

From Real to Reel: A Study of the Biopics of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath

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Abstract

*The biopic has emerged as a popular mode of film making in contemporary culture. As such it deserves greater critical attention than it has so far received. Like its literary counterpart—the biography, the biopic too is a fascinating but complex and hybrid genre interlacing the ‘real’ and the ‘reel’. The paper shall attempt to bring forth the significance of biopic in the contemporary age by looking at the cultural implications of adapting woman authors—Virginia Woolf in the 2002 film, *The Hours* and Sylvia Plath in the 2003 film, *Sylvia*. The objective of this research is to study the significance of the biopic in the contemporary age vis-à-vis the cultural implications of adapting the woman author from ‘real’ to ‘reel’. It is pertinent to note that adaptations of the author, from real to reel, carry inflections arising from the adaptor’s gender and socio-cultural position. What further complicates matters in case of adapting the author is that the process of adaptation distorts the sequence of reception. While the adaptation of texts release multiple often fertile interpretations of the original text, the adaptation of the author, generally produces versions which satiate commercial concerns of mass entertainment thereby frustrating the original expression of the creative writer, overshadowing it with the veil of popularity.*

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Marginalization and exclusion have prevailed in society since time immemorial. In the nineteenth century for example, women authors faced intellectual oppression within a patriarchal culture. They were outnumbered by patronizing male authors who thought that women had no adequate intellectual skills to produce a quality literary work worth competing with. In order to step on the male-dominated literary stage and stand alongside the men, female authors had to use male pseudonyms or write anonymously to avoid the condescending judgments of critics. In most cases, the addition of women writers to the canon has proceeded by arguing that a particular woman writer meets the standards generally applied to male authors, that she evinces similar values, that she contributes something important to an understanding of (white, male) Western culture.

Female authorship is a metaphor for female agency and the struggles of feminism have primarily been a struggle for authorship. In her book *Silences*, first published in 1978, Tillie Olsen pointed out that women writers have largely been left out of most mainstream anthologies. In the context of the achievements of women writers in the twentieth century she raises the question as to “why are so many women silenced than men? Why when women do write,...is so little of their writing known, taught, accorded recognition?”(15) Historically, women’s authorial signatures have been hidden or obscured. In “A Room of One’s Own” Virginia Woolf draws attention to the absence of women authors and how women are represented by men in their works in a distorted manner. Women authors have had to face tremendous psychological pressures as literary creativity was at cross purposes with the expected role of women.

In the twenty-first century, forty years after feminism has made its way into the academy, when biopics celebrating women authors have flooded the silver screen, reclaiming women’s authorship may seem redundant. However, when it comes to women’s authorship, what has happened before can easily happen again. For hundreds of years there has been this very strong control over the canon which resisted women being written into it. Like the literary canon, Hollywood is also male dominated. What lives Hollywood chooses to celebrate depends on a complex set of motives: women’s achievements are often not given the big screen treatment. In the real world women are hardly encouraged to be heroes and the same is reflected in the biopic. While there are many Great Men biopics, biopics on women are few. So the very presence of women author biopics is a positive sign, but the way in which the life of a woman author is told, what aspects are included or excluded may be ideologically determined and may involve a patriarchal system of reduction.

Feminism as a social movement also exerted a great influence on film criticism in which the problems of representation and spectatorship are of prime importance. The theoretical shift here is from viewing cinema as mirroring reality to an understanding of cinema as fabricating a particular ideological view of reality. In “Women’s Cinema as Counter Cinema” Claire Johnston states how cinema creates the ‘myth’ of woman. Sometimes the viewers automatically surrender to the image and are aligned to the camera’s view which might uphold the dominant discourse and thereby maintain the status quo. Thus the viewers must be critically alert. In “Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema” Laura Mulvey talks about the subject position offered to the spectator and the idea of the ‘male gaze’. The subject or the person who is looking is ‘male’ and the object of the gaze is ‘woman’. Mulvey identifies the camera’s way of seeing the world as the dominant patriarchal gaze and the relationship between the spectator and the screen image as voyeuristic.

While mass media has helped to promote the figure of the woman author it has generated many an intense debates about the commodification of literature, culture and the persona of the author. Cultural and commercial agendas are often involved in cinema’s love not only for literary material but also the literary process. Literary biopics involve not only glamour and intellectual respectability but also a ready fan following and awards-friendliness. But invariably they end up as intensely fictionalised tales that feed on personal misfortune, conveniently ticking off the events that inspired the fiction. What ultimately happens is that it takes away the subject’s literary importance.

Films like *Sylvia* (Directed by Christine Jeffs, 2003) and *The Hours* (Directed by Stephen Daldry, 2002) based on the life of Plath and Woolf respectively showcase women authors fighting mental illness. Elaine Showalter notes in *The Female Malady* and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note in *The Mad Woman in the Attic* that madness is the price that women authors have had to pay for the exercise of their creativity in the male dominated culture. However, in recent biopics on the life of authors like Plath and Woolf, we see the dangers of romanticizing hysteria, sickness, dementia and alienation as with these aspects of the authors exaggerated, the essence of the writer and her creative genius are diminished to an alarming extent. A lopsided and thus distorted picture of the artist is held up. The woman author is once again stereotyped in these misrepresentations of her life and philosophy.

Sylvia raises two vital questions in the minds of the viewers: firstly, why make a biopic about Sylvia Plath and secondly what does the film actually tell us about the writer? Plath’s suicide on 11 February 1963, at the age of thirty eclipses her legacy even today. She has often been tagged as ‘schizophrenic’ and ‘mad’ and the trend is to look at her as a victim of Ted Hughes’ adultery and subsequent desertion. Plath is often compared with Marilyn Monroe. Like Monroe, the archetypal tragic Hollywood blonde, Plath has become the model of the mentally afflicted poet, the betrayed and abandoned woman. Munroe and Plath are not simply two celebrities who committed suicide, they are women who are famous for dying young, marked by their femininity, public visibility, power and suicide stories. Their lives were defined by severe instability and have turned into bestsellers. Thus, as a famous and tragic heroine, Hollywood found Sylvia Plath both alluring and irresistible.

In the biopic *Sylvia*, screenwriter John Brownlow and director Christine Jeffs tell the story of the fatal death and mutually destructive relationship between young American poet Plath and British poet Ted Hughes. The casting of Gwyneth Paltrow as Sylvia Plath is incredible—the actress not only resembles the writer closely in appearance, her rendering of Plath as a gifted poet plagued by nightmares, is brilliantly restrained in its inwardness. But unfortunately the biopic misrepresents the author’s life through its melodramatic plot, sensationalism and absence of poetry. The film portrays the passion and romance of the early relationship between the couple and its progress into jealousy, suspicion, infidelity and separation, culminating in Plath’s suicide in 1963. The downward spiral commences as the couple begin to lead a secluded life in a farmhouse in Devon where the Wevills are invited over the weekend. The scene that results in Hughes’ decision to leave is the one that follows the visit of the Wevills to Devon. Already in a fragile mental and emotional state, Plath becomes unhinged when she rightly suspects Hughes of having an affair with Assia Wevill (Amira Casar). On discovering her husband’s infidelity, Plath retaliates and consumed by fury at his betrayal, she destroys and burns his work and then asks him to leave. Plath’s life is painted in banal shades of emotional torment and domestic distress as she is caught up in maternal duties during the day and engages in writing sprees during the night. As the film proceeds towards the end it becomes increasingly loaded with foreboding and premonitions of death. Finally, on a particularly bleak winter, alone, feeling abandoned and locked inside her only ‘blackness and silence’, she puts an end to her life.

Directed by Stephen Daldry, with a screenplay by David Hare, the 2002 film *The Hours* is an adaptation of Michael Cunningham’s 1998 novel of the same name. Cunningham’s novel in turn uses the original working title of Woolf’s novel and bears an intimate affiliation to *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). Cunningham makes Woolf a character in his novel. Thus *The Hours* is no longer just an adaptation of Woolf’s novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, it becomes an adaptation of Virginia Woolf herself. Mrs. Woolf in *The Hours* is a construct of three men who desire to define her: Michael Cunningham, Stephen Daldry and David Hare. Both the text and film versions of *The Hours* have an enduring impact on Woolf’s identity as a writer. Cunningham’s fictionalisation of Virginia Woolf in his novel has resulted in an ever increasing distance from the historical author. The reader of *The Hours* looks at Woolf

through Cunningham's filter, which is once removed from the historical Woolf. The viewer of the movie *The Hours* looks at Woolf through several filters: David Hare's, Steven Daldry's, and even the actress Nicole Kidman's. Finally one approaches Woolf through a distorted refraction of various lenses. The act of reinterpretation of the life of an author on screen, in the form of biographical film, is often also a political act. Biopics of troubled and gifted authors usually serve to reinforce the traditional binary construction of gender. In both the film texts we find that the cultural depiction of insanity and suicide are problematic. Whereas biopics with male protagonists such as *A Beautiful Mind* represents heroic psychological battles ultimately leading to enlightenment, those about mentally troubled women, such as *Sylvia* and *The Hours* portray darker, more morbid versions of personal struggle that end with suicide.

The movie *Sylvia*'s first visual is that of a headshot of Plath lying asleep, covered in a white sheet, pale as a corpse, eyes closed. It is an unsettling image and in the backdrop, in a sombre voice over, we hear about her innermost psychological turmoil:

'Sometimes I dream of a tree, the tree is my life. One branch is the man I shall marry and the leaves my children. Another branch is my future as a writer and each leaf is a poem. Another branch is a glittering academic career. But as I sit there trying to choose, the leaves begin to turn brown and blow away until the tree is absolutely bare.'

The message that is conveyed to the audience is that her life is foreshadowed by death. The theme of death is represented from the very outset in *Sylvia* in a similar way as it is done in the Virginia Woolf biopic *The Hours*. Both the biopics are framed by the suicides of the authors in the opening and closing shots. The films thus set up the life-stories of these authors as heading inevitably towards their death. The decision to place it at the beginning of the films shows that the directors are ready to privilege the death of these women authors above everything else, thus suggesting that a tragic demise is the inexorable destiny of these twentieth century women writers. Through their focus on the suicides of these two women authors, Jeffs and Daldry powerfully foreground their deaths over their professional achievements and re-imagine these influential writers as mad, doomed victims.

In the film *Sylvia* there is no earnest attempt to look at Plath and her craft or the give and take of ideas between Plath and Hughes about art, politics, life or love. Plath is portrayed most of the time as a bitter, jealous housewife and only when their relationship fails, does she assert her identity as a poet-- the trauma of the separation feeds her muse. Early in the film we find Hughes and Plath reciting Shakespeare and Chaucer to one another as a playful act of courtship and later they join their friends to listen to a recording of Robert Lowell. But after these early scenes, as the film moves forward, the conversation becomes humdrum which is rather disheartening because after all it is a biopic about two of the most distinguished writers of the English literature. The Hughes family's ban on the use of the poems in the movie may be the reason why we do not find the authors reciting from their own works. However, we derive no knowledge of what inspired Plath to use her art as an outlet for her emotional turmoil. She is seen to be cleaning the house and baking cakes to conceal her writer's block. During this time poetry was still a male domain. Plath finds herself embittered on witnessing Hughes' easy success while she keeps toiling for years to earn money and fame. Her inner demons start to emerge, provoked by the humiliation of seeing Hughes get attention from the literati and his female students while her creativity is constantly choked by the burden of mothering her children and bearing with Hughes' affair that eventually ruins their marriage. This renders the film as mere psychodrama of the Plath-Hughes relationship and not a biopic about the poets as writers. The central theme happens to be their relationship which again is related to other themes like jealousy, isolation, conflict, infidelity, separation and guilt—all of which culminate in the suicide. As an oversimplified representation of Plath and Hughes as poets—the film fails to convince us.

In *The Hours* while Cunningham's portrayal of Woolf's insanity, thoughts, fears and homosexuality are fairly accurate, he provides no alternative for the reader but to perceive Woolf as a creative artist perpetually tortured by mental illness: "... she prays for dark the way a wanderer lost in the desert prays for water" (*Hours* 71). Cunningham foregrounds tensions in Mrs. Woolf's relationship with her husband. One afternoon, as Mrs. Woolf attempts to escape her life in the suburbs, intending to catch the train to London, Mr. Woolf comes in search of her "like a constable or proctor" (*Hours* 170). Contrasted against Mrs. Woolf's imagined freedom in London, Mr. Woolf, Richmond and the Hogarth House confine her. As Mrs. Woolf's flight to London is aborted, she reflects, "On this side is stern, worried Leonard, the row of closed shops, the dark rise that leads back to Hogarth House" (*Hours* 172). However, it is ironic that in her biography on Virginia Woolf, Hermione Lee offers quite a different picture of Woolf's relationship with her husband: "Leonard Woolf's obvious suitability as a husband was both an attraction to Virginia and, perversely, an obstacle. He was the right age. He belonged to her 'family': he had loved Thoby...and he was the closest of her closest friends" (Lee 302). Cunningham's stress on

Woolf's illness serves to fortify his reading of Woolf as a victim—trapped by society, by her husband, and by heterosexuality.

By foregrounding lesbian sexuality, Cunningham makes Mrs. Woolf his own lesbian heroine. Contrasted against the sombre, morose relationship between Mrs. Woolf and Leonard is Mrs. Woolf's relationship with her sister, Vanessa. Just before Vanessa leaves Hogarth House, the two sisters share a kiss with hints of eroticism: "Virginia leans forward and kisses Vanessa on the mouth... behind Nelly's back, it feels like the most delicious and forbidden of pleasures" (*Hours* 154). The apparent innocence of the kiss diminishes and the repressed sexuality of Mrs. Woolf becomes more visible. Mrs. Woolf's engagement with lesbianism is also obvious as she creates her characters. As Cunningham's Mrs. Dalloway becomes the Clarissa of the future, her sexuality influences the interpretation of Virginia Woolf's Clarissa Dalloway and her sexuality, and by extension, also the sexuality of the author herself. Although Mrs. Woolf is an imagined and fictionalized version of Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf," what is so perturbing is that Mrs. Woolf of *The Hours* could come to signify Woolf herself. It is not simply Cunningham's perception of Woolf which problematizes the issue, it is the mass media event of Cunningham's "Virginia Woolf" becoming the new Woolf--- the fact that people may now read and see Virginia Woolf and her text through Michael Cunningham's filter which is dangerous. The 2002 film *The Hours* adapts from Cunningham novel, ultimately amplifying the issues of madness, suicide and homosexuality. This in turn distances the viewers of the film even more from the original text of *Mrs. Dalloway* and from Woolf herself.

The subversive act of limiting Plath and Woolf is apparent in the two biopics, and though the filmmakers eulogise Plath and Woolf as woman authors and give them an after-life in media, they are completely unfaithful to the portrayal of both the feminist writers' message and their persona. What happens to the two authors in their cinematic representations is what Virginia Woolf had spoken about in *A Room of One's Own*--that if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of great importance, "...some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband" (41). Indeed the 'reel' version of women authors mythicize the philosophy and personality of the author, in order to adapt the same into the popular mass medium of the film. The filters of the adaptors inevitably alter the way we perceive the author. Biopics are endowed with clear ideological and cultural significance -- they can influence, shape and construct public opinion. *Sylvia* and *The Hours* direct the audience to look at events and the authors in a certain way. They once again reinforce the impression that even today Plath and Woolf are figures typically depicted as one-dimensionally tragic, remembered for their traumatic lives and morbid deaths. The films thus engage in the 'mythisization' of Plath and Woolf in the Beauvoirian sense, i.e. when 'myth' is used as a tool to stereotype women and thereby to arrange society into patriarchy.

Thus, one of the ways that mass media misrepresents women who are successful and famous is by underrepresenting them in their public roles. What is taken away is their agency which leads to mere objectification. Not only are successful women less visible, they are often subjected to stereotyping when they are visible which limits our perception of their capacity to succeed against all odds. Theirs is mostly a story of failure and victimization. Biopics like *The Hours*, *Sylvia*, *Iris* and *Frida* are few films among many that bear testimony to this distasteful and bitter truth.

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