

Analysis of *Lion* (2016) as an Adapted Biopic of

“A Long Way Home”

M Asif Ikram Anjum^a

Lecturer, Department of Humanities, CUI Lahore campus

*Correspondence Address: asif4605@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study sets out to analyses a biopic - Lion (2016) which is adapted from Saroo Brierley's bestselling book "A Long Way Home (2013)". The book and the movie depict the incredible life history of SarooBrierley, a five years old child and now a young man who used modern technology "Google Earth" to rediscover himself including his childhood life and hometown in India. At the age of five, the unfortunate SarooBrierley got lost in a local train in India which caused him to face many dreadful realities of life in Calcutta before being formally adopted by an Australian couple through an orphanage. The analysis of the study reveals that the movie qualifies for Giannetti's (2008) concept of faithful adaptation as well as Wagner's (1975) two modes of adaptation i.e. transposition and commentary. The present study also addresses Stam's (2000) criticism on strict fidelity to discuss medium specificity approach. The study concludes that biopic, representative of its genre, has specific conventions and the movie Lion (2016) successfully qualifies for biopic as a genre.

Keywords: Biopic Genre, faithful, transposition, commentary

Introduction

The present study aims to analyze the movie “Lion (2016)” as an adaptation of the book *A Long way Home* (2013). Broadly speaking, autobiography is difficult to define because it is used synonymously with memoir, life writing, self-narrative and it almost denotes all the modes of telling one's own life. Autobiography is the narration of author's own life or a significant part of it. Writing about oneself gives an account of a person's own experiences in one's life. Author of an autobiography develops his/her self in a specific given social, cultural, political and familial context. In an autobiography, the narrator reviews

a significant portion of his/her life and considers it as a process of interaction with a coexistent world (Weintraub, 1975). History always remembers the names of those people who fight against all the oddities of life and struggle hard to prove their identity. Such people may remain unnoticed by common people but the motivational life stories of these people can never be ignored by a writer. Once they are brought onto the paper, many movie makers bring their efforts on the screen by making biographic movies (biopics) because the aim of the biopic is to explore and unravel the real life stories of significant individuals. Scarcity of the review of literature available on biopics shows that it is has been the least explored and the least recognized area among the researchers. Bulkina (2013) further strengthens the view by stating that biography has never been recognized as a genre in itself because of its changing priorities. Neale (2000) adds more on the above by saying that the biopic has never been a matter of serious concern among critics. With the passage of time, biopics became acceptable to viewers and critics because a few of them were based on the bestselling biographies. Watson (1999) suggests that autobiography appeals the readers who seek in it truth about another human's life. Saroo Brierley's bestselling book *A Long Way Home* (2013) is a highly appreciated autobiography which revolves around the life of Saroo Brierley. After getting familiar to the incredible life story of an Australian (adopted) young boy Saroo Brierley, Garth Davis was ambitious to bring his life story on the screen. *Lion* (2016) remained successful, not only among its viewers, but also critics because of the promotion of universal humanity.

Research Problem

Although the concept of genre is not new, the biopic has a long history but it has never attained the status of a separate genre with its specific customs and traditions.

Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to find out:

- i. the extent the movie *Lion* (2016) is faithful to Saroo Brierley's book *A Long way Home* (2013)?
- ii. the possible changes that can take place in the movie due to the change of medium.
- iii. whether the movie *Lion* (2016) qualifies for biopic as a genre.

Research questions

Q. 1 To what extent is Lion (2016) faithful to A Long way Home (2016)?

Q.2 What possible changes have taken place in the movie due to the change of medium?

Q.3 Does the movie Lion (2016) qualify for biopic as a genre?

Scope of the Study

The present study highlights the importance of biopic as a separate genre with its unique identity. It aims to unveil certain traditional misconceptions about the notion of biopic and this study has the potential to unveil new avenues of research in biopic genre which will be helpful for future researchers working in the field of biopic genre.

Literature Review

Scholars disagree on the origin of autobiography as a genre. A rapid increase in the number of autobiographies over the last fifty years suggests that it is a very recent genre but personal narrative transcends the limitations of time and place. Autobiographical writing has been with us since long, irrespective of the titles it takes. According to Olney (1998), the practice of autobiography has been with us for a long time and it is with us in generous supply today. Autobiographical writing is not a recent genre of literature; it has existed under different titles. Gusdorf (1980) is the earliest scholar of autobiographical genre who granted this form of literary genre. It examines the actions of an individual who warrants the respect of the society and its acclamation and claims that collection and narration of one's own past is not a universal phenomenon. Autobiography asserts itself only in recent centuries and is employed on a small part of the map of the world. Alabi (2005) disagrees with the above argument by stating that autobiography is a recent genre and suggests that autobiography has been a long-established and popular medium of communication in different cultures. Mason (1980) also stresses that writing autobiography is an ancient genre of writing.

Just like autobiography, movie adaptation is as old as the text itself. Adaptation is often described as problematic because whenever there is a portrayal of text on the screen, there is always an issue of loss which is quite natural due to the change of medium. It is very important for the adaptation to be in line with the changing demands of the relative era. According to Burnett (2012), it is compulsory for

every adaptation to comply with the requirements of the existing era. A comparison of the source text with the adaptation of the source text has always been a hot debate among critics and researchers. According to Cattrysse (1997), differences from the source text should never be considered unfaithful rather these differences should be considered as the norms of movie adaptation. Further expanding this point of view, Marciniak (2007) asserts that adaptation and source text should not be compared to each other because of their genre requirements. Whelehan (2006) seconds the view by saying that whenever there is a comparison between the source text and its adaptation, there is always an issue of superiority and inferiority. So, it is far better to take these two genres as independent. Talking about fidelity issues, Ştirbeţiu (2001) says that fidelity to the source text is another issue that is very hot among critics. In earlier times, fidelity of the adaptation with the source text was regarded as a tool to gauge the success of the adaptation. Different researchers have proposed different categories of adaptation. Giannetti (2008) categorizes literary adaptations as literal, faithful and loose adaptations. Literal adaptation is normally restricted to plays. Furthermore, literal adaptation involves a movie which is based on a stage play which basically preserves both the setting and dialogue of the original e.g. Mike Nichols' *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (1966) is a good example of Edward Albee's play of the same name. Faithful adaptation attempts to recreate the literary source and attempts to preserve the plot structure, characters, and major events and tries to recreate the literary source by keeping it as close to the original spirit of the book as possible e.g. *Tom Jones* (1963). Loose adaptation only takes a single idea, theme, situation, or characters which are then developed independently and is often done with older texts such as Greek myths, Shakespearean play and movies based on true events also fall into this category. Examples of loose adaptation include *Dangerous Liaisons* (1988), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1992) and *The Iron Giant* (1999). Wagner (1975) classifies adaptations into three modes: transposition, commentary, and analogy. Transposition is a type of adaptation in which the screen version sticks closely to the literary source e.g. *Wuthering Heights* (1939). Commentary is a type of adaptation where the original is purposely or unwittingly altered due to the intentions of the movie-maker. The analogy is a further deviation from the original work to the point where the movie can be seen as a

separate work of art (McFarlane, 1996). Moving away from the issues of fidelity, Stam (2000) suggests talking about medium specificity approach.

Custen (1992) defines biopic as composed of life or the portions of life of a real person whose name is used. According to Berger (2014), the biopic is mostly associated with melodrama. The narrative is based on a protagonist whose development is narrated according to the classic dramatic arc. According to Taylor (2002), the genre "biopic" is characterized by weak narration in which the story is often told in episodes resorting to stereotypical as well as mythical story patterns. Custen(1992) examined the ideological dimensions of biopic production processes during the studio era while Bingham (2010) examined the modern biopic as a form of cultural representation. Talking about the process of making of biopic, Spirou(2014) says that the real challenge on the part of moviemaker is to decide what to select and what not to select from the source text. Although everything is not possible to convert on-screen, sometimes a few scenes are hard to portray for which the concept of invention is important because it helps the moviemaker to cope with the challenges of portrayal which are otherwise impossible.

Society plays a vital role in the construction of identity and one shapes his-self according to the norms presented by the society for his acceptance in the society. A subject takes different models offered by the society and shapes them according to his/her own choice (Coslett, 2000). Autobiographer uses not only the factual events but also considers social representations and cultural values. Self and society are interconnected; self collectively makes society and on the other hand, self gets its identity from the culture and the society around him. *Lion* (2016) is a real-life story of Saroo Brierley, a five years Indian champ, who got lost in a local train and after facing the oddities of life finally adopted by Australian couple leading to his discovery of original family and hometown through the use of Google Maps. Garth Davis, Australian television, movie and commercial director directed the movie *Lion* because he was immersed in the story of the young Indian child. Talking about the inspiration behind this movie, he replied that "the story is very attractive and magical. Therefore, I decided to come to India to see the reunion of Saroo with his genital mother after 25 years. The experience of this very moment was awesome ---

weeping, laughing and hugging--- all this can never be attained from the book”(Hindustan Times, 2017, February 06). The propitious movie is accredited with the cast of high-profile actors like Nicole Kidman, Rooney Mara, Dev Patel, Deepti Naval, Nawazuddin Siddiqui, and Tannishtha Chatterjee. All the crew worked willingly and comfortably with each other. The screenplay of the movie was written by Luke, the Australian award-winning playwright. The movie’s budget was \$12 million while it earned \$140.3 million at box office which shows its universal applause. The most prominent themes of the movie *Lion* are poverty, home, identity, and above all humanity because the movie *Lion* is based on one of the stories which seem fairy tales occurring in utopic world because it dramatically states the story of a young Indian boy, Saroo Brierley, who got lost, away from his hometown and unable to recall his hometown and finally adopted by an Australian couple enjoying all the luxuries of life, and after twenty-five years, he is going to reunite with his genital family by using Google Earth. The movie shows that man should never give up courage because, after oddities, a good time is always there. When the movie shows desperate young boy wandering around the streets of Calcutta, lying on the ground on the railway station and eventually attacked by child kidnappers, he tried his best to prove himself as the fittest person for his survival because it was the only ray of hope which could have resulted in a grown-up, prosperous Australian businessman Saroo Brierley. After getting lost in Calcutta, Saroo continues to wander around the city before his encounter with apparently nice woman named Noor who shows her affection towards young Saroo and finally offers him to come to her apartment where she tells Saroo about an affectionate man, Rama, to help him find his home because he was always busy in helping others. When young Saroo comes across him and realizes that both of them are just seemingly affectionate and have bad feelings for him, he escapes the place instantly followed by a strong chase of Noor. Spending alone two months in the vicinity of Howrah Bridge, he is observed and finally taken to the police by a young man. The young child was unable to recall his birthplace as well as family which eventually decided his fortune to be in the orphanage. Spending a period of three months in that orphanage, Saroo comes across Mrs. Sood, a very kind-hearted woman who informs him that she has made a great effort to find out his family by placing an

advertisement about him in several local newspapers but did not get any response. Afterwards, it is brought into notice of the young Saroo through Mrs. Sood that an Australian couple wants to adopt him. Upon the consent of Saroo, she starts teaching English to young Saroo so that he may not face any difficulty in interacting with his adoptive parents and finally he moved to Hobart, Tasmania in 1987. His adoptive parents, Sue and John Brierley, were very kind and affectionate and it was their affection which helped him in settling down smoothly. After one year, his adoptive parents adopted another boy, Mantosh, who was always in trouble adjusting to his new home. In the movie, there are occasional flashbacks showing Saroo helping his mother in lifting stones, wandering in search of food and often stealing coal from the running train with his brother Guddu because the exchange of coal with the shopkeeper was the only source of getting milk for the poor family. At the end of the movie, a slideshow covers the main incidents of his life including his stay at NavaJeevan, his home in Australia with his adoptive parents along with Mantosh, and the meeting of his genital mother and the adoptive mother. In the end, song “Never give up” is very soothing to mitigate the effect of loss occurred in these 25 years and raising a sign of hope as expressed by his genital mother Kamila, “I never gave up hope of Saroo’s coming back home” because hope sustains life. The movie *Lion* (2016) remained very successful among reviewers and critics. *Lion* (2016) earned 8.1/10 rating by IMDB, 4/5 by Common Sense Media and 86% by Rotten Tomatoes which proves the success of the story among viewers and critics. According to a critic from Times of India, Vyavahre (2017), *Lion* movie is full of sadness and happiness, frightening as well as inspirational. *Lion* movie breaks your heart into pieces and then mends it well. It makes you believe in miracles and encourages you to face all the atrocities of life through consistency and courage. According to Chen (2016), critic from Common Sense of India, if you want to watch the movie *Lion*, you should be ready to cry a lot because it is all about a young child whose innocence affects your heartbeat --- it is about the young man who was alive only with the memories of his family. Even the word “Lion” symbolizes courage and strength to never give up against the atrocities of life. The screen-play writer, Luke Davies, in an interview, reveals that he was lost in the life story of young boy and wanted to

make it lifelike and declares *Lion* as a faithful adaptation of *A Long Way Home*.

Methodology

The present study aims to analyze the movie *Lion* (2016) as an adaptation of SarooBrierley's book *A Long way Home* (2013) in the light of Giannetti's (2008) concept of faithful adaptation on the one hand and Wagner's (1975) categories of adaptation as well as Stam's (2000) medium specificity approach on the other hand. The movie *Lion* (2016) as biopic is also checked for its compatibility as a genre of the biopic in itself.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of the present study is based on the theories, modes, and mediums of adaptation proposed by Gianetti (2008), Wagner (1975) and Stam (2000) on the one hand and conventions of biopic as proposed by Bingham (2010) and Cheshire (2015).

Analysis and Discussion

This segment discusses analysis of the data followed by discussion.

Lion (2016) as Faithful Adaptation

The analysis of the movie as an adaptation of SarooBrierley's *A Long way Home* (2016) reveals that Garth Davis' *Lion* (2016) successfully qualifies Giannetti's (2008) concept of faithful adaptation because except a few changes, due to the change of the medium, the movie is very close to the source text. There are many instances which prove this close relationship between the source texts. For example, both the book and the movie are based on the life of SarooBrierley, a young Indian child, showing him wandering around his hometown with his brother, Guddu, covering the time span of his being lost to his reunion with his family. Certain changes are definitely there, because whenever there is a portrayal of page on screen, change is certain. The book covers 170 pages and it is not possible to discuss every detail in the 160 minutes span of the movie. Moreover, movie encompasses all the major incidents which revolve around SarooBrierley to make it more lifelike including his childhood hobbies, the family's poor health, means of livelihood, getting lost from parental family, alone child in a train heading towards Calcutta, troubled life on the station, moving in the orphanage, adoption by Australian couple and finally his reunion with his family. The movie also qualifies for Wagner's (1975) modes

of adaptation, transposition and commentary. As mentioned earlier, a transposition is very similar to faithful adaptation where the source text is portrayed on the screen with minimum perceptible interference, while commentary is a mode of adaptation where the moviemaker deliberately or inadvertently alters a few scenes for re-emphasis. Even though the movie is true to the spirit of the book but apart from the missing scenes, there are some changes that make this movie slightly different from the book. In the movie, SarooBrierley is shown stealing coal with his brother Guddu while the book starts with epilogue and remembering of SarooBriereley's wishes to ever come across his genital family (Brierley, 2013). The only emphasis in the opening of the movie on Young SarooBrierley shows the deliberate attempt on the part of moviemaker to glorify and make the character of young innocent child more appealing which qualifies for the commentary mode and which takes its root from the concept of invention. Another difference can be noted in the movie which is the portrayal of his genital mother Kamla. The text reveals that she is very beautiful woman (Brierley, 2013) while in the movie, she is not portrayed so. In the book, Kullu is mentioned while in the movie only Guddu is shown as his brother. The possible reason behind this may be his association with his childhood friend and brother with whom he used to have fun. The book talks about the environment of Nava Jeevan which is totally different as shown in the movie. In the book, the kids used to go to school and the young Saroo used to wander around the orphanage while in the movie, there is nothing mentioned like that. Administration of this orphanage is shown very cruel in the movie as compared to the book. One possible reason may be to depict the true situation of orphanage where alms and funds are utilized for so called care of the children.

Changes according to the Medium

Above cited analysis shows that the movie is faithful adaptation of SarooBrierley's book *A Long way Home* (2013). It also qualifies for Wagner's modes of adaptation: Transposition and Commentary. The movie *Lion* (2016) is checked for a medium specificity approach proposing that an adaptation should be faithful to the essence of the medium rather than the source (Stam, 2000). The question of fidelity has always been central among researchers and critics. Stam (2000) is totally against the issue of fidelity and asks whether it is the plot or physical description of the characters or the intentions of the writer, the

movie should be faithful to. Therefore, medium specificity approach is highly desirable which states that the movie should be faithful to the essence of the conventions of movie as a medium. Movie is a genre which uses hypermedia to meet the expectation of the audience as compared to the text. As mediums of representation, the movie is made of icons while the prose is made of signs (Monaco, 1981). Because of the visual appeal, the images in the movie have more subtle relationship with its viewers which is not in the case of words. Additionally, the sound in the movie has greater liberty to enhance the understanding of its viewers. The movie has advantages as well as disadvantages because movie makes comprehension easier among its viewers but at the same time, it fails to dive into people's inner world (Bo, 2008). Complying with the approach of medium specificity, the movie is best suited to watch and complies with the needs of modern viewers.

Lion (2016) as Biopic

According to Polaschek(2013), biopic has been underestimated as a genre which is also supported by Bingham (2010) by saying that film industry has never given biopic a status of genre having its own conventions. Cheshire (2015) further adds on by saying that the genre of biopic is still deficient without having specific codes and conventions. The movie *Lion* (2016) has been attempted to analyze as a biopic; an independent genre. According to Cheshire (2015) and Bingham (2010), biopic should not only revolve around the life of a real person because this genre does not cater fictional characters but also avoids the stories where the name of the protagonist does not match real person. The protagonist should be an important person and should have done something big in his life. By following these requirements, the movie complies with these conventions because it revolves around the real person, SarooBrierley who is a successful Australian businessman as well as motivational speaker. He has also run a non-government organization to help missing children. Before the publication of the book, SarooBrierley was a lesser-known person but just after the publication of his book, in which he used Google Earth to discover his homeland. Review of the literature shows that the subject of the biopic was preferably a flawless personality but now with the passage of time, it has started accepting the weaknesses in their character and the same can be traced in the movie where Saroo,

along with his elder brother Guddu, used to steal coal from the train. The second major convention is the narrative time frame of the biopic which is selected according to the importance of the life period of the protagonist. In *Lion* (2016), the time frame is SarooBrierley's childhood period to his reunion with his family. As far as period of release is concerned, *Lion* (2016) was released in 2016 in Australia with its almost international release in the world when the issue of missing children grew viral around the globe and the text at the end of the movie reveals that every year around 80,000 children go missing in India. As far as the narrative structure is concerned, *Lion* (2016) follows a chronological order of the life of SarooBrierley; although, there are occasional flashbacks to help the audience in comprehending the theme. *Lion* (2016) strictly follows historical accuracy convention of the biopic. The last convention of biopic is that it has become auteurist director's genre (Bingham, 2010). Garth Davis, director of the movie, best known for directing episodes of the series, took personal interest in the direction of the movie. He personally visited India along with SarooBrierley to come across his genital family. He worked very hard on the young actor "Sunny Pawar" to make him feel comfortable in front of camera because of his first exposure to camera. *Lion* (2016) proves itself a perfect example of biopic.

Conclusion

The present study aims to analyze the famous movie *Lion* (2016) as an adapted biopic of *A Long Way Home*. The analysis of the data and the findings of the study corroborate that the movie qualifies for the status of faithful adaptation of the book. Moreover, biopic qualifies in itself as a separate genre. Adaptation is not just a mere replication of the source text but it is something beyond it because of its own traditions and values. *Lion* (2016) is undoubtedly a faithful adaptation of SarooBrierley's *A Long Way Home* (2013) but it does not replicate all the events of the book. Some scenes are deliberately altered by the movie-maker for reemphasis which qualifies the commentary mode of adaptation as proposed by Wagner (1975). The movie also conforms to Stam's "medium specificity" approach (2000), as a number of scenes are omitted, reduced and modified for easy intelligibility. *Lion* (2016) also conforms to the conventions of biopic as a genre. It revolves around a real and alive person, SarooBrierley, covering a time frame

from childhood to reunion with the family. The narrative structure is linear following the chronological order in the movie.

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