

Intertextual and Extratextual Evolution: Reading *The Color Purple*

- Shaifali Arora

Abstract: The very criteria of judging a film adaptation on the concept of fidelity had largely affected its individuality in the early Twentieth century. However, in the latter half of the century film theories of critics like George Bluestone and Andre Bazin gave film adaptations their due status as the genre of film grew to gain popularity. A reader's proximity with a novel develops an approach that expects the film adaptation to be an exact copy of its source text. The film adaptation of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* was also criticised for playing with the author's feminist stance and for its inability for fidelity to its source text. This paper will attempt to present Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* as a profound filmic adaptation of Walker's novel whose identity as a film does not derive from its comparison with the novel for fidelity but its own artistry.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Fidelity, Adaptation, Cinema, Source text, Extratextuality, Temporal evolution, Chronotope, Genre, Sisterhood, Feminism, Womanism, Transference, Subtext.

The chronotope is the place where the knots of narrative are tied and untied. It can be said without qualification that to them belongs the meaning that shapes narrative. (Bakhtin, 250)

Outside a text, a "chronotope" affects the very experience of reading and reader's association with that text. It influences a reader and his socio-cultural milieu that had itself influenced the creation of that text. Relation between a literary and a real "chronotope" produces a picture of a unified text. The experience of reading a text like Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, a text that has been adapted and re-adapted in diverse genres will differ in diverse "chronotopic" backgrounds. Different "chronotopic" backgrounds, of the author, of characters, of events in the text and of its many adaptations and interpretations of the novel *The Color Purple* have produced a text that has been culturally evolved over the years. The adaptation of the novel in a Hollywood film by Steven Spielberg was momentous of its eventual popularity. However, Spielberg's adaptation of the novel *The Color Purple* in a film barely after three years of its publication was widely criticised for lessening the author's feminist stance by not dealing with the subjects of lesbianism and incest. Yet Spielberg's move towards a tender portrayal of the subtexts of lesbianism and incest was a smarter one. Excessive focus on such themes would have affected its popularity at the box office especially among men. Considering readers' proximity with the novel, film was criticised for being infidel to the source text. Criticism of the film in being infidel raised a question over its individuality. History has stayed witness of the diminutive status that has been accorded to the film in comparison to grandness of the novel. George Bluestone argues in his

book *Novels into Films* that the two genres of film and novel cannot be compared for being different genres of art. Bluestone's theory favours the changes a film adaptation is bound to have. He says, "...Changes are inevitable the moment one abandons the linguistic for the visual medium... A (Film) cannot be directly compared with B (novel) because the scales of judgement are different." (Bluestone, 174-175) Any piece of art whether it is a novel, a poem, a painting or a film, each has its own uniqueness. However, an idea does not take birth from nowhere. It has traces in the ideas and concepts of the works/scholars/writers preceding it. Julia Kristeva influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of a "dialogic novel," invented the term "Intertextuality" in late Twentieth century. She argues that "any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (1980, 66). She uses the popular phrase by Bakhtin to explain her concept of "Intertextuality," "each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read" (1980, 66). "No work is original in itself," says Kristeva. There is always something, some idea that influences or inspires an artist and its work. A novel and a film cannot be compared on their potential for originality.

Story, plot or structure of two texts may have similarities but the time and space while writing a book and while shooting for a film affects them differently. A novel and a film are two different genres of art. Identity of a text cannot be defined by its capability of being fidel or infidel to the works preceding it but its intertextual connections that prompts the creation of its identity as a film or a novel. A novel can be adapted in a film by the consent of the author but a film cannot lose its individuality for saving that of the mother text. A director infact promotes and flourishes the mother text through its own artistic visions. The thriving transference of various subtexts from the novel *The Color Purple* into its film adaption is done through the splendid use of various props on screen. Spielberg profoundly retells the story of protagonist's life in a cinematic space. The detailed layout of Celie's life in the novel is beautifully captured on screen. Attires, colors, fields of pink-purple flowers, and even furniture in the film have connotations of a range of sensations. Exploration of the genre of Blues music becomes a vital trope in the film in empowering its women characters and in strengthening bonds between them. In the novel, Shug Avery, a Blues singer names her first song after Celie's name, 'Miss Celie's song' that she sings for her at Harpo's JukeJoint. This very song is transferred to the film as 'Miss Celie's Blues.' Blues music is beautifully employed in the film, becoming a key trope for exploring the theme of sisterhood, crucial to Walker's 'Womanist' standpoint. Music becomes a medium in the film for union between Shug and Celie and for reunion of Shug and her father in the end. The eventual reunion of spiritual and secular, of Church/divine (father) and Blues/Devil (Shug) is decisive of the film in the end. The sense of pain and suffering in scene of separation of two sisters, Celie and Nettie is not clearly apparent in language of young Celie in the novel. This lack is not just due to Celie's unawareness of whole set of events but to the immaturity of her language.

He say one night in bed, Well, us done help Nettie all we can. Now she got to go. | Where she gon go? I ast. | I don't care. He say. | I tell

Nettie the next morning. Stead of being mad, she glad to go. Says she hate to leave me is all. Us fall on each other neck when she say that.
(*The Color* 19)

It seems that Celie wants to say much more but is incapable of expression. However, the sentence “Us fall on each other neck when she say that” is suggestive of pain and points to many implicit meanings symbolic of Celie's inexpressible emotions. Nevertheless, this very scene changes the entire flow of events in the film. The idea is similar, the emotions behind it are also alike but both the genres have their own ways of expressing them. Whereas, in the novel the parting scene seems to be only an exchange of dialogue with various undertones, in the film it turns into a full-fledged drama. The expression may not be “identical” but is “equivalent,” talks Andre Bazin in his book *What is cinema?*. The “fidelity” is achieved not at the material level but at the “aesthetic” level maintaining the very difference between two genres. Novel is written in first person narrative of the epistolary form. In the film version, it moves from the first person to an omniscient “enunciation.” “Dear God, I am fourteen years old. I have always been a good girl. Maybe you can give me a sign letting me know what is happening to me,” begins the novel. (*The Color* 3) The film tries to catch up with the voice of first person of epistolary form but gradually the narration begins to draw closer to a central voice i.e. of the director. Voice of Celie in background of the film speaking her letters is taken over by live exchanges of dialogues between characters. In the novel, lesbian relationship between Shug and Celie has been given a graphic description. “I lie back on the bed and haul up my dress. Yank down my bloomers. Stick the looking glass tween my legs. Ugh. All that hair. Then my pussy lips be black. The inside look like a wet rose,” puts Celie in her letters. (*The Color* 75) At this point Celie is exposed to her sexual instincts beginning to realise her longings and aspirations. The transference of this space of encounter between Shug and Celie in front of a mirror to a large screen would have turned gruesome. Presenting a picture of vagina on a wide screen in the film would have happened to be unsightly for a large audience. Instead of presenting an exact graphic description of this mutual space, Spielberg shifts to a poetic description using tropes of costumes, colors, flowers and other props on screen. The filmmaker, here, builds up that desire, that sexual desire in the relationship between Shug and Celie through the trope of color. The red dress of Shug that Celie tries on herself later in front of the mirror is symbolic of her aspiration to be like Shug. Even the manner of laughing and giggling in this very scene is symbolic of that very desire that Celie had never felt in herself before. The film accepts the fact of their relationship, their love and bodily desires by giving a gentle portrayal to their relationship through tropes of music and color. Film, not to forget, is a collaborative medium. The contribution of a director, a producer, a script writer and actors affects it in many diverse ways unlike a novel, largely a creation of a single author. On top of that, film primarily is an economic venture constructed within the space of Hollywood's cultural hegemony where the financial success becomes the chief concern. It becomes necessary to give a film an outlook that makes it successful at box office.

Another trope of quilting introduced in the novel is successfully transferred to the film. The film celebrates freedom and power that Celie gains from her business of stitching pants. She proudly creates colourful pants and owns a showroom to her own name, "Miss Celie's Folkspants est. 1937." Unlike earlier, Celie steps towards her freedom, free from the shackles of violence and brutality. She is a completely changed figure who has realised her own self, her own space and the value of her life. The film presents her as an entirely new personality, decked up in colourful pants, proud of her showroom, aware of the real world and confident of her own self that is clearly apparent in her changed body language. The emotions on screen always stay extreme in dramatisation of various momentous scenes. Whether it is the separation or reconciliation scene of two sisters, or the moment when Celie resists her husband Albert's authority and violence, or the final reunion of Shug and her father, the dramatisation at various points is intense in its representation. Besides its film adaptation, *The Color Purple* was also adapted into a Broadway musical in 2005 by Scott Sanders, almost after twenty years of film release. The musical adaptation was received with a great enthusiasm by the audience. The musical created stronger roles for its women characters. However, the very idea of creating a musical seems to have come from the film itself. It is the profound enactment of the genre that moves from the screen to the stage. Music becomes the language of fear, of revolt, of pain, of love and of desire. Each and every character represents that passion and that fervour needed to express in the genre of Blues music. Watching a musical is a live experience. It is a direct face to face encounter between the characters on stage and audience in front. The level of vigour and strength that a character shows on stage is unmatched. The exploration of the varying emotions of love, pain, anger, and suffering in the musical presented through music is intense. The language of music in *The Color Purple* performances breaks the boundaries of fear, oppression and violence creating bonds of love and respect between characters. The writer of the story of Broadway musicals, Marsha Norman, winner of the Pulitzer prize for her work *night, Mother*, also believed on the capability of a musical to display the intensity of varying emotions in the relationships between characters. "I think there is a chance in songs to get past the defences that people have to more fully express what it feels like to love somebody, to lose somebody....that is really hard to do in a talk," she says in an interview. Audience loved live performances of the musical at Broadway theatre that later continued also in a national tour. The Broadway production earned eleven 'Tony Awards' (2006) nominations.

The current socio-cultural milieu is different from that of the period of 1980-1990s, the period of release of both the novel and the film. Over the years, a socio-political-economic-cultural environment undergoes an assortment of changes. Civil rights laws and political shifts have brought a positive change in the status of Afro-Americans all over the world. Growth in literacy rates, scientific and technological advancements define the contemporary world. The story of *The Color Purple* that began in 1908 does not end there in 1982, but is carried forward by its film and musical adaptations passing through the era of globalization to the

Twenty First century. In the light of those changes we would here move on to place *The Color Purple* in midst of these changes, after more than thirty years of its publication at present. Being adapted in a film and a musical, *The Color Purple* has kept on speaking for the cause of Afro-American women. Its basic plot has been enunciated differently in different generic adaptations not losing its contour. Infact, these adaptations have promoted the novel's essential issues and subjects in diverse socio-cultural settings. It is a story of author's grandmother, of an early twentieth century Afro-American generation and of a period of cultural revival known as Harlem Renaissance. It is the cultural legacy of the movement of Harlem Renaissance that is carried forward in Walker's *The Color Purple*. Walker puts it in an interview with Patricia Gras, "It's not autobiographical in the sense that I knew hardly anybody, I listened to people tell stories about the family. Part of the creation of *The Color Purple* is just out of a longing to be more intimate with my ancestors at a time when I didn't exist." *The Color Purple*, so becomes a text carrying many stories and narratives both literary and real. It, in that sense, becomes a text maintaining many intertextual relations to the stories from Walker's own past and to the works of her literary foremothers, especially the prominent author Zora Neale Hurston and renowned Blues singer Bessie Smith. Maintaining her community's cultural inheritance in the backdrop, Walker brings to the centre voices of Afro-American women in the novel. By doing so, she fights back the years old injustices and oppressions done to black women within their own families. Moreover, her story gives an account of the various roles and positions that these women possessed within their own families and the world outside. Writing about a woman like Celie who continues to suffer due to violence and injustices done to her by her step father and her husband, Walker moves on to write of a woman like Shug Avery, a Blues singer, who fights back injustices done to women in Afro-American society and accomplishes all her dreams. Toni Morrison talks about power of fiction when she describes her historical novels as "a kind of literary archaeology" of the life narratives that are absent from the written records. Fiction plays a vital role in filling those blank spaces and to unearth the voices suppressed under burdens of history. The realities and truth of lives of Afro-American women presented in this fiction enable readers to envision and to reflect over the veracity of the conditions under which Afro-American women would have lived their lives. An autobiographical narrative like Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* reveals the bitter truths and ruthless realities of the circumstances, slave women lived under slavery. *The Color Purple* is not an autobiography but it gives voice to Afro-American women that had stayed silent for years. Walker's works are more "authorial" than "autobiographical" puts Yvonne Johnson in her book *The Voices of African American Women*. The novel thus itself becomes a link between the past and present, between the preceding and the current generations and between the ancient cultures and the current 'chronotopic' structures.

How a text, rich with such details and accounts, is received after its adaptation in a film and a musical? A text is received differently in different "spatio-temporal" backgrounds. Evolution of a text into a

classic is largely due to the reader's acceptance of it by reading, discussing and criticising it. The criticism, instead, leads to a text's immense popularity. Andre Bazin in his book *What is Cinema?* says that sales of a novel "increase after it has been adapted to the screen" (Bazin, 22). The two popular adaptations of the novel *The Color Purple* and the criticism that followed it made it enormously popular through the world. It attracted attention of feminists, young scholar and major cultural authorities. Bazin argues in favour of film adaptations and says that "... the original work can only profit from such an exposure" (Bazin, 22). The statistics show that the sales of the novel *The Color Purple* were increased manifold after its film adaptation. The evolution of the human nature over time and the world around it does leave an impact on reader's experience of reading a text. Besides the reader, it is also the authorial figure, the author itself whose views and perceptions change with time and experience. Talking about Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* in an interview with Patricia Gras, Alice Walker says that:

...At first I hated it...first I watched it in a huge theatre...there I sat with two other people. It was the weirdest experience. Everything looked so big and so incredibly off but later... I went to the opening in New York city thinking I would still hate it...and they are of course are all my family, all from everywhere and they were laughing and happy and crying and sobbing and I realised that there was quite a wonderful film.

Considering the proximity of the author with her text within the space of only three years, justifies the first experience of watching the film as "incredibly off." To completely grasp the inner soul of a text at first viewing in a theatrical space is impossible. It is a covert detailing of many subjects in a film that is comprehensible only after multiple viewings. Film being a collaborative medium produces multiple perspectives that can be grasped only through repeated viewings for many motifs and symbols are not discerned in the very first viewing. It is important to observe that a film cannot say everything directly; it articulates a meaning through the tropes of costume, color, flowers and many such props. Even wallpaper on the wall is suggestive of a theme. The gap between release of the novel and the film *The Color Purple* is very less and watching a text in an entirely new medium would make it difficult for an author to obtain hold of it at the very first experience of watching. There lies a difference between a theatrical and a personal viewing that has become very lucid in present times through the availability of personal DVDs/CDs. The space and time that a personal viewing gives allows a viewer to stop, think and re-commence watching a story on screen. It also depends on the proximity of both the novelist and the reader to the text that determines the very experience of watching a film adaptation. Watching that very film today in a more culturally advanced society where the issues like sexuality or lesbianism are being openly discussed than to what it was a generation before; *The Color Purple* emerges as an entirely different text. It is its temporal evolution across cultures that has made it a classic. Both the novel and the film exceeded their time and space of release in terms of exhibiting the issues of gender and sexuality that were still culturally unacceptable. After the release of the film in

1985 to the Broadway Musicals in 2005 and to the novel's Thirtieth anniversary in 2012, at every stage we see a new, culturally evolved text. These are more readily acceptable in the contemporary society unlike thirty years back. Within this space of thirty years, each musical performance of *The Color Purple* presents a more culturally advanced society than to what it was during the release of the novel or the film. Musicals greatly added to our understanding of *The Color Purple*. Seen in the limelight of these three texts, the novel, the film and finally the musicals these adaptations give a rounded perspective of *The Color Purple*; a temporally and a culturally evolved text.

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