



Authorship and Adaptation; Study of the authors of Little Women

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Abstract: Literature has existed since the time humans learnt to communicate. Authors having been presenting their views

of on society for centuries and some works have become timeless and thus belong in the genre of classics. These timeless literatures are not only subjected to changing times but also to the contemporary competitors that take the stage as years pass. Their quality to mould according to the society is one of the reasons they have lasted and this mould has been used by many others to create more literature. A growing phenomenon is the use of written literature to be adapted for the screens. It has led to the exploration of the classics to understand and present to the society the evergreen realities of the human kind but it also brings up the question of whose vision is being presented; the original author or of the writer who has adapted it. The paper explores the relationship between the changing authorship and adaptation to understand how they impact each other using the work, Little Women by Louisa May Alcott that has been adapted multiple times through the years.

Keywords: Little Women, adaptations, films, Alcott, literature, society.

Introduction

“Literature adds to reality, it does not simply describe it. It enriches the necessary competencies that daily life requires and provides; and in this respect, it irrigates the deserts that our lives have already become.” ~ C.S Lewis

Many say no book is read twice because a person changes, their views change and their perception of the world changes. Literature may stem from the realities of the world and blossom into figments of thoughts penned down by writers but it also has the power to mould into the minds of the readers and become what the person wants it to become. It can transport people to the eyes of the author and watch the shared world from someone else's point. If literature can mould for the readers, then one can presume it has the ability to shape itself when being adapted by another writer. Authorship of literature is the identity of the person who wrote the said literature, but with literature that is primarily an adaptation of another creation the question arises, does the authorship of the adapted literature change or is the credit continued to be held by the original author.

Many English language classics are often used as a base for further works, be it writing publications or even films. Authors take creative liberty to these stories but also keep the essence of the original intact. Thus, a growing trend of adaptation of literary works in the current society. The paper aims to understand the question of authorship in literary adaptations while comparing famous classics to their film adaptations like Louisa May Alcott's Little Women to its movie adaptation by Gillian Armstrong and Greta Gerwig.

Authorship and Adaptation

From the time writing has seeped into the human existence, there have been literature. What essentially was a mode to

communicate became a form of entertainment and art. Some people became known for their writing and created literature that has been published decades ago but continue to be a success. They are praised for their timelessness and eloquent use of the language. People who master this and try their hand at creating more such literature are called as authors. Though the term, author, is commonly used to refer to persons who write prose or books or novels, in actuality it encompasses anyone who writes or creates something (Merriam-Webster). This includes both books and films. The umbrella term provides for a platform that is large enough to hold both new and adapted content.

Over the years, many new authors revisit earlier work and try their hand on them to bring it out to the world again and remind the audience of the wonders stored away in the old-time classics. Many of Shakespeare plays have been revisited countless number of times and been used to recreate the charm of old literature in theatres, movies and even as a base for other novels. Romeo + Juliet by Baz Luhrmann in 1996 captured the beauty and eloquence of the famous play Romeo Juliet by Shakespeare along with adding his own style and futuristic elements, making the adaptation well known both in the critics' circle as well as the common audience. It is one of the names in the famous adaptations of Shakespeare alongside Julius Caesar which was made in 1953 by Joseph L Mankiewicz and 10 Things I Hate About You by Gil Junger, a rethinking of the famous play, Taming of the Shrew (Dickson, 2019).

Each of these revisits or adaptations have something completely unique to the work that has not been picked from the original. In *10 Things I Hate About You*, Gil Junger reimagined the *Taming of the Shrew* to be set in an average high-school of America where the "shrew" is a loud and scowling teenage girl. Adapting the same themes and storyline as the original play, the film builds on the plot laid by Shakespeare but with the setting, characters and the general idea thought by Junger. This brings the question of who deserves the literature credit for the success of the movie? It can be argued that Shakespeare is the one true author of the famous story and Junger has just added a slight twist to the already prominent tale but on the other hand, changing the entire perception and setting of the tale changes a majority of the story and shares only spirit of the play and not the play in itself. Authorship seems to change or in the least shared between multiple people as the number of adaptations of a particular piece increase.

Based on the Auteur Theory of Authorship in Film, the director gives the motion picture the uniqueness and the vision. Though it does not credit the other experts behind the production of the film, it gives credit to the director for the vision of the movie. It is a widely accepted theory of authorship because in many of the cases the creative vision of the film does originate from the director itself. The theory was published by Francois Truffaut in 1954 about the progress of the American films. He said that auteur filmmakers may work with others on a film but make the end product their own personal creation, "an expression of his own personality"

(Tregde, 2013). If the filmmaker does provide their own ideas and personality into their film doesn't this in itself alter story and thereby alter the authorship.

Authorship is vital to literature because the story and the art does not solely come from the final piece of literature that makes its way to the readers or the viewer's hand, it stems from the biography and the life of the author also. Interpretation of literature can only be heightened intellectually and become more emotionally pleasurable with the understanding of the author and their life as theorised by experts (Mallon and Kirsch, 2014).

Take for instance, *Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening* by Robert Frost is a beautiful poem without the knowledge of the life of its poet, but once the reader is not oblivious to the troubles of Frost, they can see the pain and suffering of his life in between the picturesque poem. It intellectually deepens the understanding of the reader and grows their knowledge of the themes of the poem. This is another importance of the authorship in literature. If there is ever an adaptation of the poem, in form of a film or even another written publication and the author of the adaptation has not been through similar troubles then can the audience expect the similar glimpsing of the darker side of life or will it shine light on completely set of misfortunes and imagine different woods that they would have liked to visit but can't because of promises and decisions already made (Frost).

Authorship of literature is very important in any form; original or adaptation as the person involved in the process of

creating it cannot help but put a little of them into it, be it an adaptation of Dickens, Louisa May Alcott or even more contemporary writers like Sally Rooney, Stephen King or Agatha Christie. It is even possible for the original author to adapt their own work. Fleabag by Phoebe Waller Bridge is originally a one-woman play that she wrote to present in theatres in England which she then later adapted as a full series produced by BBC. She adapted and changed multiple elements not only to incorporate a bigger cast but to also make it more suiting for the television audience.

The Literary Journey of Little Women

Novel

Among the names of the top women writers like Jane Austen, Bronte Sisters and more recently Margaret Atwood, there is also the name of the woman who was breaking through the societal expectations during the American Civil War, Louisa May Alcott. She is known for her works like Little Women, Eight Cousins and adult novels like A Modern Mephistopheles. With the variety of works that she has published, many were known to the world under a pen name so as to distract people from the fact that she is a woman. Much later in life, she revealed to her readers in the society her true identity and invariably her gender.

For a writer who was forced to conceal their sexual orientation for a long time, Alcott wrote primarily about women. She gave them both loud and timid personalities that appealed to the large range of audience that consumed her literatures. She did

not shy away from making her female characters strong and opinionated. This is one of the reasons why Little Women was so well taken by the world. Little Women was about the life of 4 March sisters; Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy. It is set in time of the American Civil War where their father has been recruited for war. Chronicling the day-to-day activities of girls in different periods of life; Meg being at an age where marriage was knocking at the door, Jo opening up to relations with people other than her own blood, Amy trying to step out of the shadow of her vastly talented elder sister and Beth trying to battle the disease that was taking over her life (Alcott, 1869). It includes the dynamic changes that gets introduced when someone new joins and becomes a major part of the day. It has a simplistic quality of realism that enraptures readers to keep coming back to the soothing nature of childhood.

The classic children's book has a plethora of themes through the book as one of the reasons of the wild commercial and critical acclaim was how naturally Alcott embodied various aspects of humanism into the books like the struggle of having a distant parent, societal expectations, relationships and the striving for various forms of success. Alcott highlighted the effects of different financial standings on the same problems by introducing the character of Theodore Laurence. He was a boy of Jo's age who was financially more well off than the March family but who too had distant parents. His character is very pivotal to the dynamic of the family as his sudden presence in the sisters' lives is another of the driving forces of the novel.

The novel is heavily inspired by the life of Louisa May Alcott. It is autobiographical in nature and she has based a major part of the protagonist, Jo on herself. She was told to write something for the girls and different from her usual gory murder and crime stories. Taking up the project, albeit with reluctance, she proceeded to write her story based on the few girls she knew, her sisters. Alcott created the March sisters and Laurence based on her own family and neighbour. Jo was based on her and Jo's story became the story of how she herself got the project of Little Women. It wasn't completely based on the life of Alcott family for the reason that Louisa was not permitted to let Jo go unmarried unless she died in the story. Alcott who herself was unwed thought the concept of women to be fit only for wife to be ridiculous and made her character the same way but when the publisher informed her that the book would not be published if Jo was unmarried and alive, she was forced to twist her arm and marry Jo off to the second male lead, an older professor named Bhaer ("Alcott: Not the Little Women You Thought She Was", 2021).

Surprisingly for both Alcott and her publisher, Thomas Niles, the book's first volume sold fast and became a best seller. Louisa credited her success to the grain of truth present in the novel and how it talked of relationships the way friends do with each other (Waxman, 2018). The very authorship of the novel is giving birth not only to the characters and plot for the first time but to the uniqueness and completely personal aspect to the story. Louisa May Alcott carved herself and her understanding of the society into the story. She did not

resurrect a new world but her own life into the pages of the two-volume novel.

Adaptation

There are over five movies that are based on the novel. Along with that Little Women has been adapted into multiple television series, musicals and theatre plays. Many renowned names through the years have contributed to this range of adaptations and bagged awards to bring life to this beloved children's classic. It is one such classic that did not need to stand the test of time to reach the fame that it boasts of today. Since its original publication, plays and adaptations have been spiralling out and it has been adapted and translated into 50 languages in various regions of the world (Delamar, 1990).

The first film adaptation that is still available to all was made in 1933 and much similar to the reaction to the novel, the movie too was an instant success. As mentioned before, Little Women adaptations have almost always included the big names of the media and entertainment industry. The 1933 film had the most iconic cast with Katherine Hepburn playing Jo March and the controversial casting of the 20-year-old Joan Bennet, who was pregnant at the time of shooting, as the 12-year-old Amy March. Keeping aside that controversy, another critique that was aimed at the story of this adaptation that was directed by George Cukor and written by Victor Heerman and Sarah Y. Mason, was the lack of the theme of financial disparity and the disassociation of the sisters from the family

problems (Skiles, 2016). The difference in the story could be because of the prevalent financial troubles that had taken over America at that time and to appeal to the nostalgic element of the story and give the audience a way to escape the dreary reality, Cukor made the movie a safe haven and a relief from the realism. He found it easier to make the girls free of financial sentiments and give them the childlike innocence throughout the story unlike Alcott who did not free the sisters from the harsh world that force them to grow up (Marchalonis, 1999).

The next prominent film adaptation but not the second was Little Women 1994 directed by Gillian Armstrong and the script written by Robin Swicord. Swicord had made it very clear in an interview that thought she wanted to do a "true adaptation" she wouldn't shy away from making the script more inclined towards the issues and matters that are important in that time and talk about things that women of that time desperately need to hear. She mentioned how the novel would convey most of those aspects itself because of the timelessness of the feelings expressed but to cater it to the specific audience was a task she wished to undertake in the adaptation (Hollinger and Winterhalter, 1999). She was able to unveil the sisters of the book as more than young girls but even as young feminists. This is a creative liberty that couldn't be portrayed as clearly by Alcott because of the ideologies that were present for women and their role in society. The politics of the times varied and gave more leeway to Armstrong to picture the March family as more than sisters

making way through society but giving them the voice to play a part in this society.

The impact of the writing can be credited to the vision of the filmmaker and the words of the screenplay but the platform for this feminist amplification was provided by the strong headed characters and life of Alcott herself. This is one such adaptation where the tracing of the literature journey gets particularly messy. As though the film gives a powerful feminist ideology to the story, it also loses the subtext of the commentary of the gender roles in the society. It becomes focused on the underlying opinionated quality of all the sisters and uses it to drive the plot which removes the element of domestic stability that is also an equally vital element in Alcott's portrayal of the family yet, the Winona Ryder starring movie was critique-famous for being an accurate adaptation of the Little Women family.

Swicord's feminist approach was considered bold in her writing for Armstrong directed Little Women but then came Little Women 2019 directed and written by Greta Gerwig. Gerwig, unlike all her predecessor wanted to flaunt feminism in her movie and give the women centric classic "everything that the boys get" (Gamerman, 2019). She said in an interview that when a remake of a story of war and battlefields then everyone assumes a big scale production but when someone steps in to make a remake of a girls entering womanhood and/or societal relationships then something small and quaint comes into mind. This is the reason she went above and beyond to explode the story of something that means a lot to the lives of women and "men as well" (Gamerman, 2019).

Using her creative liberties to step away from a traditional adaptation to modernise the story while continuing to use the original time period. She changed the narrative of the story by centring the movie on the novel being written by Alcott through Jo. It starts with Jo submitting a copy of her novel to the publisher and him saying that the female protagonist needs to be married (similar to the actual occurrence in Alcott's journey of Little Women). From there does Gerwig pick up the story by showing Jo looking back at her childhood with her sisters? Gerwig not only put forward the financial woes of the American Civil War but also highlighted the craving of relationships along side the want to be independent and successful. The two loudest and opinionated sisters, Jo and Amy were given two bold and important speeches in the film where the earlier talked about how if she was given another chance to be proposed by her best friend, Laurie, she would marry him and not because she loved him but she was overwhelmed with the thought of never being loved herself. The latter on the other hand forego love and talked about how in this society if a woman has to give up all her independence, then she would rather employ her powers to choose a rich husband than follow the riskier path of love. She says-

“Well, I’m not a poet. I’m just a woman. And as a woman there’s no way for me to make my own money. Not enough to earn a living or to support my family. And if I had my own money, which I don’t, that money would belong to my husband the moment we got married. And if we had children, they would be his, not mine. They would

be his property, so don't sit there and tell me that marriage isn't an economic proposition. Because it is" (Gerwig, 2019)

The portrayal of Amy March in this adaptation of the classic is another major reason for the success of the Oscar-nominated film besides the stellar cast of Meryl Streep, Florence Pugh, Saoirse Ronan, Laura Dern and Timonthee Chalamet. The movie ends with the plot introduced by Gerwig of Jo watching her novel about her sisters being published. The movie also sees for the first time many smaller elements of the classic. Gerwig justified her aims completely in this adaptation as she not only exploded the stories by adding her own ideas into it but also managed to stay true to Alcott's views on the dynamic of the sisters and their friendship with Laurie.

The authorship for the 2019 adaptation can be said to be equally shared between the two writers as the success is vested in the innovation and modernisation of the timeless classic but also in the foundation of the relationship dynamic established by Alcott. Additionally, Gerwig even paid tribute to the writer by fusing Alcott and Jo and restoring the autobiographical element of the novel (Acocella). It grew and developed as per the society which is the entire purpose of literature; to understand the world today better.

Finding

Adapting a classic is a subtle task as the author treads on a ground that has been created by some other author with their own beliefs, ideologies and views on the world. It is like

adding oneself into someone else's world and making a place there. If the interpretation of the adaptation author of the original work syncs or compliments the thought of the original, literature is gifted with a true and authentic adaptation but at the same time if the interpretation builds a different world on the same foundation, one might either witness something new and great or a failed masterpiece. Either way, authorship of any literature can be a conflicting ground as the background of the literature, the story of the author and other influences playing a part in literature comes into focus. It becomes more prominent in adaptations.

This is also the reason why adaptations are important because they help revisit timeless literature and expose a new set of audience to it. In this paper, the example of Little Women by Alcott can be seen to be adapted multiple times through the years. From the time of its initial release, Little Women has been adapted quickly. All the adaptations came at times when the feminist movements were gaining power again. They had long spans of time in between each other that gave the writers and directors to add elements completely unique and specifically catered to the audience of the time. The relationship between Laurie and Jo became more informal and personal through the series of adaptations and the feminist thought started oozing out of the sisters more.

Another major change in the adaptations was the redemption Amy March seemed to get. She was often seen as the antagonist as she is the one who burns the first novel written by Jo and also acts as the third person in the beloved friendship between Laurie and Jo but by the end of Greta's

adaptation of the story, one can see the perceived antagonist becoming not only human to the audience but also relatable and hailed as an equal to Jo. This revisitation was at a time when the audience was becoming sympathetic towards the negative characters and was open to titling them as misunderstood. It also helped that the adaptation explored Amy as a voice of women making their path in a man's financial world with aims of success. Little Women's literary journey is the slow unveiling of powerful feminists with each adaptation growing their quotient of ease in making the sisters stronger and more powerful than the previous set.

Conclusion

Adaptations shows how authorship is fluid and moulds according to the person viewing and creating it. They may build on the same thing but can never create the same. If an adaptation does well, the credit for the work cannot solely go to the original author but must be shared by all creators. This includes the vision of the director, the screenplay by the writers along with the grounding done by the original writer. It is a blessing of literature to have the quality of shape shifting that allows it to be revisited countless times and yet producing something unique.

Swicord created an authentic adaptation of the novel but also retained her thoughts on the subtexts of the book like the relationship between the sisters and how they encouraged each other to achieve their ambitions without being pressured down by what society demands them to do. Even though

Alcott presented Meg March as the perfect woman as per society who married off early and mothered 2 children, Swicord gave the eldest sister more character and bolder. She made the relationship between Meg and the tutor who she marries to be a bold choice made completely by her and not by the compulsion to be married. Similarly, Gerwig built on Swicord's interpretation by involving a conversation where Meg talks about her decision to love the tutor knowing that money would continue being a problem and her wish to live a lavish life will be compromised. Both these adaptations made Meg more than a figurine of the society and into a person of her own being. Greta Gerwig's Little Women is certainly a collaboration with Alcott than simply an true adaptation of the work. Little Women truly shows the journey and impact of authorship in adaptations clearly.

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