallow his ego as the woman refuses to succumb and he then tries to use other tactics such as pressurising the factory owner Jiwan Sheth to get the woman out. While the owner and the guardian have a discourse through the closed doors, within the factory, the other labour women start forcing Gemi indirectly. They are now worried for themselves too and feel that it is indeed Gemi's fault that she is so beautiful and young and must succumb to the power. Poor young woman is now only at the mercy and courage of the caretaker, Abhu Makrani who like a father swears by his life to protect her and the other women who work in the factory.

The story ends with the factory owner warning Abhu that it is he who gives him his bread and butter and must therefore obey his command and open the doors so that the guards can come for the woman. Chunilal Madia ends the story quite suddenly at this turn, where the caretaker Abhu Makrani clings to the last resort. He pulls out the gun that his master has provided with him to safeguard the factory over his own chest and ends himself. The story ends here.

We, as readers are left to ponder as to what could have happened next. The helpless woman must have probably been subjugated at the hands of the male driven society. We don't really know what happens next yet we do know!

Chunilal Madia's short story somehow for me lacks in words. It could have been developed more and a suitable end could have been provided. Maybe it was his intention to bring the readers to notice what

i.e. 'Mirch Masala'. In the movie she comes across as a noble and courageous woman. While the story begins with Gemi running for her life and entering the factory, this event occurs in the film almost at the lapse of some 40 minutes. Till then the director nicely lays out the natural and cultural panorama that would form important aspects of this film.

The film begins quite interestingly, we see the arid landscape of Kathiawar. We see a man walking along this barren land with a donkey carrying some weight on its back. Just around this time, a Gujarati Duha (a meter in poetry) seems to befall the audience's ears. One may easily assume that the man walking down the hills is the one singing this ear pleasing Duha. The scene shifts to that of red chilli fields and the people who work there; it shifts to that of some parrots flying over these fields and a large scarecrow standing in the midst. As the camera zooms over a close up shot of three bright red chillies, the frame freezes and the title credits begin.

We may assume here that the film maker is setting up the background of the film for us in the beginning itself. At the end of the credits, a hand plucks out these three red chillies and the scene shifts over to what seems like a lake or a river. Here, a few women are seen filling their pots with water, when suddenly we hear the voice of many horses reaching through the arid land towards them. These horses are being ridden by a handful of soldiers led by the Subedar. The women are petrified and flee the scene, except one. She is Sonbai. The character based on Chunilal Madia's Gemi. She is not scared of the uniformed men and in fact is verbose about her dislike that the horses have been brought at that end of the river where only humans are allowed to drink

water. Her manoeuvre and outspokenness almost immediately seem to attract the Subedar.

The story develops gradually and many minor plots are divulged before the viewer. These sub plots are quite interesting. They are absolutely original since the source text carries no mention of any of these. Some of these sub plots are the love affair between the village Sarpanch's younger brother and a village girl. There is another one where Sonbai's husband lands a job in the railways and moves away to the city, and then there is the character of an unfair landlord that unrightfully gains the land of the simple villagers.

We understand that this film is based on Chunilal Madia's story 'Abhu Makrani' and the film maker has kept the core of the original story intact, but he has introduced many original elements into the film.

One such innovative element is the use of music in the film. Since cinema is an audio visual medium, the use of components in a wise way can only add to the overall effect of the film. For the most part of the film we are exposed to numerous types of music ranging from classical vocal to western music and also Gujarati folk music. Let us see for example, the classical thumri being played on a gramophone by the Subedar as a show of his power and lavish temper. There is a folk song that is sung and performed by Babubhai Ranpura which is filmed on the group of women playing garba, traditional Gujarati folk dance. Thus the use of music is made such that it only accentuates each event that occurs in the film.

The village and its people are beautifully characterized in the film. Another element in the film that stands out clearly on its own is the natural backdrop of the rural India comprising of hills and mounds,

lakes, fields, tiny village homes and the people who inhabit these homes. There are varied village characters be it the spineless village sarpanch, the ardent school master, the money lender, the sarpanch's wife and the watchman of the besieged chilli factory, each character in the film seems to be there for a reason. Here we may note that in the adapted work i.e. the film, the filmmaker introduces a myriad of new characters that are not present in the original story. Let us have a glimpse at these characters. There is the village head, or the mukhi, the epitome of patriarchy. He is as exploitative as the Subedar is. He dominates his male authority over his wife and daughter and even sticks to abusing them verbally or physically if he feels the need be. Then there is the school teacher known as 'master' He is a libertarian person. The village postman delivers to him the daily newspaper. He is also mocked by the villagers as 'swaraji'. The school teacher's character comes across as a social reformer. He persuades mukhi's wife to send her daughter to the village school. As girls are not allowed to study in this narrow minded society he believes that if the mukhi family would change this trend other villagers would follow. Another character is that of Mukhi's brother, who comes across as submissive and it seems his only interest is the village girl Radha with whom he has been secretly carrying on a love affair. There is the village priest who is blinded by the holy knowledge and is seen to be coaxing Sonbai in the last few scenes to give in to the Sidebar's demands in the name of 'dharma'.

Amidst these varied male characters, there is one female character that carves a space for her in the film. There is no mention of any such character at all in the story on which this film is based. But this character to me is so strong that it is definitely worth a mention. She comes across as a woman who stands up for herself and other fellow woman. She is

Mukhi's wife. Visibly upset with the way the male dominated society crumples women and uses them when and where they like this woman is not the one to remain silent. She is ignored by her husband because she could not bear a male child. This greatly disturbs her. When she steps out of the home to send her daughter to the school, the mukhi verbally reprimands her. But later that day when she realises that Sonbai and the other women trapped in the high walled factory need help she gathers a few other village woman and marches out into the village streets rebelling. This time she is beaten by the mukhi and locked in the house.

There is one particular scene, where we see her carrying lunch for the women trapped in the factory. This is a scene where we see how she empathizes with the trapped women. Even though she is not amongst the women inside the factory walls, in her own life she is very much trapped.

As all these events unfold, slowly we are led to the final part of the film. As the Subedar himself approaches the factory, he is surrounded by the village men. What is interesting is that the men of the village are of the opinion that Sonbai must be given to the tyrant in the hope that this will end his malevolence.

While the Subedar forces the door open, Abhumiya is ready on the inside to take on the wronged men. He fires at the Sidebar's men and is shot back in return only to die. Seeing the man who guarded her life die for her sake, fills up Sonbai and also the other women with a new spurt of energy. They are quick to think and act. Using the ground chilli powder as their handy weapon they throw a sackful of it into Subedar's eyes. This obviously inflicts tremendous pain and the Subedar falls flat on the ground. The film ends with Sonbai standing over Subedar who is

crying out in pain holding a dagger. We can easily guess what could have happened next. Probably the Subedar went blind or was killed by Sonbai. Either way, the good triumphs over the evil.

It is interesting to note here that a few quite meaningful additions in the film have been made. The village sarpanch who is no less a tyrant than the Subedar visits him and requests him to provide relief to the poor villagers in the taxes. Another meaningful addition to the movie is that of the lecherous Subedar attracted by Sonbai and following her at the lake or stopping her as she passes his tent and ask her to spend time with him. Here Sonbai slaps him back and in turn begin the chain of events that lead finally to the Subedar's end.

I would like to conclude by saying that the interdependence of fiction and films leads us to some interesting facts. Fiction is an art of words, whereas film is that of visuals. In fiction we see/imagine place as they are described in the written word. But in a film we are not left to imagine, we simply see the actual location/place. This means that while a work of fiction makes use of words to describe a place, the same is done with the help of cinematography in a film. When we read a work of fiction, we read the descriptions of characters, events and locations and in turn imagine them to suit our understanding. Each reader's imagination would differ and would thus interpret the descriptions in their own way. This imagination would differ from person to person. But when the same work of fiction is adapted into a film, the filmmaker's imagination is seen on screen by all the viewers. It is believed by many that a good adaptation is that which is faithful to the original source. Here it is often forgotten that the two mediums are different and each has its own advantages and limitations. Therefore what would be suitable for one medium could prove to be disastrous for another. It can

be said here that a good adaptation is that which balances the original source and also the adapted version.

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