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## A STUDY OF THE VARIABLES BETWEEN HAWTHORNE'S 'THE SCARLET LETTER' AND ITS FILM ADAPTATION OF THE SAME TITLE BY ROLAND JOFFE

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### ABSTRACT

Literature and its film adaptation are a separate and distinctive forms of art like painting, dancing, music and sculpture. Any form of 'art' provides aesthetic pleasure to human mind. It is creative and innovative. Any form of art imitates the potential and strength of other arts. Film adaptation comprises literature, music, singing and painting also. Although film adaptation is based on literature, it has its own entity and strength. Novel is considered the most realistic form of literature to contribute human life photographically. The popular social or political or moral story of the novel has been largely taken into consideration for film adaptation either in Hollywood or in Bollywood.

Nathaniel Hawthorne contributed 'The Scarlet Letter', the most praised and applauded novel in the history of 'American



Novel'. It is considered the first and best psychological novel. It has caught the attention of number of film makers for film adaptation. Among the number of transformations of the novel, 'The Scarlet Letter' into film adaptation, the film adaptation by Roland Joffe is considered for the comparative study between the novel and its film adaptation.

This paper concerns with the study of text and context of the novel 'The Scarlet Letter' by Hawthorne, and the film adaptation of the novel by Roland Joffe. It also attempts to make a comparative study of the novel and its film adaptation in order to find their own spirits and

strengths. This paper highlights the variables reflected in the film adaptation of 'The Scarlet Letter' and the appropriate reasons behind the variables.

**KEYWORDS:** Literature, painting, dancing, music and sculpture.

### 1. INTRODUCTION:

Aristotle considers 'Art' as an imitation of life. In Coleridge's view, Art is an imaginative fanciful creation and Artist is a creator who is gifted with esemplastic imagination. Art is the expression of the temperament of the art maker. It is the application of human creative skills. It uses imagination and creativity for an

aesthetic delight. The creative essence of any kind of art gets reflected through its distinctive and innovative identity. Literature has its own charm and effect with the imaginative power and literary skills of its creator. Its purpose is to evoke readers' aesthetic pleasure. Hence, it is considered a form of fine art like painting, dancing, music and sculpture. Literature classifies into poetry, drama and novel. Among the three forms of literature, novel is one of the chief forms of literature. It contributes human life realistically. Although it is an earlier than poetry and drama, it is most popular in any period. The novels of social or political or moral concerns have been caught the attention of the people and film makers of the world. It has been largely considered for film adaptations in either 'Hollywood' or 'Bollywood'. John Harrington, in his book

'Film And / Is Art' has estimated that one third of all films ever made have been adapted from novels in the world. Like literature, Film adaptation is also form of fine art. It is an innovative and experimented form of art. It contributes aesthetic pleasures in different perspective than literature to the viewers of literary and non literary tastes. It is an effective and influential form of art with the skillful use of technological resources. Film adaptation is the transfer of certain things of one form of art to another. It is a congregation of and involvement of the distinctive forms of art like drama, novel, poetry, music and painting. It is an art form like others which inherits the potentials of other art forms. The transmission of certain potentials of one form of art into another is also the essence of 'art.' William Jink, the popular American educator and critic brilliantly describes how the film is a product of different art forms in the words like- "If a modern film is carefully considered, it becomes evident that it (film) is heavily indebted to other older art forms. For example it draws freely upon the tradition of live theatre especially the techniques of staging, lightening, movement and gestures; from the novel it borrows structure, characterization, theme and point of view; from poetry an understanding of metaphor, symbolism and other literary tropes; from music, rhythm, repetition and counter point and from painting a sensitivity to shape and form, visual texture and color."

Filmmaking is a fruit of the joint application of the skills of the director, producer, script writer, actors, different technicians and their effective use of technological resources. Film adaptation is nothing but the transformation of one discourse into another and one medium into another. It is a difficult and challenging task for the filmmaker to visualize the same effect and outcome depicted in the literary form. At the time of transforming the material of source book into different medium, the artist has to keep deep conscience about the different discourse or medium through which the artist suits the story. Film adaptation is an honest attempt to convert the source material in order to suit and appropriate the new and different medium and discourse. Literature conceals imagination while film adaptation is fully based on visualization. Literature enables readers to imagine and understand the content of the story but film adaptation enables viewers to view and easily understand the content of the film story. The story of film adaptation is interesting and easy to understand the viewers not only because of its visualization but also the story of film adaptation are already known the viewers before viewing the film. The matter of discourse is also different in novel and its film adaptation. The filmmaker converts the story of the novel into different perspective in order to make the story most likable to the viewers and the purpose behind the attempt is to obtain handsome financial outcome. The filmmaker endeavors to encompass all types of viewers and make one them to the story in commercial view point.

Film adaptation is fully based on the novel and it attempts to contribute the same story of the novel but in different perspectives. Such temperament of film adaptation gives way to maintain some alterations or variables than its source book. The variables between novel and its film adaptation are generally on thematic, artistic and technical grounds. Like literature, the film adaptation contributes its own beauty, merits and shortcomings also. Therefore, it will be baseless to study the film adaptation of the novel in just taking into account only the fidelity of the filmmaker to the novel. It is because each of the forms of fine art has their individual and distinctive characteristics and specifications. A few exclusions and inclusions in the film adaptation of the novel reveal it as a distinct text. The filmmaker presents the things of the source book in completely new creative way of expression with new morals and advanced techniques.

The study of the variables reflected in the film adaptation than its source book and their appropriateness is a task of entertainment as well as a task of enormous challenges. It is an interesting to study the similar story of the novel to be reflected in its film adaptation in different perspective and medium. It is also amusing to study the spirits of two different art forms and their different power of expression of the similar story. It is a task of challenge because the study of the variables to be reflected in the film adaptation than the novels is only possible by concentrating the spirits of two forms of art simultaneously. The comparative study of two different forms of art is possible only after keeping in mind the different charms, distinctions and merits of the two art forms. The study also focuses on the appropriateness and essentiality behind the variables to be reflected in the film adaptation of the novel. The comparative study of the novel and its film adaptation helps to study the entire text and context of the novel and its film adaptation separately and then put them side by side in order to find out the similarities and variables between them. Although film adaptation is based on literature, the novel and its film

adaptation must study separately and find out their different charms, strengths and capabilities. Both forms of art are different in many respects although one is based on the others.

## 2) Novel and its Film Adaptation: Dissimilar Features: -

Although the film adaptation is fully based on novel, it still evokes different charms, distinctions and merits in the province of art. The study of film adaptation of the novel aims to find out the effects of the visual language on the basis of composition, color and light, shadow and contrast, camera angles and distance, pace and rhythms and the association of images and sounds and the effects of the written language is on the basis of literary devices and techniques. It focuses on the importance between verbal communication as in novel and visual communication as in the film adaptation.

## 3) The variables between the novel 'The Scarlet Letter' and its film adaptation-

The film 'The Scarlet Letter' (1995) directed by Roland Joffe is an adaptation of the novel- 'The Scarlet Letter' (1850) written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, an American writer. Nathaniel Hawthorne contributed an historical story of the sin of adultery and its atonement in the outlook of puritan society in his 'The Scarlet Letter.' The universal appeal and widely applauded story caught the attention of number of filmmakers for film adaptation in 'Hollywood' but the film adaptation made by Roland Joffe is taken into account for the comparative study between novel and its film adaptation. The comparative study of the novel 'The Scarlet Letter' by Hawthorne and its film adaptation of the same title by Joffe immensely helped to find out the variables to be reflected in the film adaptation and they are as under-

(1) The novel 'The Scarlet Letter' by Nathaniel Hawthorne begins with an Introductory Part entitled 'Custom House.' The story of the sin of adultery of 17th century as recorded in history is presented through the story of the novel according to the psyche of 19th century American people. The introductory part of the novel concerns with the number of things to be happened in the personal life of Nathaniel Hawthorne. This part is very significant because it offers an historical, geographical, social, religious and Puritan background to the story Hester Prynne and her guilt of adultery. This section authenticates the episodes in the novel. This portion occupies about 40 pages in the novel. This significant part is absent in the film adaptation of the novel. The film adaptation is based on the 200 pages of the novel excluding the introductory part of the novel.

(2) The beginning of the film adaptation is with the crowd of Red Indians who are celebrating their fire rituals. The torchbearer- a red Indian- runs through forest holding the torch up and hands it over near the waterfall. The scene of fire ritual helps to enhance curiosity to know about the purpose behind the rituals and further happening. It shows that the story of the film is moral and puritan. The film is released in 1995 and it reveals how the filmmaker remains loyal to the film media and to the psyche of contemporary society. The filmmaker brings love and adventure in the film adaptation with keeping in view the young modern viewers. This portion is absent in the novel on which the film is based on.

(3) Pearl, a major character in the novel while it is minor character in the film. She is the narrator in the film but the narrator in the novel is the novelist himself. In the novel, she is a married woman and she has become the daughter-in-law of a family of aristocrats in England. In the film, she narrates her mother's tragic and frustrated story. In the film, Pearl is presented an infant in richly embroidered clothes stitched by her mother, Hester.

(4) There are three 'Scaffold Scenes' in the novel 'The Scarlet Letter.' The first scaffold scene is at the beginning of the first chapter of the novel. In the scene, Hester comes out of the prison with an infant of about three months old to the raised platform of the scaffold. The mob of people including Roger Chillingworth, Hester's husband supposed to be dead cast an eye of contempt on Hester. Among them, the group of five women seems to be commenting on mild punishment given to Hester of wearing the badge of 'Adultery' throughout her life. The second scaffold scene is at the middle part of the novel in which Dimmesdale looks standing on the scaffold alone at night and Hester and Pearl join him to stand together on the scaffold. This scene is watched by Roger Chillingworth who gets a proof that Arthur Dimmesdale is co-sinner of Hester's adultery sin. The last scaffold scene is at the concluding part of the novel in which the minister, Arthur Dimmesdale confesses his guilt in psychological pressure and dies soon. Roger Chillingworth too dies after some days. In the film, the middle



scaffold scene is deleted but other two scenes are elaborated.

(5) The love story of the novel is fully tragic. In which, Arthur dies in repent and Hester too dies after some years. The dead body of Hester buries by the side of Arthur's burial place with keeping space between them not to meet even after death. It highlights the puritan psyche of sticking up the social codes and conducts. The love story in the film adaptation is fully comic. The victory of love is shown in the film adaptation with the union of the lovers. Such change is there in the film adaptation with keeping in view the humanistic and democratic psyche of modern viewers. In the novel, the badge "A" for "Adultery" looks converting into 'Angel' in the course of time while it seems crushing under the wheel of the horse –cart at the ending scene of the film adaptation. This change is in terms of providing the likable and comic story to the audience of the last decade of twentieth century.

(6) In the novel, the illegitimate love relationship is strictly prohibited in the puritan codes and conducts, while such relationship isn't considered serious in the film adaptation. Arthur Dimmesdale's sermons touch Hester's heart and then the serious love story in the puritanic environment starts between the lovers in the novel. Arthur Dimmesdale is psychologically presented in the novel. His sense of guilt is more intense in the novel than it is in its film adaptation. He dies in the psychological stroke in repent of guilt feelings at the scaffold. He presses his hand on his heart which is symbolic of the invisible mark of his involvement in the sin of adultery. In the film, Arthur Dimmesdale's looks free from the deep sense of repentance of guilt conscience. In film, Hester looks Arthur in three different events and then she falls in love with him. She looks Arthur naked while swimming and then a helper in extracting the wheel from the mud pond in the road and then appearing as a maker of fiery sermons from the pulpit. The ancient story of the sin of adultery presented in the 20th century society in different viewpoint to suit the atmosphere of the time. The character of Reverend Dimmesdale is presented in an entirely different light in the film from what it is in the novel.

(7) Roger Chillingworth is presented in the novel just when the first scaffold scene is in progress. Roger Chillingworth makes inquiries of the sin the woman with an infant in her arms committed. He recognizes the woman to be Hester Prynne and though he has assumed the identity of Dr. Roger Chillingworth, he accepts to be Roger Prynne- Hester's husband. This identity he of course suppresses and asks Hester to abide by his injunction of not revealing his identity. The characterization of Dr. Roger Chillingworth is changed rapidly. It is mentioned in the novel to be accompanied by a Red Indian who has come to liberate Roger from the band of Red Indians among whom he lived. This is what is mentioned in the novel. In the beginning, the Red Indian ritual, in the middle the Red Indians are shown torturing Roger and then again in the middle he is shown dancing, yelling, moving among them as if one of them. He carries a buck-head and then swoons. It is declared by the Red Indians that he is possessed and therefore they get rid of him. He comes to Salem and knows about Hester's guilt. This lengthy presentation of Arthur's involvement with the Red Indians is just mentioned in the novel but in the film it is quite prominently presented. Next, it is noticed that Roger has become almost one of the Red Indians dancing and yelling among them. This transformation is absent in the novel but in the film it is presented at length because the director of the film, Roland Joffe desires to present the story of 'The Scarlet Letter' in the format of the formula movie and he has used the western adventure format and also the Romantic love story format. He has changed the characterization of Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale and also of Dr. Roger Chillingworth to suit the format of the two formula patterns. The triangle of the husband (Roger), the lover (Arthur) and the beloved (Hester) is there but both the angles of the husband and the lover are presented in a light which is totally different from its presentation in the novel 'The Scarlet Letter.' It is evident that these deviations and departures are deliberately made by the director of the film because his aim is to present the old story in a manner in which it will satisfy the audience of the modern times.

(8) The witch incident occupies a considerable portion of the novel. The Governor's sister, Hibbins makes many attempts to take Hester or Pearl to the forest of witches. This part is deleted in the film. Its presence in the film is shown where Dr. Roger Chillingworth first makes the mark on Pearl's body and then holds baby Pearl high and displays the mark to the entire public as a mark of being a witch or a token of witchcraft in which his desire to mark Hester as the witch who is nursing her child to become the same. The presence of Hibbins is there in the film but she is treated as a minor functional character in the film. This change is there because in the seventeen

century the witch trials were the focus of social life. In the nineteenth century, these trials assume significance and they are prominently displayed in the narrative portion of the novel. Towards the end of the twentieth century, the year 1995 when the film came out- this portion proved to be redundant and has now lost its significance and so in the film it is treated rather suggestively and indirectly except in the scenes where Dr. Roger Chillingworth makes an issue of the same mark. The mark does not carry any "wicked" magic significance because the film goers have already seen Dr. Roger Chillingworth making the mark himself on Pearl's body and he displays the same mark which he has earlier made on her body.

(9) In the novel, a large portion is about the needle work carried out by Hester Prynne. Her art of embroidery is appreciated by one and all in and around Salem and Boston. She was busy day and night in her work of embroidery which helps her to relax from psychological tortures due to her sin of adultery. It makes her financially independent also. Because of her embroidery skills, people came into contact even though Hester is declared a witch and appreciated her goodness and humanity. Such appreciation helps to convert 'A' for 'angel' instead of 'adultery' at the closing part of the novel. Her needle work becomes a source of livelihood and makes her independent financially. It was a time when someone had to depend on earning for livelihood but it is less important in the livelihood of 20th century. Through needle work, Hester could contact people and reveal her goodness.

(10) The concluding of the story of adultery in novel is fully tragic, while it is fully comic in its film adaptation. The tragic end of the story of Hester in novel was with keeping in view the psyche of the puritan society and its strict codes and conducts, while the end of the Hester's story is comic to suit the democratic and tension free modern society where there is a little scope for codes and conducts. The viewers of modern age consider that the film art is as a source of entertainment and so the responsibility of the film maker is to provide entertainment otherwise the viewers have other options for source of entertainment like non print media such as radio, television and many other formats of entertainment. Therefore, the film adaptation of 'The Scarlet Letter' is with the delightful end of the story of adultery in order to culminate it into true and genuine love and make it likable to modern society. The directors of the films today supply whatever the public demands. The directors could get handsome financial returns after supplying public demands and so film making is a kind of business rather than a province of art. In the novel, there is no such commercial view involved.

(11) In the novel, the letter 'A' remains on Hester's gown. The letter 'A' means adultery according to the rigid and morally strict puritan mentality. It proves to be a symbol of social contempt and the contempt continues even after the death of Hester. It is because the puritan people buried Hester by the side of Arthur's burial place but keeping some space between them so that the lovers could not meet each other at the grave yard. Although Pearl drops the letter on the ground in one of the scenes and Hawthorne may desire to drop the issue of adultery there, it continues and remembers the puritan society even after the death of Hester.

In film, the mark of adultery is crushed under the wheel of the horse cart in which now in the midst of the public glances, looks and glare drive the legitimate husband Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale, his wife Hester Prynne and their daughter, Pearl. This is how the film ends on a note of joy, happiness, union and the erasing of the guilt.

(12) Hawthorne's 'The Scarlet Letter' is the best psychological novel. It highlights the inner workings of the minds of all major characters. Dr. Roger Chillingworth befriends with Rev. Arthur Dimmesdale to find out the reason behind the psychologically disturbed Arthur Dimmesdale. He could find out the co-sinner of Hester's adultery and the father of Pearl. It verifies him in the scene in which Arthur stands and confesses his sin. Roger supports the lovers outwardly but tortures inwardly. He takes away Arthur from the scaffold where Arthur is standing and Hester and Pearl accompanied him. Such arrangement is to make the story more tragic and touching. But such mental chaos, disorders and turbulence of Arthur's inward mind is absent in the film adaptation. It is because film adaptation has a limitation to appropriately present the inner working of character's mind which can be dominantly and effectively presented in novel.

(13) The role of the gossiping women or the chorus is very much reduced in the film though it is given prominence in the novel for their functions of commenting of the action.

(14) In the novel Pearl is born in the prison- house while in the film her delivery takes place in Hester's cottage. The female nurse is an important character in the film but she has no such position in the novel.

(15) In the novel, the little red bird is not mentioned but in the film adaptation, the flights of the red bird which are followed by Hester have a significance of immense truthfulness. The red bird plays an important role in the film adaptation. It attracts Hester at the beginning of the novel and leads her at the bank of river where Arthur bathes. The red bird becomes a symbol of passion and lust. It flights secondly to bring Hester out to meet Arthur and it revives passion in Hester. The use of red bird is nice to revive passions in the film adaptation.

(16) The slave girl is purchased by Hester for a price. This dumb slave girl is the witness of what goes between Hester and Arthur. She looks at the sex scenes from the peep-hole giving the cine-goers the same opportunity of watching Hester removing her clothes while taking her bath and her clothes being removed by Arthur when they enjoy sex. The maid is tortured to confess what she has seen and then her mutilated dead body is displayed in the film.

(17) Similarly the role of the nurse is extended. She is presented prominently from the beginning. Then she plays an active role in the delivery of the baby. She frequently supports Hester. She too is tortured for extracting information from her. This is not in the novel but it is in the film.

(18) The number of characters is reduced in the film. The obvious reasons behind this thing that the change is made. The casting requires a small number of key characters and as such the film has the three main characters. Pearl's role is reduced except the Maid and the Nurse. Other characters such as the mob in the market place, the governors, the senior priest, the chorus of five women, the drummer, the guards, the soldiers- including the horse- riders are presented as the minor characters and their number is considerably reduced. This is quite obvious taking into consideration the star system of the film industry in Hollywood.

(19) The novel has about 240 pages of which the 'Introductory Section' of the 'Custom House' has about 40 pages which is deleted in the film adaptation. The remaining portion of 24 chapters is of 200 pages and the running time of the film is approximately of 150 minutes which means that each page of the novel if faithfully presented will get 45 seconds. What is noticed is that there are deviations, departures, alternations, deletions, additions, interpolations in the film adaptation of the novel 'The Scarlet Letter.' Some pages are prominently presented and some are totally suppressed. The arrangement of some events is deliberated changed. The fifth chapter- 'Hester at her needle', the eleventh chapter- 'the interior of a heart', the eighteenth chapter- 'A flood of a sunshine' do not find their place in the film adaptation though it occupies the space of one eighth portion of the 24 chapters (24 pages)(12%) of the novel 'The Scarlet Letter.'

(20) An indefinable purity and lightness of conception are the chief merits of the novel 'The Scarlet Letter'. In the film both are distorted making it a game of passionate adultery and the conception is distorted through the commercial ends. On the basis of this it can be stated that the Director of the film has played with both the beginning and the end of the novel. What he has presented of the main body of the novel in his film adaptation is disproportionate and truly commercial.

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