



**FILM ADAPTAION AS TRANSLATION: A STUDY OF THE FILM ADAPTATION
BASED ON THE NOVEL *NO WAY TO TREAT ALADY* BY WILLIAM GOLDMAN**

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Introduction

The present paper deals with the study of the film adaptation of William Goldman's novel *No Way to Treat Alady* from the perspective of film adaptation. It is evident from the ancient periods of Ramayana and Mahabharata that there exists a large body of translations and adaptations created in verbal, written as well as in visual and digital forms. It is an urge of every human being to re-create an art form or literary narrative by means of either translation or transposition from the already existing artifacts and adapting it to the new form suitable to purpose. The continuous process of adaptations and translations of the popular books into the films is a proof of these recreations in new shapes.

Though the adaptations are the extended part of the translation studies, there is a difference in their theories and implementation. This research paper intends to prove that Film Adaptations are not the Translations with the study of the film adaptation of William Goldman's famous novel *No Way to Treat a Lady*. It will be proved on the basis of the different Translation and Adaptation theories.

Theoretical Frame Work

Translation Studies in the late 1950s put forward the perspective about adaptations can be a form of translation. The Linguist and Translation Studies Scholar Roman Jakobson considered Film adaptation as an "inter-semiotic translation" (translation from one linguistic

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system to another between mediums, or between a verbal and nonverbal system). He states that translation of fiction and poetry is more of an art.¹

Translation process includes transfer of language, cultures, traditions and semiotics. Some literary works are based on literary conventions which are difficult to carry over on screen. Some novels have a strong plot base but author's unique writing style might be lost in translation.

But adaptation is the process where a story in whole or in part is transferred into other media. As it is often considered by some critics as a merely derivative work, it is treated as an inferior form. Film adaptation is a tricky process which includes proper selection, addition, alteration and deletion from the original story part and making a new creation from it. While making a cinematic adaptation, a screenwriter and director should stick to the central theme and original story developed by the author.

Critics like Bluestone states that the adapter,

“looks not to the organic novel whose language is inseparable from its theme, but to characters and incidents which somehow have detached themselves from language, and like the heroes of folk legends, have assumed a mythical life of their own”. He considers filmmaker as an independent artist, “not a translator for an established author, but a new author in his own right”. He states that filmmaker decorates the story with his own vision and cinematic techniques.²

Reading a book is a process of mental “translation” of words into an image. For example, when reader reads a word ‘tree’, he translates the word into an image in his mind and then visualize a picture of it with his own idea and experience. Film lacks this inner process as it gives a direct and outward sensory experience to the spectator with already translated visuals, decorated with colour, action and sound.

Andre Bazin in his book, *What is Cinema Vol.I* states:

“Undoubtedly the novel has means of its own-language not the image is its material, its intimate effect on the isolated reader is not the same as that of a film on the crowd in a darkened



cinema- but precisely for these reasons the differences in aesthetic structure make the search for equivalents an even more delicate matter, and thus they require all the more power of invention and imagination from the film-maker who is truly attempting a resemblance. One might suggest that in the realm of language and style cinematic creation is in direct ratio to fidelity. For the same reasons that render a word-by-word translation worthless and a too free translation a matter of condemnation, a good adaptation should result in a restoration of the essence of the letter and the spirit. But one knows how intimate a possession of a language and of the genius proper to it is required for a good translation.”³

In novels, characters play an important role because they can engage the spectator’s imagination through the similarities and differences. Like plot and story, characters are also transported from text to film but during this process, some changes like names of the characters, occupation and locations are unavoidable. In novel, reader gets to know the thought process of the character through first person narratives or monologues. But in films the narration disappears and the narrator’s perspective is expressed through the use of voice-over or other cinematic techniques.

Andre Bazin again in his book, *What is Cinema* states:

“The novel offers the cinema characters that are much more complex and, again as regards the relation of form and content, a firmness of treatment and a subtlety to which we are not accustomed on the screen”.

Through the above-mentioned theories related to Translation and Adaptation, this research paper will make analysis of the film adaptation of the novel *No Way to Treat a Lady* by William Goldman.

***No Way to Treat a Lady* (Film 1968)⁴**

is the American psychological thriller film with some characteristics of Film Noir and Black Humour. The film was an adaptation of William Goldman’s novel of the same name (1964)⁵. It tells a story of a serial killer, Christopher Gill who murders lonely middle-aged ladies



in New York City by impersonation of various characters. The film was critically acclaimed and Rod Steiger's performance in the lead role was admired by the critics.

When William Goldman wrote the original novel, he was facing 'Writer's Block'. He has mentioned the back story of the novel in his memoir, *Adventures in the Screen Trade*.⁶ He was inspired by a report in the newspaper about the Boston Strangler. The report has raised a possibility about more than one killer may be involved in those series of murders. Goldman got the content and created two stranglers in the novel who were jealous of each other. He wrote a brief novel of 160 pages within ten days. The novel is divided into 53 chapters. William Goldman makes use of innovative narrative technique by writing some chapters in third person narration, some as a crime report in a newspaper in tabloid form. The most important is the first person narration in the form of personal notes written by Morris or Moe Brummell, the detective who is dealing the serial killing case. The novel progresses along with the development of two major characters through this triple narrative technique. The incident of each murder is described in detail by using third person narrative which follows the report about that murder in a newspaper. After each report, the killer makes anonymous phone call to Detective Morris showing dissatisfaction about the newspaper report. He is desperate for becoming a front-page sensation in 'The New York Times'. He conveys the additional details of the murder in a sarcastic language. After the third murder, the news report questions, about killer's motive, Gill calls Morris and gives him a funny riddle by asking:

"When is a motive not a motive?" and answers by himself as "When there isn't one".

Gill plays with the language used in the report and improves and makes variations in his pattern of killing as Doctor Wanger mentions in one of the news reports:

"There sure is something the matter with him". As to the pattern of the killings.

Christopher Gill's character is developed by using the multiple narrative techniques. He is a serial killer who is obsessed on his late mother who was a famous stage actress. His hatred towards his mother diverts him to kill the ladies of her age. Besides being a Broadway theatre owner and director, he is a master of disguise. His preys are lonely middle-aged women. He



takes entry in his victim's house by adopting disguises like priest, police, gay hair-dresser, and a transvestite. The novel is able to bring various tricky surprises by retaining the identity of the killer through misleading or limited physical description of the characters. In the film the actor, Rod Steiger was recognizable throughout the film despite of his disguise in many characters. He chit chats with the ladies whom he is going to kill within a few minutes. He gains their trust by joking and making them laugh whole heartedly. During this healthy atmosphere, he strangles them to death. In the scene where he strangles Mrs. Alice Mulloy in the disguise of Father McDowel, he makes her laugh for a while and strangles her by making a growling sound resembling an animal which crosses the line of cruelty. When he confirms that she is dead, he kisses her forehead and murmurs:

“You know Mumma, you rest in peace”.

His insanity does not stop by killing them, he humiliates the dead body. He undresses the killed lady and balances her on toilet seat in disgusting way with painting a pair of lips on their forehead with red lipstick.

Paramount Pictures released a sensational trailer before the release of the film by describing the killer as:

“He just likes to kill and that's no way to kill a lady”.

In the end sequence of the film, he enters in Palmer's apartment who is Morris's girlfriend. He serves her favorite food in a Chef's style with an informal conversation with her. But when the telephone rings and she get up from chair to lift the phone, he shouts at her as “Don't answer” which gives her the danger alert and she asks him, “Why me?” on which he answers, “better to ask him” (Morris).

The second protagonist of the novel is Morris Brummell, a Detective who is the Officer In charge of the Gill's case. The role is played by George Segal. He is ironically nicknamed as 'Moe' which ties him to the childhood memories and his ultra-possessive Jewish mother. She feels embarrassed that her son is investigating the case and she expresses:



“My own son goes looking at dead women’s naked bodies. I tell you Morris, that’s no way to treat a lady.”

His life and his thought process are revealed through his diary notes.

The book describes many comic and romantic interludes where reader can relax and enjoy, but its main focus is on the complex parent-child relationship which is the link between Brummel and the killer. The novel does not end in a conventional way. It is appreciable that with the brief newspaper report, Goldman gives a brutally shocking and unexpected end.

In the film, screenwriter John Gay has taken cinematic liberty while translating the novel into film. He kept only one strangler that was Christopher Gill. Goldman was not happy with these major changes made in the story. Some of the character’s names were changed, and some characters were dropped during the adaptation. The basic crime theme was handled creatively with the mixture of humour and horror.

The film critic Ernest Betts compared the film with Alfred Hitchcock’s thrillers praises as:

“The film has a macabre humor which just takes the edge off the horror and is sometimes hilarious.”⁷

The ending sequence of the film was different from the novel. The thrilling action sequence made much impact on the audience. The innovative narrative technique which was the back bone of the novel was altered into cinematic techniques like camera angles, extreme close ups, witty and funny dialogues and most importantly strong characters made live through the excellent acting of the protagonists.

Conclusion

As the film keeps the fidelity with the theme and basic plot of the novel but lacks in translating writer’s style and narrative technique, it may be considered as an adaptation rather than a translation of the original text.



Hence, this research paper successfully proves that the film, *No Way to Treat a Lady* is not a translation but an adaptation of William Goldman's novel of the same title.

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