

SHIRLEY L. ARORA'S NOVEL WHAT THEN, RAMAN? (BETTADA HOOVU)

Abstract

Kannada- language film, Bettada Hoovu of 1985 directed by N. Lakshminarayan and produced by late Parvathamma Rajkumar whose late son Puneeth Rajkumar (1975-2021) was a child artist in the lead role played the naïve Ramu. His performance earned him the National Film Award for Best Child Artist. Deccan Herald rated the film number one among the best “children’s movies in Kannada”. The film won three Filmfare Awards South. Dr. Shirley L Arora, an American writer, and Indian ‘bahu’ married to Harban is actually the contributor of the story from her novel What Then Raman? It is irony that she has hardly made any place among anglophile Indian readers. She is less known and oblivious to the passage of time.

Keywords: Bettada Hoovu, Dr. Shirley L Arora, Anglophile Indian readers, Puneeth Rajkumar.

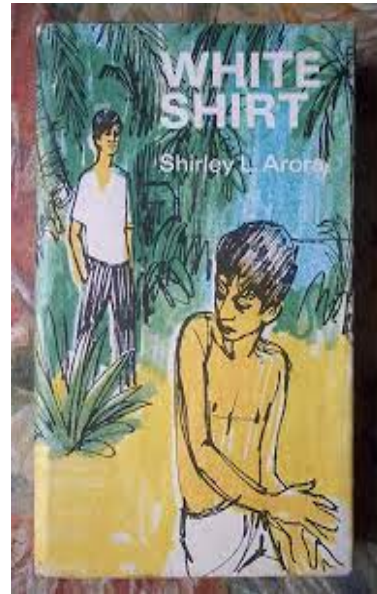
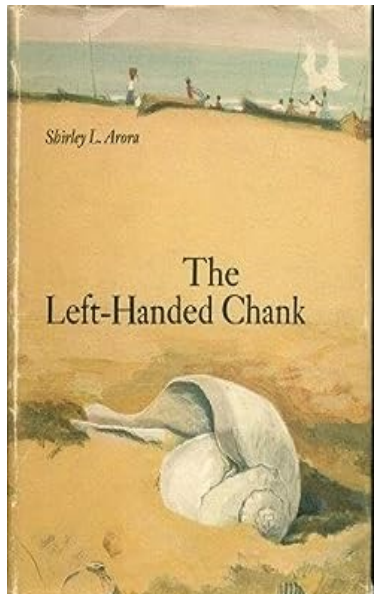
Author

A H Parvin
Assistant Professor
Presidency University
Bengaluru
Karnataka, India.
parvin.hussain72@gmail.com

Indian anglophile who read literary works by Indian writers in English can relate to the culture and life described in English because of the indigenous picture portrayed by them in their works. But there are many foreign authors who have visited India originally for leisure or to write about it; nevertheless, after falling in love with the country, many of them decided to stay permanently. Their writing sheds light on a part of India that we frequently ignore because it seems ordinary. You will be able to see India differently and get a peek of India at different points in its history thanks to these novels by foreign authors like Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof*, Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*; *Out of India*, Taslima Nasrin's *Lajja*, Sam Miller's *A Strange Kind of Paradise: India Through Foreign Eyes*, Françoise Gautier's *A History of India as it Happened: Not as it Has Been Written*, Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and *Kim*, William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns*, Mark Tully's *Upcountry Tales: Once Upon a Time in the Heart of India*; *India's Unending Journey*, Tom Alter's *The Longest Race*. Herman Hesse's *Siddhartha*, E M Forster's *A Passage to India*, Stratton Hawley's *A Storm of Songs*, Roberto Calasso's *Ka*, Mark Tully's *Upcountry Tales: Once Upon a Time in the Heart of India*, Sam Miller's *A Strange Kind of Paradise*, Paul Brunton's *A Search in Secret India*, Paul William Roberts' *Empire of the Soul* and so on.

It is disheartening to know that among the list mentioned above Shirley L Chopra has hardly made any place among anglophile Indian readers. She is less known and oblivious to the passage of time. The readers hardly know her and her literary contribution. Her children's book set in South India includes *What Then, Raman?* (1960) later renamed to *Tiger on the Mountain*, *The Left-Handed Chank* was later renamed to *The White Shirt*.,





She contributed to the study of proverbs by analysing their social importance, particularly from the listener's point of view. The Perception of Proverbiality, which was included in the first volume of "Proverbium"¹ stands out among the author's many proverb-related articles. It was the essay in international proverb scholarship that received the most citations, according to bibliographer Wolfgang Mieder.

About Author:

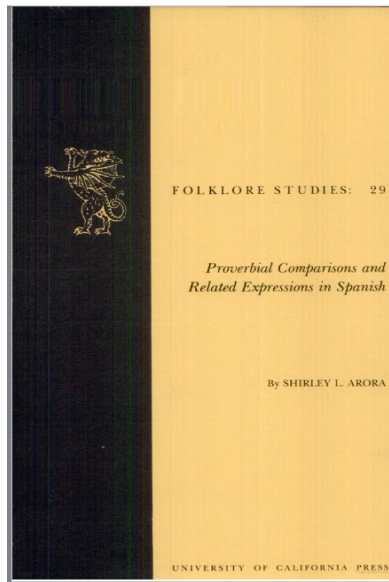


Shirley L. Arora was an internationally famous American researcher who specialised in Paremiology² and folklore. Her research mostly centred on folktales, myths, and bird folklore. Paremiological issues influenced her significant scholarly works. She looked into the proverbial similarities that frequently appeared in Peruvian author Ricardo Palma's

¹ "Proverbium"; Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship, 1 (1984), 1-38

² A proverb is a brief, widely accepted adage that is passed down from generation to generation and that encapsulates knowledge, truth, values, and conventional beliefs in a symbolic, fixed, and easily remembered form. Mieder 1985:119; also in Mieder 1993:24

writings, and in 1977 she produced one of her useful publications, *Proverbial similarities and Related Expressions in Spanish*.

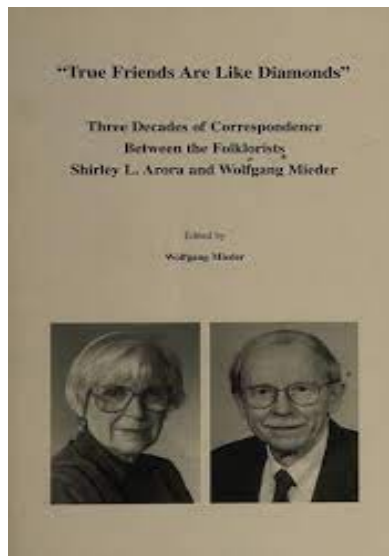


Additionally, she contributed numerous pieces to the Yearbooks *Proverbium* and *Paremia* on a variety of paremiological subjects. Her numerous publications were published in both English and Spanish, but her work on "The Perception of Proverbiality" (1984), which was also translated into Spanish as "El reconocimiento del refran" (1997), made the most significant theoretical contribution. It is one of the books on proverbs that receives the most citations worldwide. She was a well-liked educator, a conscientious administrator, and an entertaining speaker at conferences held both domestically and abroad. She has made immeasurable contributions to the field of Paremiology, for which she deserves enormous gratitude. She also made a significant contribution to the field of modern proverb studies and will undoubtedly be remembered with respect and appreciation. She is particularly well-known among folklorists for her various writings on the La Llorona tale, including the frequently cited work "La Llorona: The Naturalisation of a Legend"³. On March 23, 2021, Prof. Shirley L. Arora passed away at the late age of nearly 91.

Wolfgang Mieder who was acquainted with Chopra expresses that he has never forgotten the pleasure and joy he experienced while reading her book. She gave it to him as a present many years ago, and he was taken by surprise when he realised his Paremiological acquaintance was a published author as well. However, he wished to quote from her letter to him dated January 27, 1995, in which she describes what he had said so far in her own words. He quoted from "True Friends Are Like Diamonds": Three Decades of Correspondence Between the Folklorists Shirley L. Arora and Wolfgang Mieder,⁴ a book of letters he published in 2010 to commemorate their long friendship and Shirley Arora's 80th birthday.

³³ Arora, L Shirley. "La Llorona: The Naturalisation of a Legend", *Southwest Folklore*, 5 (1981), 23–40.

⁴ Mieder, Wolfgang. ed. "True Friends Are Like Diamonds": Three Decades of Correspondence Between the Folklorists Shirley L. Arora and Wolfgang Mieder Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 2010, pp. 80–83



He still has a few copies of this 314-page book. One of her letter is autobiographical in nature as follows:

January 27, 1995

Dear Wolfgang:

[...] I was born in Youngstown, Ohio. My parents had moved to California just after their marriage but they actually drove back all the way across the country just so there would be one more native Ohioan in the family. (It was no easy trip back then, either, even if it was not exactly like cover wagon days.) Less than a month after I was born they drove all the way out to California again. Except for the years I spent in India, and short visits elsewhere, I've lived here ever since. I grew up in Glendale, went through the local school system and community college, then left to attend Stanford. Harbans [Arora] and I met there. He's from Punjab (Northern India) and was getting his Ph.D. in biology. When he finished his degree, he went back to India to fulfil his contract of government service (a requirement of the fellowship that sent him to Stanford); I completed my B.A. and my M.A. at Stanford and then joined him over there. We were married in Kodaikanal, a town in the South Indian hills a day's journey or so from Mandapam, the location of the government research station where Harbans was posted. Mandapam is a small, isolated place on the seacoast just opposite the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). When we were there, there wasn't even a road to it; you had to go by train and then walk the last couple of miles from the station. (Now there's a road and a bus.) We lived in Mandapam for close to four years before returning to the U.S. to stay. Our older son, David, was born in Kodaikanal and was two years old when we came back here.

Air fares were out of reach then, at least for us, so we came by ship and then by train, a total of approximately one month. Not a luxury cruise by any means. Harbans was appointed to a research position at Caltech, so we settled in Pasadena. I enrolled in night classes to get my General Secondary teaching credentials, and taught a couple of years in the L.A. school system (junior high Spanish, English, Life Science, Physical Science). Then I was awarded a fellowship at UCLA, so I left my teaching job to become a full-time doctoral student. That was in 1958. In 1960 our younger son, Alan, was born, and in 1962 I completed my Ph.D. I joined the faculty that same year.

My interest in folklore goes back to my years at Stanford, where I studied with Aurelio Espinosa, Jr., and with Juan B. Rael, two leaders in the field of Hispanic folklore studies in this country. (Aurelio Espinosa, Sr., had retired shortly before I arrived, so although I met him I never had a class with him. It was Rael, actually, who got me started in the study of Hispanic proverbial speech, specifically proverbial comparisons; my dissertation topic – the use of comparisons by the Peruvian writer Ricardo Palma – grew out of a class I had with him. During the years I spent in India I kept my Spanish “alive” by reading and re-reading all six hefty volumes of Palma’s work, so that by the time I returned to the U.S. and entered UCLA I had the groundwork for my dissertation essentially done [published as *Proverbial Comparisons in Ricardo Palma’s “Tradiciones Peruanas”* (1966)]. At UCLA of course I worked with Stanley Robe, who was my dissertation chairman. Wayland D. Hand was also a member of my committee. I don’t know what other odds and ends of information might be appropriate to add. Hobbies? I enjoy natural history, especially bird watching, and besides the “usual” travel to Europe and a couple of visits back to India, I’ve done some of what could be considered “eco-travel,” including trips to Costa Rica, the Galapagos Islands, and the Peruvian Amazon (twice). Most of my field research has been concentrated in Mexico and Spain (and of course Los Angeles). An offshoot of my interest in natural history has been an interest in folklore related to animals and birds, and I’ve been doing articles on birds for the *Encyclopedia of American Belief and Superstition* [that was unfortunately never published].

My novel grew, as you know, out of my experience living in India. *What Then, Raman?* is set actually in Kodaikanal (although it’s not called that in the book), and the other book *The Left-Handed Chank*, has as its setting the seacoast where we lived most of the time. The film *Bettada Hoovu* is a Kannada-language version of *What Then, Raman?*, Kannada being the language of Karnataka State. The state government gives prizes for the best films each year, and *Bettada Hoovu* won the second prize for 1985, while at the same time I was named “Film Writer of the Year” (!). Although I missed the awards ceremony (which included, I’m told, a rain of rose petals falling down on all of the awardees), I was given a very nice private award ceremony when I went to Bangalore, the state capital, a few months later. The film went on to win the national government award as best regional film of the year, and the boy who played “Raman” won India’s equivalent of an Oscar as best child actor. (If there’s time during your visit here in April, maybe I can show you the video of the film; it has English subtitles, which the Indian government provides for all prize-winning films so that they can be shown on TV – English still being the de facto common language in India.)

[...] All the best, Shirley

Through this letter we get brief bio-note about Shirley. This letter also reveals her connection to India and how she got her sir-name “Chopra.” It also talks about her interests, hobbies, achievements, her literary contributions. She also makes mention of popular Sandalwood film *Bettada Hoovu*, the film adaptation of her novel, *What Then, Raman?*

This book can be regarded as a classic for young readers. Despite its relative obscurity, it belongs on the same shelf as Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*. Shirley L. Arora's *What Then, Raman?* was published in 1960. It has won both the Jane Addams Children's Book Award and the Charles W. Follet

Award. Later, the book was retitled *Tiger on the Mountain*. Numerous additional languages, including Swedish, German, Danish, and Urdu, have also had this book translated.

The reasons why readers might find this book so interesting are: First of all, it had a unique subject matter at a time when fantasy, historical literature, and stories about English and American children dominated the market. Second, Shirley Arora had a profound concept, and her writing is incredibly warm and sympathetic to her characters. The illustrations are provided for every important scene to make it easy to imagine. One of the important themes is the value of education.

I. DISCUSSION

A person in a rural location can overcome the barrier of the poverty trap with the aid of education. According to the research, it is discovered that a person's ability to escape the poverty cycle is dependent on the socioeconomic position of their family. Further research reveals that these people's educational attainment is essentially nonexistent, as their poor socioeconomic standing prevents them from having access to a healthy environment, good schools, and amenities. Those who choose not to attend school or deprived of education may result in unemployment or low-incomed petty jobs with hand-to-mouth situation which pushes people into utter poverty.

In this story, Chopra, portrays a struggling 11-year-old child who lives in Kodaikanal in the Palani Hills during the 1950s who is the subject of this Indian English novel. His mother cultivates and sells vegetables, and Raman's father is a wood cutter. Even though they are struggling financially and Raman's father is illiterate, but he insists that Raman attends school because he feels that education will help Raman lead a better life. Raman is the first person in his village who is learning to read and write. Raman himself aspires to be a teacher and is compelled to purchase a lovely book from the stand of the neighbourhood bookshop. For Raman, books open up a completely new universe. He wishes to be a “great scholar” someday by reading many books and also wish to own the bookshelves and many more things for himself.

Reading becomes his love, especially classic tales of legendary Indian heroes. He saves money and buys tiny paperback novels from the shopkeeper Tumbuswamy. But what he really wants is a physical copy of the *Ramayana* with exquisite illustrations. For Raman, getting an education and making enough money to acquire that book are difficult tasks. He discovers that his ambition to learn sets him apart from his previous pals because he is the only person in his town who can read.

The bond between Raman and his parents is equally complicated. Raman's father supports him in clinging to his dream while acknowledging the need for economic realities. Raman is tasked with taking care of the family while his father is out working to make money. In order to keep the family fed in the here and now, Raman's mother is preoccupied. She doesn't even have a choice between food and Raman's reading. The prevailing crisis forces Raman to ultimately leave school. He discovers a means to make money by gathering wild flowers for a woman from the United States who is a college professor taking a break in the hill country guesthouse to write and illustrate a botanical book.

In a terrifying episode, Raman takes a chance by entering a mountainous jungle where ferocious tigers live, in order to find orchids and earn the money, as he needs to realise his aspirations. South Indian hills are where Raman resides. As a result, he is familiar with the mountain's one-eyed tiger folklore. He is very certain that he doesn't exist and that it is just an old man's story. Raman had to scale the mountain by overcoming many obstacles nonetheless. For the family's rice, he must get a job. Had not his father told him that he is responsible now for the others. He advances significantly towards manhood as he comprehends the significance of his father's words and carries such a heavy load on his young shoulder for the family. Generally, some youngsters of his age even after having privileges, and access to books yet they take it for granted. But Raman had to struggle so hard to make both the ends meet. Many such children like Raman had to literally fight for things in India due to poverty, especially in remote (hills) or rural areas for survival.

Being a young boy, Raman hasn't really considered anything besides the idea of acquiring an education and possessing a book. He views these as goals in and of themselves. He simply wants to be in academics, not a woodcutter. Just learning was sufficient for Raman prior to meeting the American instructor. The American woman, however, who purchases his orchids strikes up a conversation with Raman and shows an interest in him. Raman explains to her that he wants to go to school and that he is the sole reader in his family and village. He expects her to be immensely be impressed with him with words of appreciation, but instead she responds that it is a great responsibility. Raman promises her that he will become a famous scholar and amass a large library because he feels she isn't expressing enough admiration for him. She teaches him, however, that his education comes with a duty that is considerably bigger than the advantages it grants. When the teacher asks, "And what then, Raman?" he searches his heart for the response. Raman would naturally be infuriated at this point. Earnestly, is it not enough for Raman to become educated and become a scholar in order to escape the cycle of poverty and illiteracy? She demands more of him. But as this notion began to take root in Raman's head, he pondered: What good is education? What purpose does it serve to read so many books? As Raman returns home and contemplates all of this, his younger sister regrettably remarks that she would dearly want the opportunity to attend school as well. Since Raman is aware that this is not possible, he offers to teach her himself. The following day, her best buddy arrives with a desire to learn how to read, and Raman's old acquaintances begin to appear.

'We can't go to school in the town,' Jesu-Dasan, went on. "But if you could teach us, Raman, in the evenings after our work is done, the way you teach Vasanti and Dasan... Raman was silent. I wonder if I could, he thought. It would not be easy. How would I go about teaching so many?...The thoughts came tumbling faster and faster. Raman felt excitement mounting within him. He could do it! He would do it! He would be – he smiled at the thought – he would be a teacher!"(43)

Raman begins to realise that he need not stand out from the other members of his village because of his schooling. He can continue to work towards a degree and apply it to a project that benefits those in his community. The book celebrates a sense of belonging and community. It is an invitation to use the talents one has been given to serve one's community. Throughout the novel, the idea of community and familial loyalty is woven in.

When Raman has finally saved enough money for which he has worked really hard, even ventured into the tiger-infested woods to purchase the lovely, illustrated book he craves, the story's climax occurs right at the conclusion. He goes to the market while holding six rupees. Raman begins to give the money to the bookstore after going there. He holds his breath. Winter is approaching, and he was distracted when he saw his little sister's foot poking through a hole in their old, worn-out blanket that morning. He simply cannot get her out of his mind. He gently haggles and purchases a large, cosy crimson blanket using the maths he struggled with at school. The worst part at that point is to decide between buying a book for himself and a blanket for his younger sister. We can tell from the book's excellent writing that Raman has chosen wisely. He has suddenly realised the value of education. Education benefits our heart as much as our brains. It is not something we have only for ourselves because it makes us happy; neither is it an end in and of itself. Unless we are prepared to utilise it to help those around us, it has no value. Despite the adversity, Raman's zeal and persistence never diminishes he tells the bookseller that someday he would buy the book he desires to read.

“Tumbuswamy the bookseller, who was old and wise and whose eyes saw many things, looked down at Raman and the paper-covered package in his arms. He saw the tear in the paper and the red wool of the blanket showing through. And because he had also seen the six rupees in Raman's hand before, Tumbuswamy the bookseller understood, and his old eyes as they looked at Raman seemed suddenly a little wet. “Some day,” Raman said softly, “someday, Tata, I am going to buy that book.”

Honesty, character, and the willingness to set aside one's own ambitions and prioritise the needs of our families over our own are the book's primary theme.

The author discusses the importance of reading and oral and written storytelling in Raman's life. The illustrations of young Raman is shown in a lovely scene reading a book while perched on the edge of a cliff. Also, the illustration of old and the young sit around the fire in a circle and listen to Tata Natesan's stories, stories from ancient India as well as Indian mythology and legends, as the author also portrays a nostalgic picture of Raman's village and their love of stories. Shirley Arora is an expert storyteller who beautifully combines action, suspense, poetry descriptions of the Palani Hills, as well as the inner struggles and moral ambiguities in the world of the little kid.

The readers might be wondering what happens to Raman after he purchases the blanket and leaves the market. Shirley Arora provides the reader with just enough details throughout the book to demonstrate that although Raman did end up with a blanket, it's by no means all he has. There's hope for Raman.

In this story, the theme is about the significance of education which not only helps in gaining knowledge but also inculcates moral values, ethics. It teaches how to value the relationship, how to prioritise things, how to handle the crisis and many more things. As a child Raman has learnt the very big value of life that is 'sharing is caring'. He was good in reading so he was sharing his knowledge to his sister and friends. When he found that the torn and tattered bedsheet is not protecting his siblings from the chill, though he had money to buy the book which he was aspiring to read one, yet he prioritised on the need of the hour and opted to buy the bedsheet for the family. Though he was disheartened, yet he was still with the hope that someday he would buy the book which he wishes to read.

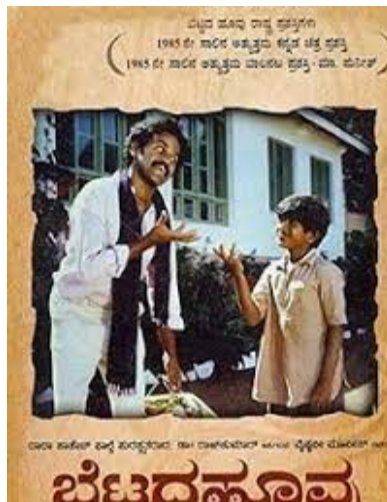
Film adaptation of the novel What Then, Raman?

Shirley L Arora's novel "What then Raman?" is adapted into Indian Kannada-language film, Bettada Hoovu of 1985 directed by N. Lakshminarayan and produced by late Parvathamma Rajkumar whose late son Puneeth Rajkumar (1975-2021) was a child artist in the lead role played the naïve Ramu.



His performance earned him the National Film Award for Best Child Artist. Deccan Herald rated the film number one among the best "children's movies in Kannada". The film won three Filmfare Awards South.

Bettada Hoovu (What then, Raman?)



The narrative centres on Ramu's early years. Ramu, who was raised in a low-income family, works in a guesthouse where tourists from abroad lodge. He enjoys reading books written in Kannada. Ramu wants to study so that he may provide for his family, but his family's circumstances are not good. Ramu's lifelong goal is to buy the Kuvempu-penned Sri Ramayana Darshanam. By offering wild flowers to a botanist, he begins to amass savings.

However, the circumstances force him to choose between buying a book and a blanket to keep his family warm throughout the bitter winter. An account of dashed expectations is what follows.

Puneeth plays Ramu, a young boy born into a poor family, living with his parents and two siblings in a hill station. His parents hardly make ends meet; mother working as a fruit and vegetable seller, and father running errands in and around the village, often as a help to the visiting tourists and sell chopped woods. However, Ramu likes reading books and going to the school. He even friendship with a healthcare worker, who teaches him English after school. He is fascinated after watching a screening of the film Sri Ramanjaneya Yuddha in his village and also upon seeing Kuvempu's Sri Ramayana Darshanam at a bookstore, both based on the epic Ramayana, and wishes to buy the latter to read. Costing Rs. 10, he begins working towards it.

Due to an off-season when tourists return home, Ramu's family situation becomes dire and his father has to move to the city in search of work, leaving the responsibility of managing the family to young Ramu. Ramu is now forced to drop out of school to and to earn for his family. He starts doing little chores around the village like carrying the luggage of the tourists and cutting grass, while saving a part of his earnings towards buying the book. He begins selling wildflowers to an American teacher, who is writing a book on Indian wildflowers. He earns ten rupees, enough to buy the book, when he brings an orchid flower to the teacher. However, when he goes to buy the book, he has a rethink. He has to make a decision between buying the book or a blanket to comfort his family members from the chilling winter cold. In the end, he decides to get the blanket, much to the happiness of his family. But then his dream of buying the book is shattered.⁵

The protagonist of the story, Ramu, is portrayed as a boy of ambivalence and at times as resilient, a flitting figure between endurance and despair, vulnerability and violence. This story examines the world from the child's perspective. Here we see Ramu dealing with serious poverty and oppression. The story offers unique insights into this young mind who is witnessing and at the receiving end of such harsh realities. Regardless of how movie is presented, it conveys a truth about the human condition, including the struggles and bittersweet victories of life. This movie, regardless of the format, it will make the audience feel nostalgic.

Can films be considered literature in the same way that prose and poetry are? Of course, the lines aren't exactly drawn, but literature typically refers to something that is largely expressed through language (writing, spoken word, oral storytelling, dramatic monologue, etc.). Film is typically thought of as largely a visual medium, despite the fact that it contains other forms of media as well (music, speech, etc.). The term "text" as a blanket term for cultural creation arguably works better because it is less ambiguous, even while it isn't specific enough to encompass the fact that literature and film are both creative, audience-oriented texts. Along with the tools to address its mixed media elements, we can apply all of our literary criticism techniques to film as well. From text to theatre to film, a story might occasionally come full circle.

According to Forbes, screenplays that are adapted from books can make up to 53% more money at the box office than original screenplays. For whatever reason, adaptations of

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bettada_Hoovu

novels into films are more popular among moviegoers than original works of cinema. However, not all films based on books are created equal although they are all generally superior to the average video game movie. Despite the vast differences between the novel and the feature-length film as artistic forms, discussions about the triumphs or failures of certain adaptations are inexhaustible among cinephiles.

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