

How Does the Baskervilles' Hound Look?: Adaptation as Critique

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How does Sherlock Holmes look? Does he look like Jeremy Brett (1933-1995) or Basil Rathbone (1892-1967) or Nicol Williamson (1936-2011) or Peter Cushing (1913-1994) or Robert Downey Jr. (1965-) or Rupert Everett (1959-)?

All these actors have played Holmes in various adaptations, either of the canonical stories by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) or in pastiches inspired by him, with varying degrees of success. While these actors of different eras approached the role in diverse manners – depending on the school of acting they belonged to – students of film studies as well as Holmesiana have limited their debates to questions such as “who suited the role best” (Britt) and “whether Robert Downey Jr. was not too short to play Holmes” (Gentry-Birnbaum). Such debates are undoubtedly valid – and add considerably to our understanding and enjoyment not only of the adaptation but also of the written text.

However, a similar query as to how the hound looks in the most famous of Doyle's stories and the most oft-filmed of the Holmes canon, *The Hound of Baskervilles* (1902), would have been probably more rewarding than enquiring into how faithfully the filmmakers have adapted Doyle's vision of the world's first private consulting detective. This is because Doyle had given extremely clear, though apparently contradictory, directions as to how Holmes looks. In the very first story, *A Study in Scarlet* (1887), he is described as someone who is over six foot tall, and extremely lean – thereby looking considerably taller; someone who had stains all over his fingers, although otherwise clean and tidy; someone who lived in a chaotic manner, yet extremely efficient as far as his work was concerned (10). Doyle, in the rest of the canon, adds to these initial impressions, and thereby gives us a character that is fleshed out in our mind's eye. Hence, any deliberation over whether an actor suited the role is limited to a gross correlation of the adaptation and the original story.

But in discussing how the hound looks we find ourselves on slippery territory as Doyle hardly describes it in the novella; rather, he leaves a lot to the reader's imagination. Filmmakers have taken advantage of this, and in the twenty odd adaptations of the story, the hound has been variously portrayed as something that is practically eerie – as in the Hammer House production (1959), to just a stray mongrel in the Granada production (1988). In fact, it has been left out altogether in at least one case – Biren Nag's *Bees Saal Baad* (1962). While there is hardly any debate on the hound's portrayal, it is significant that the manner in which the hound is depicted shows the tone that the filmmakers chose to give their adaptation – whether to make it a mystery or a horror film, or even a romantic story. Hence, such questioning is necessary as it leads us to the crucial issue of whether the merit of adaptations is just based on their faithfulness to the original text.

Early film critics evidently believed that fidelity to the text is of paramount importance (Aragay 12). Most, if not all, authors too have rebelled against any fiddling with their work by the filmmakers, and have desired their texts to be regarded as

sacrosanct. Dick Francis (1920-2010) in his *Wild Horses* (1994) depicts this angst of authors through the delineation of Howard Tyler as he struggles with the various changes that are made to his best-selling novel (17). Tyler complains to the narrator, who is directing a movie based on his novel, that: "[...] you changed *the* script. [...] You wilfully misinterpreted my intention. [...] What *you* think is a good film, [...] and what *I* think is a film truthful to my book, are totally opposite. All *you* care about is how much money it makes" (63-64).

Tyler's grievances are not at variance with what most authors have experienced. Thomas Leitch in his essay 'The Adapter as Auteur: Hitchcock, Kubrick, Disney' writes about how Daphne du Maurier (1907-1989), for instance, was displeased with the liberties that Alfred Hitchcock (1899-1980) had taken with her *Jamaica Inn* (1936) when he directed it, and did her best to not allow him have a free hand during the filming of her celebrated gothic novel *Rebecca* (1938) (Aragay 109). Budd Schulberg (1914-2009) walked out of the film production of his novel *The Harder they Fall* (1947), as he felt that the studio's policy was too intrusive and that they curbed his creativity (Boozier 11). R.K. Narayan (1906-2001) too confessed to a sense of betrayal at what the filmmakers had done to his Sahitya Academy Award winning novel for the year 1958, *The Guide* (*A Writer's Nightmare* 214-15).

While these authors were arguably justified in their protests against the modifications to their works, their griping is still based on the assumption that a good adaptation is a faithful one. However, as early as in the 1950s, film critics started distinguishing adaptations from their respective source texts while critiquing them and argued that adaptations should be judged on their own merits (Bluestone vii). In this context, Malgorzata Marciniak suggests that filmmakers should be "seen as readers with their own rights, and each adaptation – as a result of individual reading process" (60). Such criticism evokes the post-structuralist theory as the reader is placed on a higher pedestal when compared to the author (Barthes).

Hence, while Shylock and Fagin are depicted as grubby Jews in some film adaptations, they are presented as pitiable folk who were discriminated against by others. Hamlet, similarly, is presented as a dithering fool by some filmmakers, while he is shown by others as a person facing an unenviable choice. Even Heathcliff is shown in some adaptations as a forlorn gypsy who is more sinned against, than sinning. Such critiquing of literature is not just limited to characterisation: even the setting, be it the slums of Victorian London in adaptations of the works of Charles Dickens (1812-70) and Doyle, or the indifferent nature in Thomas Hardy's (1840-1928) Wessex, is delineated with curiously significant variations suggesting the manner in which the film or TV unit had understood it.

This distancing between the adaptation and the text is not necessarily unwelcome as filmmakers might insert scenes that are not present in the original, but which make sound commercial sense. BBC's *Pride and Prejudice* (1995) is a good example as it included scenes of Darcy walking out of the lake, which were not present in the novel, and satisfied the audience's desire for "erotic intensity" (Marciniak 64). Similarly, scenes that the filmmakers think would satisfy the audience's need for sentimentality, romance, and melodrama might be included. Sometimes this might go to the extent of

including scenes that are dictated by the stardom of the actors. For instance, the Telugu film *Veta* (1986), an adaptation of Alexander Dumas' (1802-1870) *The Count of Monte Christo* (1845), has scenes that showcased the matinee idol Chiranjeevi's (1955-) dancing abilities.

However, film adaptations need not be limited to interpretations, and additions or deletions of a few scenes. Elaborating on this, Geoffrey Wagner opines that movie adaptations are of various kinds such as transposition – meaning a translation from book to screen with no changes, commentary – where minor changes occur, and analogy – where the book is just a take-off point for the filmmaker (222-227). Despite such categorization of adaptations, he still believes in a hierarchy of interpretations, with fidelity being given paramount importance (Aragay 16). Furthermore, such classification simply discusses variations in film depictions and suggests that film representations are at best a critique of the texts.

While it is undeniable that films do interpret and critique texts, Wagner hardly touches upon the reason why texts are adapted into films. Most film adaptations are for an audience who prefer to watch a scene unfold on screen rather than visualize it in their mind's eye – because they are unable to or are uninterested. However, these are not the only reasons for film adaptations. The popularity of a book might lead to its film adaptation, as it assures decent box-office returns. Hence, bestsellers and award winners are immediately lapped up by filmmakers as they are in public consciousness. Pulitzer Prize winning novels such as Margaret Mitchell's (1900-1949) *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Harper Lee's (1926-) *To Kill a Mocking Bird* (1960), bestsellers such as John Grisham's (1955-) legal thrillers and J. K. Rowling's (1965-) Harry Potter books are examples of this kind. Moreover, in Hollywood, these adaptations are not only commercially but also critically successful as the great majority of Academy Award winning films have been adaptations (Boozier 13). The situation is not all that different in India, as the success and critical acclaim garnered by films such as the various adaptations of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's (1876-1938) *Devdas* (1917) and *Parineeta* (1914) have shown.

However, the case for film adaptations becomes muddled when we consider the adaptation of books that are not in public consciousness. Raj Khosla's (1925-1991) *Naqab* (1989), an adaptation of Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins's (1824-1889) *The Woman in White* (1859), is such a film. The Indian audience of the 1980s could hardly be expected to be aware of Collins, although he was extremely popular in Victorian England. Similar examples are Alex Pillai's adaptation of Sheridan Le Fanu's (1814-1873) *The Wyvern Mystery* (1869) in 2000 and Ketan Mehta's (1952-) adaptation of James Hadley Chase's (1906-1985) *The Sucker Punch* (1954) as *Aar ya Paar* in 1997. So the question naturally arises regarding the rationale behind such film adaptations.

The answer to the question probably lies in why authors choose a utopian or historical setting for their novels. Authors choose such backdrops to comment upon problems prevalent in their age, while warding off criticism by apparently locating their characters in a distant land – either in the past or in the realms of fantasy. Are filmmakers using books that are set in a different culture and period for a similar reason?

One is tempted to infer as much as that would allow them to successfully evade censorship while not only critiquing the written texts and/or interpreting the contexts in which they were written, but also commenting upon the current society. Such an explanation would also make the current predilection towards adapting novels and plays from earlier eras obviously rational.

Hence, Khosla while adapting Collins's novel as *Naqab* uses it to present the cultural restrictions that are prevalent in 20th century Muslim society and the problems caused by such impositions. Thus, he cleverly relegates the mystery to the background as he deals with varied issues such as sanctity of marriage vows, fidelity, and alcoholism. Ketan Mehta similarly uses Chase's hard-boiled crime novel. *The Sucker Punch* is inspired by American noir writers, and comprises common noir thriller elements such as femme fatale, rampant corruption, and a nightmarish city. Mehta makes the femme fatale a modern career conscious woman, and shows how she is equally threatening to a conservative society. He, moreover, uses the film to comment upon youth's desire to quickly get rich in a corrupt world. Thus, we can see that the filmmakers used these novels to critique contemporary society while ostensibly adapting a literary text.

Suitable examples from adaptations of diverse literary genres such as children's literature, gothic romance, sensation fiction, horror, melodrama, comedy of manners, and heroic tragedies will serve to further elucidate this point. David Moore's 2005 adaptation of Thomas Hughes's (1822-1896) *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857) varies from the text in not only its thrust, but also in the delineation of the central figure. The protagonist in Hughes's novel is Tom Brown, and it depicts his diverse adventures and misadventures, and his metamorphosis from a rowdy kid into a mature young man. The film, however, makes Thomas Arnold (1795-1842) the central character and shows his impact on Rugby School. This difference in the book and the film adaptation stems from the current desire to relook at Arnoldian ethics. While criticised earlier for showing a penchant for Muscular Christianity, Arnoldian principles are now admired for the paramount importance they gave to discipline – a quality that is essential to succeed in today's chaotic world.

BBC's 1978 adaptation of Emily Bronte's (1818-1848) gothic melodrama *Wuthering Heights* (1847) directed by Peter Hammond (1923-2011) is no longer just a tale of unrequited love. While Bronte's novel depicts the angst of an anti-hero, Heathcliff, the film adaptation makes him a character that is more to be pitied than feared. It is true that Bronte presents the class differences that existed in the society at that time. However, the narratorial voice in the book does not suggest or support changes in then existing class divisions. The filmmakers, on the other hand, use the movie to criticise snobbery in society. Pertinently, it is hardly a coincidence that such ill-desired qualities are still very much a part and parcel of the current milieu.

Film adaptations of sensation literature have also followed this trend. Collins in his *The Woman in White* tells a tale of intrigue and mystery that surround three young women. The novel deals with various issues such as illegitimacy, insanity, inheritance and intuition. However, the prime focus throughout the novel is the solution to the identity of the secretive woman in white who appears in the very first chapter and disappears in an uncanny manner. Tim Fywell's (1951-) movie adaptation (1997), on

the contrary, diminishes her importance as it focuses on property laws. The marriage laws in the Victorian era are evidently unsatisfactory as they gave more rights to men when compared to women (Cobbe). The situation has not changed a lot these days although property laws are considerably more generous to women than before. However, the subjugation and oppression of women is still very much a cause for concern, and every day we hear of various kinds of physical and mental abuse that women have to put up with. The film adaptation focuses on this aspect of the novel and tries to address the concerns of modern-day women who seek redress.

Similarly, Bollywood's rendition of Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*, *Bees Saal Baad*, is more concerned about the message it wants to deliver, than in either creating an eerie atmosphere or unravelling the mystery. The Victorian novella, while being the most atmospheric and horrifying tale of the Holmes canon, is a study of ratiocination and shows how Holmes manages to solve a seemingly unsolvable mystery full of red herrings. Biren Nag's film, which is understandably more famous for its haunting musical score than for its lacklustre screenplay, goes to the extent of replacing the almost superhuman Holmes with a bumbling detective. This effectively shows how logic and deduction, which Doyle strove to uphold, are relegated by the filmmaker. The film concentrates on driving home the message that crime does not pay and that a mindless belief in superstitions can only result in distress.

Dickens's (1812-1870) *Oliver Twist* (1838) is also adapted in a like manner by Tony Bill (1940-) in 1997. The novel uses equal elements of sensation and sentiment to weave a sensitive story of an orphan finding his inheritance. Dickens sets the novel in London for the most part, and uses it as a social commentary on the manner in which the seamy underside of the great city escapes the notice of government officials. He further criticises the corruption that is prevalent in various institutions that are set up for public welfare, such as the orphanage and the workhouse. The movie, while using these props to comment upon the nightmarish aspects of cities, also depicts the villains in a more understanding manner, thereby suggesting that the presence of such criminals is more due to an incompetent government rather than an inherent proclivity to evil.

Even adaptations of romantic novels such as Jane Austen's (1775-1817) *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) have an axe to grind. Austen's novel is primarily a criticism of the mindless obsession of women with marriage. She also comments upon the hypocrisy that was rampant at that time. In contrast, Simon Langton's (1941-) film adaptation (1995) is a scathing critique of women's inability to understand men. This distinction comes to the fore when we consider the portrayal of Darcy. Austen depicts Darcy as a proud gentleman who has to get rid of his pride to understand, respect, and love Elizabeth. The movie version, on the other hand, depicts him as a mature gentleman who has no time for frivolities. In a sense, he is closer to Austen's George Knightley in *Emma* (1815) than Darcy. In the movie version, it is Elizabeth who has to learn to swallow her pride and purge herself of prejudice to understand and appreciate Darcy. This change suggests the moviemaker's understanding (or, should one say, misunderstanding?) of women.

Similarly, Vishal Bharadwaj's (1965-) *Maqbool* (2003) and *Omkaara* (2006), based on William Shakespeare's tragedies *Macbeth* (1606) and *Othello* (1603) respectively, show

the tragic demises of a mafia don and a local politician. Set in a contemporary world, the movies not only show how lust for power and jealousy are universal evil emotions but are also a telling comment upon the distasteful world in which we live.

These examples suggest that film adaptations are critiques of the written work as well as contemporary society. Justifiably, film adaptations thus provide not only a sub-text to the written text, with implications of intertextuality (Cattryse 53-70), but also serve as a pretext to look at the current context.

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