The Lorax: An Adapted Animated Movie in Ecocritical Perspective

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Abstract:

Literature and cinema both are interconnected to each other and comparison comes eventually. Every cinematic adaptation work faces the critical view of the critiques and the viewer’s reaction and opinion of the film. According to Linda Hutcheon, adaptations were seen by most critics as inferior to the adapted texts, as “minor”, “subsidiary”, “derivative” or “secondary” products, lacking the symbolic richness of the books and missing their “spirit”. Therefore in films which are adapted version of the original book, we tend to search for that same “spirit”. Sometimes we get it; sometimes we get a new interpretation. But some adapted works outshine the original work into a new creative work of art and live up to the audience’s expectations successfully. Here in this paper, I have taken an American computer-animated 3D musical comedy film The Lorax (2012) based on a classic children’s book The Lorax by Dr. Seuss of the same name, published in 1971. This children’s picture book made into a fascinating, colourful film. This book has an environmental message to the reader and the film is based on that environmental theme. Here I focus on how far the filmmaker able to preserve the essence of the environmentally responsible theme into the adapted version of the movie. In this paper I want to show with ecocritical perspective how far the film becomes successful to convey the social message of environmental consciousness of the book to the larger audience.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, Environmental awareness, Environmental Degradation, Film adaptation and appropriation.

“This above thoughtful moral message is from the popular classic children’s picture book “The Lorax” (1971) by the famous author Theodore Seuss Giesel (better known as Dr. Seuss). It has an ecological concern that speaks the dangers of deforestation, pollution and disregard for the earth’s environment. This book is adapted into an American computer-animated 3D musical comedy film in 2012 with the same name “The Lorax”. It was produced by Illumination Entertainment and was released by Universal Pictures on his 108th birthday of Dr. Seuss on March 2, 2012. It is the second adaptation of the book, following the 1972 animated musical television special. In the book the story of Ted, the previously unnamed boy who visits the old Once-ler, looking for real trees continues in the movie version.

In the original book, a young boy was in search of a man called the Once-ler who tells the story, in flashback, of a young, energetic ambitious entrepreneur known as the Once-ler who grows
rich by intermittently hacking down truffula trees and by mistake wipes out an entire ecosystem. Dr. Seuss's *The Lorax* is a cautionary environmental tale of how man's greed and lack of awareness can destroy the environment. The story begins like this:

> At the far end of town
> Where the Grickle-grass grows
> And the wind smells slow-and-sour when it blows
> And no birds ever sing excepting old crows . . .
> Is the Street of the Lifted Lorax. (Dr. Seuss 1-5)

The Old Once-ler remembers those days when ‘the grass was still green and the pond was still wet and the clouds were still clean’, and he could hear the melodious song of the Swomee-Swans on air:

> One morning, I came to this glorious place.
> And I first saw the trees!
> The Truffula Trees!
> The bright-colored tufts of the Truffula Trees!
> Mile after mile in the fresh morning breeze. (Dr. Seuss 62-66)

In flashback, Once-ler explains to the boy when he first came to that ‘glorious place’ and saw the ‘Truffula Trees’ and how he exploited that beautiful place by chopping down all the Truffula Trees in order to make Thneeds, a garment which “everyone needs.” As the Once-ler continued to destroy the land, the Lorax (the guardian of the forest) appeared suddenly and says that he “speaks for the trees, as the trees have no tongues,” (Seuss101) and asked Once-ler to stop cutting trees recklessly. Instead of stopping, the Once-ler continued chopping down the Truffala Trees until it becomes a barren land. The disappearance of all the Truffala Trees affected the rest of the ecosystem. The living creatures suffered the consequences of cutting all the trees. The forest creature like Bar-ba-Loots developed a disease called ‘the Crummies because of gas and no food in their tummies’, the Swomee-Swans could no longer sing, the Humming-fish couldn’t hum. Because of chopping down all Trufullal trees, the Brown bar-ba Loots have no food, Swammy Swans have no nest. The Once-ler’s factory wastage polluted the air; fish cannot survive in dirty water, and the factory smog covering the sun but Once-ler was too ignorant to see these environmental destructions. It ruined the biodiversity of that place as all the living creatures struggling for their survival. Lorax’s helpless protests do not stop him. Once-ler pollutes the sky, river and landscape, until the last Truffula Tree falls. Finally, Once-ler was distraught because the place was uninhabitable because of his business's pollution. He is left ruined and abandoned by his own family and becomes a recluse. The Lorax sends all the animals away to search for a better place to live before departing himself into the sky, leaving only a stone cut word: "Unless".

Surrounding by this polluted town, a young boy searches for the reasons for the creature named the Lorax (the guardian of the forest) who mysteriously vanishes to the sky many years ago. He finds the answers from the old Once-ler, who tells the story of greed and environmental destruction. The regretful Once-ler, the faceless, bodiless narrator tells the story himself and remembers the ‘glorious place’ filled with wondrous Truffula Trees, Swomee-Swans, Brown bar-ba-
loots, and Humming-Fishes. Tempted by the beauty of the Truffula Tree tufts, he greedily chops them down to produce Thneeds factory:

“A Thneed’s a Fine-Something-That-All-People-Need!
It’s a shirt. It’s a sock. It’s a glove. It’s a hat.
But it has other uses. Yes, far beyond that.
You can use it for carpets. For pillows! For sheets!
Or curtains! Or covers for bicycle seats!” (108-112)

The Lorax who was the guardian of the forest tried to pursue Once-ler to stop destruction of the land around him, but Lorax failed to convince him to stop cutting trees and left that place sadly. The Lorax who speaks for the trees "for the trees have no tongues" repeatedly warns the Once-ler, but his words of wisdom are all in vain. At the end, the Lorax with heavy heart leaves that place leaving only a rock engraved "UNLESS." But, there is hope for the future, a future in which the young boy can play a major part. That is why the Once-ler gave him the last seed he kept for long years wandering what to do. Finally he realises the true reason behind that word “unless”:

“But now, says the Once-ler,
Now that you're here,
the word of the Lorax seems perfectly clear.
UNLESS someone like you cares a whole awful lot,
nothing is going to get better. It's not.
“SO...
Catch!” calls the Once-ler.
He lets something fall.
It's a Truffula Seed.
It's the last one of all
You're in charge of the last of the Truffula Seeds.
And Truffula Trees are what everyone needs.
Plant a new Truffula. Treat it with care.
Give it clean water. And feed it fresh air.
Grow a forest. Protect it from axes that hack.
Then the Lorax and all of his friends
may come back”. (253-272)

The Lorax reminds us, 'I speak for the trees for the trees have no voice.' But still there is a hope, the Once-ler has saved a single Truffula Tree seed, the fate now rests in the hands of a caring child, who can make a unpolluted, green future. Dr. Seuss through this story warns us about human greed, environmental degradation like deforestation and reckless behaviour with non-human animal. This is a touching tale, pointing out the need to be ecologically conscious and seriously think about our planet. The important theme of this book is environmental awareness of people and the environment. The story is simple with environmental message, rhymes are wonderful, delightfully original creatures, and all these make it a popular picture book in children's literature. The characters are very innovative, charming, and lovely especially Lorax who warned us of deforestation:
I am the Lorax. I speak for the trees.
I speak for the trees, for the trees have no tongues. (Seuss 100-101)

Dr. Seuss tried to make us pay attention about our environment and our responsibility towards it. The Lorax is obviously a condemnation against industrial waste, pollution of water, air and entire biosphere.

The book is considered at present time a canonical text of literary environmentalism. The Lorax is a powerful critique of deforestation, and people’s anthropocentric attitude. There has to be a balance between people’s need and preserving natural resources. The essential part of the book is conservation. The message is to conserve natural resources and taking care of the environment. In the movie “The Lorax” (2012) directed by Chris Renaud, the main character the Lorax and the Once-ler remains in the story. But in the movie the unnamed boy’s story has been extended. The film is extended version of the original book. Here, the protagonist of the story is not Lorax, as the title suggests, but Ted, a 12-year old boy with a zeal for adventure. He lives in Thneedville, a futuristic city where the trees come with remote controls and fresh air is monopolised and sold as a commodity by a little, chubby business tycoon named Mr O'Hare. Ted embarks on a quest to find a real tree in order to win the love of Audrey. He will do anything to find a real life truffula tree in order to impress the girl of his dream Audrey (named after Dr. Seuss’s wife in real life). While Ted was on his journey, he discovers the incredible story of the Lorax, a grumpy but charming creature who speak for the trees to protect the world and its inhabitant. This animated film is the fine example of human’s exploitation of the natural world.

In the movie the cast includes Zac Efron as Ted, Danny DeVito as the Lorax, and Ed Helms as the Once-ler. New characters introduced in the film are Audrey, who is voiced by Taylor Swift, Aloysius O'Hare, voiced by Rob Riggle, and Grammy Norma, voiced by Betty White. The film was a box office success although it received some mixed reviews. But children loved this animated movie, what the book wants to tell, the movie depicts it very well. The movie is vibrant, colourful, bright, and full of adventure, good catchy songs, for the entire family audience. It retains the charm of Dr. Seuss’s original 1971 fable. The movie is about 86 minutes. As an animation movie, it does complete justice to Seuss’s rich illustration, and it featured in new trend 3D version. This film is the fourth feature film based on a book by Dr. Seuss, and it is the second fully computer-animated Dr. Seuss's adaptation (the first one is HORTON HEARS A WHO! which gained popularity among children and the first to be released in 3-D. The Lorax was also Illumination’s first film presented in IMAX 3D (known as "IMAX Tree-D" in publicity for the film). Illumination Entertainment gave us incredible films like Despicable Me (2010), ‘Toy Story’, ‘Lion King’ and in 2012 we get Dr. Seuss’s ‘The Lorax’. The film’s themes of environmental responsibility and the evils of corporate machinery are clearly visible and the filmmaker is able to preserve the essence of Dr Seuss’s original story.

Film and literature have been closely connected. Many Classical novels adapted into movies, and this old tradition is still going on in present time and this process will continue in future too. Some alterations to the original are inevitable, and sometimes welcomed, as these alterations of
classical text is a creative process to connect with the modern audience. Dr. Seuss’s imaginative world becomes life like in the movie with visually spectacular 3D adventure story.

In 21st century, the urgent global issue is protection of the environment. The vulnerable condition of natural sources on earth is a major environmental issue. At present, the awareness of protection and preservation of the environment is necessary for all of us. This picture book gives us an important concept of environmental justice and how people’s anthropocentric attitude devastating non-human world. Dr. Seuss’s *The Lorax* is a fine example of thought provoking environmental awareness book. The vital theme of this book is that the balance is essential between people’s requirement and preservation of the environment.

Eco-literature or ‘ecological literacy’ can motivate the children to get engaged with the environment and develop their knowledge of environmental concepts. It examines Ecocriticism as a field of children’s literature. The term ‘ecocriticism’ was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism”. It did not become popular until the 1989 meeting of the Western Literature Association, when Cheryll Glotfelty used the word as a part of a term for a critical approach to study nature writing. Glotfelty in her collection *The Ecocriticism Reader*, defines ‘Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment’ and adds that ‘ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.’ (xviii)

According to Ambika Bhalla, ‘Picture books are a very effective tool to promote environmental literacy. They breathe life into concepts that are perceived to be dead in the textbooks. Further, they give words and pictures to help the children think about issues and situations along with providing stories’. Not only they raise important issues, but they also entertain. Thus children’s literature can be an effective medium to initiate environment consciousness. Children’s literature with a touch of ecological issues can help promote eco-consciousness among the future generations. Ecocriticism focuses on how literature depicts the environment and what messages an author tries to convey about the environment through his/her works. Ecocritics examine how characters interact with the natural environment. They also consider how literature will influence the opinions of those who are exposed to it. Ecocriticism is concerned with the relationship between characters in texts and the natural world. In ecocritical point of view Dr. Suess’s *The Lorax*, the creature called the Lorax is symbolic of environmentalists and its helpless attempts to stop mass destruction of trees fails, and ultimately, such destruction causes the environmental degradation. In the light of ecocriticism, the movie “The Lorax” has an important message to tell to the world. And that message is -Why would we need a tree? Without a tree our ecosystem will fall and our whole existence totally depends on this ecosystem. We are environmentally responsible for our earth.

According to James Cisneros “the adaptation of literature to the silver screen has long been considered a privileged *topos* for comparing different media”. Generally, most of the film-goers want to see the adaptation version of novel into film. Film makers also take the challenge to fulfil audience’s demand. Especially literature lover eagerly wait for the adapted version of the movie to release soon, they want to experience the book visually and then the comparison between the two started. Which is the best one the book or the adapted movie? Some movies get very good response from the audience, sometimes it fails to impress them. Movies made for the audience for
entertainment purpose, sometimes we find moral message for the society, and its creative process, visual technique, musical tune, graphic pictures, director’s new creative vision, actors’ powerful performance all of these help to make the film attractive and worth watching.

According to Morris Beja, since the inception of the Academy Awards in 1927-8, 'more than three fourths of the awards for “best picture” have gone to adaptations . . . the all time box-office successes favour novels even more'(Beja78). Generally, Filmmakers read the original sources and come out with a new interpretations, each adaptation is a result of individual creativity. Adaptations are now being considered as products of artistic creativity. An adaptation is regarded as an interpretation, as a precise and innovative vision of a literary text, as creative activities. But it has to remain faithful to the original source and creative vision of the author.

The debates on cinematic adaptations of literary works are evident and the debate will continue as literature’s connections with movie industry will continue everlasting. Here the movie “The Lorax” successfully maintains the “spirit” of the book, the environmental message of saving trees is very clear and loud. Viewers’ can easily understand the theme of the movie, so the filmmaker is able to pull out the essence of the book into a box-office hit movie. It reflects contemporary global issues and concern for the non-human world. The movie ends with a positive ending just like the book that there is a possibility to stand up and stop cutting trees, and plant more trees, and make a change to protect our earth.

References:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ecological_literacy
The Lorax (also known as Dr. Seuss' The Lorax) is a 2012 American 3D computer-animated musical fantasy comedy film produced by Illumination Entertainment and based on Dr. Seuss's children's book of the same name. The film was released by Universal Pictures on March 2, 2012, on what would have been Seuss' 108th birthday. The second adaptation of the book (following the 1972 animated television special), the film builds on the book by expanding the story of the Lorax and Ted.