

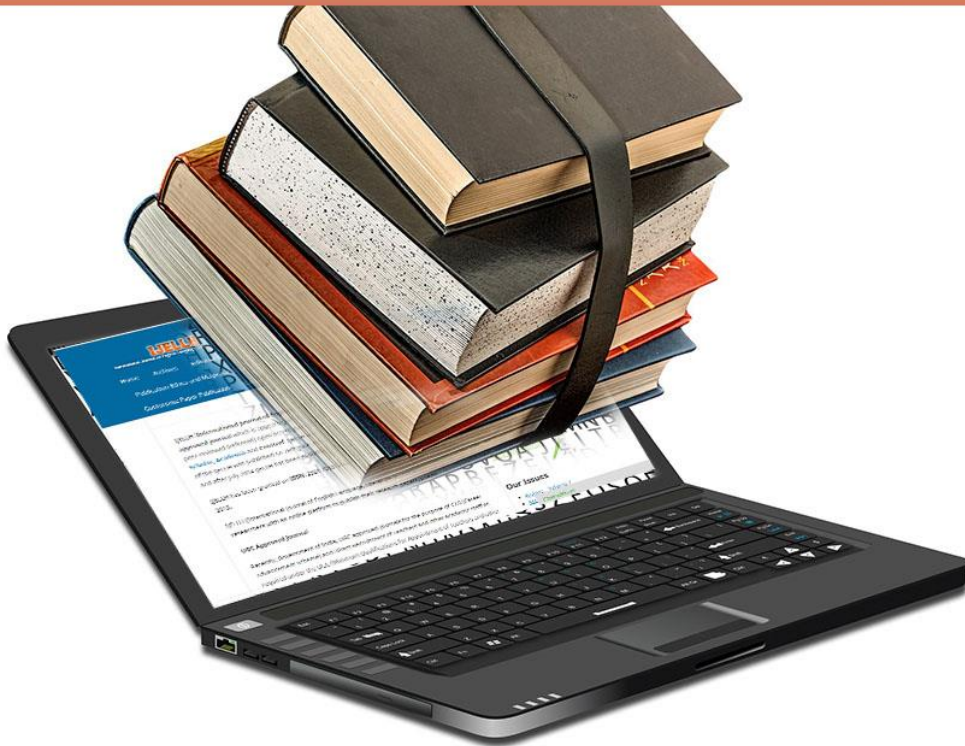
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*From The Mayor of Casterbridge to The Claim: Study of the film and  
Adaptation Theory*

Abstract

The film industry, especially Hollywood, have been relying upon the adaptation of literary works like novels, dramas, short stories, comic books etc since the inception of the big screen, for several reasons. One of the novelists whose work has been adapted into films profoundly is Thomas Hardy, who the critics like David Lodge notice to be a cinematic writer. Owing to the adaptation of a huge number of works of literature into films and representation of these has given way to debates, dissent and arguments in the academic circle, for it is believed that these representations distort and devalue the classics and other literary works, showing infidelity towards the original work. These debates and dissensions have given rise to various approaches and theories of adaptation. Theory of infidelity with which it gained its ground is no more in vogue and has been replaced by many other theories

like theory of interpretation, translation and intertextuality. This paper takes up Thomas Hardy's famous novel *The Mayor of Casterbridge's* adaptation into Michael Winterbottom's film *The Claim*, studying the theory and how successful or significant the adaptation has been.

Key words: adaptation, infidelity, reinterpretation, translation, intertextuality

Adaptation, in the context of media can be defined as:

An altered or amended version of a text, musical composition, etc., one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from the novel or similar literary source. (Oxford English Dictionary)

This definition however is inconsistent with various contemporary media adaptation theories, where adaptation is no longer from literature to film only, but has become multidirectional to suit the needs of the ever demanding, pleasure loving and adventurous audience. In this case the biological meaning of adaptation becomes more apt, taken from Oxford English Dictionary :

A process of change or modification by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment or ecological niche, or a part of an organism to its biological function, either through phenotypic change in an individual or (esp.) through an evolutionary process effecting change through successive generations.

A text is like a living organism which has to adapt itself to changing environment in which it is transplanted in the form of a film, video game, comic book, television serial etc., where sometimes it can flourish well and other times may even perish. A well known theorist Linda Hutcheon in her seminal work *The Theory of Adaptation* argues that "a text can not only survive the shift from one form to another, but it can also thrive in ways not previously possible in the original form"(34).

Since the beginning, the discussion on adaptation has been plagued by the issue of fidelity. The analysis of any adaptation traditionally focussed on the replication of the source text to the adapted one, where source text was always considered primary, touchstone and the original, whereas the adapted work was always regarded as secondary and impure. The issue of faithfulness was natural to the critics too who looked upon adaptation as comparison between two works of arts. This approach of criticising a work of art, however, is not in vogue now, as fidelity issue in adaptation is based upon the idea that there is only one original and correct meaning of the source text and it needs to be captured by the adapted work, irrespective of the fact that different readers read it and create and imagine their own meanings.

Some writers have come up with categorization of adaptation to lower the privileged position fidelity has been enjoying for a long time. Geoffrey Wagner in his book *The Novel and the Cinema* suggests three categories a film maker or critics can make use of. The first category is Transposition, where a novel is directly, without any amendment is presented on to the screen. Second is Commentary, where the original is unintentionally altered here and there and presented. The third category is Analogy which significantly deviates from the original and a new work of art is produced from the original one. Another writer who suggests more or less the same three kinds of categories to reduce the relation between the source and the film is Dudley Andrew. There is yet another categorization put forward by Michael Klein and Gillian Parker. First approach shows fidelity towards the source. Second, reinterpretation of the source, retaining the core of the structure of the source, and the third approach is considering the source only as a raw material. In the same line Morris Beja, another important writer gives two main classifications. The first approach shows total fidelity to the source text, and the other approach deals with the adapting the source text to create a work of art having its own integrity.

Beside these classifications to reduce the strong influence of fidelity to an adaptation, many theorists like Andre Bazin, Bela Balazs, George Bluestone and Sergei Eisenstein “thoroughly survey the nature and method of the adaptation as an inter relative thing between literature and film”(94). The theories of Bela Balazs which came out in 1920-30 in his collection of essays *Theory of the Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. Balazs considers the novel to be a “potential raw material to be transformed at will” (94), to produce a new literary form. He writes:

It is also admitted that the literary foundation of the new art, new script is just as much specific, independent literary form as the written stage play- there is nothing to prevent them from being literary masterpieces-the film script is an entirely new form.(246-247).

Balazs contribution lies in his argument that “the adaptation is an independent work; a stimulus which is neither inherently inferior to its source, nor less worthy than the so called original work”(95). Balazs emphasises not on the filming but in the creation of the screenplay.

However, theorists like Siegfried Kracauer and Andre Bazin took it further, where Kracauer presented the concept of ‘cinematic and uncinematic’. He argues that adaptations make sense when the source text is founded in objective reality, not in any mental or spiritual experiences. In his work, *Theory of Film*, Kracauer writes that “the redemption of physical reality is the only true purpose of Cinema, an examination of the psychological state of Emma Bovary has no place in the scheme”(239). Andre Bazin, a French critic, on the other hand contrasts Balazs by arguing that “faithfulness to a literary source, its “spirit” was its fundamental nature of adaptation” (101)., which the cinema rediscovers through its own technical devices. In his essay, *In Defence of Mixed Cinema*, he writes:

...fidelity as a virtue and that adaptation should be regarded as a form of translation from one language to another....a good adaptation is the essence of the letter and the spirit (138).

So here comes the adaptation as translation. George Bluestone on the other hand firmly puts forward his theory that adaptation is not translation, the adapter is the true author and work produced is an independent work of art. In his work *Novels into Films* (1957) Bluestone asserts that “the successful screenwriter in an adaptation must understand the limitation of the film medium and a make a serious adjustment to a set of different and other conflicting conventions” (100).

Theory of intertextuality, considers adaptation as a form of intertextuality. According to Linda Hutcheon “We experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation”(8). In the same line, Brian McFarlane in his book *Novel to Film: An Introduction to the Theory of Adaptation* writes:

The stress on fidelity to the original undervalues other aspects of the film’s intertextuality. By this, I mean those non-literary, non-novelistic influences at work on any film, whether or not it is based on a novel” (19)

These influences are inevitable as Hutcheon says in her book *A Theory of Adaptation*:

Neither the product, nor the process of adaptation exists in vacuum: they all have a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture.....what can happen when the stories travel—when an adapted text migrates from its contact of creation to the adaptation’s contact of reception. Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable. (xvi)

Linda calls adaptation as transculturation or indigenization across culture, languages, and history (xvi) whereby the meaning and impact of stories can change immensely.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* adapted to the film *The Claim* will be studied from this point of view.

*The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) by Thomas Hardy, one of the famous Victorian writers, is based upon the tragedy of Michael Henchard, 'Man of Character', who sells his wife Susan and daughter Elizabethan Jane in drunkenness, to become the mayor later in his life. His downfall and suffering begins when his ill wife and daughter arrive looking for him, coinciding with the arrival of a young, intelligent and civilised gentleman Donald Farfrae, whom Henchard insists to join his business, and who later becomes his rival. Henchard at last loses everything, his wife, daughter, position, Lucetta, (his comfort) all going to Farfrae, and dies miserably. The novel has many other rustic characters, and the novel is full of incidents, for the novel was first published as a weekly serialisation from January 1886. With many incidents moving around Henchard, Hardy has developed the character of Henchard beautifully. The novel's setting is the rural England, where the drama of life and death of Henchard is played.

*The Claim* based on Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* is year 2000 film which is scripted by Frank Boyce Cottrell and directed by Michael Winterbottom, where the role of the novel's Henchard is played by Peter Mullan called Daniel Dillon. Dalglish (Wes Bentley) is Farfrae of the novel, who is an engineer and rail road surveyor, whereas the role of Lucetta, (Lucia in movie, who is a Portugese immigrant and a business woman) is played by Milla Jovovich. We see Sarah Polley (Hope in film) as Elizabeth Jane of the novel and her mother Elena's role (Susan in the novel) is played by Nastssja Kinski.

The structure of the film is very much similar to the novel. However, only two incidents, first, the selling of wife and daughter in drunken rage by the protagonist, and second, the returning of the duo, coinciding with the arrival of another character, playing a crucial role in the movement of the story, are the only two narratives which are common

between the novel and the film. These two events are the cardinal functions of narrative. Cardinal functions, according to Roland Barthes “are the ‘hinge points’ of narrative: that is, the actions they refer to open up alternatives of consequence to the development of the story; they create ‘risky’ moments in the narrative and it is crucial to narrativity” (11). The setting of the film varies drastically. Instead of the green rural background of Hardy’s novel, the film has for its setting rugged Sierra Nevada Mountains, and the year is 1867. The plot and the story of the film is not the same as the novel. Unlike the novel which shows the entry of Hechard as a hay trusser along with the selling of his wife, the film shows the entry of the mother and daughter coinciding with the arrival of Dalglish, who is an engineer and works as a surveyor for Central Pacific Railroad Survey to the town of Kingdom Come, which is governed by Dillon. The scene of the wife selling is shown as a flash back in the film, which Dillion recalls going into the same shack where he had sold his wife and daughter for claim to the gold which a disillusioned man called Burns offered him for the exchange. The film aptly does justice by selecting snow clad, blizzard stricken Sierra Nevada as the background, for it not only reinforces the philosophy of Hardy, that in the context of time and space any human being is a mere speck, but also “is an insistent presence that constantly reminds the audience that the story occurs on the frontier, far away from the cultural and societal restrictions of the eastern United States and Western Europe” (Allingham). The story is based on California Gold rush of 1849 when Dillon exchanges his wife for gold, and bears the consequences of it later. The film shows the rapid spread of railroads which had actually happened during the later years of the nineteenth century. Both, the gold rush and the railroad were great historical and cultural phenomena in making California what it is now. The film also shows the use of newly invented electricity in the patient to rejuvenate them (here Elena is given the shocks as the treatment). This drastic change in the setting and also the depiction of incidents of cultural and historical importance in the film becomes clear, knowing that the



film was released in the New York City. The film had most of the Americans as its audience, and Winterbottom tried to indigenize the film so that the audience could associate itself with it.

Unlike the novel, the film cuts off several scenes and characters, which in the novel help lead to a gradual development of the story as well as proper characterization. The absence of rustics which played important role in Hardy's novels critiquing upon the bygone things as well as aiding in disclosing the character of the protagonist and others so well has resulted in weak characterization in the film. However, the omission of many scenes in the film is the prime necessity of a screenplay based on a great Victorian novel. It has to be simplified because of the time constrain. In this regards, Linda Hutcheon writes, "...I don't mean only the plot, although particularly in the case of a Victorian novel teeming with secondary characters and subplots, severe pruning is required, but also the intellectual content" (1).

The character of Henchard of the novel (Daniel Dillon in the film), who is a passionate man full of energy with "sense of justice and fitful generosity", has been presented well through different incidents, but the pride, grandness and impetuosity, which he carries throughout his life along with remorse, self-laceration and wretchedness he experiences in the novel before his death lacks in the film. The absence of an important secondary character, a rustic, Abel Whittle, deprives the film of humanitarian aspect of the protagonist. Nevertheless, the words spoken by Dalglish (Farfrae in the novel) to Hope (Elizabeth Jane in the novel) while Dillon's dead body is being carried on the sledge, can, if not fully, but partially, replace the greatness of this man of character. Dalglish speaks of him:

*They were like kings.*

*Pioneers, people like Dillon. They came here when there was nothing. They build these towns and reigned them like kings.*

This dialogue of Dalglish, his rival, sums up the character of Dillion (Henchard).

Another, quite noticeable change which the script writer prudently brought about in the film relates to Lucetta Templeman (Lucia, a dance hall singer). Philip V. Allingham, in his review of the film writes:

The screenwriter has wisely realized that, outside the demands of an overly scrupulous Victorian society, there is no necessity for the morally ambiguous Lucia (counterpart to the novel's Lucetta) to die merely because she has indulged in pre-marital sex with the story's male principals.

Here, we again see how the adapted film takes in consideration the contemporary time, culture and space of the people and place to which the film (or other works of art) is meant for.

Another very noticeable thing which can be seen in the film but is totally absent in the novel is the brothel house. The idea behind presenting a brothel in an isolated and uninhabitable place like the mountains of Sierra Nevada can be justified though. The brothel is run by Lucia, the paramour of Dillon, who is the second rich person in the Kingdom Come. Lucia's character is ambiguous, and her being the owner of it signifies it. Secondly, it is the only diversion for the men living in a cold place like Nevada where there is nothing to do in winters, but have booze, women and tobacco and wait for summers to arrive. It is the brothel with women, booze and tobacco which keeps the population of the place intact. This notion is clear in the film when Lucia implores all the people to move to the valley from where the railroad is to be built. She declares:

*Kingdom Come tobacco shop and saloon will be closed as of today. We are moving to the valley near the railroad. There will be no women and no drink in the Kingdom Come from here on in. If you want women, tobacco or drink, you know where to find them.*

The transformations which we witness in the film are natural and necessary to adaptation. The film adaptation here repeats the same story in a different setting, as Walter Benjamin says that “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories” (90). The film not only brings in mind the Henchard of Hardy’s *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, but also the historical and cultural aspect of the Gold Rush of 1849, scientific developments in the field of electricity and railroad. “It has its own palimpsestic things”, as Linda Hutcheon writes that “adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative-- a work that is second without being secondary” (9)

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