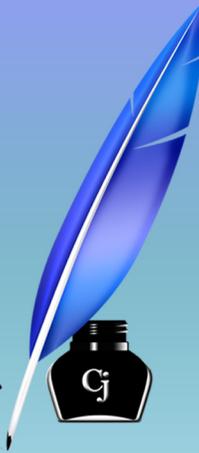


ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access Journal

June 2013 Vol. 4 Issue- III

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com
criterionejournal@gmail.com

Translating Literature into Visual Images: From Fiction to Film

Pragati Shukla

Research Scholar,

Dept. of English and Modern European Languages,

University of Lucknow.

What technique takes place when narratives expressed through the written words are transformed into the language of sound and moving pictures? The purpose of this paper is to discuss the interesting process of transforming a work of literature into film with the especial study of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*.

Guide, Devdas, Angoor, ShatranjKeKhiladi, Maqbool, Omkara, 3 Idiot, these are famous film titles from the past years. They have one thing in common. All of them have literary sources; they are film adaptation of novels, drama or short –stories. But the term ‘adaptation’ is not a new phenomenon at all and not just a part of film studies. If we talk about intertextuality, we find that stories always seem to draw from other stories. Even the ancient Indian dramatist, poets like Kalidas, Tulsidas based their work in most cases on myths and stories that had already been told. Moreover the process of adaptation first came in literary studies when the reader started changing words into images. In other words, in literature this process takes place when a reader reads a text and starts to change or alter the words of the text into images in his mind. Thus the process of adaptation shows a relationship between words and images, and in cinematic world, it shows a relationship between a verbal text and a visual text. The term adaptation is sometime used as, transference, transformation and interpretation. But it is incorrect to use it in this sense because a film, based on a work, is not a transference or interpretation of the text but actually is an adaptation or alteration of a verbal text into a visual text. In other words, it is a making of a new text not an interpretation of the text.

The study of adaptation process itself is fascinating look at how meaning is created with words in literary text, and how that verbal meaning is translated into the visual images. The cinematic adaptation, like life itself, cannot duplicate a pervious text. It may approximate it, vary it, or extrapolate ideas and feeling from it. When studying the adaptation, the excitement is not in finding the approximation of meaning made from one text by another but it lies in the comparison of both media, in the discovery of how a verbal text takes a concept and works to create a mental image, how a cinematic text utilizes technology and visuals to translate those concepts onto the screen.

There could be several issues among the directors for film adaptation such as- an interest in the work, search of a good story, economic security etc. But the problem is always same – “How to adapt?”. Yes, in adapting a novel, the screenwriter is always faced with difficult choices: what to include/exclude, how to compensate for necessary removals, how to cast characters and incidents, how to show what the writer tells just because the major problem is of time and language. Films operate in physical time which is limited and the novels end when the author wants or he feels like it. Except it, the language of written text is satirical, classy and metaphorical which cannot easily be conveyed through cinematic language which has different tools. According to some critics, we cannot adapt fiction into film because both are different medium of expression. They argue that fiction allows the reader to his own fancy, creativity, and

vision-even doubt- to see a particular scene, event or character. The author has no final control over this; what he offers is a direction, a frame which the reader then fills. In a film, on the other hand, this frame is already completely filled; nothing is left to be imagined. So when we watch an adaptation, it could go two ways: either deepens and enlarges the imagery we had from the reading, or, it could be dissatisfaction, lacking so much of what we had seen when reading the story.

It is true that film and fiction both have different tools, but one thing we should not forget that sometime films deepen our impressions and images: they fill gaps from which a reader isn't even aware of especially in case of non- native reader. For example in the novel *The Color Purple*, as a non-native reader we were not aware of many images and situations as Nattie's life in African continent etc. As a non- native reader we cannot exactly imagine her situations because we don't belong to African society .So what we did, we imagine the things according to our own surroundings, but actually it is the film which fills that gaps in our mind or intensifies our images and expressions. Furthermore, films dramatize different events simultaneously on one screen, a clear limitation of the print medium. In other words; hundred pages of novel can be expressed only in one scene.

Thus, it can be said that though film adaptation is a crucial issue among the practitioner of both art form but we cannot deny the fact that film based on a work has its own definite value both in cultural background and literary setting.

There are different types or categories of adaptation, depend on the situation, director/writer' choice, and on the availability of the audience. According to Wagner, there are three types of adaptation which are in trend- literal, traditional and radical adaptation.

1. **Literal adaptation** is an adaptation where the director reproduces the plot and all its attending details as closely as possible to the word of the book. For example- adaptations of Shakespeare' plays by BBC or adaptation of R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi Days* by Rajshri production.
2. **Traditional adaptation** is an adaptation where the director tries to maintain the overall persona of the text such as plot, mood, settings, and stylistic conventions but also makes little adjustment in the visual representation that he finds as necessary and appropriate to the story. For example-in the film adaptation of the novel *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, there is no description to the death of Dr. Urbino' friend Jeremiah de Saint-Amour.
3. **Radical adaptation** is an adaptation where the director reshapes the book in extreme and radical ways both as a means of interpreting the literature and of making the film a more fully independent work. Radical translation has two stages-
 - (i) Where the director re-interprets the story by relocating it in terms of time, setting, place, etc. as Vishal Bharadwaj does in *Maqbool* and *Omkaara*.
 - (ii) Where the director takes the story as a medium to convey his own ideology as Rajkumar Hirani does in *3 idiot*. This film is based on the novel *Five Point Someone* by Chetan Bhagat which deals with the student's life in IIT, love and narrates how a five point student can also get a good job. While in its adaptation, the director changes the main theme and comments on education system of India, raises the

issue like student' suicide etc and gives a message to the audience, "Pursue excellence, and success will follow you".

Thus we can say that adaptation is a matter of director's choice. Now after discussing the major aspects of adaption theory, we will evaluate Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple* as a part of film adaptation theory.

The Color Purple is American period drama film directed by Spielberg, released in 1985 and based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel by Alice Walker. It was shot in Anson and Union counties in North Carolina. *The Color Purple* is a story of a poor and an unfortunate black girl Celie, set in the early 1900's. Walker's use of epistolary form of writing where Celie's letter to God gives us a vision of her life and throws light on the plights of African American women such as poverty, sexual abuse, racism and post colonialism. The reader is able to follow Celie through years of growth and maturity. Celie is transformed when she finds her confidence through the help of two strong female companions – her sister Nattie and her husband's friend Shug.

Theme -In the novel *The Color Purple*, Walker presents Showalter's three stages of feminism - feminine, feminist and female very pertinently through the character of Celie. In the first phase – feminine she presents Celie as subordinate creature in Albert's house where she does not have her own voice. She only listens and she only speaks to God through her letters. But when Shug arrives in her life, she enters in the second phase – feminist. She finally protests against Alberts and in the third phase- female that is autonomy comes when she finally leaves Alberts house and lives her life according to her will. Thus in the novel through the character of Celie, Walker tries to show how finding your voice and asserting yourself can help you to oppose authority. As Chelsey Boutan points out, "Through Celie's letters to God and her sister Nettie, including her letters about her abusive husband (Albert), it becomes visible to the reader that everyone has the strength to tackle and defeat adversity"(17). When we analyse film adaptation, we find that Spielberg very aptly transforms Celie's letters to God into powerful cinematic images. As Bouten comments :

Similarly, the film represents this theme, but instead of showing Celie writing letters, Spielberg turns powerful letters into powerful scenes. A memorable scene occurs at the dinner table when Albert finds out that Celie is leaving him to go with Shug to Memphis. Direct quotations from the book are used as Celie stands up at the table and calls Albert a "lowdown dog." In a letter from the novel Celie wrote, "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook, a voice say to everything listening. But I'm here" (Walker 207). In contrast, during the movie Celie said this line directly to Albert's face. The film made this line a turning point for Celie, because it showed how she no longer is a submissive, timid individual. On screen, the audience sees Celie transform into a confident woman, who shows that by asserting yourself you can break free from your oppressors(17).

Walker also comments on repetitive nature of sexism which is one of the important notions of patriarchal society of any country. Novel and movie both appropriately analyse the patriarchal dominance and abuse that women tolerate at each stage. For example, Albert beats Celie, Albert and Celie tell Harpo to beat his wife, Harpo beats his wife Sofia. Walker through the character of Sofia and Shug tries to show that this patriarchal dominance and this repetitive abuse can be broken if woman wants. Moreover Walker also comments that woman should be treated as individuals not as sex objects. Again like the novel, film rightly presents this theme.

Character/ Cast -Moreover, the casting of film is very appropriate and according to theme of the film especially the character of Celie. Whoopi Goldberg very faithfully presents Celie's desires and aspirations through her expressions (see figure1). Commenting on casting Boutan points out,

...Actress Whoopi Goldberg embodies Celie, but also brings new life to the character through her sly twinkle, hidden smiles, and silent laughter. These slight differences, not evident in the novel, help the audience to hear and see the transformation of Celie from a passive, invisible person into a strong, independent woman (18).

Figure 1



Set-In terms of set designing, film holds to the novel's setting that is rural Georgia of 20th century. The film was shot in Anson and Union counties in North Carolina (see figure 2) "...Both the film and novel have Celie's story set amongst poor blacks in rural areas of the South. As a poor, black woman from this region Celie has little education and knowledge of the outside world" (18).

Figure 2



Spielberg's version of *The Color Purple* strongly follows the novel's plot. But the ending of the film does not follow the novel. In the novel Walker portrays that Albert and Celie become friends at the end. They sit together and talk to each other but we do not see them together in the film adaptation.

While Celie is the key focus throughout the entire novel, this is not the case in Spielberg's interpretation. The plot turns from the central point being Celie to Albert towards the end of the film. After Celie leaves Albert, her life as a free woman is not portrayed in the film as it is in the novel. For example, Celie's shop is only shown in one scene. Instead, the audience becomes more interested in Albert whose unclean house and addiction to alcohol attract the audience to pity his sufferings. In addition, the film's ending also differs slightly from Walker's novel. In the novel, Albert goes through change and develops a friendship with Celie who said, "And now it do begin to look like he got a lot of feeling behind his face" (Walker 280). Celie's pardon and Albert's awakening are not exposed in the film. (18)

Symbol-Moreover film adaptation of novel very pertinently presents the main symbol that is 'the colour purple'. The film opens with the principal symbol 'the colour purple' as we can see in the image one where Celie and her sister Nattie are playing in the field but here Celie does not understand the meaning of this color as she later admits to Shug, "I never truly notice nothing

God make. Not a blade of corn (how it do that?) not the color purple (where it come from?). Not the little wildflowers. Nothing” (Walker 197). Shug tells her the value and beauty of this God’s creation ‘the colour purple’(images two) , “I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don’t notice it” (196). Moreover the film also ends with the ‘colour purple’ when Celie reunites with her sister Nattie (image three).



Image 1



Image 2



Image 3

Thus it can be said that Spielberg does faithful adaptation of Alice Walkers *The Color Purple* in terms of theme, characters, set, symbol etc. Both the novel and film presents Showalter's three phases of feminism significantly.

Thus after overall discussion, we can say that translating a verbal text into a visual text is a very difficult job and it doesn't matter which method is using by the director , the important point is that his adaptation is doing justice to the text or not.

Works Cited:

- Bluestone, George. *Novels into Films*. Berkely: University of California Press, 1957. Print.
- Boutan, Chelsey "The Color Purple: Evaluation of the Film Adaptation," ESSAI 8.11(2010):17-19. Web Dec 19 2014.
<: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol8/iss1/11>>
- MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 7th ed. New Delhi: East West Pres, 2009. Print.
- The Color Purple*. Director Steven Spielberg. USA: Warner Home Video. 1998. DVD.
- Wagner, Geoffrey. *The Novel and the Cinema*. New York: Associated University press, 1975. Print.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket books. 1985. Print.