

Film and Television Adaptations of Byomkesh Bakshi

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Abstract: Literature has always been a great source for films with countless literary characters making their way to the silver-screen. Depending on the vision of the directors, these characters often undergo massive transformation and hence appear very different from what we read in the books. In India, Sharadindu Bandhopadhyay's literary creation Byomkesh Bakshi has been one of the most adapted characters. The first Byomkesh Bakshi to grace the Bengali screen was Uttam Kumar picked by Satyajit Ray to play the detective in Chiriakhana (1967). Rituparno Ghosh's Satyanweshi (2013), an adaptation not of Satyanweshi but of another novel Chorabali (Quicksand) also failed for different reasons. The problem with Anjan Dutta's adaptation of Byomkesh is that it fails to offer anything new.

Keywords: Film adaptation, Television adaptation, Literary characters.

1. Introduction

Literature has always been a great source for films with countless literary characters making their way to the silver-screen. Depending on the vision of the directors, these characters often undergo massive transformation and hence appear very different from what we read in the books.

In India, Sharadindu Bandhopadhyay's literary creation Byomkesh Bakshi has been one of the most adapted characters. Directors ranging from Satyajit Ray to Basu Chatterjee and Dibakar Banerjee have created their own versions of Byomkesh.

2. Byomkesh Bakshi in Satyajit Ray's Urban Milieu

The first Byomkesh Bakshi to grace the Bengali screen was Uttam Kumar picked by Satyajit Ray to play the detective in Chiriakhana (1967). Chiriakhana was Satyajit Ray's 2nd attempt to visualize urban Calcutta, the first being Mahanagar. Satyajit's Byomkesh was made just before his Calcutta Trilogy and most importantly, as some might observe, helped him as the experience proved fruitful. Byomkesh Bakshi's appeal as the self-styled inquisitor, a detective not by profession but by passion, found him a dedicated following among generations of readers.

But Chiriakhana was remembered as Ray's bad film. Uttam Kumar made a very unconvincing Byomkesh Bakshi. His star image came in the way of making him believable as Byomkesh.

From his 'distanced' performance, it seemed that he lost interest in the role and the film halfway through. Uttam Kumar was as brilliant an actor as he was popular as a star. But he looks absurd disguised as the Japanese horticulturist Okakura.

3. Rituparno Ghosh's Satyanweshi and a Very Different Byomkesh

Rituparno Ghosh's Satyanweshi (2013), an adaptation not of Satyanweshi but of another novel Chorabali (Quicksand) also failed for different reasons. The original story is a nail-biting suspense happening away from Calcutta in a small 'kingdom' where Byomkesh and Ajit are invited to solve the mystery of a missing accountant. Bollywood filmmaker Sujoy Ghosh is cast as Byomkesh Bakshi with Anindyo Chatterjee playing Ajit.

Rituparno Ghosh's Byomkesh was a bit atmospheric, and it did his best to keep the period feel alive. The story was not tampered with, it was slow, kept moving with a pace to be careful, the cinematography, the narrative, and everything else seemed okay. But once again the movie's lack of script and a very weak Byomkesh, in terms of acting, failed to do justice to this adaptation as well.

4. Byomkesh Comes Back in Anjan Dutta Adaptations

The first, Byomkesh Bakshi, was adapted from Adim Ripu rooted in the tragic story of a young man born of an illicit relationship desperate to be acknowledged by his biological father. The next, Abar Byomkesh was adapted from Chitrabor and the third Byomkesh Phire Elo, was adapted from Beni Sanhar. Abir Chatterjee plays Byomkesh in all three. But once again it was a missed opportunity.

The problem with Anjan Dutta's adaptation of Byomkesh is that it fails to offer anything new. It was tepid, lacked proper execution and failed to move away from the shabby script that ruined the appeal of Byomkesh. Chatterjee is one of the best Byomkesh Bakshis we have seen on screen except Rajit Kapoor's portrayal that practically identifies him with Sharadindu's Byomkesh. Dressed in spotless white kurta-pyjamas or dhoti-kurta, Abir has been given a pair of black-framed spectacles which adds to the dignity of his character. His performance brings a handsome Byomkesh Bakshi to life.

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5. The Perfect Byomkesh in Basu Chatterjee's Byomkesh

Considered by many to be the finest adaptation of Byomkesh Bakshi and also one of the best television series to be made in India, Basu Chatterjee's Byomkesh is a cult and even now. Doordarshan has regular re-runs of the show. Here Byomkesh, played by Rajit Kapoor, looks as if he just came out of the books, which was a tough act to match and that is why the adaptation is just perfect.

Basu Chatterjee invested heavily on the character and the script and maybe that's why his adaptation even today has remained a benchmark. Maybe it was Basu Chatterjee's connection to middle cinema that helped the cause and made this adaptation of Byomkesh a stunner. Also, Rajit Kapoor as Byomkesh was flawless as he easily managed to look the simple, ordinary yet sharp Satyanweshi that Byomkesh was.

6. The Re-branding of the Detective as Detective Byomkesh Bakshy

Director Dibakar Banerjee's adaptation of one the famous Bengali detective of the 1940s, from Saradindu Bandyopadhyay's novels, is an ambitious and indulgent undertaking. With Sushant Singh Rajput playing the sleuth and the rock-themed background music, the film garnered much hype. Dibakar known for his out of the box films, left no stone unturned to make Byomkesh pan-Indian and move away from all the adaptations done till now.

First, he has fused several Byomkesh Bakshi stories as a single tale. Second, Dibakar Banerjee has added some of his own creations in here, like characters that are not there in the original stories and not only this, Dibakar has also changed the characteristics of the major protagonists. Third, the soundtrack of Byomkesh is a mix of metal, funk, hip-hop and even jazz. Fourth, Dibakar invested a lot of time to perfect the script of Byomkesh.

7. Conclusion

Since it is a period film, parts of Kolkata were re-created by production designer Vandana Kataria, to get the feel correct. Dibakar's Byomkesh is an attempt to re-interpret the character and totally change the image of the dhoti-kurta wearing sleuth and make him more edgy, more devious than the Byomkesh we all know him to be.

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