

## **Screen Literature: gain or loss?**

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**Abstract:** With the advancement in science and technology everything has taken a different shape. Reading literature that was once considered to be a major source of entertainment and knowledge has now been transformed into screen literature by television, video games and movies. As a result of this critics have started debating the effectiveness of this shift. There are endless examples in this regard and many blockbusters are in fact based on some written books. Not only classics but also contemporary literature is now a part of the new genre called screen literature. Although it cannot be denied that these great stories and characters will live forever not only on paper but also on screen forever. Yet screen literature is not without its disadvantages. The aim of this study which is qualitative in nature is to assess the extent to which the literariness of the original text is affected with particular reference to the novel – *Gone with the Wind* by Margret Mitchell which was turned into movie in 1939 and appreciated as a blockbuster becoming a legendary classic of the American cinema. It was not only the first movie to bag ten Oscars for the very first time but maintained that record until *Ben-Hur* (1959).

**Key Words:** Screen Literature, genre, novel, movie, theatrical translation, transformation

### **Introduction**

For centuries literature remained the most popular form of entertainment encompassing poetry, drama and novel. Reciting poetry in royal courts and in groups etc. was a norm and performance of plays in public goes more than two thousand years back but with the passage of time a major shift came in. Poetry from the long epics and romances turned into sonnets and short poems and even though once it was the most famous genre, it started losing its popularity. If we look at the time line it can be seen that the long verse started getting replaced by the short one around the same as science made progress. Of course literature did not die altogether but a trend that started with the advent of cinema was that of movies based on pieces of literature. 'Although adaptation has been practiced since the days of silent movies, its pervasiveness does not mean that it has been universally accepted. Some theorists have even rejected the strategy per se. numerous commentaries have given absolute preference to fiction over film or to film over drama' (Zatlin, 2005: 150). Certainly this phenomenon is by no means new but the trend is growing. Referring from a 1998 article that was published in *Variety*, Naremore pointed toward the fact that 20% of movies made the previous year, and this is only in America, were adapted from books whereas another 20% 'were derived from plays, sequels, remakes, television shows, and magazine or newspaper articles. This means that only about half of the pictures seen by the public that year originated from scripts' (Naremore, 2000, 10).

Performance of plays continued and theatre thrived in spite of growing popularity of the cinema. Today Broadway is still very popular even though most of the plays are easily available on DVD in the form of movies. Many movie adaptations of Shakespeare's plays are available including the famous 'The Taming of the Shrew' and 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'. Transformations of Shakespeare's works have been given more attention as compared to all other aspects of film adaptation. According to Russell Jackson one of the reasons is probably that the Elizabethan text provides with more room for maneuver. The text can be cut to fit the ideal time of a movie that is under two hours, hence, using only 25-30% of the source text. This practice of condensing is accomplished by 'cutting within speeches and scenes, making the dialogue leaner but (mostly) preserving the scene's original shape' (Jackson, 2000: 17).

This phenomenon can be observed in Michael Hoffman's 1999 film adaptation of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. 'Hoffman retains Shakespeare's language, albeit with cuts, but he moves and modernizes the setting. Although Hoffman's movie shifts the fiction forward, because it does not depart from the original story, it does not classify as an analogy in Wagner's terms' (Zatlin, 2005: 180).

The reason for cutting these plays short has been best stated by British playwright Alan Bennett, 'Film is drama at its most impatient' (quoted in Erskine & Welsh, 2000: xvi).

Tennessee Williams' plays have also been transformed into movies that bear little resemblance to the theatrical version. Another great playwright Arthur Miller's plays have been turned into movies. Famous plays of **Harold Pinter and Eugene O'Neill have been transformed into movies** and no one can forget **George Cukor's** famous musical 'My Fair Lady' sometimes referred to as an improved version of Bernard Shaw's 'Pygmalion'. Although a lot of criticism has been seen as far as screen literature is concerned there are those who have tried to justify and defend the practice. 'The servitude of fidelity is undesirable for all concerned: even if it were possible, it would yield unstageworthy results. Collaboration with living authors is not always easy: the give and take of any interpersonal relationship may be complicated by an author's unwillingness to accept modification to a beloved text. But if the author respects the translator's judgment and open dialogue is possible, collaboration is ideal' (Zatlin, 2005: 5-6). Since theatre is essentially commercial it always aims 'to connect with the sensibilities of today's spectator' (Cuadernos de Teatro Clasico 16, 2002:21).

However, drama is not the only genre that has fallen victim to this practice. Novel has probably suffered more because novels are written for leisurely reading not performance. In his introduction to *Film Adaptation* (2000), James Naremore has cited a 'cartoon that Alfred Hitchcock once described to Francois Truffaut: two goats are eating a pile of film cans, and one goat says to the other, "Personally, I liked the book better."' (Naremore, 2000: 2).

Although the trend of transforming novels into movies started quite early it kept growing with the passage of time and now it seems as if the trend is that as soon as a book is published and gains a certain level of fame and recognition, copyrights are bought and book is turned into a movie. Human beings are born with the gift of imagination and while reading we tend to create mental pictures and have a desire to see them in a vivid visual form. 'We read a novel through our introjected desires, hopes, and utopias, and as we read we fashion our own imaginary mise-en-scene of the novel on the private stages of our minds' (Stam, 2000: 54).

This imaginary mise-en-scene is inevitable but transforming a written text into a movie is not without its disadvantages and some of the problems faced are very similar to those faced in translation. 'In 1992, when I first taught a graduate seminar, "Literature into Film", I was struck by the similarities between translation and adaptation/transformation theory. The strategies and conventions of film are often described as a language. At the fidelity end of the scale, the goal in translating a play to a second natural language or transforming it for the screen is to carry the source text over into that other language with dynamic equivalence' (Zatlin, 2005: x).

But how can these problems be overcome? In defining the relationship between film adaption and source text Dudley Andrew gave three modes that are now considered classic definitions: 'borrowing, intersection, and fidelity of transformation' (Andrew, 1984: 98).

Geoffrey Wagner has suggested using the original dialogue in the new genre exactly as it was in the source text. 'Transposition', is the term used by Wagner and it involves 'the minimum of apparent interference' (Wagner, 1975: 222). The trouble with this approach is, 'How can one simultaneously be true to the author and yet reach the target audience?' (Zatlin, 2005: 5). Zatlin goes on to say, 'Making a movie of a "sacred text" can be risky' (Zatlin, 2005: 173). He admits, 'In theatrical translation, however, some betrayal is a necessity' (Zatlin, 2005: 1). But at the same time he argues, 'Fidelity is in the eyes of the beholder' (Zatlin, 2005: 171). Zatlin is one of the proponents of this practice. 'Theatrical translators and authors of film adaptations should be aware that once a text is removed in time or space from its original context, it has the potential for transmitting new meanings, intentional or not, to some if not all spectators' (Zatlin, 2005: 188).

Zatlin is not the only proponent in this regard. There are others who have favoured and defended the practice.

'Much of the discussion of film adaptation quietly reinscribes the axiomatic superiority of literary art to film, an assumption derived from a number of superimposed prejudices' (Stam, 2000:58).

'The language of criticism dealing with the film adaptation of novels has often been profoundly moralistic, awash in terms such as *infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration*, each carrying its specific charge of outraged negativity' (Stam, 2000: 54).

And according to Robert B. Ray it would be more productive to analyze 'how stories travel from medium to medium' (Ray, 2000: 41).

Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Charlotte Bronte, Victor Hugo, Louisa May Alcott, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Alexandre Dumas, Leo Tolstoy, Bram Stoker, Mary Shelley, James M. Barrie, Gabriel García Márquez, Harper Lee, Truman Capote, H.G. Wells, Thomas Hardy, J. R. R. Tolkien, James Fenimore Cooper, William Wharton, Mario Puzo, John Steinbeck, Lew Wallace, Stephen King, Winston Groom, **Hanif Kureishi, Bapsi Sidhwa, Ken Kesey, Thomas Harris, J. K. Rowling, Erich Segal, Stephenie Meyer,** and Margaret Mitchell are among the few in the endlessly exhausting list of writers whose works have been transformed into movies.

#### **Aim of Study**

Greatest actors of all times have performed in these movies yet screen literature is not without its problems. The problems faced in film adaptation of drama are not as complicated and complex as when novels

are transformed into movies. Drama relies on dialogue whereas novel essentially relies on narrative and that is where the real problem comes in. The aim of the study is to ascertain as to what extent the essence of the original text is lost when it is transformed into a movie comprising of few hours with reference to *Gone with the Wind*.

### **Method of the Study**

The study is purely qualitative in nature. The researcher herself is the subject and opinions have been given in the light of experiences both as a teacher as well as a student. An in depth analysis of the novel *Gone with the Wind* as well as the movie is there considering the differences between the two, using comparison and contrast to see how affected the novel appears to be when the novel and the movie are placed side by side.

### **Findings and Discussion**

One of the major problems faced while transforming a movie into novel is that novel as a genre is essentially dependent on narrative and once words are not written and nothing is explained but only visual aspect can be used along with dialogue too many details are left out, leaving the story rather incomplete.

Time is a major constraint in screen literature. Movie, as a genre, is essentially commercial. Since so much money is at stake it has to target the widest range of audience possible. The running time of the movie *Gone with the Wind* is 3:42 (excluding intermission), which according to the standards of an English movie is rather long. Although a classic and a great hit most of the young generation today finds it too lengthy to be tolerable and skips parts of it. Yet for a person who has read the novel with complete devotion the movie does not do justice to the novel.

Transforming novels that belong to a different era can be extremely troublesome. Even language becomes a problem. However, that is not the case here because the movie was made not long after Mitchell wrote the novel. It was Mitchell who was criticized for the use of racist language when all she did was capture past in all its entirety. So basically the movie had to recapture what the author had already done. There are some errors pointed out in the movie which are more of bloopers. "Factual error: Scarlett is seen walking on the main street on the way to the hospital. You can clearly see a light bulb in one of the street lights."

A critical aspect that cannot be neglected in the success of this novel as well as the movie is that one of the major themes is war. The novel was published in 1936 whereas the movie was released in 1939. World War I was not a distant memory and 1939 was the year when World War II started. The whole idea and experience of the war was very close to the sensibilities of the readers of the novel and the viewers of the movie. It would not be wrong to state that timing did contribute to the success of both the novel and the movie. This is not to demean the grandeur of either or suggest they would be not quite as amazing but movie being a highly commercial form of art is essentially dependent on these external factors for success.

This novel is described as, "Romance novel; historical fiction; bildungsroman (novel that charts the maturation of the main character)". Once we place the word bildungsroman in the description of the genre things become even more complicated. When the novel begins Scarlett O'Hara is only a 16 year old country belle but by the end of the novel she is about 28. Same is the case in the movie. The problem arises that the movie only shows major events that seem to be transforming Scarlett as a person rather too suddenly, the most significant being her coming back home where one of the most dramatic scenes in the movie occurs and she vows she will never be hungry again. That seems to be the moment spanning over a few seconds in the movie that brings about a sudden change and based on that vow her future actions are determined.

That is not the case in the novel. These dramatized dialogues, in contrast, appear to have been mentioned as if only in passing especially to someone who would have watched the movie first and read the novel later. It doesn't mean that the impact of these lines is not strong in the novel but they are by no means dramatized the way they are in the movie. It is not that the protagonist comes back to Tara and the changed circumstances bring about a sudden revolution. Whatever happens everyday, every night, every second, brings about evolution and a permanent fear of hunger. "The narrator follows Scarlett almost exclusively, occasionally pulling back to give broad historical descriptions and analysis".

Movies and even many novels tend to dramatize a few significant events and based on them characters go through major transformations. This is not how things work in real life. No doubt we are the sum of our experiences but to make things clear we can take life as a rock and events as water. One sudden gush might throw the rock from one place to another but it is never enough to break it. Those little drops of water constantly falling on the rock over a long period of time are the ones that finally crack it open. Same is the case with human beings. Major events might shake us but it is the continuity of certain circumstances and conditions that shape us. Simply put we can say the difference is whereas the movie is shaking Scarlett, the novel is shaping her.

Mitchell has presented the picture of the Old South as a whole depicting it not only through narration of events but the society as a whole can only be shown through the interaction of different characters. This aspect is missing in the movie and what South once was and what it becomes is impossible to depict in the movie because

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as mentioned earlier along with the loss of narrative quality time constraint is a major hindrance in making a movie.

Each and every character in the novel has its own place and not a single character is out of place or brought in as a filler. Their place in the society as well as relationship with other characters is of vital importance. Some of the most important characters in the novel are not even mentioned in the movie. It is as if they never even existed. The character of Will Benteen, "A one-legged Confederate soldier who becomes a fixture at Tara after the war despite his lack of family or wealth. Will makes Tara a marginally profitable farm. His competence allows Scarlett to move to Atlanta and leave him in charge". It is with Will that Scarlett shares most of her feelings and that brings out the softer and vulnerable side of Scarlett which is never to be seen in the movie where she is a woman with the will of iron doing everything all by herself without anyone's help or support. Whereas in the novel Will serves as a friend and confidant with the help and support of whom Scarlett makes it through the toughest of times.

Another character that is missing is that of Archie. Archie is significant because it is not simply the incident of Scarlett being attacked in the Shantytown after Archie refuses to work for her since she has hired prison convicts to work in the mill. This is the event that leads to the involvement of men with the Klu Klux Klan and death of Frank Kennedy. Archie's refusal to work for her is not just about the cause and effect relationship but the rules and principles these people stood by even in the state of poverty. Refusing to give up what they believed to be true even after the apparent victory of the North is by all means something that becomes a major reason for conflict between Scarlett and the rest of the characters thus making her a rebel that stands out.

Scarlett has two children from her marriages before getting married to Rhett Butler and those children are never mentioned either. Going through a terrible time in Tara when she meets Grandma Fontaine and has a conversation with her, the significant part of the conversation is where fear being pivotal to a woman is mentioned.

"Ah, well, that's been fifty years ago, as I said, and since that time I've never been afraid of anything or anybody because I'd known the worst that could happen to me. And that lack of fear has gotten me into a lot of trouble and cost me a lot of happiness. God intended women to be timid frightened creatures and there's something unnatural about a woman who isn't afraid...Scarlett, always save something to fear-even as you save something to love..."

Although Scarlett is obviously ruthless yet it seems it is the fear of hunger driving her when in fact at the same time there is a strong element of lack of fear about her personality that leads her to be as ruthless as she is. This conflict leads to irony and lends amazing complexity to her character that cannot be explained or put into words. Mitchell has given a complete picture of the Old South falling apart and when so many characters go missing the picture of the society as whole is lost.

Of course due to time limitation dialogues and thought process of the characters in the novel cannot be covered. With these aspects missing not only the complexity of characters but relationships is also lost. Ashley Wilkes and Rhett Butler are not the over simplified, obvious on the outside kind of characters as they appear to be in the movie. Watching the movie one gets an impression that Ashley Wilkes is a perfect Southern gentleman and Scarlett is blind to all his flaws. On several occasions in the novel Scarlett does see the obvious flaws in Ashley's personality but turns a blind eye to them.

The sensitive side of Rhett's character never comes out in the movie except for toward the end and there too we get a glimpse of it for Melanie alone. His love for Scarlett beyond physical attraction is nowhere to be seen. The intimate moments full of love and care are missing. Scarlett's long thought process toward the end of the novel, the day Melanie dies serves as an overall commentary and in depth analysis of her relationship with Melanie, Ashley and Rhett. Looking back, even for the reader, this is the time to ponder and realize that Melanie all along has been stronger than the reader thought her to be.

This is one of the amazing qualities of the novel that the reader and the protagonist recall many events that took place and understand them at length together. Melanie's death for Scarlett is like losing her mother all over again. That she was the strongest person who stood by Scarlett's side quietly through the years even though her strength is taken for granted not only by Scarlett but often underestimated by the reader as well.

The fact that even though Scarlett was married to Frank Kennedy at the time, Rhett often accompanied her on her way to the mill whenever he was in town was not just for the sake of her company but to protect her as she passed through the dangerous Shantytown where an unfortunate incident does take place eventually when she is alone.

Although many everyday events are left out altogether when it comes to the movie, however, certain events have been modified to fit the movie as they were too important to be left out altogether such as Gerald O'Hara's death. In the novel Scarlett returns to Tara to attend his father's funeral and Will tells her that since men who swore loyalty to the Union will receive compensation for any property lost during the war, Suellen tries to make him sign papers and riding away in rage, trying to jump a fence he falls off and dies. It is after his death that the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. O'Hara is analyzed at length.

It is not just the complexity of relationships that is lost when these incidents are left out and occasionally a modified version is presented in the movie but the characters lose the layers of complex human nature that Mitchell placed originally.

## **Conclusion**

*Gone with the Wind* is only one novel among many that have been transformed into movies. Transforming a novel into a movie is not altogether evil in itself and perhaps in this time and age is inevitable but there is more to be lost than gained when this transformation takes place. In today's fast paced world a growing trend of replacing the original text with the movie among students as well as general readers is to be seen. Problem arises when one tries to substitute movie for a novel. Students giving book presentations have often been observed to base their analysis on the movie and are unable to comprehend details present in the book since they think the basic summary is all that is required to analyze a book.

This without a doubt also comes from the weak education system of Pakistan where English courses are studied on the basis of summaries given in helping material. Students take the story of a novel as a whole instead of realizing that each and every line present in the book is significant in analyzing and understanding the text in all its complexity.

Movie and novel are poles apart and thinking one can analyze a novel after watching a movie is a gross mistake. Movies are a mere adaptation of the novel not a replacement. Of course literature is no longer the sole major source of entertainment available but in these adaptations more is lost than thought to have been preserved.

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