

THE FILM ADAPTATION OF *EMMA* AS TRANSCREATION

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Abstract

Adaptation is an age old practice in literature. Often the plots of other literary works are borrowed by many writers. Even plots of others genres are adapted for the popular genre of the adapter's period, but they are presented with many alterations and creativity. With the emergence of the cinema plots of other genres especially 'novel' have been adapted for the films, but film directors present the adapted plot with exclusion and addition of the scenes. While presenting the adapted scenes directors present it in the new audio-visual form with much creativity, so film adaptation becomes transcreational activity. The present research paper endeavours to analyze Douglas McGrath's film adaptation *Emma* (1996) from transcreative perspective.

Keywords: Adaptation, source text, transcreation, fidelity, inclusion, omission, addition, auteur etc.

The present research article deals with the theory of 'Adaptation' and the analysis of Douglas McGrath's film *Emma* (1996) as a transcreation of its source text that is Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815). From the very beginning adaptation is prevalent in literary works. Writers borrow plots from other works, even from the other genres and present the adapted material with alterations as well as modification in the form of literary genre which is in vogue in their contemporary period. Further, often the same plot is adapted by many writers but it is presented in their own unique style. Adapter's style and skill of presenting the

adapted material determines the success of the new text. So the particular adapters' works attract the readers' attention.

In the 19th century 'cinema' emerged as the new form of entertainment, and as the early films were in the silent mode, filmmakers relied on familiar literary stories. Even after introduction of sound to the films, filmmakers continued to adapt literary works and adapted films played vital role in reaching literature to the viewers. Linda Hutcheon's quotation is enough to prove the potentiality of the film, she asserts that,

A best-selling book may reach a million readers; a successful Broadway play will be seen by 1 to 8 million people; but a movie or television adaptation will find an audience of many millions more...¹

Above quotation obviously indicates that 'film' is the most popular form of entertainment. Adaptation benefits both the source text and adapter: in the former case source text reaches many viewers in the form of film; in the latter case popularity of the source text and its author help film adapter to easily attract the attention of viewers. Popularity of film adaptation indicates the success of adapted films. In this context Linda Hutcheon's statement is worth to cite, she emphatically states,

Why, even according to 1992 statistics are 85% of all Oscar-winning best pictures adaptations? Why do adaptations make up 95 percent of all the TV movies of the week that win Emmy Awards?²

Above statement indicates the success of the film adaptation and superiority of adapted films over other films. The main reason behind popularity of film adaptation may be the changing lifestyle of modern era, due to hectic life style a few people bother to sit many hours to read literary texts, but on the contrary many prefer to watch films adapted from the masterpieces.

As novel was popular literary form, and both film and novel have some common aspects like dialogues, narrative technique, plot etc., many film directors adapted novels for their films. A renowned critic, James Monaco, highlights the close relation between 'film' and 'novel'. He observes, "The narrative potential of film is so marked that it has developed its strongest bond not with painting, not even with drama, but with the novel."³

Due to this close relation between both the forms, filmmakers abundantly adapted the novels for their films and viewers got an opportunity to watch their favourite masterpieces on the screen. Jane Austen's novels are one of the best examples of successful adaptations.

Literary oriented viewers go for adapted films under the influence of source text, and they expect maximum characters and incidents of the source text to be included in the film. Considering this point in film evaluation, especially in the beginning period much emphasis was laid on 'fidelity' or faithfulness of the adapted film to its source text. But now considering the length of film and literary text it has become apparent that it is not possible for director to include all the incidents and characters in the film. Further considering his period, director has to add some more incidents and characters. But it cannot be expected that

all the viewers might have read the source text, considering this factor modern film critics do not consider fidelity in film evaluation. Nowadays most of the critics focus on addition of scenes, rather than omission because experience has proved that viewers get attracted to the films for the additional scenes. This is the reason behind particular film adaptation becoming popular among many films adapted from the same source text. Sidney Howard, script writer of Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) is a staunch supporter of fidelity. Thomas Leitch cites Howard's statement regarding fidelity: "If news got out that I was in even the slightest way responsible for any deviation from the book, then my life wouldn't be worth living."⁴

From the above discussion it is obvious that in the process of inclusion and exclusion of scenes director needs to be alert because fidelity of the adapted film depends on the number of inclusion and exclusion of scenes. If the maximum scenes are omitted from the adapted film, the film will fall in the category of infidelity or loose adaptation. It means director has to balance between inclusion and omission of scenes and has to take care that important scenes should not be omitted from the film. Regarding inclusion and omission of scenes and the effect of omission is quite clear in James Monaco's assertion, he asserts,

Commercial film still cannot reproduce the range of the novel in time. An average screenplay for example, is 125 to 150 typescript pages in length; the average novel three times that. Almost invariably, details of incidents are lost in the transition from book to film.⁵

In film adaptation director adapts the source text which is in written form and presents it in the audio-visual form, it means here the process of transformation takes place. But director just does not transform the adapted material, but omits and adds many scenes and characters. Further, presents the adapted scenes with different settings which Julie Sanders calls 'transpositional', besides sound effect, light effect, camera work, editing etc. play major role in film making. As a result adapted film gives different experience to the viewers than the source. Thus director presents the adapted material creatively in new form, so film adaptation should be considered as 'transcreation'.

Analysis of the Film *Emma* (1996) As Transcreation

Jane Austen's novel *Emma* (1815) has been adapted by many film directors including Amy Heckerling for *Clueless* (1995), Douglas McGrath for *Emma* (1996), Jim O'Hanlon for *Emma* (2009) and Rajshree Ojha for *Aisha* (2010). Among all these adaptations the film *Emma* (1996) is considered as the most successful adaptation. It won the 'Oscar Award' in 'Best Original Musical Category, it has also won 'Satellite Award' for Best Actress category, 'London Film Critics Circle Award' in British Actor of the Year Category. It has been directed as well as screenplay written by Douglas McGrath. Running time of the film is 120 minutes.

Douglas McGrath presents the opening scene of the film so creatively. In the credit section of the film spinning of the ball has been shown which resembles the globe, but

actually it is a ball with the pictures of local places like Highbury, London, Randall, Donwell Abbey, Hartfield and the characters related with the places. Presentation of this information in the model of globe which Emma (Gwyneth Paltro) has created as a gift for Mrs. Weston (Greta Scacchi) indicates that characters have their own world. Voiceover, “In a time when one’s town was one’s world” (00:02:30), hints about Emma’s world which is isolated from the outside world, such type of alien world has not been described in the novel. Here it becomes quite apparent that in order to keep the film’s plot unspoiled from the modern environment McGrath creatively presents the imaginary world of Emma. At the very outset through Emma’s dialogue, “The most beautiful thing in the world is a match well made” (00:02:45), McGrath hints Emma’s supposed role of matchmaker. Presentation of the Westons’ marriage is a part of McGrath’s creative presentation. In the novel they have been described as actually married, but in the present film, scene opens with the Westons’ wedding scene. Further wedding scene offers opportunity to include maximum characters in the opening scene, McGrath introduces many significant characters including Emma, Mr. Woodhouse (Denys Hawthorne), the Westons, the Bates and Mr. Elton (Alan Cumming). While shifting to the next scene dissolving technique has been used, camera focuses on globe model in the hands of Mrs. Taylor and Hartfield has been zoomed out and slowly Hartfield appears on the screen.

In the present film adaptation Douglas McGrath includes many incidents and characters of the source text. He closely adapts 20 scenes from the source text, so the film is close adaptation and it fulfills the fidelity criterion of the film evaluation. Although McGrath has closely adapted many scenes considering the short time at his disposal, he has dropped many scenes and characters of the source text. Some important scenes dropped from the present film are; dinner party at Hartfield (Vol. I, Chap. XII, P.N. 63), discussion about Jane Fairfax’s childhood and her mother (Vol. II, Chap. II, P.N. 104), Frank Churchill’s going to London to get haircut (Vol. II, Chap. VII, P.N. 132), Emma and Harriet’s visit to Fords (Vol. II, Chap. IX, P.N. 151), Frank Churchill’s fastening Mrs. Bates’ rivet (Vol. II, Chap. IX, P.N. 153), discussion about Jane Fairfax’s employment (Vol. II, Chap. XVII, P.N. 195), gathering at Donwell (Vol. III, Chap. VI, P.N. 234), Harriet falling ill (Vol. III, Chap. IX, P.N. 255), Harriet’s tooth problem (Vol. III, Chap. XVI, P.N. 296) etc. Besides these scenes McGrath omits some minor characters like James, Hannah, Miss Nash, Miss Prince, Miss Richardson, Mr. Wingfield and Perry. But these omissions do not affect or disturb the smooth flow of the plot of the film.

In the present film, besides the omission of the scenes, considering the viewers’ expectations McGrath has added some scenes which have not been described in source text. Archery scene is the remarkable example of it. In the novel Jane Austen does not describe archery practice of Emma and Mr. Knightley, but McGrath presents the archery scene much creatively and in funny manner. Archery scene reminds us Robert Leonard’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1940), in which Elizabeth proves her superiority over Darcy by hitting three bulls

eyes, but here contrasting incident has been presented to it where Emma misses her mark. Along with the addition of the archery scene McGrath changes the setting of the scene. In the source text Emma and Mr. Knightley discuss about Harriet's rejection of Robert Martin's proposal at Hartfield, in the film they practice archery at Donwell Abbey, Mr. Knightley's (Jeremy Norton) residence, during which they discuss about Harriet's (Toni Collette) refusal to Robert Martin. McGrath presents the scene in a humorous manner. In the first round Emma shoots closer to the centre, but as their discussion turns to Harriet's rejection of Robert Martin, Emma's attention diverts from archery. As Mr. Knightley tries to prove the superiority of Robert Martin over Harriet and blames Emma for her encouragement to Harriet in her rejection, Emma's arrows go wider from the centre. At one point she nearly kills Mr. Knightley's dog, and Mr. Knightley's reaction on it is funny, he says, "Try not to kill my dogs" (00:25:15). Thus archery scene gives dramatic effect to Emma and Knightley's discussion. It is a fine example of the transcreation of the adapted material. One more additional scene is Emma taking care of puppies (00:46:30) during which Emma tries to relieve Harriet from Elton's attachment, but in the source text the Woodhouse family does not keep puppies. McGrath so creatively uses the puppies that brown eyes of puppies remind Mr. Elton to Harriet. The addition of puppies causes the shift of the scene. In the source text Emma consoles Harriet about Mr. Elton's leaving for Bath at Mrs. Goddard's place but due to introduction of puppies in the present scene discussion takes place at Hartfield. Above scenes are just a few samples beyond these examples there are still more additional scenes which are found in the film. But these additional scenes do not cause deviation in the adapted plot; on the contrary these scenes have been mingled into the borrowed material in such a way that they become part and parcel of the plot.

McGrath creatively represents the adapted material with different settings than the description of the same scenes in the source text, for example, in a scene which deals with Mr. Knightley's visit to Emma and Mr. Woodhouse (00:04:10 – 00:07:36), they are shown having drinks, but in the source text Emma and Mr. Woodhouse are described at the backgammon table. Shift from game (backgammon) to drinks indicates their jolly mood. One more scene in which Emma tries to divert Harriet's attention from Mr. Martin to Elton (00:17:27 – 00:19:09) is Hatfield lawn, further Emma and Harriet are shown in a tent, but there is no description of the tent in the source text and on the contrary in the source text present scene immediately follows after Emma and Harriet's encounter with Robert Martin on Donwell road. In the present scene the gap between their meeting with Elton and their discussion provides enough time to Emma for the preparation. The scene in which Emma sketches Harriet has been shown on the bridge in the Hartfield garden, but in the source text place of drawing has not been described. Further, in the source text sketching work continues for two days, but in the present scene sketching scene has been curtailed to a single day, that too with many changes like dropping Mrs. Weston and not engaging Mr. Elton in newspaper

reading etc. But changed settings of the scenes do not affect the theme of the scenes on the contrary they leave positive effect.

McGrath portrays the characters much accordance with their description in the source text. There is much similarity between description and depiction of Emma's character in the source text and the present film adaptation. Jane Austen describes Emma as,

Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever and rich with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.⁶

McGrath also begins the very first shot of the film with Emma. She has been shown in delightful mood, beautiful, smart at speech. But from the emotional dimension McGrath's Emma is more sympathetic. American actress Gwyneth Paltrow with her mesmerizing beauty makes Emma more sympathetic. In the film, age difference between Emma and Mr. Knightley has also been lessened. In the novel there is sixteen years age difference between Emma and Mr. Knightley, but McGrath presents them nearly of the equal age which helps his Emma to understand Mr. Knightley sooner than Austen's Emma. Further McGrath presents Emma more active, she has been shown driving her own carriage and doing archery practice which indicates emerging feminism. Emma's costume is also against the Austen's tradition. In the Austen's period ladies guarded their skin with clothes from sun, but in the present film Emma and Harriet have been shown in short sleeved clothes and hatless. In this regard Linda Troost asserts, "Emma's dress would have astonished Austen"⁷. Emma's father, Henry Woodhouse, has also been portrayed much akin with the source text. He has been shown typical Old father in traditional costume. McGrath shows him occasionally chuckling which makes him sympathetic and jolly. Harriet Smith has also been presented with much accordance with the description in the source text. In the source text Harriet's nature has been described in the following words,

Harriet certainly was not clever, but she had a sweet, docile, grateful disposition, was totally free from conceit and only desiring to be guided by anyone she looked up to. (15)

In the film Harriet has been presented more credulous and pathetic than either Austen's description in the source text or portrayal in other films. She has been shown following Emma's orders and can be easily persuaded by Emma. Remaining characters like Robert Martin, Mr. Elton, Miss and Mrs. Bates have also much resemblance with Austen's description. Mr. Knightley's character has been very closely adapted, like Knightley of the source text, he often teases and tries to correct Emma. But McGrath assigns some extra characteristics like, his interest in archery and dogs.

McGrath has succeeded in creating Victorian environment and British culture. To create contemporary environment he uses horses, horse carriages, ball dances, old fashioned houses, libraries equipped with old styled books etc.

Conclusion:

If we consider inclusion, exclusion, addition and setting of the scenes, distinction between film and the source text is apparently found. But film and literature are two different forms of arts and they have their own characteristics and limitations. Further considering the need of his period, adapter has to make certain changes in borrowed material, and it is not possible to transform one art into another without any alteration. Again there is less possibility of all viewers having read the source text, and their relating the film with its source text. So adapted film should be enjoyed without considering its source text and it should be treated as director's new creation and independent art. And director should be considered as auteur of the film, and film as transcreation of the source text.

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