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The Cinematic Adaptation and Representation of the Female Gothic of Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* in *Shanti Nilayam*

Subhasshri R

Abstract:

Ever since the days of Lumière Brothers, cinema became the modern leisure for the common man, began to showcase the unbelievable, unknown and the unexplored. It emerged as the definitive medium in transcribing the written word through its magic of cinematography on the silver screen. This phenomenon grew significantly over a period of time, wherein great literary masterpieces since antiquity found deft representation on the celluloid and at times they departed or deviated from the original and were either adapted or modified according to tastes and needs of its onlookers.

Accordingly, this article attempts the study the notion of adaptation against the notion of adapting the literary text *Jane Eyre*, the Victorian classic, penned by Charlotte Bronte. It further intends to undermine the elements of gothic, especially the female gothic and how the director has adapted in the Tamil-language film *Shanti Nilayam*.

Key Words:

Film adaptation – *Jane Eyre* – female gothic elements – *Shanti Nilayam*.

“The book is a film that takes place in the mind of the reader” - Paulo Coelho

“An Adaptation leads the cinema-goer to the original to find out what they're missing and if they already know the book it can still illuminate a theme, a character, an idea” - David Nichollas

Cinema is a popular medium which showcases the social, cultural and artistic portrayal of the unbelievable and the unknown. Although it is predominantly seen as an entertaining medium, it emerged as a prominent medium in transcending and transcribing the written word through its extravagant audio-visual depictions, thereby etching a profound impact on its onlookers. In the words of Veena Jain, “Cinema” has become “a serious art form...commingling of the visual, the oral and the philosophical” (249). At the same time, the cinema as an art form has close association with literary aesthetics wherein they become interactive, reciprocative and interdependent.

Ever since the origins of the cinema, adaptations of literary works, especially novels have gained significant position in the realm of cinema. This facet is legitimized by recognizing its mark by the Academy Awards which confirms a separate award for adapted screenplays, distinguishing them from the original ones (Babu et al 95). Above all, the contemporary academia acknowledges the cinema and its adaptation of literary magnum opus through serious and rigorous study as a new discipline through subjects like Film Studies, Literature and Media Studies.

This paper comprises of the following section viz., introducing the concept of adaptation of literary texts as films, then the key events of the novel *Jane Eyre* are mentioned, followed by the cinematic of it as *Shanti Nilayam* – its similarities and differences. The concept of female gothic is spelt out and the elements of gothic in the novel are focused and the episodes and techniques of gothic representations in the film counterpart are elaborately discussed and the paper is concluded.

According to Oxford English Dictionary, “adaptation” has “a plurality of meanings and applications, most of which allude to the process of changing to suit an alternative purpose, function or environment; the alternation of one thing to suit another” (web). However, the term ‘adaptation’ [emphasis mine] has a different meaning in the field of media studies, which refers: “a film / movie, book or play that is based on a particular piece of work but that has been changed for a new situation” (n.pag). in short, an adaptation is seen as a process of adapting a book or a play into the screen. in the words of Mark Brokenshire, when the content undergoes adaptation, “it is subjected to a variety of focus and factors, which are dictated by the nature of the source text, the reason for adapting the text, medium, market, and culture into which it is adapted” (web).

Key Events in *Jane Eyre*

First published in 1847 under the pseudonym of Curren Bell, Charlotte Bronte’s most popular book was *Jane Eyre*, which chronicles the trail and tribulations of an orphan girl who finds her hold during the early 1800s in Northern England. Orphaned shortly after her birth, she was brought up by her abusive aunt, Sarah Reed, who torments young Jane physically, emotionally and spiritually. After some awkward situations with her cousins, Jane is sent to a further nastier place, the Lowood School, run by the hypocritical headmaster Mr. Brocklehurst. Despite the situations becoming harsher day-by-day, two persons who instill warmth in little Jane’s mind are her compassionate supervisor, Maria Temple and the god-fearing Helen Burns. However, they were temporary solace as the latter died of consumption and the former got married and left Lowood.

In the meantime, Jane tops her class and desires to become a teacher. Meanwhile, she also applies for a job as governess to the young French girl Adele Varens, the ward of Mr. Edward Rochester, the master of Thornfield Hall. Right from the beginning, he seems to be brooding over some dark, murky, mystery, which is deepened with episodes of a series of hysterical laughter during the night, heard from the attic, ultimately panicking naïve Jane. Nevertheless, when Mr. Rochester is confided by Jane, the former nonchalantly replies they are from Grace Poole, the seamstress, who works there. A fire at Mr. Rochester’s room further puzzles and fear creeps within Jane.

After some time, Jane develops an attraction for Mr. Rochester, while he flirts with Ms. Blanche Ingram, who in turn schemes to marry Rochester for his wealth. However, he wittingly asks Jane’s hand for marriage who readily accepts without knowing the costs of the act. Mr. Rochester hastily prepares for the wedding but before the ceremony, they are interrupted by Mr. Mason, a London lawyer, who reveals the shocking truth that Mr. Rochester is already married to Bertha Mason from West Indies and is locked up in the third floor attic. Bertha is revealed as a lunatic and is looked after by Grace Poole.

Perceiving herself to be tricked, Jane is crestfallen and with remorse leaves Thornfield Hall and encounters the Rivers’ siblings viz., St. John, Diana and Mary, wherein Jane takes up a teacher position at the rural school. Jane accidentally discovers that she is related to the Rivers’ siblings and has inherited a fortune of £20,000 and they equally divide the fortune among themselves. Things turn out otherwise when St. John asks Jane to marry him but she refuses the offer instead would accompany him to India on a missionary work, as an act of religious duty. Out of nowhere, Jane telepathically hears Mr. Rochester calling out her name and Jane rushes to see Mr. Rochester at Thornfield Hall. She is shocked to see the estate completely burned by Bertha who also died in the fire and above all Mr. Rochester is blinded by the incident. Jane out of love and compassion marries Mr. Rochester and regains his sight in one eye.

Shanti Nilayam

Directed by G.S. Mani, the 1969 Tamil regional film was believed, according to film reviewer Randor Gay, initially to be an adaptation of the mega-hit *The Sound of Music* (1965), [but] it is actually an adaptation of Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre*, with some elements thrown" (The Hindu Mar. 28, 2018). The Tamil version was the S.S. Vasam wherein the screenplay and dialogues were penned by Chitralaya Gopu. The film also won the National Film Award for Best Cinematography to Marcus Bartley and was also a big commercial success and ran for 100 days. The film featured a star-studded casting wherein the original characters of the novel are indicated in brackets against the roles they played.

- * Kanchana as Malathi (Jane Eyre),
- * Gemini Ganesan as Bhaskar (Mr. Edward Rochester),
- * Vijaya Chandrika as Janaki (Bertha Rochester),
- * Balaji as Balu (Mr. Mason),
- * Vijayalalitha as Sheela (Blanche Ingram)
- * Leela as Paapamma (Grace Poole)

Unlike the original novel wherein Mr. Rochester's protégée is a single girl child – Adele Varens, this film adaptation has five children (4 girls and a boy) under the guardianship of Bhaskar, who are the orphaned kids of his deceased elder brother, which is a witty creation of the director. Two additional characters who feature in the cinematic adaptations, find significant positions, though trivial, are Nagesh as Ramu, who serves as a comic relief and his mother, Bhaskar's aunt, is played by Pandari Bai. Besides these, the director has also indigenously created roles like Bhaskar's father, and Janaki's revengeful father, played by V.S. Ragavan and Senthatamari respectively, who features in an interesting sub-plot in the movie version, wherein Bhasker's father accidental attacking fatally kills the latter's father, thereby making Balu's (Mr. Mason) deranged sister to get married to Bhaskar.

Some of the prominent similarities between the original and adapted include the orphaned protagonist who is ill-treated by her aunt and indeed gets her academic foundation at a boarding school from a warm-hearted supervisor. Malathy takes up a job as a governess at Shanti Nilayam (Abode of Peace) whose landlord is Bhaskar and falls in love with the latter. However, Sheela courts Bhaskar who dismisses her to be pretentious and proposes to Malathy. Nevertheless, during the wedding ceremony, Balu interrupts it by shattering the truth that Bhaskar is already married to his sister, who turns out to be, the madwoman locked up in secluded part of the house. Towards the end, Janaki burns down the house and is eventually killed, along with her brother Balu, in the act and ultimately clearing the path for Bhaskar to marry Malathy.

Female Gothic

According to M.H. Abrams, originally the term "Gothic" referred to the Goths, a Germanic tribe, later it came to signify "Germanic" then "medieval" (69). Further, the term transcended to the domain of architecture denoting medieval architecture which featured "the use of pointed arch and vault" and was prevalent "through western Europe between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries" (69). In the literary jargon, the term 'gothic' began during the late 18th century in the context of Romantic period originally featuring depictions of "ancient castles – experiences connected with subterranean dungeons, secret passageways, flickering lamps, screams, moans, bloody hands, ghosts, graveyards and the rest" (Norton web). During the later stages, it also meant to "designate the macabre, mysterious, fantastic, supernatural and ... the terrifying" (Norton web).

However, the term 'gothic' underwent a new paradigmatic shift with the coinage of the term 'female gothic' which was first used by the feminist critic Ellen Moers in her article entitled "The Female Gothic: The Monster's Mother", published in *The New York Review of Books* in 1976. Dr. Katherine D. Harris points out some of the points of distinction for the female gothic wherein the protagonist is an orphaned heroine also features a persecuted victim and a courageous heroine is further perused by a patriarchal figure. The woman must prove herself through courage in case of physical dangers. On observing the elements of female gothic, the atmosphere is often an eerie and a bleak one, where the text underlines the notions of social and religious definitions of gender and above all, there are predominance of terror, poetic realism and supernatural elements (web).

Elements of Gothic in *Jane Eyre*:

The initial element of gothic is exposed through the locale which are represented through two places viz., Jane's aunt place – the Red room in Gateshead Hall and Mr. Rochester's estate. Earlier, in the beginning of the novel, Jane is provoked by her cousin John which instigates little Jane to yell at her cousin, "You are like a murderer – you are slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!" (*Jane Eyre* hereafter as *JE* 7), for which she is punished by locking her in the 'red-room' [emphasis mine] by her nasty aunt, Mrs. Reed. The room was "a spare chamber ... chill, because it seldom had a fire" (*JE* 10) but what adds to little Jane's fears was the fact that Mr. Reed died in this room. Bronte brilliantly depicts the eeriness of the red-room juxtaposed with an image of Jane resembling as an ethereal creature through the following words:

All looked colder and darker in the visionary hollow than in reality; and the strange little figure there gazing at me with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving ... had the effect of a real spirit: I thought ... like one of the tiny phantoms, half-fairy, half imp" (*JE* 10).

All of sudden, Jane feels ghastly notions as she imagines the dead Mr. Reed returns to earth in order to punish his nasty wife's eccentric behaviour as his last wish. She screams and pleads the servants to take her away from the room but her aunt dismisses the act haughtily and poor little Jane faints. Later she awakens in her bed wherein the kind servant Bessie and the affectionate apothecary Mr. Lloyd are standing near her bed and silently speaking among themselves. Consequently, this episode of Jane instills fear and develops nightmarish elements wherein the colour red of "curtains of deep red damask" and "the carpet was red" ... "the foot of the bed was covered with a crimson cloth" (*JE* 9) may signify danger or blood and the room symbolizes as a cage imprisoning her from freedom and niceties of childhood.

The major episode which unfolds the gothic elements is the Thornfield estate and the mystery shrouding Mr. Rochester. Earlier in the novel, the master of the estate is introduced by Mrs. Fairfax, the landlady, as "unimpeachable ... peculiar ... not easy to describe ... but a good master" (*JE* 102) and suddenly Jane is startled "to hear in so still a region, a laugh ... a curious laugh – distinct, formal, mirthless ... the sound ceased, only for an instant" (*JE* 103-104). Mrs. Fairfax tells Jane that the laugh belongs to Grace Poole, an eccentric servant.

Several months pass unperturbed until she accidentally encounters Mr. Rochester who rides a horse and frightens Jane. She thinks a supernatural mythical 'gytrash' [emphasis mine] has tried to attack her but it is she who scared Mr. Rochester, making the horse slip on a patch of ice, along with its rider. On enquiring her whereabouts, she informs him that she is the governess at Thornfield and helps him rise. Only on returning to Thornfield, Jane realizes that the man she helped was none other than her employer — Mr. Rochester. Later in the evening, Mrs. Fairfax spills a part of the

gloom surrounding Mr. Rochester to Jane that he lost his brother, Rowland, nine years ago, thereby inheriting the property.

Once again, Jane hears the disturbing hysterical laughter outside her bedroom and this time it is much louder and feels someone opening the door. Leaving her room, she sees smoke covering Rochester's room and curtains on fire. She pours water and instead of calling Mrs. Fairfax, he hurries saying that he must a visit to the third floor. While he warmly thanks Jane for her timely gesture of saving his life, he blames Grace Poole for the hideous act, thereby asking to keep the incident a secret, which startles Jane. However, the following day, the servants are told that the candles made the curtain get fire. Further, Jane also comes to know that Grace is paid more than other servants, which puzzles more than before to Jane.

The frequent arrival of Mr. Mason and his odd behaviour confuses Jane. It reaches its peak once Rochester forces Jane to accompany him in order to nurse the bloody arm of Mr. Mason. This incident deepens the mystery surrounding Rochester. At one point, love blossoms between Jane and Rochester and she is asked for marriage and consents positively for the same. Then onwards, for Jane the estate is abode of peace while Rochester sees it as a prison which robs his freedom until the final episode wherein the mystery is unveiled that the hysterical laughter comes from his insane first wife, Bertha Mason, who is locked up in the third floor of the attic and not the servant Grace Poole. At last, Bertha sets the entire house on fire blinding Rochester and Jane marries him out of compassion.

The Cinematic Adaptation of the Gothic in *Jane Eyre* as *Shanti Nilayam*:

As mentioned earlier G.S. Mani's *Shanti Nilayam* was an adapted Tamil language film version of the English classic *Jane Eyre* and is similar to Cinderella. In his text, *Pride of Tamil Cinema: 1931 to 2013*, G. Dhanajayan observes the technique of adapting the film *Shanti Nilayam* thus:

The popular English novel was adapted very well to suit Tamil audience tastes with songs, comedy scenes and thrilling elements by Gopu. Kanchana steals the scenes with her beauty and refined acting while Gemini Ganesh was perfect for the role of a hero with a difficult past, trying to overcome his sorrows (209).

The film initially showcases naïve Malathi (Kanchana) praying to Lord Muruga that her aunt must not scold or beat her and starts doing all the household chores as a menial. Later her aunt gives her kids coffee, while Malathi shares a small of given porridge to the pet dog which infuriates the arrogant aunt who violently beats her and locks in a dark room (Illustration 1). This scene showcases the fear of Malathi, which audio-visually depicts the plight of Malathi similar to that of Jane's red-room episode. The scene depicts Malathi's banging the locked door to open (Illustration 2), then the span of time from day to night by showing a lighted kerosene lamp (Illustration 3), strange insects' sound, above all her loud scream on seeing a scorpion (Illustration 4).



Illustration 1



Illustration 2

Illustration 3



Illustration 4



Then Malathi is taken to a boarding school wherein the episodes of Helen Burns or the strict Mr. Brocklehurst are not adapted instead the benevolent Ms. Temple is depicted. Years roll by and she grooms herself to become an excellent teacher and applies for the job of governess for five kids. Unlike the original novel wherein Jane is scared by Rochester's horse, the scene in the film shows Bhaskar (Gemini Ganesh) more heroic who only takes a chance to mock Malathy, nevertheless, the latter ridicules him and his horse.

Although Bhaskar is neither depicted moody nor mysterious man, he is shown to be a strict guardian for his protégés who expects extreme discipline and decorum. Earlier, after her arrival at the estate – Shanti Nilayam, which means an abode of peace, during dinner time, the director suddenly zooms to Paapamma (Illustration 5), the mysterious servant figure, who triggers fear within naïve Malathi and makes Bhaskar uncomfortable.



Illustration 5



Illustration 6

There are three different occasions wherein Malathi is scared thrice; once it is the kids who frighten her, next Bhaskar's unexpected arrival at the hallway and third time she hears the hysterical laughter, which she presumes to be the servant Paapamma. Once again, the cinematography plays magic in showing Paapamma as an enigmatic figure and the background music adds eeriness to the scene, making Malathi run to Pandari Bai's room who comforts her saying it is the servant who is a somnambulist (Illustration 6) and laughs hysterically.

An important motif used in film is fire wherein on three instances they occur. First, Bhaskar's bedroom curtains are set on fire (Illustration 7) which was timely saved by Malathi, then the wedding saree (Illustration 8) torched by the Bhaskar's insane wife and finally the fire which Janaki sets to the entire house during the climatic fight burning down the entire house (Illustration 9). Unlike in novel, Balu who plays the role of Mr. Mason, visits periodically Bhaskar to exhorts money which adds an eternal question not only in Malathi's mind but also in Ramu's (Nagesh) too.

However, his role is unraveled only towards the climax who shatters the bitter truth that Bhaskar is already to his insane sister Janaki. At last, he tries to safeguard his sister from fire and ultimately gets killed along his sister in the act.



Illustration 7



Illustration 8



Illustration 9

Conclusion:

Cinemas create the magic on its onlookers by transcending time and locale in depicting issues which are appreciated not only by its onlookers but also by its creators. Although written a century ago, this Victorian classic *Jane Eyre* created a huge impact on distant lands and cultures, thereby making it an interesting work of art. As Satyajit Raj aptly points out that our filmmakers should search for materials based on the aspects of Indian life such as the habits, speech, dress, manners, the foreground and the background, this film was adapted on the needs of its audience by its creators thereby making a huge hit.

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BIO-NOTE

Dr. Subhasshri. R started her career as an Assistant Professor in English at Idaya College of Arts and Science for Women, Puducherry, (affiliated to Pondicherry University) then worked briefly as Guest Faculty in the Department of English Studies at Central University of Tamil Nadu (CUTN), Thiruvarur and worked as Guest Faculty in the Department of English & Comparative Literature at Pondicherry University, Puducherry. Presently, she has been selected by the UPSC and appointed as Assistant Professor of English, Bharathidasan Govt. College for Women (Autonomous), Puducherry. Her areas of research interest include American Drama, Women Writing, Research Methodology and UGC-NET coaching etc.

E-mail Id: - subhasshri_r@yahoo.co.in