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Things Fall Apart back to the Owners: Adapting Achebe's Text to Film for the Igbo Populace

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ABSTRACT

At the beginning of scholarship on film adaptation, critics dismissed adapted films as watered down versions of their literary antecedents. Scholars such as Woof (1950) argued that the films were reductive of the supremacy of the texts, and that films depended on the popularity of literary texts in order to gain credibility. This fidelity-betrayal aesthetic would see adapted films reviled and disregarded as fodder only fit for the lower classes of the society. In further arguments that were logocentric (aiming to vouch for the supremacy of the text and dismiss the dependence of the adapted film), films adapted from literature were judged to be less intellectually stimulating, and born out of a lack of ingenuity on the part of the filmmakers to create new works of art, completely autonomous in their right

(Cartmell, et al. (2008). Using the case of **Things Fall Apart** (the literary text and the adapted film) this paper, however, seeks to counter this notion and rationalize that in adapting the film from Achebe's text, the filmmaker succeeds in bringing the story of Okonkwo and Umuofia back home – to the people among whom it originally happened. The main argument in this paper is hinged on the understanding that while the text is discriminative, allowing only the schooled members of the Igbo population to read their story, the film is more accommodating. This is made possible because the cinematic medium has the ability to reach a larger section of the Igbo people who do not have a reading chance or interpretive ability to interact with the narrative in the literary form and the meanings thereof.

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Introduction

Being an intertextual reading of the two texts, the filmic and the literary, this study avers that ***Things Fall Apart*** is a realistic adaptation. David Orere adapts Achebe's text so that the resultant film becomes a translation of its literary original which keeps faith with the Igbo world view and its capitulation as imagined by Achebe in the literary antecedent. The paper analyses how sound and narrative voice are used to render the filmic narrative effectively, while keeping fidelity with the literary original. The first section of this paper looks at the correlation between the textual and cinematic dialogue. Next, the paper looks at how diegetic sound – to be specific voice-over narration – is used as narrative point of view to tell the cinematic story. The study contends that where the literary text uses a third person omniscient narrator throughout the text, the film, in selected and profoundly significant parts of the narrative employs voice-over narration by an omniscient narrator who is not a character in the story. In this case however, the narrator's voice relays both a verbatim narration of the text and paraphrases which echo the textual narration. The paper concludes that it is by this strategy that the filmmaker is able to retain the spirit of the original narrative in the literary text for the benefit of a wider reading audience – part of which is Igboland.

Transferred Dialogue: Literary Dialogue to Cinematic Dialogue

It is important to further buttress the argument that the film ***Things Fall Apart*** being a translation from its literary original, a comparison of the dialogue between the two forms is necessary. Rauma (2004) has written on the reflections between dialogue in the literary original and cinematic dialogue. While studying the metamorphosis of dialogue between the Stephen King's novel ***The Green Mile*** (1996) and Frank Darabont's motion picture, ***The Green Mile*** (1999), Rauma (*ibid*) introduces the conception: 'Direct Transferral of Dialogue.' Rauma contends that according to some views on film adaptation, dialogue is one of the elements in the novel that is directly transferrable to the film. Rauma (*ibid*) concedes, however, that the process of adapting prose dialogue to cinematic dialogue is complicated and therefore, the novel does not easily render itself for transferral to screen. But she adds: Direct transferral of dialogue does exist, however. I have defined as a directly transferred line any line of dialogue which exists in the film in the exact form it does in the novel, leaving aside variant spellings such as getting/gettin' (p. 122).

Rauma adds that this direct transferral is one of the strategies used by filmmakers to retain fidelity to the literary original. The excerpts below will reveal that the dialogue in the film is similar – almost identical to that in the literary original. What is more, characters, setting and scenery realized in the film paint a true picture of the textual representation of the same in Achebe's text. Hence, in adapting prose dialogue in Achebe's text, the filmmaker opts for – in very many instances – a word-for-word rendition of the literary dialogue in the film ***Things Fall Apart*** as shall be illustrated in the excerpts below. Most importantly, the illustrations that follow show how the adapted film correlates with Achebe's literary original in terms of using cinematic dialogue to tell the tragedy of Okonkwo and Umuofia.

Except 1 of dialogue in the literary text:

"Have you heard," asked Obierika, "that Abame is no more?"

"How is that?" asked Uchendu and Okonkwo together.

"Abame has been wiped out," said Obierika. "It is a strange and terrible story. If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes and heard their story with my own ears, I would not have believed. Was it not on an Eke day that they fled into Umuofia?" he asked his two companions, and they nodded their heads. "Three moons ago ... a white man had appeared in their clan."

"An albino," suggested Okonkwo.

"He was not an albino. He was quite different." He sipped his wine. "And he was riding an iron horse. The first people who saw him ran away, but he stood beckoning to them. In the end the fearless ones went near and even touched him. The elders consulted their Oracle and it told them that the strange man would break their clan and spread destruction among them." Obierika again drank a little of his wine. "And so they killed the white man and tied his iron horse to their sacred tree because it looked as if it would run away to call the man's friends. (Achebe, 1958, p. 97)

Excerpt 1 of dialogue in the adapted film, part 35:

Obierika: Have heard that Abame is no more?

Okonkwo: What?

Uchendu: How is that?

Obierika: Abame has been wiped out. It is a strange and terrible story. If I had not seen the few survivors with my own eyes and heard their story with my own ears, I would not have believed ... a Whiteman had come into the clan.

Okonkwo: An albino?

Obierika: No! Not an albino, he was quite different, and he was riding an iron horse. Oracles had said that a strange man would visit their clan and spread destruction, and some other men would follow his way. And that the Whiteman was their harbinger sent to survey the terrain. People did not understand the man's language, and worse still, they thought that his iron horse would run away. Then, they killed the Whiteman and hung his iron horse on their sacred silk cotton tree.

Excerpt 2 from the literary text:

"Why is Okonkwo with us today? This is not his clan. We are only his mother's kinsmen. He does not belong here. He is an exile, condemned for seven years to live in a strange land. And so he is bowed with grief. But there is just one question I would like to ask him. Can you tell me, Okonkwo, why it is that one of the commonest names we give our children is Nneka, or 'Mother is Supreme?' We all know that a man is the head of the family and his wives do his bidding. A child belongs to its father and his family and not to its mother and her family. A man belongs to his fatherland and not to his motherland. And yet we say Nneka - 'Mother is Supreme.' Why is that?" (Achebe 1958, p. 94 – 95).

In the same spirit of demonstrating fidelity to the literary original while adapting, the filmmaker also executes a one-to-one rendition of the section above in part 33 of the film. In this section of the film, Uchendu convenes a family meeting and proceeds to make a

speech in the same stream of thought, beginning with “Why is Okonkwo with us today?” In addition to supporting the case for faithful adaptation, these one-to-one renditions of the literary into the cinematic also go in line with the seeming intent on the part of the filmmaker to have the text live in the world of the film with regard to voicing some of the strongest philosophical arguments that Achebe makes through his characters.

Hence, ***Things Fall Apart*** emerges as a realistic and faithful adaptation that retains a one-to-one fidelity to the literary original. Though limited in terms of cinematographic elements and the creation of effect compared to the two other films, it is clear that there was an endeavour on the part of the filmmaker to produce a film that reflects the true spirit of the literary text from which it is adapted. Anyanwu (2010) and Ugochukwu (2014) posit, in the absence of an Igbo translation of the novel ***Things Fall Apart*** (1958), this film fills the void that would have left the Igbo people unaware of their own story. Before the reediting of the film under study here, it had in fact earlier on been remade in Igbo with English subtitles (Anyanwu, 2010).

Movies are primarily about moving images, where the sound design and dialogue support the image and not vice versa. This is why in film; economy of words is called into attention. While a couple of a character’s lines in the dialogues cited above are undeniably drawn out and go against the rule of thumb in film that stipulates that a good dialogue ought not exceed 30 words, these dialogues heavily borrow from Umuofian and veritably, African tradition where dialogue is not just dialogue for its own sake. Traditionally, Africans are very social people and this sociability is accomplished and enhanced through dialogue. Almost every key function is completed by some form of discourse. And the conversation in most cases is dramatic as seen above. The dialogue is the action. Dramatic dialogue is dialogue in which characters try to do something and try to change something, in which characters seek to have effects on other characters. The case of Obierika above is clear. Subsequently, the extent of the dialogue does not diminish the power of the images; it still compliments the moving pictures.

From the examples cited above, it will also be noted that the screenwriter endeavoured to not only to preserve the dialogue rich in subtext that characterizes the literary text but also uphold the subtext in dialogue fashioned out of narrative descriptions. Part of the strategy in this regard entailed maintaining the Igbo idioms in all regards. The hidden information in the subtext is extremely entertaining for the audience since it adds extra layers of meaning to the action.

By appropriating word-for-word adaptation of the dialogue and description of the literary original, the film therefore indigenizes Achebe’s story among his own people with the most compelling cases of this indigenization being the dirge performed by Ikemefuna’s mother, the war song during the destruction of Okonkwo’s compound after his accidental killing of Ezeudu’s son, and the formulaic prayers and greetings. In Anyanwu’s own words, the film answered the “need to bring back the stories (*sic*) (that have travelled far and near) to the people as their own story” (Anyanwu, 2010, p. 37). Further, Anyanwu (*ibid*) avers:

From reading all of Achebe’s novels and a wide range of his critical essays, I realized that my responsibility as an adaptor of an Igbo novel is to create a sense of community among the people. The retelling of the people’s stories is the first step towards achieving this, for in doing so, the adaptor helps the community to retrieve those values

and elements that empowered them as a people. It becomes necessary, therefore, that the adaptations must be culturally recognizable to the people. (p. 171).

This section of the study has endeavoured to present the conformity in the *fabula* (narrative) between the literary antecedents and their corresponding films. It is clear from the foregoing that all the three films retain the spirit of the literary sources, in spite of the variances that are to be discussed in the next section. This section has also proven that ***Things Fall Apart*** is a realistic adaptation that retains a one-to-one correlation with the narrative of its antecedent. We can therefore conclude that a filmmaker may choose the degree to which to exploit the creative license in adaptation, depending upon his/her vision of the narrative.

Non-Diegetic Sound in Transferred and Re-assigned Descriptions

The use of narrative off-screen voice in ***Things Fall Apart*** is one of the means by which the film pays allegiance to the literary original. Both in wording and tone, the film maker pays tribute to Achebe's text which for the most part addresses the tragic convergence of two different cultural viewpoints in Umuofia. Importantly, sound is used in the film as a narrative device to compensate for the literary text's narrative description of the tragic fall of Okonkwo and Umuofia. The few instances of voice over narration in the film are actually either direct quotations or re-readings of Achebe's novel, or limited paraphrases. According to film scholar and critic, Rauma (2004), this practice in film adaptation is referred to as 'direct transference'. The catastrophic arrival of the missionaries in the whole of Umuofia, specifically in Abame is presented in one such voice over in the film. In part 32 at 06:10, of the film, a voice narrates:

The arrival of the missionaries in Abame had caused a considerable stir. In the surrounding towns and villages, their activities were a source of great sorrow, not only to the adherents of the traditional religions, but to the leaders of the clan. Many believed that the strange faith would not last—after all, none of the converts was a man of substance. They were called the *efulefu*. They were the excrement of society, and the new faith, the mad dog that had come to eat it. (underlined – authors' emphasis)

Compared with the prose narration in the literary antecedent quoted below, the above filmic narration is a paraphrase that keeps alive Achebe's story in the film. The gradual fall of Umuofia is told by the omniscient voice-over narration such as the above. Sound is hence used in film to perpetuate the tragic mode of the literary antecedent. Some of the underlined words in the voice-over quoted above are indeed identical to the quotation from the literary antecedent as shown below:

The missionaries had come to Umuofia. They had built their church there ... None of his converts was a man whose word was heeded in the assembly of the people. None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men. The imagery of an *efulefu* in the language of the clan was a man who sold his machete and wore the sheath to battle. Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, called the converts the excrement of the clan, and the new faith was a mad dog that had come to eat it up. (Achebe, 1958, p. 101) (underlined – authors' emphasis)

The same voice recurs twice in part 33 of the film first at 01:05, and then at 09:25. In the former instance, the narrator proceeds:

Many people in Abame did not believe the Whiteman because his god was neither the god of the earth; the god of the sky; nor Amadiora the thunderbolt. ... To the converts, the words of the hymns were like drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. (underlined – authors' emphasis)

Rauma (2004) introduces the concept of re-assignment with regard to comparative analysis of prose fiction and film. She notes that a piece of dialogue or description attributed to one character, event or object in the literary original is shifted to, and attributed to a different character, event or object in the resultant adapted film. While the cinematic narrator re-assigns the above exposition and attributes it to the people of Abame, it is Nwoye to whom this description is attributed in Achebe's literary antecedent as shall be seen in the quotation below. In this case however, these words are mostly a paraphrase with main words transferred directly from the literary antecedent. In the film therefore, the description is transferred from the people of Abame and re-assigned to Nwoye. Of Nwoye, Achebe in the literary antecedent writes:

But there was a young lad who had been captivated. His name was Nwoye, Okonkwo's first son. It was not the mad logic of the Trinity that captivated him. He did not understand it. It was the poetry of the new religion, something felt in the marrow. ... The words of the hymns were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry palate of the panting earth. Nwoye's callow mind was greatly puzzled. (Achebe, 1958, p. 104.) (underlined – authors' emphasis)

Again here, as in the previous case, the underlined words which are attributed to different subjects in the different media are identical. By this practice, the adapted film keeps faith with the literary original in castigating the cultural flaws in the Igbo world view which are to blame for the ease with which the Whiteman conquered the people with his new religion. Thus, the film and the text become united that the ground in Umuofia was fertile and predisposed to the fall under the Whiteman's colonial intents because of a complex set of factors arising from the side of the Whiteman and from the people themselves. No motivation, other than the brutal killing of Ikemefuna, and other injustices like throwing twins to die in the evil forest, thrust Nwoye and other converts into the grateful hands of the Whiteman and his religion. Finally, the film plays in tandem with the animist spirit of Achebe's **Things Fall Apart** (1958). The above pair of quotations shows that in both film and literary text, the earth is treated as if it possessed human life. This is done to highlight animist spirit prevalent in the Igbo society (Pepetela, 1989) and to acknowledge their belief in god of the earth, *Ani*.

The final instance of voice over narration in part 33, at 09:25, is further evidence of re-assignment:

The missionaries were permitted to take all the land as they cared to, after all, they would all be dead within four days. But as the days turned into weeks; weeks into

months, none of the converts of the new faith had died. Many more converts were won by the Whiteman for his god in the heavens. (underlined – authors' emphasis)

The narrator in the film says the words in this paraphrase of the text about the people of Abame whereas the narrator in the literary antecedent says the similar about the people of Mbanta as shown below:

The next morning the crazy men actually began to clear a part of the forest and to build their house. The inhabitants of Mbanta expected them all to be dead within four days. ... It was said that he wore glasses on his eyes so that he could see and talk to evil spirits. Not long after, he won his first three converts. (Achebe, 1958, p. 105 – 106) (underlined – authors' emphasis)

To begin with, this is the film's way of affirming that the experience of the people of all of Igboland (and indeed the whole of Africa) under the invasion of Christianity and colonialism was the same so that it did not matter where one lived. Christianity and attendant Colonialism arrived in Africa, and it became inevitable that the whole continent would feel their presence. To highlight the inevitability of Christianity conquering the people of Igboland, the film makes the spread of the new religion easier than it is described in the literary original: the literary narrator says the Whiteman "won his first three converts" while the cinematic narrator states "Many more converts were won" by the Whiteman.

Conclusion

This study contends that where the literary text uses a third person omniscient narrator throughout the text, the film, in selected and profoundly significant parts of the narrative, employs voice-over narration by an omniscient narrator who is not a character in the story. In this case however, the narrator's voice relays both a verbatim narration of the text and paraphrases which echo the textual narration. The paper concludes that it is by this strategy that the filmmaker is able to retain the spirit of the original narrative in the literary text for the benefit of a wider reading audience – part of which is Igbo land.

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