

Adaptation of Visual Storytelling and Symbolism in ‘Shanthi Nilayam’: A Reflection of ‘Jane Eyre’

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Abstract

This study delves into the intricate world of visual storytelling and symbolism in the classic Indian film ‘Shanthi Nilayam’ and draws parallels with Charlotte Bronte’s timeless novel ‘Jane Eyre’. By analysing the use of cinematic elements and symbolism in both works, this research aims to uncover how ‘Shanthi Nilayam’ adapts and reflects the themes and motifs found in ‘Jane Eyre’. Through a comparative lens, this study provides valuable insights into the cross-cultural adaptation of literary classics in cinema and showcases the power of resonance of storytelling and symbolism across diverse artistic mediums and cultures. This study underscores the importance of visual storytelling and symbolism in cinematic adaptations of classic literature. It illustrates how “Shanthi Nilayam” creatively reinterprets “Jane Eyre” through visual means, offering a fresh perspective on Brontë’s timeless narrative.

By exploring the interplay of visual elements and symbolism in “Shanthi Nilayam”, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how cinematic adaptations can capture the essence of a literary masterpiece while infusing it with cultural and visual richness.

Keywords: Film Adaptation, Jane Eyre, Shanti Nilayam, Culture, Story Telling, Symbolism.

“...each reader creates his own film inside his head, gives faces to the characters, constructs every scene, hears the voices, smells the smells.”

— Paulo Coelho, *The Zahir*

“Adaptation is a profound process. Means you figure out how to thrive in the world.”

— John Laroche

Tamil cinema, known for its rich storytelling traditions, has a long history of adapting literature into visually captivating films. While contemporary adaptations of English novels have become increasingly common, the roots of this trend trace back to the 19th century when the seeds of cross-cultural storytelling were first sown.

In the 19th century, Tamil Nadu was a region deeply influenced by British colonial rule, which introduced English literature to the local populace. This period witnessed the birth of a cultural exchange, and Tamil writers and filmmakers began exploring the narratives and themes of English literature.

One of the earliest and most influential Tamil film adaptations of an English novel from the 19th century was “Shanti Nilayam” based on Charlotte Bronte iconic work, “Jane Eyre”. Directed by G. S. Mani, “Shanti Nilayam” was released in 1969 and is considered a milestone in Indian cinema. Set in a medieval Indian kingdom, the film incorporated elements of chivalry, romance, and conflict from the original novel into a Tamil context.

The film's protagonist, Malathi, played by the talented actress Kanchana, was a strong and independent character inspired by the novel's heroine, Jane. "Shanti Nilayam" seamlessly blended Indian and Western storytelling elements, showcasing the cultural fusion of the time. The film was a massive success, not only in Tamil Nadu but also in other regions of India, demonstrating the universal appeal of such adaptations.

Another remarkable adaptation from the 19th century, Tamil cinema witnessed a groundbreaking moment with the adaptation of an English novel that would forever leave an indelible mark on Indian cinema. This film, based on an English novel, was not just a cinematic translation but a creative masterpiece that seamlessly blended two worlds of storytelling in the same year in 1969.

The film in question is "Raman Ethanai Ramanadi", directed by P. Madhavan and based on the celebrated English novel "Around the World in Eighty Days" by Jules Verne. While the original novel by Verne was a tale of adventure and travel, Madhavan's adaptation brilliantly reimagined it in a Tamil context, capturing the essence of the book while adding its own unique flavour.

"Raman Ethanai Ramanadi" was not just a commercial success; it was a cultural phenomenon. It resonated with audiences of all ages and backgrounds, transcending language barriers. The film's universal themes of perseverance, humility, and the beauty of diversity made it relatable to people across India.

In retrospect, the 1969 Tamil film adaptation of "Around the World in Eighty Days" stands as a testament to the power of storytelling and the adaptability of literature. It demonstrated that a well-crafted adaptation could breathe new life into a classic story, making it relevant to a contemporary audience. The film's ability to seamlessly blend the charm of the original novel with the vibrancy of Tamil culture is a testament to the creative genius of its makers. These 19th-century English novel adaptations not only enriched Tamil cinema but also contributed to the evolution of Indian storytelling. They demonstrated the adaptability of literary narratives, transcending cultural and linguistic boundaries to resonate with a diverse audience.

Tamil cinema's adaptations of 19th-century English novels were pioneering efforts that bridged the gap between two distinct literary traditions. "Shanti Nilayam" and "Raman Ethanai Ramanadi" are timeless examples of how literature can transcend its original context and become a source of inspiration for cinematic masterpieces. These adaptations not only entertained audiences but also ignited discussions about social issues and cultural integration, cementing their place in the annals of Indian cinema as significant cultural artifacts.

Key Elements in Jane Eyre

"Jane Eyre" is a classic novel by Charlotte Bronte, published in 1847. It tells the story of Jane Eyre, an orphaned and mistreated young woman who grows up in the care of her cruel aunt and cousins. Despite her difficult upbringing, Jane is a strong-willed and intelligent girl who seeks independence and self-respect. As a young adult, Jane becomes a governess at Thornfield Hall, a sprawling estate owned by the enigmatic Mr. Rochester. There, she develops a deep emotional connection with Mr. Rochester, and the two fall in love. However, Thornfield holds a dark secret that threatens to unravel their happiness.

Throughout the novel, "Jane Eyre" explores themes of social class, gender equality, morality, and the search for love and identity. Jane's journey is marked by her determination to assert her worth and maintain her principles in the face of societal constraints and personal challenges.

The novel takes readers on a compelling and emotional journey as Jane navigates the complexities of love, morality, and societal expectations. "Jane Eyre" is celebrated for its strong and independent heroine and remains a timeless work of literature, known for its exploration of inner strength and the pursuit of personal integrity in a rigid and often unfair world.

Shanti Nilayam

Directed by G.S. Mani, the 1969 Tamil regional film was believed, according to film reviewer Randor Gay, initially to be an adaptation of the mega-hit *The Sound of Music* (1965), [but] it is actually an adaptation of Charlotte Bronte's classic novel *Jane Eyre*, with some elements thrown" (The Hindu Mar.

28, 2013). The Tamil version was the S.S. Vasam wherein the screenplay and dialogues were penned by Chitralaya Gopu. The film also won the National Film Award for Best Cinematography to Marcus Bartley and was also a big commercial success and ran for 100 days. The film featured a star-studded casting wherein the original characters of the novel are indicated in brackets against the roles they played.

- Kanchana as Malathi (Jane Eyre) - Protagonist
- Gemini Ganesan as Bhaskar (Mr. Edward Rochester) – Hero of the work
- Vijaya Chandrika as Janaki (Mrs. Bertha Rochester) – mad wife of hero
- Balaji as Balu (Mr. Mason), - Mrs. Bertha Rochester’s brother
- Vijayalalitha as Sheela (Blanche Ingram) – who is willing to marry hero for the shake of wealthiness.
- Leela as Paapamma - servant who attended Janaki (Grace Poole)

Additional Characters for the Purpose of Cinematic Adaptation

- Nagesh as Ramu (Bhaskar’s cousin)
- Pandari Bai as Ramu’s Mother (Bhaskar’s aunt)
- V.S. Ragavan as Bhasker’s father (Rochester’s father)
- Senthathamari as Singaram (Mrs. Bertha Rochester’s/ Janaki’s father)

Unlike the original novel where in Mr. Rochester’s protegee is a single girl child – Adele Varens, this film adaptation has five children, Geetha, Sudha, Latha, Lalitha and Raja (4 girls and a boy) under the guardianship of Bhaskar, who are the orphaned kids of his deceased elder brother, which is a witty creation of the director. wherein Bhasker’s father accidental attacking fatally kills the latter Janaki’s father, thereby making Balu’s (Mr. Mason) deranged sister to get married to Bhaskar. Some of the prominent similarities between the original and adapted include the orphaned protagonist who is ill-treated by her aunt and indeed gets her academic foundation at a boarding school from a warm-hearted supervisor. Malathy takes up a job as a governess at Shanti Nilayam (Abode of Peace) whose landlord is Bhaskar and falls in love with the latter. However,

Sheela courts Bhaskar who dismisses her to be pretentious and proposes to Malathy. Nevertheless, during the wedding ceremony, Balu interrupts it by shattering the truth that Bhaskar is already married to his sister, who turns out to be, the madwoman locked up in secluded part of the house. Towards the end, Janaki burns down the house and is eventually killed, along with her brother Balu, in the act and ultimately clearing the path for Bhaskar to marry Malathy.

“Jane Eyre” – Thornfield vs “Shanti Nilayam” - Shanti Nilayam

“Thornfield” in “Jane Eyre” and “Shanti Nilayam” in the Tamil film of the same name serve as pivotal settings in their respective narratives, playing essential roles in the development of the stories and the exploration of various thematic elements.

Gothic Atmosphere in Thornfield, Mr. Rochester’s estate, is portrayed as a gothic mansion with a dark, brooding atmosphere. It is surrounded by a wild, mysterious landscape, reflecting the gothic elements present in the novel. The eerie and isolated ambiance contributes to the suspense and tension in the story. The symbolism of Thornfield represents Mr. Rochester’s tumultuous past and the secrets he harbours. The mansion’s dark and hidden attic serves as a symbol of Mr. Rochester’s past mistakes and his attempt to conceal them from the world. The name “Thornfield” itself alludes to the prickly, thorny nature of the secrets contained within. In Thornfield is where Jane Eyre finds employment as a governess and where she first encounters Mr. Rochester. Her time at Thornfield marks a crucial period of personal growth and self-discovery. Her experiences there challenge her independence and self-respect. Shanti Nilayam is depicted as a grand and opulent mansion in the Tamil film. It stands as a symbol of wealth, privilege, and societal status. The vast estate is surrounded by lush gardens and epitomizes affluence. The concept of Mystery and Suspense are similar to Thornfield, Shanti Nilayam also carries an air of mystery and suspense. The mansion hides a dark secret related to Malathi’s past, which adds depth to the storyline. This hidden truth is a source of tension and intrigue, much like the attic in Thornfield. Central to the Love Story in Shanti Nilayam is where Bhaskar and Malathi’s love story begins to unfold.

It serves as the backdrop to their passionate and forbidden romance. The mansion's lavish setting contrasts with the forbidden nature of their love, emphasizing the societal barriers they face. In both Thornfield in "Jane Eyre" and Shanti Nilayam in the Tamil film "Shanti Nilayam" are significant settings that contribute to the atmosphere, symbolism, and thematic development of their respective narratives. They represent more than just physical locations; they are integral to the characters' experiences and the unfolding of complex relationships and secrets. These settings serve as powerful tools in conveying the emotional depth and tension within the stories, making them central elements in both works.

the time, just as the attire in "Jane Eyre" reflects the fashion of Victorian England. The visual cues in clothing help place the story in its respective cultural context.

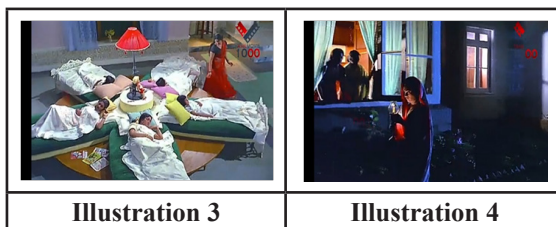


Illustration 3

Illustration 4

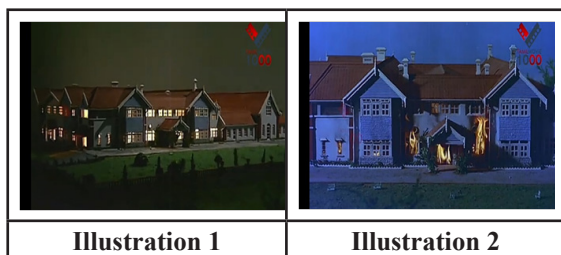


Illustration 1

Illustration 2

"Thornfield Hall represents patriarchal house which imprisoned 'Bertha' the inner self of Jane herself. Susan Meyer argues that "Thornfield Hall stands as a material embodiment of the history of the English ruling class as represented by the Rochester's as the repressed history of crimes" (71).

The third floor of the mansion is the store room where the unnecessary objects are kept. Bertha is also kept there.

Visual Story Telling and Symbolism

"Shanthi Nilayam" shifts the setting from the English countryside to an Indian context. The visual storytelling in the film effectively portrays the lush landscapes, grand mansion, and evocative atmosphere, much like the English moors in "Jane Eyre". Cinematography of both "Jane Eyre" and "Shanthi Nilayam" use cinematography to convey the emotions of the characters. Dark and moody shots often symbolize tension and mystery (Illustration 4), while brighter scenes symbolize moments of connection and love (Illustration 3). The costumes in "Shanthi Nilayam" reflect the Indian culture of

The protagonist of both "Jane" and "Malathi" are strong-willed, independent women who face challenging circumstances and very devoted towards power of God (Illustration 5). They are strong-willed, independent women who face challenging circumstances. Jane Eyre is an English governess, while Malathi is a woman from a traditional Tamil background. The societal and cultural contexts in which they exist are different, which shapes their experiences and decisions. Both characters are central to their respective stories and influence the lives of other characters.



Illustration 5

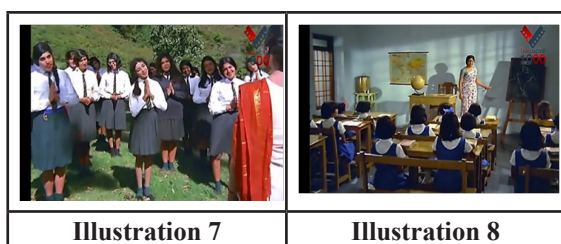
"Jane is abused emotionally and physically because she is very rebellious from childhood. She remarks, I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me; I must resist those who punish me unjustly. It is as natural as that I should love those who show me affection, or submit to punishment when I feel it is deserved" (56).

In both "Jane Eyre" and "Shanthi Nilayam", the house plays a significant symbolic role. In "Jane Eyre", Thornfield Hall represents secrets and Mr. Rochester's past. In "Shanthi Nilayam", the mansion Shanthi Nilayam serves a similar purpose, concealing secrets and revealing the past of the characters.

Fire is a recurring symbol in “Jane Eyre”, representing passion, transformation, and destruction. In “Shanthi Nilayam”, fire is also a powerful symbol, notably in the climax, where it represents both destruction and the catharsis of revealing hidden truths. The natural world, especially the moors in “Jane Eyre”, is a symbol of freedom and escape. Similarly, the natural landscapes in “Shanthi Nilayam” are used to convey emotions and the characters inner struggles. First, Bhaskar’s bedroom curtains are set on fire (Illustration 6) which was timely saved by Malathi, then the wedding saree torched by the Bhaskar’s insane wife and finally the fire which Janaki sets to the entire house during the climatic fight burning down the entire house (Illustration 7)

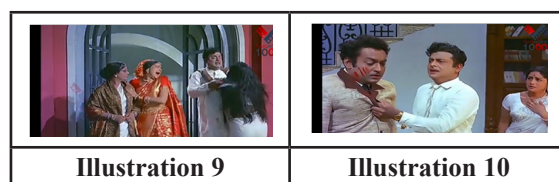


Social Class and Gender in both “Jane Eyre” and “Shanthi Nilayam” explore the themes of social class and gender inequality. The adaptation reflects these themes in an Indian context, highlighting the challenges and restrictions faced by women in Indian society. The journey of self-discovery and independence undertaken by the female protagonist in both works is a central theme (Illustration 7 & 8). “Shanthi Nilayam” maintains this theme, portraying the female lead’s struggle for autonomy and identity. Love and redemption are key themes in both stories. The adaptations explore the power of love to heal and transform damaged souls, even in the face of adversity.



Wedding Ceremony

In “Shanthi Nilayam” Malathi takes up a job as a governess at Shanti Nilayam (Abode of Peace) whose landlord is Bhaskar and falls in love with the latter. However, Sheela courts Bhaskar who dismisses her to be pretentious and proposes to Malathi. Nevertheless, during the wedding ceremony, Balu interrupts it by shattering the truth that Bhaskar is already married to his sister, who turns out to be, the madwoman locked up in secluded part of the house (Illustration 9). Towards the end, Janaki burns down the house and is eventually killed, along with her brother Balu, in the act and ultimately clearing the path for Bhaskar to marry Malathi. In “Jane Eyre” The frequent arrival of Mr. Mason and his odd behaviour confuses Jane. It reaches its peak once Rochester forces Jane to accompany him in order to nurse the bloody arm of Mr. Mason. This incident deepens the mystery surrounding Rochester (Illustration 10). At one point, love blossoms between Jane and Rochester and she is asked for marriage and consents positively for the same. Then onwards, for Jane the estate is abode of peace while Rochester sees it as a prison which robs his freedom until the final episode wherein the mystery is unveiled that the hysterical laughter comes from his insane first wife, Bertha Mason, who is locked up in the third floor of the attic and not the servant Grace Poole. At last, Bertha sets the entire house on fire blinding Rochester and Jane marries him out of compassion.



Conclusion

This comprehensive study on literary adaptation in film and television aims to shed light on the dynamic interplay between two distinct artistic mediums. It emphasizes the creative challenges and opportunities presented by the adaptation process, highlighting the enduring appeal of bringing literary worlds to life on screen. In, “Shanthi Nilayam” successfully adapts visual storytelling techniques and symbolism from “Jane Eyre” to create a unique Indian cinematic

experience while preserving the core themes and narrative elements of the original work. It is a testament to the universality of Charlotte Brontë's story that it can be reimagined in different culture. One of the most striking aspects of the adaptation is the use of visual symbolism. In "Jane Eyre", the imposing Thornfield Hall serves as a symbol of mystery, secrecy, and the past. Similarly, 'Shanthi Nilayam', the titular mansion in the film, becomes a visual metaphor for the hidden truths, buried memories, and complex relationships that define the narrative. The filmmakers employ the sprawling mansion's architecture, the play of light and shadow, and the ominous presence of its residents to create an atmosphere of intrigue and foreboding, much akin to Thornfield Hall. Visual storytelling techniques in "Shanthi Nilayam" also play a pivotal role in conveying the emotional depth of the characters. The film utilizes close-ups, expressive cinematography, and symbolic imagery to immerse the audience in the inner turmoil of the protagonists. The use of visual cues, such as a recurring motif of a broken mirror symbolizing fractured identities and hidden truths, adds layers of meaning to the narrative, mirroring the symbolism found in "Jane Eyre".

Moreover, "Shanthi Nilayam" seamlessly blends the cultural and social context of South India into the narrative while preserving the core themes of "Jane Eyre". It explores issues of caste, class, and gender, which are pertinent to the Indian setting, making it a culturally rich adaptation that resonates with a broader audience. This cultural fusion serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of Brontë's themes, as they transcend geographical boundaries and resonate with the human experience worldwide.

In conclusion, the adaptation of visual storytelling and symbolism in "Shanthi Nilayam" offers a

profound reflection of "Jane Eyre", showcasing the brilliance of filmmakers in their ability to reinterpret a classic work in a distinct cultural context. Through this cinematic endeavour, the filmmakers pay homage to Brontë's timeless themes while adding a layer of cultural richness and visual depth to the narrative. "Shanthi Nilayam" stands as a testament to the enduring power of storytelling and the universality of human emotions and struggles, reminding us that great literature and its adaptations continue to captivate and inspire audiences across the globe.

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