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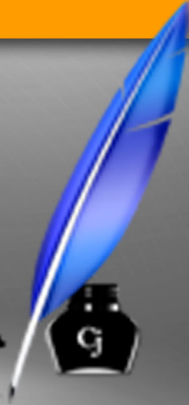
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## Children's Books Adaptations: A Reading of *War Horse*

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### **Abstract:**

Adaptations are significant in the sense that they offer a rebirth and reinterpretation to the once forgotten literary works through an audio-visual narrative. Clad in the new form of technology, they transcend the boundaries of literacy enabling the text to have a deeper penetration into the ideological framework of the present society. The phenomenon of adapting literature into film has flourished in the late nineteenth century, and children's literature has left its own landmarks in the arena from *Alice in Wonderland* (1903) to recent *Hunger Games* (2012) movies. Film-makers' reasons for this adaptations of literature can be cross commercialism as well as a high-minded respect for literary works which induce their preservation in a different medium. This paper discusses the complexities involved in the adaptation of books for children with special focus to the Spielberg movie *War Horse* which is an adaptation of the book by Michael Morpurgo.

**Keywords:** Children's literature, adaptation, cross commercialism.

'The media we use and the stories they tell help to make us who we are'.

- Mastronardi (89)

As the formative years of childhood lay the foundational stones of a kid's future, the transformative energy of children's literature is something that cannot be ignored. According to Perry Nodelman, literature for children is part of a colonization process that adults play on their own offspring in the same way the Western super powers controlled the Orient. They are spoken for, therefore silenced; their histories are written for them so that they might live accordingly. Didactic to the core, they contain the seeds of domination within, in order to secure the child who is outside the book. "In other words, we show children what we "know" about childhood in hopes that they will take our word for it and become like the fictional children we have invented – and therefore, less threatening to us" (Nodelman 32).

If the Puritans have started writing for children during the sixteenth century to teach them scriptures, so that they will be absolved from the sins they are born with, the focus has shifted now to a class and gender consciousness and giving an awareness of the power structures of the society they are to live. "Perhaps more than any other texts, they reflect society as it wishes to be, as it wishes to be seen, and as it unconsciously reveals itself to be" (Hunt 2). The stories they encounter in their earliest days provide them with caricatures, images and attitudes which in turn become a part of the adult identity they will carry and modify throughout their life.

The sector of children's films too, like its mother genre, is not yet liberated from the politics of ideology. As entertainment industry is part of the consumerist world and is therefore not freely given, it is succumbed to the demands of the corporate arena. In this tradition we have *Home Alone* series which advertise the aristocratic life style, *Toy Story* with the definition of good kids and bad kids, and *The Land Before Time* which alludes to Christian mythology and gender difference.

Children's films in general are linear and follows an Aristotelian narrative pattern with a beginning, middle and an end which proclaims the happily ever after of the fairy tales. Journeys which result in the transformation of the protagonist and the presence of alternative worlds function as an integral part of the plot. In the words of Bazalgette and Buckingham this is unsurprising given that "childhood is often seen as another world" (1).

The history of children's cinema is as old as the history of the film which dates as far back as 1895 with Lumiere Brothers' production of *Watering the Gardener*. And the commercially successful literary adaptations of the silent era include Cesar Antamaro's 1911 version of *Pinocchio* and Hepworth's *Alice in Wonderland* (1903). Special effects too found their way to celluloid through literary adaptations of *A Trip to the Moon* (1902) and *Aladdin* (1906). With the rise of MGM, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Warner Brothers and Disney cinema passed through its golden age with a handful of literary adaptations ranging from *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) to the box office hit *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

Though movements like American Film Noir and Italian Neorealism might have passed over this budding but influential arena, their capstone pictures like *The Bicycle Thief* and *The Window* (an adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's novelette *The Boy Cried Murder*) featured adorable child characters. The contribution of the Third Cinema to children's film sector cannot be neglected at this instance; during 1950s it emerged with Indian director Satyajit Ray's The Apu Trilogy [*Pather Panchali* (1955), *Aparajito* (1956), and *The World of Apu* (1959)] and the 1980s witnessed another two famous examples: *Pixote* (1981) and *Salaam Bombay* (1988). In Ian Wojcik – Andrews' words "they offer a perfect counterpoint to films such as *E. T.* and *The Little Mermaid* and the image of the child offered by the Disberg stables" (108). And the children's books adaptations still gather audiences and provide a new birth and visual pleasure to popular story books as in *Harry Potter* series, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Golden Compass*, *Eragon* etc.

From time to time the famous directors have suffered the snubs of critics and Disney is in the forefront. For instance Frances Clarke Sayer's interview "Walt Disney Accused" published in *The Horn Book Magazine* of 1965, condemns Disney's adaptations of canonical fairy tales as overly simplistic and sentimental without the tragic tension between good and evil. "Without these moral contrasts, the adaptations are just 'sweetness and light' . . . it is bad for morality and society" (Andrews 37).

Steven Spielberg is another name which stands out in this history and his movies are often called as homage to Disney. Though he inspires a traditional portrayal of children, the children in his movies are never entirely innocent or devoid of knowledge; in their dramatic and action oriented stories they echo the real world in some way.

This paper focuses on one of Spielberg's own movies which bagged six Academy Award nominations in 2011 including that of Best Picture. *War Horse* which in Spielberg's words concerns itself with the 'love story' of a horse and its owner, is an adaptation of a children's novel by Michael Morpurgo with the same name. Published in 1982, the story got its breakthrough with an acclaimed theatrical adaptation which won an Oliver Award and five Tony Awards and the magical words of this former Children's Laureate reshaped the history for young generation. Morpurgo's inspiration for a World War I story for children was a result of his talks with veteran soldiers, his experience with children who stayed in his charity organization – Farms for City Children – and ultimately the haunting painting of F. W. Reed which shows horses during First World War charging into barbed wire fences. The story runs along the following lines:

Novel begins at Joey's infancy where this little horse-narrator is painfully snatched from his mother. He finds solace in his new master Albert, a kind and gentle boy of thirteen, who trains him for farm and rides him well too. But the outbreak of World War I fractures this curious animal-human relationship; Joey is sold to the army for the mortgage money and a long picaresque adventure begins. Army acquaints him with a new friend, Topthorne, but his owners (first Captain Nicholls and later Trooper Warren) soon become a prey to the enemy bullets. Both horses find themselves at the mercy of Germans where they are treated gratefully to bring the wounded back from the battlefield.

Emilie, a little French girl befriends them while they are camped at their grandfather's farm and the happy days are back again though short lived. Their second sojourn in the battle shatters Topthorne and he dies leaving Joey alone in the no-man's land. The wounded Joey, to the utter shock of the readers, is given a helping hand from a soldier from either side and by the tossing of a coin his ownership is passed to the British side.

Albert, who has joined army with the determination to save his soul mate, meets him at the veterinary hospital. When the horses are auctioned in public, Albert loses Joey to Emilie's grandfather who bids for him for the little girl who is no more. But on hearing Albert's devotion, the old man hands over Joey to him for a penny and a solemn promise to take care of the horse. Albert returns home victoriously and marries his sweetheart.

On May 2010, Spielberg announces his intention of a movie adaptation with Lee Hall and Richard Curtis as scriptwriters and the idea is brought to theatres on the Christmas day of 2011. Producing an audio-visual counterpart to the literary text involves an appropriation in accord with the cultural and ideological mindset of the new spectators and when that includes the ever shifting minds of children, the task turns to be all the more challenging. Morpurgo's *War Horse* is intended for children below the age of twelve and the purpose of this particular narration is stated in the beginning itself through a fictional author's note: "Some in the village, only a very few now and fewer as each year goes by, remember Joey as he was. His story is written so that neither he nor those who knew him, nor the war they lived and died in, will be forgotten" (Morpurgo 6).

Spielberg's visual extravaganza bears these words and pays tribute to this idea, at the same time concentrating on a much wider family audience. The presence of an animal protagonist makes the story exclusively for children, but the use of constant swearing words, war scenes and killings objects its presentation to little kids. Animal stories often offer an effective articulation regarding the issues concerning children partly due to the similarities that they share in their status; the same reason makes it all the more difficult for a transformation to visual media without digital techniques.

Adaptation, whether it is to stage or movie, is not simply a reflection of the things in source work but an interpretation and a new creation of art having a distinctive existence of its own. French New Wave considers the director as the auteur with the assumption that the films of the same director contain common traits as does the books of a single author. Though it should be admitted that the director is the king as he is held responsible for the vision and success of the movie, the fact that cinema is the result of a collaborative effort cannot be disregarded. The director and the scriptwriter share the honour of adaptation, but for the sake of convenience as well as a matter of importance, this paper will refer *War Horse* movie as a Spielberg film.

The success of an adaptation depends on its reinvention of the original and presenting it as something new and fresh. In the words of Linda Hutcheon, part of the pleasure of

watching an adapted movie “comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing an adaptation; so too is change” (4).

With the exception of some few surprising shifts in character roles and plot development which makes it appropriate for a family audience, movie on the whole remains faithful to Morpurgo’s original text. *War Horse* bears the credit of being the first Spielberg movie shot entirely in Britain. Movie covers twelve locations and the Wisley Airfield at Surrey is used as the setting of French battle scenes. Specially designed mud makes the battle field appear authentically filthy. Except for three shots which are used to ensure the safety of the horse, there are no digital maneuvers applied. The Devon landscape with its magnificent clear blue sky towering in the background becomes the perfect setting for the growing up of a yearly colt and young lad, both in the movie and the book.

However a major shift occurs in the matter of narration. Like in Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*, Morpurgo’s Joey narrates his own story thus dominating over his human masters. While in animation movies animals do speak, it is difficult to get into a horse’s head during a realistic picture. The technique is to use a voice over but Spielberg chooses the method of omniscient narration which opens up possibilities for further development in plot and character. The absence of an alluring first person narrative creates a distance between Joey and the child audience but makes the movie more palpable to an adult mind. While in the book Joey’s narration ensures his survival of war (as the story is much like a flash back), movie puts the spectators on edge about his safety from time to time making the picture more turbulent.

Morpurgo details what Joey sees, but the movie offers more. Albert’s role is elevated to that of a hero along with Joey and in between the war scenes camera shoots over to Devon and continues his story in parallel. His unnamed parents have become Ted and Rosie Naracott, and Spielberg turns the drunken father in the book to a Boer war veteran who gives away his farm to his brothers and settles down on a waste land. This father’s credentials put more expectations on young Albert of the movie who follows his father’s footsteps to war.

Jeremy Irvine who plays his debut role as Albert in the movie looks seventeen, though the Albert in the book is only thirteen when the story opens. This proves to be helpful as the introduction of another character to show his growing process would have crowded the scene. Moreover, the absence of Zoey, Joey’s old horse friend in the farm helps to stress the powerful bond of brothers between Joey and Albert. With Albert the Devon landscape attains a character of its own which makes him proudly announce ‘We’re Devon boys’.

A war story as usual predicts the nonexistence of female characters in major roles. Tradition demands their limitation to weeping mothers, consoling daughters and angelic nurses. During the formative years of childhood media serves as the constant source of information on gender distinctions and provides “a nonstop flood of normative models of male and female behaviour” (Huntemann 308). They become what they see. In accordance with these *War Horse* portrays two female characters.

Rosie, the nameless incapable housewife of the novel has become an enlightened creature in the visual media. Evidently Spielberg doesn’t want to present a passive lady of 1982 with her understanding of husband as her lord and master, to a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience. Movie’s Rosie make things work and Ted Narracott has that understanding and respect for her. As an avid supporter of her husband, whom she might hate more but never love less, her



spirited nature won't allow anyone dictate her on the matter of family, not even Lord Lyons the landlord.

On the other hand, Emilie's character doesn't fare that well. She is the much awaited comic relief among the war scenes but remains as the shadow of the confident, brave Emilie of Morpurgo. The thirteen year old is pretty, her prattling amuse the audience, and her weak physical stature and untimely death provide the ample sentimentality the little girls offer in movies. While Morpurgo features Emilie as a rare girl who rides Joey often and gives them up to the army with a brave face and startling authority, movie has turned her into a cry baby whose first attempt to ride Joey – a manly, independent action – ends in their separation forever. With Albert she shares a mutual affection for Joey, but unlike her English counterpart her gender status makes her incapable of pursuing her vision to save Joey. Men go out and make things happen but girls wait for things to happen.

Adaptation is called a surgical art which involves usual subtraction or contraction. This filtering of the story to make it more appropriate for the new age, ensures that the audience's familiarity with the text do not breed contempt. Morpurgo's novel is not long but Spielberg has got rid of the part of Trooper Warren and Herr Hauptmann and has brought two different aspects in return.

Entry of Lord Lyons puts forth a peasant vs. land gentry theme to the plot. A simple bet between two fellow farmers is developed into a conflict between the working class and the aristocracy where nature gives Naracott family the ultimate victory. The very sight of Joey rejuvenates the repressed feelings of Albert's father and he buys the young colt in an unusual price in order to spite his landlord, to prove that the greedy sod can't just buy everyone. His victory might be short lived (there is rent to pay) but that does not make this Boer war hero a slave.

The story of the Schroeder brothers, another fresh addition to the plot, gives light to the war on the enemy side. Spielberg has his fare share of World War II movies (*1941*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, *Empire of the Sun*, *Schindler's List* and *Saving Private Ryan*), but *War Horse* is his first attempt on a World War I theme. As it's a movie for children and family, the brutally realistic pictures of war with its mangled bodies is avoided; the combat lasts only twelve to fifteen minutes and there is hardly any blood or close up shots on the war scene. The death of Captain Nicholls and his company is shown metaphorically with rider less horses and the faces of the dead enemy soldiers are turned away from the screen to prevent intimacy.

Morpurgo has taken care not to put any prejudices against Germany on the little minds. He has introduced his book as an anthem to peace, which doesn't concern with the 'pity of war' like Owen. The horse doesn't take any sides but fights with both German and British army and the movie follows this suit. Though they are murdering each other, no one knows what its all about which is apparent in Albert's words: "I don't know what it's about, something about some old Duke that's been shot somewhere. Can't think why that should matter to anyone, but she [mother] says we'll be in it all the same" (Morpurgo 16).

Schroeder brother's desertion of army to fulfil a promise to their mother makes clear that the German shares the same feelings. The story gives the enemies the human element and prevents them being stamped as emotionless monsters. The unrealistic but beautiful climax where both sides join together to save Joey, makes the message clear to the young: War is a nonsense affair, "any problem can be solved between people if only they can trust each other" (Morpurgo 82).

The recurring image of Ted Naracott's army pendant adds a romantic charm to the movie. Novel gives the reference of a German soldier awarding Joey with Iron Cross for his services in pulling ambulances and the movie develops this into a symbol of brotherhood between Joey and Albert, a charm that keeps Joey safe. Pendant keeps Albert's memory alive throughout the movie so there won't be any mistake as to the true master.

Language is a major problem that confuses the story. Joey's picaresque journey acquaints him with English, French and German languages and though it is a bit unrealistic he seems to comprehend all without any troubles so as to narrate it well. Spielberg too uses this filmic license as a change in language will affect the coherence of the plot. Instead the German and the French characters use highly accented English which gives way to no doubts on their respective nationalities.

Unlike literary texts visual adaptations lack in techniques to mirror the interiority of a character and they rely mostly on the actor's ability. Soundtracks in this respect play a major part in directing the audience's response to a chain of events, taking over the role of metaphor in the cinematic medium. In the words of the sound editor Walter Murch, music in film "functions as an emulsifier that allows you to dissolve a certain emotion and takes it in a certain direction" (Hutcheon 41)

War Horse is the 25<sup>th</sup> collaboration between Steven Spielberg and composer John Williams, and the soundtrack received a Sammy Award for the Best New Film Score CD. The sixteen parts in the original score combine the pastoral and majestic beauty of the countryside with a quiet clarion to war and adventure, using a combination of Celtic and English folk music. Starting with a warm Celtic feel in the early cues of "Dartmoor, 1912", the mood gets darkened as the story enters into war scenes and Williams gracefully completes the circle with a slow return to the bucolic mood of Celtic tones in "The Homecoming". Film opens with the sun raising over the calm countryside, so the setting sun of Dartmoor and a return to the same musical pattern gives the story the much awaited completion and the desired welcome to the winning Knight.

Finding his pet horse alive from a war is nothing short of searching a needle in haystack and Spielberg has retained this miraculous aspect of Morpurgo's story throughout the movie. Its foundation might be a literary work, but that doesn't make an adaptation second rate or inferior. Morpurgo was an unknown writer from Devon these past years, and now his story and his message have got to millions. In an educational side too adaptation plays a major role as an entertaining film or drama version stimulates children to read the book on which it is based. Cutting away the differences in literacy which prevents one's access to knowledge adaptations bring literary works to a larger audience thus "giving it an afterlife it would never have had otherwise" (Hutcheon 176).

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