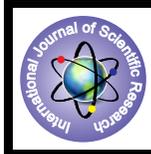


Fiction in Cinema and Cinema in Fiction



Literature

KEYWORDS : Fiction, Cinema, The Scarlet Letter

Ms. Smita B. Bhatt

Vice-Principal & Head, Department of English Sheth P.T. Mahila College of Arts & Home Science, Surat

ABSTRACT

"The study of literature casts light on the meanings in the film and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the literature"-

Ronald Perrier, "From Fiction to Film"

Fiction is a print of words extended over the pages of the text. Words or signifiers indicate signified or meanings refer to things in their absence. So is the case with the cinema that projects shadows on the silver screen through the visual aids.

This paper aims at exploring the similarities and differences between the Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" and the cinematic version of "The Scarlet Letter" by Ronald Joffe". The novel is versioned into a cinema bearing the same title.

"The Scarlett Letter" is a novel of Romance written by Hawthorne that unfolds the plot of the Puritan, in human and cruel, moral code of conduct imposed on the innocent lovers. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Scarlet Letter" is famous for presenting some of the greatest interpretive difficulties in all of American Literature. The novel is his greatest accomplished work in American literary history.

The film industries have made a tremendous progress in the art of adaptations of masterpiece fictions like novels, stories and dramas into films. It has been generally observed that Hollywood distorts and corrupts serious literature for the entertainment or the pleasure of mass audience. The mass culture represented in films is the same in East or West. In the present paper an endeavor has been made to touch upon several aspects of the novel of romance. The Scarlet Letter in the light of the recent film adaption of the same novel directed by Roland Joffe. This novel is written by Nathaniel Hawthorne an American novelist of the 19th century. It is a story of sin, guilt and repentance. Setting of the novel is Boston in new England colony where the settlers are puritans in the mid 17th century.

The first chapter of the novel opens with the metaphorical description of two simple scenes namely a prison door with scaffolds on the front side and cemetery on the other side. There is also a wild rose-bush near the prison door. A crowd of men in sad-colored garments and women wearing hood, assembled in front of the wooden edifice to watch the victim. These scenes metaphorically unfold the theme of conflict between binary oppositions-nature and culture. The prison-door and scaffold symbolizes the harsh inhuman cruelty as a puritan law to punish natural instinct inherent in human beings while on the other hand a wild rose bush stands for spontaneous free play of natural instinct the very demand of nature.

The cemetery nearby stands for fornication or adultery to be sentenced to death. There is a hint of adultery committed. There is no full-fledged lascivious scene narrated. It seems quite gratuitous. The decency and puritan discipline is maintained through the novel.

Hester Prynne married with Roger Prynne lives alone as her husband has been abroad for a long time and was supported to be killed by the red Indians. She comes into contact with Dimmesdale Arthur a young and renowned pastor of the Puritan church and both of them fall in love and she bears a child. For her ignominious act she was imprisoned and is brought out of prison. Her lover Arthur appointed as a judge asks her to declare the name of her fellow transgressor but she keeps silent as she does not want to see him punished to death for adultery. So deeply impressed by her loyalty to her lover Arthur exempts her from death punishment and according to puritan law she is compelled to wear the scarlet Letter 'A' for the rest of life as it is the token of crime and infamy.

With this scar letter Letter 'A' on her bosom she becomes an object of gaze of humiliation. In Lacanian term her punishment under the Puritan gaze suggests the dominating male authority as a cultural symbol. Under the father's law her individuality and subjectivity is trapped in the identification of the other. On the other hand the pastor Arthur hides his true identity and

does not disclose himself as the violator of law. This is another crime greater than his adultery committed with her because he is caught in the honour and dignity of his post and position so he is also the victim of the other. His hiding his fatherhood to Pearl her daughter and Hester's covering her breast with the scarlet letter deny their parenthood. This is their most unpardonable crime.

Now let us switch over to the most modern film adaptation of 1995 as directed by Roland joffe. The narrator of the novel begins the story focusing on guilt and shame and severe punishment. On the contrary the narrator of the film highlights on the theme of romantic love between Hester and Arthur. Here Arthur does not adamantly adhere to the cruel and callous puritan law as fixed and rigid. When pregnant Hester is imprisoned for her illegitimate and illicit act and gives birth to a child Arthur visits her in Prison holds the girl baby in his arms, baptizes her and expresses his sincere desire to openly declare as her father but Hester bluntly refuses to announce this secret as she does not want her lover being hanged. The Arthur of the film is wholeheartedly prepared to sacrifice his life for love's sake. As such he commands a great respect and sympathy from the audience. While the Arthur of the novel is self-hypocrite, deceptive and wears the mask of falsehood.

In a commercialized film nudity in the bathroom and bath tub or bed-room scene is deliberately shot in the film. It is full of exotic excitement to make the film hit on the box office. The film Scarlet Letter is no exception to this formula. In this film version the heroine Hester Chases a red canary which leads her to the sea-side house of of Arthur and finally leads her to his bathing place. Here Arthur is seen naked gliding through the water. One more erotic bathing scene is shot. Hester delights in her naked body. The audience is made voyeur (gazer) through Mituba , Hester's slave girl, who peeps at Hester's naked body through a small hole. The actual sexual scene between Hester and Dimmesdale takes place in the barn on the heaps of grains of wheat. This obscene shot is not permissible in the puritan world of the 17th century Boston. It is an chronic, indecent and super addition in a distorted form. In the novel such liberty is not taken to maintain the spirit of Puritanism. The stay begins after adultery. Such lascivious scene is quite gratuitous. But in the modern film it is badly needed to keep the audience glued to their seats therefore the Script writer Douglas Day Stewart and the director Roland Joffe should not be blamed for their disloyalty towards the original novel as charged by a film critic James Berardine. Instead of hanging Hester and Arthur he ought to have been hanged not in the real life but in the film.

If you want to exonerate the film reviewer from the charge of nudity scene you will have to change your erotic attitude into symbolic interpretation by quoting the symbolic approach as cited in the following Para from the essay "The Three Genres "

by Luce Irigary :

“Clothes that are only for others, those are not an expression of my flesh. Once woman clothes herself she is unable to love herself, to care for herself. She tries to be what she is not. That is the only way to be desirable, beautiful and attractive to the male. For this purpose she has to assume artificial approaches. This is the reason why she falls in love with her naked body. To cast off the veil symbolically refers to lovers’ violation of the fatherly authority and it gives vent to the inner urge of natural instinct”.

Nature assumes a dominant role as a living character opposed to puritan culture that tries to oppress and suppress the subjectivity and individuality of the true lovers in the film version. Hester once riding freely in the wood gets the wheels of her horse-cart stuck in mud. She gets down to push the wheel, mean while she gets down coincidentally joins his hands with her but they meet failure. At last, Arthur sets free the horse from harness. This symbolizes that they are free from the mask of puritan culture to give vent to their natural instincts and consequently fall in love with each other. Thereafter they frequently meet in the forest and their love flourished to its climax. Thus under the benign influence of Nature Arthur (takes off) unveils the mask of stern, Puritanism and appears as natural as human being should be.

Similarly Nature provides solace to Hester and Arthur in the novel when Hester and Dimondale meet in the forest after their painful and remorseful life of seven years. Each looks like “a ghost and awestricken, both admit that they found no peace owing to puritan guilt forced upon them by cruel and in human law. It brought nothing but despair in their life. When they sit together Arthur confesses his falsehood and says: “I have laughed in bitterness and agony of my heart at the contrast between what I seem and what I am?”. Thus in the church he felt restless but Nature instills cheerfulness, freshness and vigor into his heart and enables him to breathe freely. His heart overlaid with sin is relaxed when he casts off his mask of Puritanism. The suppressed love in his unconscious self pops up on the surface of his consciousness and feels familial affinity with Hester and Pearl. In this way Nature opens his eyes to the inner reality of his self that blurred by his ideal that kills his individuality. Really he reminds us of Nietzsche who criticizes that Christianity emasculates, effeminates and enervates man. This is true in the case of Arthur. He realizes this fact when he is free from all shades of tradition handed down to him by ancestors when he is in the forest with Hester.

There is a little change in the character of Chillingworth both in the novel and film. Supposed to be dead, he suddenly appears in the crowd when Hester is to be punished for her adultery. He tries to find out the secret as a physician attending Arthur who is physically and mentally broken down by hiding his secret of his affairs with Hester; He is firmly determined to avenge Hester’s humiliation and infamy. He tortures Arthur by reminding of his sin as a result Arthur is already depressed and collapsed. During his visit to Hester he agrees with Hester to stop down from his priesthood, have reunion with her and Pearl but when returning to his room Chillingworth tortures him fatally. At last accompanied by Hester and Pearl he hangs himself and brings an end to his Life to save himself from infamy and humiliation so he creates the impression that he is a hypocrite. The end is very tragic in the novel.

On the contrary in the film version Chillingworth does not inflict torture on Dimmesdale so in the novel. Besides this change Dimmesdale knows Chillingworth’s true identity that novel does not, in fact, reveal. Chillingworth directly wants to murder Arthur. He wearing a gabs of American Indian shears off the (scalps off) (head) of a red Indian mistaking him as Dimmesdale. It turns the plot to a different direction. He dies himself by hanging himself when he realizes his mistake that he had killed the wrong man. As a result the Native Americans are agitated and they raid the entire town. Hester was just going to be hanged but Arthur reaches on the spot and declares that he loves Hester and his daughter. The puritan crowd shouts: “Hand him! Hang

him”. But the American natives save both Arthur and Hester and help them run away because they love their religious preacher. The last scene features Hester, Pearl and Dimmesdale derive away on the horse-cart. This happy end is spoilt when Pearl as an adult narrator gives an account that Hester and Arthur died when she was in her teens.

In this film sexuality is the union of the souls. If a man and a woman love each other religion should be liberal to accept this reality. An ideal virtue should not be exalted over love or mutual passion for each other. Nature and culture should not be isolated from each other. The harmony is set up between nature and culture in this film adaption. The equilibrium is set up between Arthur and Hester. He is depicted as a true lover he is always ready to sacrifice his life for the sake of love for Hester. But Hester and Arthur play the quite reverse role in the novel. Hese Hoster possesses the sterling quality of head and heart. She out wins him.

Hester:

Hester takes the scarlet letter from her boom and throws it to a distance among the weathered leaves. When this stigma gone, Hester heaves a deep sigh and relaxed himself from the burden of shame and her anguish and agony is departed from the spirit. This change in her also affects Arthur. Thus their hearts so full of radiance overflow upon the outward world. Their heart vibrates and throbs with life when enclosure turns into disclosure.

But as soon as Arthur reaches the town the highly illuminated spirit is blighted and over shadowed by the evil influence of the wicked soul of Chilling wroth, He is divided into the rob designed by others. Thus Hawthorne delves deep into the heart of Hester who excels the hypocrite Arthur who values the other more than his real self. His blindness to Puritanism makes his self-alienated and he lives his death till he dies by killing himself.

Hester and Arthur recall me of the Renaissance painting of the doom’s day. On the Day of Judgment some dead rise from the grave and don clothes to cover their naked body but those dead of Renaissance spirit rise in their birthday costume. The former try to seem unreal while the latter seem real.

The story line is changed when the novel “The Scarlet letter” is transformed into a cinema to enhance emotion and its impact. The cinema opens with a discussion between the town’s magistrates and a local tribe. Later, Hester is seen coming from England. In the book, Hester’s procession comes from the prison much later. The cinema is reflected through the eyes of Pearl, while the book is narrated in the third person.

Here, there are two different angles from the psychological point of view. In the cinema the natural instinct has a free play while in the novel it is suppressed that is why the minister loses his health day by day and ultimately though agreed upon the proposal of Hester to run away from Salem to unknown place and live a happy married life he succumbs to his ideals of a minister But Chllingworth leads him to more repentance. He at least confesses his sin and hangs himself to death on the scaffold. The cruelty is purged off in the cinema according to the requirement and demand of the post-modern age. The other aspects of similarities and dissimilarities are discussed elaborately by highlighting the following points:

- (1) Sexuality focused on in the novel and cinema is presented from different angles. In the novel prohibition of fornication is imposed on the two persons resulting in crime and punishment while in a cinema this rigorous ban is lifted to give vent to natural instinct. To quote Susan Langer, film like other forms of art “creates a virtual present free ways of living and ignoring moral restriction” imposed on the two souls who love each other so ardently. Through words, sounds and photography and images “force on the viewers the tension between inner reality and the social mask”.
- (2) Irony and picturesque elements are the main devices of the subversion of the original theme of the novel.

- (3) Film is bent upon to defy the orthodox views narrated in the novel.
- (4) The fiction focuses on the personality that is deceptive but in the film individuality exempted from moral code is emphasized.

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