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Comparative Study of Stephen King's Novel *Firestarter* and its Film Adaptation

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Abstract:

Stephen King (September 21, 1947 -) is one of the best-selling American authors. He has had an uncanny ability to hit the commercial bull's eye from the beginning of his career. He published his first novel *Carrie* (1976) at the age of 40' since then he has published more than 50 books, all of them internationally best sellers. Many of Stephen King's books and stories have been made into movies for both Hollywood and for televisions. Most of these adaptations have gained success and appreciation by their audience and critics. He has earned the much deserved acclaim and popularity as a contemporary author to place his name among the leading contributors to American Literature. He is regarded as the master of the Horror story developing. *Firestarter* is horror science Fiction. It was published in 1980 and was nominated as Best Novel for the British Fantasy Award. It was adapted into movie in 1984. This is a thriller about a nine year old girl child Charlie, who has the amazing ability to create fires just by staring at anyone or anything. Her father who also has the ability make people do what he wants. The researcher proposes to undertake a comparative study between the novel *Firestarter* and its film adaptations with reference to the issues regarding 'fidelity' and 'infidelity'. The film will be compared on the basis of fidelity and infidelity in characterization, narration and setting.

Novel and film both is works of art and share the common field of imagination and creativity on the part of the creators. Writer of the novel uses his creative imagination in words and develops the story whereas the film uses the techniques of cinematography, sound and editing to do the same. The major difference between books and films is that visual images stimulate our perceptions directly, while written words can do this indirectly. Film is more sensory experience than reading. Beside verbal language, there is also color, movement and sound.

The novel *Firestarter* (1980) is written by Stephen King and it is a sci-fiction horror novel. Andy and Charlie are the major characters in the novel. They fled from a government agency named 'The Shop'. Andy had joined an experiment in 'The shop'. Later, it results in a Kid with Supernatural powers and skill of pyrokinesis. In the novel *Firestarter*, Charlie McGee is the most innately determined character. This novel is about a supernatural ability of a father and daughter. The father, Andy, takes a psychological test in college that necessitates him to take a hallucinogenic drug. The partakers are never informed about the intent or possible future impacts of the experiment. In general, the hallucinogenic drug produces a diverse ability in the partakers of the experiment, such as "telekinesis, thought transmission, and mental domination. Andy's wife, Vicky, also partakes in the experiment, and it is how they meet. Also, the drug causes enduring impacts on both Andy and Vicky, thus they develop unusual power. Vicky gets the power to transfer things with her mind, whereas Andy gets the power to "push" people, and it is denoted as "autohypnosis". The story itself revolves around the scientific and supernatural elements (Perry 25).

In the novel, the majority of the events that explain the context of the story is provided in flashbacks. For instance, by the time the novel begins, Vicky has been murdered by The Shop, from which Andy and his daughter Charlie are on the run. Later, the government agents known as 'The shop' have found that Andy and Charlie have supernatural powers and attempts to control them. Charlie's power is that she can start fires with her psychic power or mind (Perry 26). Charlie has more influential 'push' than Andy and the power is called "Pyrokinesis", a firestarter. Charlie cannot always rheostat it. She can arouse it merely by thinking about it. Charlie can burn everything around her with the power (Jarat 73).

Firestarter (1984) is an American sci-fi horror movie and it is based on Stephen King's novel *Firestarter* (1980). The film was directed by Mark L. Lester. *Firestarter* stars David Keith as Andy, Drew Barrymore as Charlie. The plot surrounds a young girl Charlie who develops supernatural power known as Pyrokinesis. Also, the secret government agency named as the Shop seeks to control her. This film was shot in and around North Carolina. The child molester's character is played by George C Scott. After they partake in an experiment for a mysterious organization known as 'The Shop', Andy and Vicky realize that they have developed a psychic power. Andy with his power can influence people whereas Vicky can read minds. Later they get married and have a child, Charlie. She develops pyrokinesis, a supernatural power. The strength of her supernatural powers entices the attention of The Shop. Thus, Andy is forced to take Charlie on the run to avert her powers from falling into the agency's hand.

In the novel, King emphasizes on hidden psychic capabilities of human minds and it is widely used for horror. In the film and novel, the horror elements are not widely present, rather scientific supernatural elements are used. Thus, the horror is mainly connected with the scientific aspects. In the novel, the child character is used as the central protagonist and the character is forced to battle against uneven odds (Zboril 9). Even the film gives importance to the child protagonist and the supernatural elements are reflected through the child protagonist.

Similar to the King's novel, the film adaptation vividly used the flashback scenes for context and backstory. The flashback scenes are depicted through the extensive use of editing techniques. These effects are particular to the film medium. The literary medium lacks such kinds of aspects. Some parts in the novels are cut short in the film version. This depicts the time constraints in the film medium. Even Axe indicates that in the film medium, there is a time constraint whereas a novel has no time limitations; a film generally is confined to around two hours. Moreover, a novel is constrained by the message or idea sent by the author, whereas a film is generally constrained by a shared exertion of a few people. A novel permits more opportunity to the reader than watching a film. The audience through imagination can connect with the character and the film grants what the picture ought to be (Axe 17).

In the film adaptations, some scenes were more horrifying such as the scenes where Charlie uses the supernatural powers. This is mainly due to the mise-en-scene. The visual and graphic effects used in the film bring a great visual pleasure for the viewer's whereas in the novel, the audience has to imagine those images in their mind. The visual medium is unique because of the use of mise-en-scene. It can often create a corporeal experience of the world, and through these, the audiences encounter places, people, and things, through imagined sensual contact (Corrigan 43). The initial element in the film medium is the technical facet of watching moving images. The film does not exactly depict movement, rather it depicts the spectators a fast sequence of still images (Moss 8). These effects are absent in the literary medium. Thus, it indicates that the film medium brings a new dimension to the story. At the same time, the *Firestarter* film used minimum horror elements; otherwise, it would be impractical with a child as the protagonist. Also, such kinds of depictions could have twisted or portrayed her into something atrocious and dead inside. Even Hutcheon indicates that adaptations are announced, purposeful, and broadened re-visitations of earlier works" (Hutcheon 15). Hutcheon's theory on adaptation indicates that adaptation is not a narrow process rather it's a wider process with its own purpose and new dimension to the literary work.

In the novel, Charlie is depicted as an intelligent child beyond her years. Also, her psychic powers are portrayed through various point of view techniques and the readers get a diverse and vivid picture of the character. Whereas in the film adaptation, Charlie is played by Drew Barrymore and comes off as more of a determined child at times. This indicates that the filmmaker has made changes according to his perception. Mainly, in the film adaptations, the technique of point of view is limited and most of the time it is the director's point of view that is represented. Even Moss indicates a similar idea that the film constantly presupposes a narration, "a story being told by someone even when there is not an actual narrator". (Moss 34). In the film, the narrator is someone unseen and speaks in voiceover. Also, undertakes the position of authority in the film. In this film, it is done through the director's point of view.

King's novel indicates that Charlie's power goes beyond the pyrokinesis while in the film it is limited. This depicts that the film medium has certain limitations to portray certain things. In the film adaptation, Charlie's background is omitted. This shows that the filmmaker has the power to alter certain scenes in the source work. The reduction is one of the elements taken in the process of adaptation of a literary work into a film. It is the "reducing or cutting of elements in the source work during the adaptation process (Adje 49). Thus, this element is used in the film adaptation of *Firestarter*.

In the film, Charlie's parents are ordinary middle-class parents who are living in the suburbs. This accounts for the change in the ending. In the film, Charlie narrates her story to the New York Times rather than Rolling Stone. In the novel, King gives an elaborate description of Rainbird's captivation with Charlie. In the novel, Rainbird is a Native American, and he sees Charlie as in contact with mystical powers in which his people have lost connection. Thus, he believes that he can reconnect with these powers if he looks into Charlie's eyes when she dies. This part is not depicted in the film adaptation rather it is portrayed as a child molester. In the novel, Andy dies due to a gunshot wound to his shoulder after 'pushing Rainbird to jump from the roof of the farm whereas in film Andy dies after ruinously pushing Rainbird. This depicts that the filmmaker has created his creative aspects in the film adaptation. Hutcheon in his work indicates that the essence or core aspect of adaptation is the capacity to reiterate without imitating, to insert distinction in likeness, to be on both elements of self and other whereupon rests their actual creative and cultural value (Hutcheon 174). This depicts that adaptation work has its cultural value and the artistic aspect of it. Thus, in the film adaptation of *Firestarter* the director has bought an artistic aspect to it.

Gregory and Stobbart indicate that *Firestarter* film follows the novel as closely as possible. For instance, it used the King's dialogue almost precisely. *Firestarter* 'did' the King's novel almost scene for scene (Gregory and Stobbart 43). The film used special effects to enhance the visual depiction (Butler 2). The supernatural elements such as the telepathy, telekinesis, mysterious circumstances and pyrokinesis are used in both the novel and film version. "Telekinesis is the ability to move physical objects using only the power of the mind". This is largely used in *Firestarter*. In *Firestarter*, King intensely describes Vicky and Charlie who have the special telekinetic power (Jarat 152). The main supernatural element or component used in *Firestarter* is Pyrokinesis. It is a supernatural power where people can light a fire at a distance. In *Firestarter*, Charlie has this superpower. Even the title of both film and novel follows the same "Firestarter". Thus, it is similarly reflected in both film adaptation and novel of *Firestarter* (Jarat 153).

In the film, Charlie's powers are depicted by the sweating, heavy breathing, and the use of a wind machine to bring the visual effects of the pyrokinesis. Also, it used repeats, back off techniques to portray the tension and supernatural atmosphere. Thus, the novel used minute visual effects to convey the horror elements to the audience. Whereas in the novel, it is used with the play with words. This itself reveals that two mediums have its unique feature. However, the film adaptation of *Firestarter* creates a visual treat for viewers which is absent in the novel.

The film reviews of *Firestarter* indicate diverse changes from the novel. For instance, one of the viewers stated that "the film adaptation of a Stephen King's *Firestarter* has fallen short of its capability to truly entertain... Though I was dissatisfied with the overall production of *Firestarter*, there are a few important and notable things in the film adaptation. I was thoroughly enthralled with Drew Barrymore's acting skill." A fragile actress would have made this film tougher to watch. Mainly the characters of Charlie and George aided the film or else the film lacked the direction and atmosphere that Stephen King usually creates in his novels. This depicts the high value given to the literary medium. The viewer has mainly mentioned the King's narrative style with the film adaptation. Thus, there is a tendency for the audience to connect the film with the literary medium. Also, this brings the question of fidelity to the film.

The comparative study concerning fidelity and infidelity to their novel will certainly open new domains in Stephen King's horror Film Adaptations. It will provide new insight into film adaptation. This study would be helpful to the readers and audience of King as well as to people who will watch other film adaptations of horror stories on the screen.

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