

A Study of Racism in Christie's *Death on the Nile* and Its Cinematic Adaptation

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ABSTRACT

Recent years have exhibited the process of adaptation of literary texts into cinemas as a vogue. Therefore, this intertextuality has displayed an extensive scope for critics as well as researchers to critically acclaim the nature of adaptation. Different aspects of Agatha Christie's novel *Death on the Nile* and its cinematic adaptation directed by Kenneth Branagh (released in the year 2022) have been studied by several scholars. But this paper will exclusively comprehend the presence of glimpses of "race and ethnicity" in both the works of art. During the early decades of 20th century, the concept of 'racial differences' was widely prevalent in Europe. This had led to blooming of terms like 'imperialism' and 'orientalism' in literary discourse by western scholars. The colonisers expanded their territory to the countries of Africa & Asia and wanted to invest through trade and get maximum output from these nations. They also wanted natives of colonised countries to serve them in their army troops during the world wars. The elements of racial bias that we can trace in the chosen novel are a product of the time in which the novel was written. During that time, the norm of the English society was to avidly refer to the non-Europeans as 'others,' corresponding to their descent. This idea will form the base on which the paper will be built up while minutely anatomizing and commenting on the dialogues available in the text as well as the movie addressing racial issues.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, Imperialism, Racism, Xenophobia

Introduction:

The literary epoch between 1920 and 1939 witnessed the popularity of detective genre particularly with novels. The texts of this category basically deal with crime which is investigated by a sleuth to find the criminal and therefore, the literature bears a title called "whodunit" which means "who has done it." Detective plots, according to Ronald Arbuthnott Knox, "must have as its main interest the unravelling of a mystery; a mystery whose elements are clearly presented to the reader at an early stage in the proceedings, and whose nature is such as to arouse curiosity, a curiosity which is gratified at the end (Bernthal 4)." With the rising of crime novelists like Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh as well as their literary success, the era came to be known as the "Golden Age" of British detective fiction. Born in September 1890 in Torquay of England, Agatha Christie is popularly known as the "queen of crime". She started writing during the First World War and created around 66 detective novels along with a great deal of plays and short stories. Fictional detectives like Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple have been liked globally for their expertise in logically decoding crime events. For better understanding of her writings, Christie's novels should be comprehended *vis-à-vis* her life experiences *viz.* her broken marriage with Archibald Christie, her parents descending from two different nationalities, career in toxicity, suicidal attempts by her family members, the neuroses of the then Victorian minds, etc. Although she painted it in dark colours, Agatha had created a fictional world that had much in common with her own (Worsley 69).

Death on the Nile (1937) is one of the kinds that exhibits instances from the authoress's own life. The novel explores themes of jealousy, betrayal, and greed as it digs into the Daedalian relationships and motives of its characters. On their honeymoon to Aswan Simon Doyle and Linnet Ridgeway are confronted by Jacqueline de Bellefort, the ex-fiancée of Doyle who throughout the novel casts herself to be a poor lady as is betrayed by her

boyfriend and best-friend too. She stalks the couple everywhere they go in vengeful look which annoys them and they feel insecure. To get rid of Jacqueline's awful glance, the couple approaches Hercule Poirot, the world-famous detective and now their co-passenger on S. S. Karnak (luxury cruise on the Nile) to seek help. At first, Poirot declines their proposal saying there is no such motive of Jacqueline on which basis she can be charged. But later he has to undertake the case of Linnet Ridgeway Doyle's unfathomable murder with no external suspects on the cruise. He along with his cop friend Colonel Race uncover a web of secrets, motives, and hidden relationships among the passengers and crew. Through meticulous deduction, he identifies the murderer, exposing their entwined plot influenced by covetousness and its consequences. The novel has been adapted into various mediums like stage, television series, film, radio, video games and graphic novels. However, stating about the big- screen releases it has two cinematic adaptations: 1978 and 2022. Besides the prime themes of crime and investigation the novel and its cinematic adaptation also serve as animous critiques of racism, offering a flaming examination of the pervading racial prejudices that tainted the era of imperial expansion. So, eliminating the 1978 feature film version, this paper chooses to make a comparative analysis of racism depicted in novel to its 2022 cinematic adaptation directed by Kenneth Branagh which has been named after the novel only.

Racism

Brondolo *et al* quote Clarke *et al* while defining "racism" in their article "Copying With Racism: A Selective Review of the Literature and a Theoretical and Methodological Critique" as:

"the beliefs, attitudes, institutional arrangements, and acts that tend to denigrate individuals or groups because of phenotypic characteristics or ethnic group affiliation" (Clarke et al 805)

Racism is an unsolicited vexatious regime that ascribes superiority to one race over others, leading to discrimination, prejudice, and social inequality. It manifests in various forms, including systemic, institutional, and individual behaviours, impacting access to resources, opportunities, and rights for marginalized groups. Racism perpetuates stereotypes, fuels division, and undermines social cohesion. Referring to the episodes of world wars, Britain's colonial Others (persons of colour) immigrated to Britain for the sake of employment in wars, factories, and navy. However, subsequent to disarmament in 1919 as the soldiers were disbanded the population increased. As a result, there was shortage of housing, jobs and other facilities which favoured Whites over immigrants. This led to blooming of racial discrimination. Violence ranged from looting, destruction of property, and arson to beatings, stabbings, and shootings (Vorachek 62). Chaos and riots occurred where only persons of colour were targeted and blamed. Soon discrimination of race became an endearing topic amongst the English writers that they incorporated it in their writings. Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Virginia Woolf in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (1945) etc talked about racial discrimination and its impact on the natives. Christie being an upper middle-class English citizen was competent of her contemporaries. Christie's administration of racism in the novel associates the readers with the inter-wars British society that discriminated Blacks on their skin colour. Not only as immigrants but also as natives in their own land people were treated unfairly and detested by the Britishers.

Cinematic Adaptation

Converting a piece of literary text into cinema either in whole or part is called cinematic adaptation. Although there is no concrete historical accreditation of the term *cinematic adaptation* but it gradually emerged as vogue in late 19th century and came into practice in the early years of 20th century. And its practice can be validated on the grounds of changing and rising socio-cultural demands of the folks that led to the shifting of entertainment medium from text to performing arts. Some of the earliest adaptations are *Cinderella* (1899), *Trillby and Little Billee* (1896), *The death of Nancy Sykes* (1897), etc. Cinematic adaptation is associated with the advancement of technology in the modern times and is considered as the "point of intersection of cinema and text." But adaptation occurred in earlier days also. The suitable illustrations are the miracle plays (based on the lives of saints) and the mystery plays (based on Bible) which were enacted in different localities during the Middle Ages in England. Therefore, this process of transforming one form of art to another form is called adaptation. Adaptation of texts into cinema is a kind of *postmodern pastiche* considering cinema as an imitation of the source text. As Frederic Jameson points out in 'Postmodernism and Consumer Society' (1983): "the writers and artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds..."

only a limited number of combinations are possible; the most unique ones have been thought of already."

With reference to the above statement, Branagh's *Death on the Nile* is a pastiche of the novel of same name. No doubt that imitating a piece of art or referring to it gives birth to new genres or media, but there exist some challenges too. For instance, a filmmaker may reduce some scenes, characters, dialogues while reproducing the text in the movie due to time constraint. He or she may make some changes in the setting or twist the plot to make the movie visually appealing for the audience. Moreover, something may be added to give justice to the artistic creation of the filmmaker. In the same way, Branagh has also done some reductions, changes, and addition in his movies in terms of racial discrimination which has been explored in the following paragraphs.

Theories of Adaptation

There are several key critics who had stated their opinion on cinematic adaptation. George Bluestone in *Novels to Film* (1957), Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) and Robert Stam's contributions are substantial in this field. Linda Hutcheon clearly states "when we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works" (6). Theories of cinematic adaptation looks over how literature is reconceptualized for film, highlighting the distinct nature of each medium. Fidelity criticism assesses the faithfulness of films to their source material, while transformation theory sees adaptations as creative reinterpretations. Medium specificity underscores differences in storytelling between text and cinema. Intertextuality examines adaptations within a web of cultural references, and narratology analyses changes in narrative structure. *Auteur theory* focuses on the director's creative influence, and cultural studies consider socio-political contexts. *Reception theory* explores audience interpretations, viewing adaptations as new artistic expressions that engage with their sources in diverse, meaningful ways.

Relationship Between Cinema and Literature

The dynamics shared between cinema and literature is mutual, where literary works serve as a foundational narrative that filmmakers transform through visual and auditory storytelling techniques and in return, the movies commercially popularise the source text. The most common example is the *Harry Potter* series. This transformation is not a mere replication but an interpretative process, adapting the story to fit the unique demands and strengths of the cinematic medium. Literature can provide deep insights into characters' thoughts and detailed expositions, while film translates these elements into visual imagery, sound, and performance, creating a distinct narrative experience. This adaptive process often reflects contemporary cultural and societal shifts, offering new perspectives and resonances to the original text. Since its origin, cinema has been appealing to the emotions of spectators through enthralling images projected on the silver screen.

Racism in the text

The concept of racism in the novel although does not primarily attract the readers, but is being coaxed to construct criminality and suspect. The novel has addressed stereotype concepts like "us and them", "others", xenophobic attitude of the English folk, prejudiced mindset of English characters who showed favouritism towards their own people and discriminated the Egyptians while making judgements, etc. Christie has employed discrimination in the novel by dragging characters from various nationalities (Europe, America) who basically flaunted their individuality conforming to their nationality. They range from Mrs. Allerton who is very affectionate towards her son Tim and therefore wants to prevent him from nuisance personalities like Joana Southwood to peculiar ones like Mrs Salome Otterbourne who never leaves a chance of embarrassing her daughter Rosalie Otterbourne. On the other side there are characters like Jacqueline de Bellefort who is always dissolved in her own desires — jealousy, revenge etc. However, it is the dialogues delivered by each character in the novel which reveal their personal perception towards people of other races thus showing off the typical sense of feelings like ethnocentrism, racism, and xenophobia.

Analyzing the Text:

There are many instances of racial discrimination based on attitudes of White characters, their derogatory dialogues, and of course some third person point of view narrations. But, only the most important ones have been put down here each of them followed by a brief description.

"Five watchful bead-sellers, two vendors of postcards, three sellers of plaster scarabs, a couple of donkey boys and some detached but hopeful infantile riff-raff closed in upon them" (Christie 46). As stated by the narrator, this is how the usual street of Aswan looks like crowded by local vendors. Strolling around the city, Hercule Poirot & Rosalie Otterbourne were surrounded by these vendors who asked them to buy some local stuffs. But both being Europeans made vague gestures to prevent themselves of those "human cluster of flies" (46). Considering people as irritating buzzing fleas is a negative technique, practiced by Europeans to humiliate other human races because they were regarded as inferiors in comparison to the Whites and Poirot and Rosalie reflected on this. Next, as the new passengers dismount the launch, Tim Allerton gives a belittle remark to them as "an awful crowd as usual, I suppose," (47). This shows his eccentric nature towards the non-Europeans. At a moment in the text, it is seen that Mrs. Allerton expresses her infuriation towards the children begging for tipping. She says, "I suppose it would be quite impossible to get rid of some of these awful children" (95). The remark "awful children" is a sheer insult to the curiosity exhibited by those Egyptian children for a tourist in their nation. In fact, no Egyptian character in the novel is introduced by their name; as if their identity is of least importance thus considering them as 'others'. For example, the Egyptian boatman who sailed Poirot and other tourists to Elephantine, is highlighted without any description. His presence is considerable when Signor Richetti takes special interest in him as he observes "how promptly he steered the boat" (94). Even the stewards and stewardesses along with the manager of S. S. Karnak all of who belong to Egypt are unnamed although they played active roles being aids to Poirot in solving the mystery. They remained as minor characters only. Sense of *ethnocentrism* is displayed through the dialogues exchanged between Rosalie Otterbourne and Poirot. She declares that her condition will be better once she goes "away from people," to which Poirot replied "except those of our own number, Mademoiselle?" (104). "There's something about this

country that makes me feel wicked. It brings to the surface all the things that are boiling inside one. Everything is so unfair – so unjust" (104). This echoes her opinionated nature. The Italian archaeologist Signor Richette undervalues the explanations of the Egyptian guide who tries to convey about his homeland's heritage to the tourists. Rather, considering himself as more skilled than the guide he gets "busy examining the reliefs of African and Syrian captives on the bases of the Colossi on either side of the entrance" (133). These two scenarios serve to the presumptions of the Europeans that *they know more than any other races in all aspects*.

The slanderous attitude of Simon Doyle towards the sculptures of Egyptian civilization as he says: "Let's get out of here, I don't like these four fellows— especially the one in the high hat" (135) expresses his narrow mind set to non-European cultures. He even mimicked the native lads' show where they were buried in sand except their heads outside. It is ironical in a way that he produces some small changes of money to them as spectator but says, "very good, very nice, very expensive" (135). Poirot and Race exclaimed as "a man's handkerchief but not a gentleman's handkerchief", suspecting Fleetwood or Ferguson displays how they have presumption in judging people by their attire and attitude without knowing their real backgrounds.

Xenophobia is another important theme dominating in the novel. The term literally means fear of outsiders. Tim is unwilling to be easy-going with Hercule Poirot. To his passive attitude Mrs. Allerton says, "this outburst was quite unlike him. It was not as though he had the ordinary Britisher's dislike— and mistrust— of foreigners" (110). Sometimes when Jacqueline gets angry and furious, she is considered as looking like a Latin even if she is from France. Let these elements be explored in the cinema too.

Analyzing the Movie:

Kenneth Branagh while recreating the plot in 2022 through motion picture is not much far behind in incorporating racism in the movie. Cinema is time bound. Therefore, it is expository in nature while communicating the events of the plot to its audience. Moreover, it limits the spectator's thinking capacity as it appeals only to the audio-visual senses of the viewers. They fail to imagine beyond what they watch. Therefore, to make it feel naturalistic directors elaborate the plot by implementing the addition, reduction, and modification theories of film. The variations found in the movie can be conceptualized with reference to Ferdinand de Saussure's notions of *signifier* and *signified* in semiotics. Nagarajan in his book *English Literary Criticism and Theory* quote's Saussure as

"The relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary."

The signifier has no natural connection with the signified. They are only socio-culturally bound. Therefore, the idea that the words in the novel(signifier) represented with modification in dialogues and scenes in movie(signified) is theoretically justified. Moreover, a text can be re-interpreted through another form of art in many various ways. So are the deviations if done by Branagh. Firstly, Branagh in the opening scene of the cinema casted some of the Congolese serving the Belgian army troop during World War I which is considered as major evidence of 'Europeans imperialised Africa.' Africans were subjugated and commanded to serve the Europeans whenever necessary.



The scene of World War I at 00:02:35 in the movie *Death on the Nile* where persons in colour are seen as serving in the European Army

This scene is added to the movie which is not depicted in the source text. The addition of the scene is to make the movie attractive for the audience. The scene serves as prologue to the theme of racism as depicted in the entire movie. Secondly, we see Rosalie Otterbourne and her aunt Mrs. Salome Otterbourne are casted as Africans. They entertain the dominant race in the movie by performing as bar singers at London and in S.S. Karnak too. The change is made to draw racism to the spotlight through actions and events which would be

effective for the audience. Thirdly, Andrew Pennington the cousin of Linnet, is an American trustee to her and his skin tone is light hue. However, Pennington's character in the movie is played by Ali Fazal an actor of Indian origin with dusky skin tone. Although, this deviation in the movie from the text version cannot be said as racist, but then it exhibits the theme of diverse nationalities and inter-racial connections. Fourthly, Miss Marie Van Schuyler regards the first Cataract hotel as an ordinary place saying "It's bad enough we have to stay in this bourgeois nightmare of a hotel..." (Branagh 20:33). This shows how sophisticated and stereotyped the Britishers are towards other nationalities. Fifthly, Mrs. Otterbourne remembers one of the incidents from Rosalie's childhood days when she was insulted by Linnet's racist remarks towards her. She reports Linnet's words as "she complained to her papa about having to share the pool with a colored" (1:24:36). This explicates the defamatory conduct of the Britishers towards other races. Moreover, this exhibition of racist attitude has sprung up a mental chaos (trauma) in the psyche of the speaker. This is evident from the complaining way Mrs. Otterbourne reacted to Poirot as he tried to interrogate her regarding the murder of Linnet. Her voice deepened as she strictly refused Rosalie to be silent and let herself speak out. The rising intonation of her voice expresses her sulking mood that is still afresh after the incident happened so long ago. Lastly, Bouc's mother expresses trust issues with Rosalie Otterbourne. She exclaims, "I did not trust her. Despite the detective, I still don't" (1:27:04). Both the above incidents express xenophobic attitude of the Europeans to other races.

Conclusion

Christie's crime novel *Death on the Nile* is a genuine documentation of the racist attitude that prevailed in and was meted by the European society to the Africans during her time. Being a Briton, she has vividly documented the true disgusting nature of Europeans towards Africans. This is evident in the use of derogatory speeches, the dehumanization and depersonalization of Egyptian characters, and the overall focus on the European and American vacationers. They are portrayed in a very crude, offensive, unacceptable, and controversial manner. Equally, Branagh also stands out while depicting racism in the talkie version. However, he has made some changes to the movie— some scenes have been added for prominent facilitation of the theme, some characters have been changed to Egyptian nationality for the same purpose, and some Briton characters and their defamatory dialogues have been deleted due to time constraint regulation of the movie. But, after close reading of the text as well as watching the movie with careful attention and then deeply analysing the scenes and dialogues in both the works of art it has been observed that creators of both the forms have duly justified the theme of racism in their respective creations. The analysis has highlighted how the White characters passed derogatory comments to the Black race to cover up their own phobia of *outsiders*. Despite being insulted and ashamed of the comments, still the Blacks in both the works of art served politely to their critics. Although, it is agreeable that the text is product of its time but reading it in the contemporary time might be detrimental.

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