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Text to Screen Adaptation: Analyzing and Then There Were None

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Abstract. Adaptation is an inherent aspect of human behavior, influencing various domains of life, from lifestyle choices and food habits to literature and entertainment. In the realm of cultural production, historical events, legendary figures, and ancient texts have long inspired numerous artistic creations. In recent years, the adaptation of literary texts into films, television series, and digital content has gained remarkable momentum and widespread audience appreciation. This research paper focuses on the 2015 BBC television adaptation of Agatha Christie's And Then There Were None, analyzing it through the lens of screen adaptation. While Christie herself previously adapted the novel for the stage, the miniseries introduces substantial narrative and stylistic modifications. This study examines how the original text has been transformed to suit the demands of a visual medium, highlighting both minor and major deviations. It explores the director's creative agency in reimagining scenes, adjusting character portrayals, and altering the tone to enhance cinematic appeal. The paper further assesses the reception of the adaptation by contemporary viewers, noting the balance between fidelity and innovation. Ultimately, the study argues that while maintaining the essence of the source is valuable, adaptive deviations often enrich the narrative, offering fresh perspectives that resonate with modern audiences

Index Terms- Adaptation, Miniseries, Transformation, Text

I. Introduction

The term 'adaptation' is more commonly associated with the field of biological sciences, where it refers to a process by which an organism undergoes transformation for its own survival. This biological process involves either the gain or loss of certain features, enabling the organism to become better suited for survival. Tracing the etymology of the word 'adaptation,' it originates from the late French word 'adaptore,' meaning 'to fit' or 'to adjust.' Britannica defines biological adaptation as "the process by which organisms become fitted to their environment; it is the result of natural selection's acting upon heritable variation over several generations" (Gittleman). Furthermore, the concept of adaptation has been elaborated in three parts: first, in a physiological sense, where an animal or plant adapts to its immediate environment; second, as traits that help organisms reproduce more effectively than others; and third, and most notably, questioning whether a trait was originally developed for a different purpose than its current function. From biology, the idea of adaptation has extended into literature. Dramas, novels, short stories, and poetry have been adapted for the screen in the form of plays, films, and web series. The aim of these adaptations is not to undermine the original work but to present it creatively for contemporary audiences.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, adaptation in literature is defined as "adapting sth else, esp a text for production on the stage, radio, etc" ("adaptation"). Adaptation is about what is involved in adapting. It can be a process of appropriation, of taking possession of another's story, and filtering it, in a sense, through one's sensibility, interests, and talents. "Usually adaptations, especially from long novels, mean that the adapter's job is one of subtraction or contraction; this is called 'a surgical art'" (Hutcheon 19). This is the usual case with cinematic adaptations, where full-length novels are reduced to a few hours of movies or episodes. So, it can be said that the transformation of a text by cutting or adding elements to the story depends on the perspective of interpretation. "Therefore, adapters are first interpreters and then creators" (Hutcheon 18). There are many reasons for adapting a text for screen, where the text transforms into a two-hour movie or web series. The main objective or goal could be to present an earlier work more creatively to suit the taste of the contemporary audience or simply to play on the commercial success of an already familiar work. When an individual watches a movie or series based on a book, they naturally compare it with the original text, and they are actively involved in the process of intertextuality. They become aware when there is a deviation from the source text, and this adds a distinct flavour to the newly created text. This comparison creates a bridge between the old and new versions, but it is only possible when the audience is aware of the source text, in this context, the book from which the story has been adapted for a screenplay. If there is no knowledge of the older text, then the audience perceives it as an original text with its own uniqueness. Adaptation refers to the process and the product. It is explained in three ways by Linda Hutcheon in her book. In short, adaptation can be described as "An acknowledged transposition of a recognisable other work or works, creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging, An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Hutcheon 8).

Briefly, it is explained as, first, a product that fits into a new form for the audience. This 'new formation' is referred to as 'transposition,' wherein a text is turned into a movie by retelling a story or text from a different perspective, or by turning a historical account into a fictional story or drama. Second, adaptation is a creative process, which involves reinterpreting or portraying a story in a new way, recreating and reshaping it with a purpose for the audience. These are done in two ways: appropriation, which involves changing or altering the source text, often to critique it, and second, salvaging, which preserves it carefully for a new audience while keeping the real essence alive. Third, adaptations involve the process of intertextuality or travelling between two texts. It means that when one engages with an adaptation, they compare it to the original text and are involved in intertextual engagement, which allows them to shape their understanding by comparing the contexts simultaneously. In today's contemporary world, we can see adaptations in every format, whether in movies, web series, cartoons, or anything else. There have been many great works adapted into movies and series, like Game of Thrones, Pride and Prejudice, Jurassic Park, and many more. Even in India, we have seen many great adaptations of epics like the Mahabharata and Ramayana. These adaptations are made in the context of the new and contemporary audience.

This paper intends to delve into the process of adaptation of a novel, And There Were None (1936) by Agatha Christie to a TV miniseries of the same name directed by Craig Viveiros in 2015. As there is a lack of substantial research in the aspects of adaptation considering the text And There Were None by Agatha Christie, this research has been undertaken to explore the transformation which has been possible by the 'surgical act' of Craig Viveiros. The objective of this research is to explore the major and minor changes which stand in contradiction to the story presented in the book. Further, it also strives to address the plot change in the ending as well as the critical reception of the TV miniseries. Lastly, even after doing some major and minor changes, the plot stays true to the story. This research paper's perspective is to critically understand the change in medium which is from text to screen. This will be undertaken by delving into the comparative analysis of text and web series. As per Hutcheon's explanation of adaptation, firstly, an acknowledged transformation of a renowned text has been carried forward to create a TV miniseries. Secondly, it can also be said that the adaptation aims to salvage the source text by incorporating certain minor and major changes in the show. Thirdly, it makes the viewers compare the show with its source text, meaning it incorporates the aspects of intertextual engagement. The usability of research for text-to-screen is very diverse. Visualization of scenes while reading and experiencing it in front in the form of a movie or series is extremely engaging as the audience is consistently traveling back and forth between the texts. Adaptations help professionals like writers, directors, and producers understand themes, characterization, and narrative elements that are shaped to understand visual storytelling. Cultural aspects and timeframe are also understood and kept in mind while adapting and maintaining fidelity.

Agatha Christie was an English novelist and playwright known for 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections. Her books have been translated into more than 100 languages and have sold over 100 million copies worldwide. Christie began writing detective novels during World War I. She employed a clear and straightforward writing style. The director of the TV miniseries And Then There Were None (2015), Craig Viveiros, is a British-Portuguese television and film director. Initially, Craig worked as a camera operator on several films. His notable works include the 2015 adaptation of Agatha Christie's And Then There Were None, the serial killer drama Rillington Place, and the adaptation of The War of the Worlds. Sarah Phelps, a British television screenwriter, playwright, TV producer, and radio writer, is one of the remarkable writers who adapt major literary works for the small screen.

And Then There Were None (1939) by Agatha Christie is a classic mystery novel. Ten strangers are lured to a remote location called Soldier Island. Suddenly, a mysterious voice accuses them of their hidden crimes and murders. One by one, all ten are killed, following the pattern of a nursery rhyme hung in their rooms. And Then There Were None (2015), directed by Craig Viveiros, is a three-episode TV miniseries based on this novel. The plot and setting of the series closely follow those of the original book. However, the series incorporates some minor and major changes that deviate from the text.

II. Discussion and Findings

The story involves ten people receiving individual invitation letters from Mr. U.N. Owen to come to Soldier Island, near the Devon coast. The individuals and their professions are: a doctor (Dr. Armstrong), a schoolmistress hired as a secretary (Vera Claythorne), a couple of servants (Mrs. and Mr. Rogers), an adventurous traveler (Philip Lombard), a retired old general (Gen. Macarthur), a wealthy playboy (Anthony Marston), a middle-aged religious woman (Emily Brent), a judge (Lawrence John Wargrave), and a detective (William Blore). Every character present is a murderer. During the dinner party, their crimes are revealed: Dr. Armstrong caused the death of Louisa Mary Clees; Emily Brent was responsible for the death of Beatrice Taylor; Vera Claythorne caused the death of Cyril Ogilvie Hamilton; Philip Lombard killed twenty-one African tribe men; General Macarthur caused the death of Arthur Richmond; Anthony Marston killed John and Lucy Combes; Mr. and Mrs. Rogers were responsible for Jennifer Brady's death; and Lawrence John Wargrave was accountable for the death of Edward Seton.

The main highlight of the story is that the murders are committed according to a nursery rhyme:

- "Ten little soldier boys went out to dine,
- One choked his little self and then there were nine…
- One little soldier left all alone,
- He went and hanged himself and then there were none" (Christie 25-26).

The novel has sixteen chapters, while the TV miniseries has three episodes, each covering a certain number of chapters.

In episode one, ten strangers are invited to the isolated Soldier Island by U.N. Owen, who is mysteriously absent from the island. After the formal introduction of all ten guests, they gather for dinner in the dining hall. Suddenly, a voice—without warning, penetrating and inhuman—says, "Ladies and gentlemen! Silence please!" (Christie 37). The voice reveals the crimes or murders committed by each person. Everyone is shocked upon hearing this and begins to explain their parts. However, Philip Lombard and Marston accept responsibility for their crimes. During the discussion, Marston suddenly chokes and dies. Later, Dr. Armstrong discovers that the drink contained potassium cyanide. The next morning, Mrs. Rogers is found dead in her bed, heightening everyone's anxiety. Although this episode follows the exact events mentioned in the book chapters, certain minor changes are noticeable. In the novel, except for Dr. Armstrong, the others were ferried earlier to Soldier Island, whereas in the series, Emily and Marston arrive early. Also, Marston is depicted as a wealthy playboy in the book, but in the series, he is shown as a cocaine addict. Since these changes are minor, no significant impact is noted on the story's perception. It can be considered that the director made these changes to adapt the story more appropriately for the time in which it was produced.

Episode two covers chapters seven to twelve of the novel. After the deaths of two victims, suspicion falls on Dr. Armstrong. His room and belongings are checked, but nothing is found. Later, everyone confesses their crimes but realizes that

everything on this island is staged. During lunch, General Macarthur is found dead with his head smashed near the sea. Following this, Judge Wargrave discloses a theory: “It is clear. Mr. Owen is one of us…” (Christie 123), which also implies that Mr. Owen is not mysteriously absent as assumed at the beginning of the story. This statement creates chaos, and arguments break out among all the surviving members. Meanwhile, Mr. Rogers is found split open with an axe; he was brutally killed. Miss Brent is discovered with a stab wound to her throat. With five victims killed and five survivors on that damned island, all five survivors grow more anxious and fearful, starting to suspect each other and searching rooms, belongings, and the entire hotel to find clues about the murderer.

Significant changes can be noticed in this episode, particularly regarding the deaths of three characters, Emily Brent, Mr. Rogers, and Gen. Macarthur. In the text, after Emily has a cup of coffee containing cyanide possessed by Dr. Armstrong, a bee is placed into the cup to follow the nursery rhyme. In the series, however, she is stabbed in the throat with her needle. In the text, Mr. Rogers is killed with an axe to the head; in the series, he is killed very brutally, and his midriff is exposed, emphasizing the brutality. It can be assumed the changes in the depiction of murder in the TV miniseries were done for a more appealing cinematic presentation, which does not alter the plot structure but adds an extra element of brutality missing in the text. In the novel, Macarthur was murdered using an unidentified weapon, but in the TV series, a telescope is used to carry out the crime.

The third and final episode of the series encompasses chapters thirteen to sixteen along with the Epilogue of the novel. Notably, the concluding episode exhibits significant alterations by the director. It commences with five survivors remaining in the house, each exhibiting heightened fear and anxiety as they seek to identify the murderer. The subsequent victim is Judge Wargrave, who succumbs to a gunshot wound to the head. During the night, the four survivors devise a plan to remain awake by hosting a small gathering involving alcohol and drugs. At this event, Vera and Philip engage in an intimate encounter. The following day, Dr. Armstrong disappears, prompting the others to suspect his involvement in the murders. Subsequently, William Blore meets a fatal demise, having been stabbed and concealed beneath a bear rug. Concurrently, Vera and Philip discover Dr. Armstrong’s body near the sea. Vera then seizes a firearm from Philip and fatally shoots him. Later, in a delirious state, Vera attempts to hang herself; at this moment, Wargrave appears alive and reveals himself as the architect of the murders. He articulates his profound desire to construct an unsolvable mystery, providing Vera with an account of his plan. As Vera succumbs, suspended by the noose, she listens to his confession. Wargrave proceeds to the dining hall where two tables are arranged in opposite directions, ensuring that when he is shot, the revolver will land on the other table, thus perpetuating the enigma surrounding the murders.

This episode diverges substantially from the source text. The novel excludes any party or romantic involvement between Philip Lombard and Vera Claythorne, yet the adaptation introduces these elements to enhance audience engagement. The true identity of Mr. U.N.Owen remains undisclosed in the novel, with Wargrave’s role revealed through a letter found posthumously. In contrast, the series presents

Wargrave's confession directly, unveiling his motive to enact justice beyond the law through an unsolvable mystery.

Critic Keith Uhlich concurs with the aforementioned observations regarding the miniseries' ending, stating, "Phelps also makes a bold choice to slightly rejigger how the murderer is exposed: Where the book implies that the outside world might eventually know the truth behind the killings, the miniseries keeps the savage reality contained solely to the island. It makes it feel like we, the viewers, are part of a devilish pact, gleefully delighting in Christie's pointed brutality even as it's being reflected at us" (Uhlich). Uhlich highlights how Phelps alters the revelation of the murderer in the adaptation, differing significantly from the original text. While the novel unveils the true culprit much later, the series confines this revelation to Soldier Island itself. From an adaptation perspective, Tim Martin's insight is particularly relevant. He asserts, "Phelps's version felt closer both to the cruelty of Christie's original and to its dramatic intentions" (Martin). Martin suggests that Sarah Phelps's adaptation remains faithful to Christie's novel, preserving its core essence through the screenplay. Thus, it can be argued that the TV miniseries maintains fidelity to the source text, a hallmark of many adapted screenplays in the early twenty-first century.

From the perspective of interpretation, it is evident that the novel's distinctive appeal significantly influenced the screenplay writer's adaptation process. Reflecting on her initial encounter with the novel, Sarah Phelps remarked in an interview:

"I was shocked at how brutal it was. You can see it as a game; it's a very, very clever plot. It's a plot that you can tell someone delights in having pulled off, this extraordinary piece of sleight of hand conjuring, but within that when you read it as a novel – rather than read it as an escalating series of tricks – it's rather extraordinary. I was really surprised and interested by the fact it was published in 1939 just as war was gathering in Europe. It seems to be one of those books really about the time it is set in; it tells you more about the world than it would do if it attempted to address the complexities of the world" (Phelps).

Through this reflection, Phelps conveys that although And Then There Were None was the only Christie novel she had read, she found it dark, chilling, and remarkable. She further emphasizes the novel's thematic depth and historical context, observing that despite its 1939 publication, it retains an enduring suspenseful quality. On the thematic dimension, she adds, "It reminds you what an extraordinary mind Agatha Christie had. I found it shocking at how cold it was – the brutal nature of justice. Justice is coming, and justice will be served and it was painful" (Phelps). This highlights Christie's powerful portrayal of justice as inevitable and harsh, a theme faithfully preserved in both the novel and its adaptation.

It is important to note that Agatha Christie herself altered the ending of And Then There Were None when adapting it into a play in 1943. In this regard, critic Reece Goodall observes:

"Christie and the producers thought that the original ending wouldn't work for theatre – it's really grim and, on a practical level, there'd be no-one left to tell the story. She altered it, making both the final two suspects Lombard and Vera innocent of their crimes, and they escape and fall in love in what is a much happier ending. It filtered into the public consciousness too, with many adaptations choosing the more upbeat climax" (Goodall).

This suggests that Christie herself acknowledged the necessity of modifying the original conclusion to better suit the theatrical medium and audience expectations, resulting in a significantly more optimistic resolution. The final two suspects, Philip Lombard and Vera Claythorne, are portrayed as innocent and allowed to escape together, diverging markedly from the novel's darker finale. From this perspective, it can be argued that such transformations are both necessary and justified when adapting a narrative across different media. Similarly, Sarah Phelps exercised creative liberty in revising the ending of the 2015 TV miniseries, while maintaining fidelity to the novel's central theme of justice. Unlike Christie's stage adaptation, Phelps's version preserves the complete demise of all characters, thus retaining the original's bleak tone. Despite these modifications, the miniseries embraces the darkness inherent in Christie's text, underscoring the enduring thematic core within the adaptation.

One of the objectives of this research paper is to critically evaluate both the appreciation and criticism surrounding the TV miniseries adaptation. From this perspective, Constance Grady observes, "Lifetime's adaptation makes a couple of major changes to Christie's original tale, resulting in a work that ignores what made the novel such a masterpiece while striking out on its own as terrifically entertaining TV" (Grady). This critique highlights the significant deviations from the source text within the miniseries. Conversely, some reviewers offered positive appraisals; for instance, Maureen Ryan remarks, "The results are astoundingly and almost absurdly entertaining," emphasizing the adaptation's entertainment value and effective pacing (Ryan).

An intriguing aspect of the adaptation process is the plot's development through the incorporation of the minstrel song 'Ten Little Nigger' written by British songwriter Frank Green. This song belongs to a genre of music that perpetuated racist stereotypes about Black people during nineteenth- and early twentieth-century minstrel shows in the United States, where white performers, donning blackface makeup, mocked and caricatured African Americans. Agatha Christie's use of this song as a central motif for the systematic elimination of characters in the novel highlights how adaptation functions as a dynamic element in the creative process. Her borrowing from a culturally and historically distinct source demonstrates the intertextuality inherent in creative works. This overlap of elements often remains unnoticed unless the reader or audience is familiar with the original material. Thus, the adaptation process exemplifies a journey of boundless creativity, wherein new works are shaped by and build upon existing cultural texts.

III. Conclusion

After analyzing both the novel and the TV miniseries, it can be asserted that the adaptation remains faithful to the core essence of the original text, successfully preserving its spirit for contemporary audiences. Although the director and screenwriter introduced both minor and major modifications, the presentation, plot, characters, and fundamental themes of the novel were retained. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge the assertion that "typically the text version of a story offers a better literary experience than the film does" (Duncan 721). Indeed, a written text can never be fully replaced by its adapted form. While reading, a unique thrill emerges; each word arouses curiosity and pulls the reader deeper into an enigmatic world where shadows conceal secrets and every clue resonates like a heartbeat—a silent illumination within the darkness of the unknown. This immersive journey allows readers to gradually uncover mysteries and arrive at transformative truths. However, as Dutta observes, "a text or a novel is meant for a set of target readers – the so-called 'literary people', but a film is a product of popular culture which caters to the taste of all sorts of people, whether literate or not" (33). Therefore, although visual representation cannot replace the original text, the adaptation by director Craig Viveiros and writer Sarah Phelps successfully reinvents the story, presenting it to contemporary audiences with a refreshed perspective. The miniseries has consequently garnered widespread acclaim internationally.

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