

Article

Dipsikha Bhagawati

Belles Letters in Filmdom - T. S. Eliot: Murder in the Cathedral



Murder in the Cathedral

One of the arch gordian knots of the applied science of Humanities is the poised implementation of an interim medium. In the age long history of Liberal Arts, many innovations and discoveries were made, exercised, experimented, and explored by the newbies, veterans and the masterhands and that transformatory journey of visual transparency has been coined as cinema. Many films are made that had unfolded the stationery couch through an extended vision of cinematic text. The narratives of the pages have been brought into life, making it an experience even for the terminal groundlings.

“If film did not grow out of literature, it grew towards it; and what novels and film most strikingly have in common is the the potential and propensity for narrative.”¹

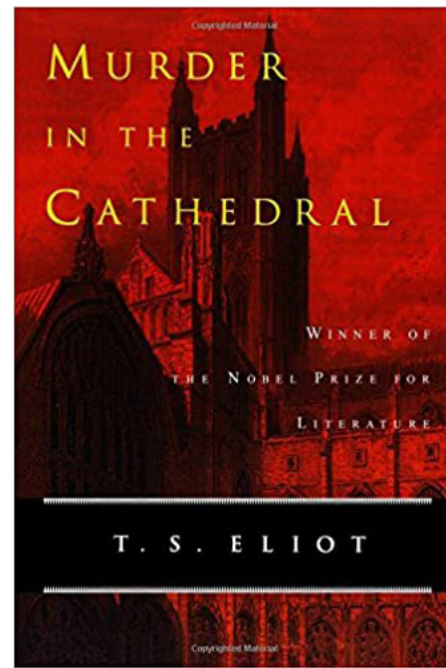
The intertwining relationship between literature and cinema resorts in the fact that cinema is the narrative of the 20th century that is beyond the generic intellectual silence of linguistic theories. The cultural workers figure it as a symptomatic unit of multidimensional use, but the statement for the folk is that, science of words is complex, it is related to psychological vision, but when translocated to the screen, it becomes comparatively simpler and accessible visual topography for the audience, though technically complex. The vibration of sounds and music, visuals in auditory motion that enrich its spectators with happy conditional logic is the success of the transformation of art. It is a journey from mute to motion.

A 1951 George Hoellering film *Murder in the*

Cathedral is a literary adaptation of American wizard T.S. Eliot's successful verse drama sharing the same title, written and staged simultaneously in the year 1935. Eliot tried to spiritualize history, did not give an account of it. The movie explores not what was there as a literary narrative but what happened in history through the tailored character of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. In the drama, history was a legacy of time, but in the movie, history is a living character. Spiritualised, empowered and reflection of time that speaks through images. Set in the background of 1170, *Murder in the Cathedral* displays how the rise of Fascism used religious doctrines as the tools of domination of the subjects who resorted in Gods' country. Director George Hoellering too was compelled to leave his homeland due to the treachery of the Nazis, and this pain of exile and separation from his own god was reflected in *Murder in the Cathedral*.

The film was shoot in that decaying cathedral of Canterbury, that was in itself a vintage cinematic text of chiaroscuro. The wide long shots and the high angle shots of the limited cavalcade at the very fast scene of the movie forecasts the approaching emergence and the victory of self concordance against aggrandized materialistic power. The fearless cross, the sound of rooster escorting the cavalcade is alarming of the new dawn in England and the Institution of moral spine and allegiance. *Murder in the Cathedral* is a poetry in celluloid, a film for the buffs. It is as larger than life metaphor as the portrayal of

Eliot showing "death in a handful of dust.". Critics often say that the text of the film is too poetic and lengthy to be received by a generic or stereotyped audience, but it is a justified adaptation of its literary almanac. It is a play of situation.



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The decaying cathedral of Canterbury, the shades of chiaroscuro throughout the movie, the gloomy, tensed atmospheric review exposing its contemporary history where the Archbishop was the victim of political malignancy of Henry ii, justify the literary narrative. He self exiled himself in France and comes back to his homeland after seven years. The chorus, that's an extract of the Greek Opera, does not really want his presence because they were afraid of his life threats. As soon as Becket enters the cathedral, one priest welcomes him,

“ Seven years of waiting, seven years of prayer, seven years of emptiness had better prepared our hearts for your coming.”

Soon the Bishop is encountered with the four tempters sent by the king. The tempters are the vital capacity of the film. The conversation between the bishop and the first three tempters reveal the whole political conflict and the bishop's persuasion for justice and serving the Kingdom of God rather than the King's monarch of monopolistic lust. All the three tempters try to allure him by trying to make him visualise the good old, lucrative royal luxuries that he once availed being as the immediate associate to the King. But as a refined and transformed devotee of God, he defies them sticking to one of his statements in the movie. --



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“ we do not know very much of the future except that from generation to generation same thing happens again and again. Man learn that from other's experience. But in the life of one man, never the same time returns”, somewhere echoing the great Chanakya chants.

Under the carefully captured high angle shot, portraying the nimbus sky, the invisibly visible voice of the fourth tempter, who is most unexpected for Becket, plays the most subtle role, “the right deed for the wrong reason.” He is ethereal to Bishop, but his voice is portrayed as a personified character. The silky,

sinuous voice over of T.S Eliot himself as the fourth tempter is a metaphorical power to the cinematic asset of *Murder in the Cathedral*. The internal conflict of Becket is at its climax during this conversation between a concrete and an abstract entity. He allures Becket of the glory of martyrdom. -

“ But think Thomas, think of glory after death”

The close shots, penetrating the lines of serious challenge on Becket's face are suggestive of the dramatic effect, that the “book” could not have created. The language of the Knights and of the tempters, specially the grave voice of T.S. Eliot as the fourth tempter is that silver lining of the entire adaptation that has proven its worth as visualising and hearting a mute text in vibrant motion.

Becket accepted his martyrdom in order to establish god's supremacy over any materialistic ethic.

A verse play is often expected to be “stagey” more than being spontaneous. The polished lexicons from the poshly costumed actors spoke majestically enough for the mobile text to make the audience sit for two hours. The random movement of camera capturing the scenes of tussle between the priests and the knights, speak through the images the tension narrated by the prose and nurtured by time and screen. The grave background score, the verse narrative of the chorus and the majesty of the royal performers presented *Murder in the Cathedral* as a serious ocular podcast of the political and historical conflict of the

time and through the external poise of the internal struggle of the protagonist, relating his essential orbit.

And the question might arise that what is the contemporary context of a 1952 film? Well, the throwback socio-political and the politicohistorical context adapted in the film is suggestive with the universal temperament of victory of good over evil, though in the long run, at the price of The language of the nights and the tempters are like our history and the situation is made contemporary, through the depiction of political expediency. Martyrdom is made contemporary as a canonized euthanasia that was the end of the long, internal suffering of the Archbishop and here the audience realise that vocal language has great dramatic potential.

It must be said that the technical presentation of literature is somewhat a complex method of art. The visual narrative of the film is somewhat flat to capture the high volt attention of its audience. The slow mobility of the film may interrupt the audience's sense of relishing a politicohistorical text on big screen. In the 18th and the 19th century the then prevailing popularity of literature was dominated by films to a considerable extent in the 20th century. Literature carries its readers to an imaginary world or a world of fantasy, whereas films display that very word in front of them, where they don't have to go through any Complex academic exercise. But whenever literature is transformed to film, it has to pass through some in evitable changes where the skull of

the textual presentation may slightly differ. Bengali film maker Chidananda Dasgupta has commented that the visual adaptations of literature

“ may undergo changes but the Berry composition of the elements the molecular structure if you like would undergo a transmutation” 2

Sometimes poor adaptation may kill a Masterpiece. Blurred technical clarity, translucent script, asperous visual narrative fail to portray that spell of words in screen. Assiduous homage to the attempted adaptation is a matter of sharp homework, because it must stimulate the psycho motor nerves of the audience, as, in the country of literature, motor skill is comparatively a second citizen.

Jean Baudrillard has stated: “ the post modern world is one ruled by simulation. It is what Guy Debord famously termed as a “society of the spectacle”, a culture driven by the production and consumption of visual signs add heavily invested in the manufacture and deployment of even more sophisticated imaging technologies..... the latest social effects, adaptations today frequently seem to reflect their makers' interest not in translating a literary text to the screen mainly, but rather in using it as a springboard to generate spectacular computer-generated and manipulated imagery.” 3

It can be easily said that the first step of film has always been Literature, may it be written or unscripted. Because as soon as the process of making a film starts, its text, screenplay, dialogues-- all are parallelly and simultaneously get associated along with. Production and Technical side is not at the frontline now. So it can easily be said

that literature has always been inspiring the filmmakers and films are incredibly influenced by the written records. History has recorded that from the period of Raja Harishchandra to the trending scenario of world cinema, almost every film bears some traces of literary adaptation or inspiration. Viz, including *Alibaba Chalis Chor*, *Aladdin*, *Cinderella*, *Prince and the pauper* and numerous ones to *Devdas*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and sensibility*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *War and Peace*, *The French lieutenant's woman*, *La miserable*, *Haider*, *Maqbool*, *Kai po che*, *Agnishnan*, *Feluda*, *Chokher Bali*, *Padma Nadir Majhi*, *Agni Pariksha*, *Pather Panchali*, or *Hrid Majharey*-- literary pieces, born out of traditional, radical or intellectual exercise of words, have always been the inspiring generic sources of cinema and the celluloidic transformation of those have been sought after either among the cine goers or movie buffs, being contingent on their social and intellectual temperament.

Murder in the Cathedral was awarded with the International Award for Best production design in the twelfth Venice Film Festival, given to Peter Pendrey. Father John Groser as Archbishop Becket, Alexander Gauge as Henry II, and the satiny voice of T.S Eliot as the fourth tempter enrich the film with the realistic cine metaphors. It's a tour de force of experiencing the physical clarity of royal words. With a limited budget, Hoellering completed the entire shooting schedule in six

weeks.

“*Murder in the Cathedral*, a work that Eliot and Hoellering created together, as one of the most uncompromising and unusual literary adaptations ever brought to the screen. It is an utterly personal project which answers only to itself and to its makers.” 4

Films are the micro units of cultural knowledge. Machines are always in love with human brains and the colab of these two potencies have created many beautiful realms in audio visual history, a quintessence of pursuit to establish an unified force out of two strong, intertwining mediums of liberal and visual arts.

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Dr. Dipsikha Bhagawati is a Teacher, Dept of English, Dawson Higher Secondary and Multipurpose School, Nagaon, Assam.