

Film as a Narrative Fiction

PRAGATI SHUKLA

Department of English and Modern European Languages
University Of Lucknow
Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh
India

Abstract:

Literature has strongly shaped the way we think and behave. Over the last hundred years film has become a progressively more powerful and dominant form and we have sufficient evidence to suggest that the visual has now significantly replaced the written form as the leading mode of communication in contemporary society.

Since film is a fairly recent phenomenon, it has rented a great deal from other forms of expression particularly from literature. The present paper focuses on the relation between film and literature and discusses film as a cinematic novel with the help of film Gandhi, directed by Richard Attenborough. This film is a multi award winning biopic film about the life of Mahatma Gandhi who was a leader of non-violent resistance movement against British colonial rule in India during the first half of the 20th century. The reason to take Gandhi as a case study is because his teachings and ideology have influenced people of all over the world and many have attempted to portray Mahatma Gandhi's life through different creative avenues such as prose, poetry, drama and theatre.

Key words: Film narrative, Print narrative, Cinematic technique, Story element, Production element

Human personification and approach towards life is related with its time and age. Human values are changing according to time and age. What was important two hundred

years back is now ignored, while what will be ignored in two hundred years, is the centre of attraction now. Tradition and culture keep on changing along with time and age. In the same sense, the relation between literature and film is not the exception from changing attitude. Ronald Perrier says about the relation between literature and film in his book *Fiction in Film*, "The study of literature casts light on the meanings in the film and the study of the film can illuminate the full value of the literature." (1971, 29) Before discussing the relation between film and literature, we should take a look on what is literature and what is film. The approaches to literature are many - the conventional mode defines literature as an entity unto itself, as a single self-contained, self-existent art, while the present mode defines literature more inter-disciplinary as well as inter-literary. Rebert Scholes defines literature as:

Literature begins in the creative possibilities of human language and in the ire of human beings to use their language creatively. Though its origin lies in the joy of creation, literature can be intensely serious. It can use its formal beauty as a way of enabling us to contemplate the most painful and terrible aspects of existence, or as a way of celebrating those things we value most highly in life. In the end, literature enriches our lives because it increases our world and to express it and share it with others. And this is the most human activity of our existence (1991, 6,7).

Literature represents a language of people, their culture, society, civilization and belief. But literature is more significant than just a historical or cultural object. It introduces us to a new world of experience. We learn about books and literature, we enjoy the comedies and tragedies, poems, stories and plays and we may even grow and develop through our literary ride with books.

Moreover film as an art form grew out of a long tradition of literature, storytelling, narrative theater, art, folklore, puppetry, shadow play, cave paintings and perhaps even dreams. Wikipedia defines film:

Films literal artifacts created by specific cultures, which inflect those cultures, and in turn, affect them. Film is considered to be an important art form, a source of popular entertainment and a powerful method for educating-or indoctrinating-citizens (Wikipedia).

Moreover film has become a very important part of our culture, influences the way we live and how our society functions. In other words, it enriches our quality of life. We should remember that films are more than mere entertainment because the message they hold, the images they present, the choices they offer and the resolution they advocate, not only shape our daily lives, but also relate to our national ideology and future goals. George Bernard Shaw saw the birth of film as a cultural revolution:

The cinema is a much more momentous invention than printing as.... The cinema tells its story to the illiterate as well as to the literate: and it keeps its victim (if you like to call him so) not only awake but fascinated as if by a serpent's eye. And that is why the cinema is going to produce effects that all kinds of books in the world could never produce (In Dukore 1997, 9).

Both film and literature are considered as a medium of expression. They both have the ability to shape our thoughts and emotions. But some critics do not accept film as a form of literature. They do not accept that there is any connection between film and literature. As a critic argues:

While the film and literature both aim to express concrete situation involving the development of a plot and the exposition of character and environment the mediums through which they seek to accomplish these are entirely different. The film depicts concrete situations involving plot development and characterization, setting and environment, emotional reactions and philosophic attitude and concepts by means of a series of plastic images, visual representation projected upon a screen in a darkened room before an audience. It is thus seen and heard by its audience and secures its

characterization form and rhythm by the purely filmic process of editing. The medium of literature however is words. The author originally creates words or sentences in order to achieve the maximum literary power and to stir the thoughts and emotions to readers (Mandel 2005, 45).

In other words, the author conveys his message through words while the director uses images. The sum of the debate is that film represents a concept by the use of visual images and literature by verbal images. It is true that film neither has a permanent vocabulary nor a fixed grammar as literature has. But film like a written text addresses our senses and emotions directly. In the words of Herbert Read:

Those people who deny that there can be any connection between the film and literature seem to me to have a wrong conception. Literature they seem to regard as something polite and academic, in other words, as something god forsaken and superannuated, compounded or correct grammar and high sounding ciceronian phrases. Such a conception reveals the feebleness of their sensibility. If you ask me to give you the most distinctive quality of good writing, I would give it to you in this one word: VISUAL. Reduce the art of writing to its fundamentals and you come to this single aim: to convey images by means of words. But to CONVEY IMAGES. To make the mind see. To project on to that inner screen the brain a moving picture of objects and events, events and objects moving toward a balance and reconciliation of a more than usual state of emotion with more than usual order. That is a definition of good literature...of the achievement of every good poet... from Homer to Shakespeare to James Joyce or Ernest Hemingway. It is also a definition of the ideal film (1985, 1025).

So far as the postmodern perspective of the issue is concerned, films can be said to be literature as postmodernism is an all-inclusive term that incorporates, encourages and celebrates all sort of experimentation. Film literature becomes much more important in the postmodern era because narrative literature is

not that much vibrant in portraying the fast developing science and technology as the visual films can. Another point in the realm of postmodern arena is that films have an edge over the postmodern absurd theatre where there is no plot, no character and nothing is the theme. Moreover films also fulfill most of the Aristotelian concept of drama. Like literature, film teaches us a story which has a purpose and uses techniques meant to impact spectators. Film is a medium with its own technique. Since a film is generally no more than 3 hours in length, it follows the structure of a short story even based on a novel. That is, the story is usually told from our point of view, follows a single major plot line, and has only a few well-defined central characters. We can take the example from film *Gandhi*. It has a single major plot which moves around the life of Mahatma Gandhi and the central character is Gandhi. It can be said that the film is a kind of a visual novel. But the most important thing about film is that this visual text offers choices which the written text may not. The spectators have greater freedom in the choice of perspective, the agencies are multiple: camera eye, narrator, light, use of space, the spoken dialogue, body language facial expression as well as the silence. There is also a planned projection of stereotypes. They raise questions and problematic issues.

Moreover, a special thing about films is that they can assume the qualities of any of the literary forms:

Like essay film can be persuasive indeed they are perhaps the strongest propaganda device ever invented, like poems, they can be lyrical and meditative... they tend to emphasize persons and events, offering us something which is partly narration told by the camera which shapes everything we see but also presented as an interaction as through the camera were present at all. (Silverman, xxxi)

Film as an art form embraces both the elitist and the popular concept of art and work closely with literary aesthetics. We can say that the two art forms - verbal and visual - are not merely parallel but interactive, and interdependent. Film has certain

connections and kinship with other forms. It largely shows with fiction an impulse towards narrative, towards the telling of a story in linear terms. Like a novel, a narrative film is narrative fiction, controlled by a narrative voice, a teller (the camera lens) that lets us see that which it wishes. And, like a novel, a film is capable of leaping dexterously in time and space, a common characteristic of narrative fiction.

Though film is narrative like fiction, it has unique qualities which fiction doesn't have. Novels are striking effects; they are beautiful to hold, to smell and to reach. They knit worlds for us about which we can only dream, or which we are only likely to see in nightmares. They teach us about ourselves, about others and about the human order. They do this through story, metaphor, allegory and image. Primarily they do it with words. It is the particular combination of words which allows a novel to do to us what it does. The words act upon our existing understandings and experience to weave new or deeper understandings. We have to use our imagination for them to work magic.

And so do films. Films seem, because of the nature of the medium, more ephemeral, we can't hold them like a book. Yet film is very powerful medium, perhaps more powerful than the written texts because as we all know, seeing is believing. Films knit images, stories, metaphors and allegories; they show us things using the words with which we are so familiar, combining these with visual and auditory cues which can enhance our lives.

Film's narrative is different from the print narrative. In film the story element (plot, character, theme etc.) plus the production element (camera angles, lighting, acting etc.) make the narrative element. How does lighting set a mood? How is a character's loneliness emphasized visually? How is a character's loneliness emphasized visually? How various characters are made sympathetic? How can the camera replace dialogue? How is point of view manipulated? How can sound intensify emotion or heighten suspense? Like looking closely at

the writer's craft to see how he or she 'showed' rather than merely 'told', looking at film with a little knowledge of visual composition, camera movement, editing and sound can make us active rather than passive viewers (PBS). Moreover the basic unit of meaning in the written text is the word while the basic unit of meaning in film is the shot; sequence of shots makes the narrative in film.

In prose fiction, the fictional world is not directly represented to the reader; rather, it is signified by the narrator's words. Unlike fiction the film works by directly showing the fictional world to the spectator 'seen' without narrative meditation. All that is seen in a film - the movements and gestures, the visual material selected to represent concepts the variations and gradations in the lighting and the performances of the actors are, of course, photographed.

In fiction, the distinction between the narrator and the reader is clear; it is as though the reader was listening to a friend telling a story. In the film, nowhere the viewers identify themselves with the lens, and thus tend to combine, with the narrator. This difference will be forever present –

In literature, the first person and the omniscient voice are mutually exclusive, for if a first person characters certainly the thoughts of others. But in movies, the combination of first person and omniscient narration is common. Each time the director moves his camera-either within a shot or between shots. We are offered a new point of view from which to evaluate the scene. He can easily cut from a subjective point of view shot (first person) to a variety of objective shots. He can concentrate on a single reaction (close up) or the simultaneous reactions of social character (long shot) (Ginanetti 1986, 370-71).

Undoubtedly, film narrative is closely related to narrative fiction. Like novel, film has plot, characters, themes, symbol but its cinematic elements, such as shots, editing, lighting, make film a cinematic narrative fiction. That is why film becomes a

kind of cinematic novel. The film *Gandhi* can be discussed in the light of cinematic novel.

When discussing film as a cinematic fiction, first aspect which strikes in mind is the narrative quality of film. Narrative is a chain of events in a cause effect relationship, occurring in time and space. A narrative is not a random string of events. Film narrative is different from print narrative. In a film, story elements and production elements make film narrative. Story elements + production element = narrative (plot, character, editing, cinematography, themes, motifs shots, symbols).

Plot - In a film, cinematic techniques are used by the filmmaker to express the narrative conventions essential to telling the story. The first element in narrative is plot. The plot is basically the story whether it be on screen or in a book. Without a plot, there is no story, and without the multitude of elements, combining to express this plot, it would not come across to the audience. The plot made up of the actions that the characters take throughout the film is cause and effect, and it will always have a beginning, middle and end. Plots in a narrative film need to have conflict and resolution in order to keep the audience's attention. The techniques used by filmmakers to express plot are multiple, and each technique is essential to the overall success of getting the plot across. These techniques are flashbacks, shot designing lighting, editing style etc.

In the film *Gandhi*, the major plot moves around the life of Gandhi. The film starts with the present tense narration and then we go to the flash back. Film begins with quote about now every event can't be recorded, but a man's heart can be seen through the events that are recorded. Then, the film begins:

No man's life can be encompassed in one telling. There is no way to give each year its allotted weight, to include each event, each person who helped to shape a lifetime. What can

be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record, and to try to find one's way to the heart of the man... (Briley, 1)

The film begins on January 30, 1948. Nathuram Godse, a young man, walks through large crowds of people going to say prayers and looks back at a rough-looking man sitting on the side of the street. When the group arrives at their destination, Gandhi comes out, helped by a young woman. Then, Godse whips out a gun and shoots Gandhi.

It can be said that the film *Gandhi* has a well-established plot because Attenborough used many techniques to express the plot. The first technique is "manipulation of time" – it means starting the film in the present tense and flashing back to the past. The film *Gandhi* begins at the end, however, and shows Gandhi being shot by at a public event. This is followed by a scene with thousands of mourners, making it clear that when Gandhi died it was a national tragedy. Following this introductory scene the film goes back in time and shows Gandhi as a young attorney in South Africa. Then the viewers interact with the past life of Gandhi.

Another technique is "set designing" and use of light. Although the majority of *Gandhi* takes place in India, the beginning of the film is set in South Africa and there is a brief interlude in London. It seems as though the South African and Indian lands are similar and perhaps the director chose to film in both these locations because *Gandhi* depicts realistically the appropriate buildings, architectural features landscapes, and climate.

Moreover, in expressing plot, props are used very technically. The film takes place between the years 1898 and 1947, thus it covers quite a long span. The proper props were all suited to the time period, particularly the clothing and transportation. For example, for the early scenes in South Africa and rural India, rickshaws and other horse-driven devices are used.

Theme - The next element after plot which is very important for the narration is theme. As much as the plot expresses what the story is, so does the theme expresses what the story is about. It is the theme of film that makes the audience consider the issue explored in the film. The theme of the film is always the main point that the film makes in trying to get across to their audience; it is the filmmaker's way to import their own particular beliefs or points of view on as many people as possible. The use of metaphors or visual motifs is generally best used to express their themes, in order to import a message without pointing a finger or preaching to the audience.

Film *Gandhi* deals with several themes, yet the three important ones are 'fight for justice', 'desire for peace' and 'commitment to a cause'. The first and foremost theme of the film *Gandhi* is fight for justice. Gandhi appeals to the others to help the fight for justice. He realizes that there is power in the masses. When many people band together to fight for a cause as a community, then true change can occur. Although all of Gandhi goals are not achieved, he does make a dramatic difference in his world.

The second important theme of the film is the desire for peace. Gandhi desires true peace over everything else. Although he realizes that true peace can only come through some strife, he does his best to bring peace to his country and the world.

The third and the last important theme of the film is dedication to a cause. When people think about commitment to a cause, Gandhi is one of the first people they think about. He refuses to let anything stand in his way as he seeks freedom and equality for everyone, both when he lives in South Africa and in his home country of India. Gandhi's unbelievable commitment to his goals inspire nations and changes the world. Since the film *Gandhi* deals with the several themes, in order to present these themes Attenborough makes use of metaphors. Metaphors or motifs are recurring structures, contrasts or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major theme.

In the movie, Attenborough used “journey” as an important motif to present the theme. Gandhi's fight for justice begins with his journey. He makes several journeys, physical, mental and emotional. He spends his time during these journeys growing as a person and preparing to lead the greatest non-violent protest in history.

Another motif is the “non-violent protest” which establishes the theme of the desire for peace. Attenborough uses non-violent protests as motifs. In the movies, viewers see that Gandhi decides to follow Jesus’ example of turning the other cheek by avoiding violence and protesting with non-violence.

Moreover Attenborough used “historical era” as an important motif to establish the theme of the film. The historical era helps grab the interest of all viewers. This epic film shows the true success of Gandhi. Viewers see that he helped not only change lives in India but also in South Africa and around the world. Martin Luther King also followed Gandhi's example to help achieve equality for African Americans in the United States.

Character- The third important element for the narrative is the character, who should be real and believable, otherwise a film would not be able to engage the audience. The audience must be able to relate to one or more of the characters, to identify with certain traits or have an emotion about a character, or they would become disengaged from the film and, in doing so, lose interest in all its aspects.

To express a character in film, a film maker needs to make use of several techniques that will bring that character to life in the shortest time possible. The first and arguably most important technique is that of casting. A cast can make or break a film in the first couple of minutes of screen projection. It is probably a director’s most essential task to cast correctly or to lose his audience.

In *Gandhi* we have some major and minor characters and each character has been presented with special care. The most important character is Gandhi and the role of Gandhi has been played by Ben Kingsley. In this film, Gandhi is presented as a person rather than just as a heroic, iconic figure.

Kingsley presents Gandhi as a dedicated and enduring man. He is willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done, when needed, he goes on hunger strikes to make points to the people and leaders. Gandhi's dedication leads the way for independence for his nation and for thousands of people who followed his example in later years.

Unlike narrative fiction, to express character in film a filmmaker needs to make use of several techniques that bring the character to life in the shortest time possible. And the most important technique is the use of symbols. For example, in *Gandhi*, Attenborough makes use of loin cloth to present Gandhi. When viewers first meet Gandhi he is a fairly wealthy well-dressed man who has made a name for himself as a lawyer. He continues to take on this attitude while working in South Africa. However, he eventually changes many things about himself when he returns in India.

While working in India, Gandhi begins wearing a loin cloth. He realizes that he normal people need to understand that he is one their side. Gandhi believes that the people shouldn't feel that they are being ordered about by yet another group of wealthy people who don't understand their needs.

Moreover, the director Attenborough used "funeral" as a symbol to establish Gandhi's character. The film begins with a scene of Gandhi's funeral. There are thousands of people gathered along the streets, and reporters and news teams from around the world are there to report on Gandhi's funeral. Gandhi's funeral is symbolic of his lifelong work and the love and respect he inspires.

Another symbol in film which relates film to Gandhi is 'Community'. Gandhi's community is symbolic is his ideal future. He creates a place where everyone is accepted and equal

while holding on to some of the old traditions as well. Gandhi's community becomes an example for the rest of the country and a refuge for those who need help and acceptance.

After going through the film *Gandhi* it can be said that film is as narrative as fiction. It combines all elements like plot, theme, and character, and puts them together. But it can also be seen that unlike fiction, the film works by directly showing the fictional world to the spectator's 'seen' without narrational meditation. Moreover film uses real time and real space. For example *Gandhi* presents a realistic and by and large chronological account of the Indian political activist's life. In film some scenes were taken in South Africa to describe the early life of Gandhi. The props were all suited to the time period and they were historically accurate as well and changed as time went on. For example the camera used by Martin Sheen's character in the beginning of the film was quite old-fashioned and complicated compared to one used later by Cadence Berman's character as she interviews Gandhi as the end of his life.

Thus it can be said that though film is closely to related to fiction, because of its cinematic element, it is transformed into a kind of cinematic text or novel.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Briely, John. *The Screenplay of Gandhi*. Imdb.com.Web.
- Dukore, F. Ed. 1997. "The Cinema as a Moral Leveler." In *Bernard Shaw on Cinema*. Southern Illinois University Press: USA. Print.
- Giannetti, Louis B. 1986. *Flashback: A brief History of Film*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall. Print.
- Mandel, Somdatta. 2005. *Film and Fiction*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication. Print.
- Read, Herbert. 1985. *Comparative Literature*. New York: Ohio University Press. Print.

- Perrier, Ronald. 1971. *Fiction to Film*. New York: OUP. Print.
- Scholes, Robert. 1991. *Elements of Literature: Essay, Fiction, Poetry, Drama, Film*. New Delhi: OUP. Print.

Webpages:

Film Language. Pbs.org. Web.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/masterpiece/learningresources/ficlanguge.html#basics>. Accessed on 11/11/2013

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Film>. Accessed on 12/11/2013.

<http://www.eicar-international.com/definition-film.html>.
Accessed on 12/11/2013.

<http://www.imsdb.com/scripts/Gandhi.html> Accessed on
11/11.2013