

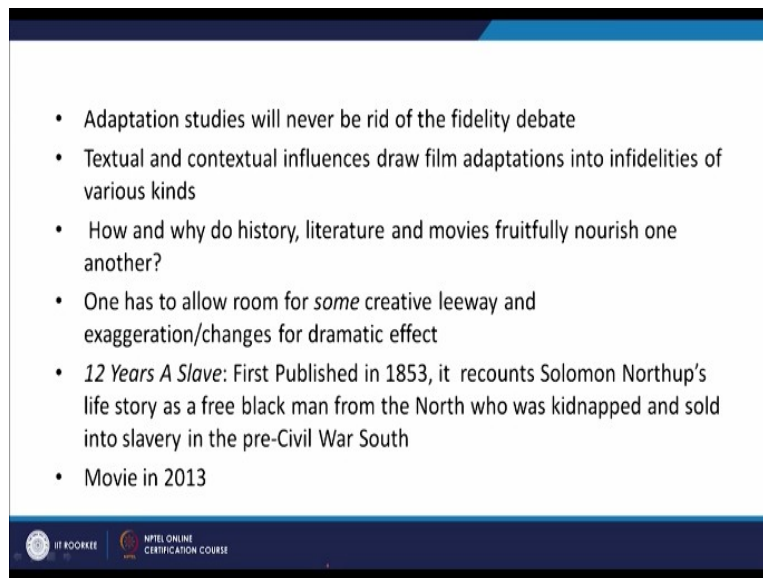
Literature, Culture and Media
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Lecture - 45
Reading of 12 Years A Slave: Film and Text

Dear participants, welcome to the fifth module of the ninth week. In the previous discussions, we have seen how the interactions between movie and literature are fraught with certain difficulties and challenges. For example, adaptation studies have always been obsessed with the fidelity debate. The pruning of the material, the pruning of the details which have been given in the novel are also a compulsory part of the filmmaking process.

Because a film has to look at the time constraints as well as also has to have certain creative leave to accommodate certain imaginative changes. In any case, we find that history, literature and movies are corroborative and they enrich each other.

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- Adaptation studies will never be rid of the fidelity debate
- Textual and contextual influences draw film adaptations into infidelities of various kinds
- How and why do history, literature and movies fruitfully nourish one another?
- One has to allow room for *some* creative leeway and exaggeration/changes for dramatic effect
- *12 Years A Slave*: First Published in 1853, it recounts Solomon Northup's life story as a free black man from the North who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in the pre-Civil War South
- Movie in 2013

As a case study today, we have taken up a particular movie *12 Years a Slave* which is based on a slave memoir. This was first published in 1853, it is based on the memories of Solomon Northup, it is the story of this person who was a free black person but was sold after being kidnapped to the Deep South during the prewar America.

The movie was made in 2013. This movie has been selected because of the intersectionality possibilities of the issues of race and gender and at the same time when we look at the

storyline we find that it also has a connectivity with the present day debates when we are looking at the issues related with various ethnicities and differences.

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The slide is titled "Significance of Slave Narratives" and contains a numbered list of six points. At the bottom of the slide, there are logos for IIT ROORKEE and NPTEL ONLINE CERTIFICATION COURSE.

1. It is important to keep a record of history no matter how horrible things are. By remembering the past, one might have the wisdom not to make the same mistakes in the future.
2. Slave narratives offer the oppressed the ability to speak for themselves. This is important, as Spivak, the post-colonialist theorist, has repeatedly stated.
3. Useful in multi-racial settings
4. Ethnic, Racial and Gender based Differences
5. New grounds of Isolation and discrimination in the contemporary world
6. Treatment towards aboriginals in every country. Apartheid often compared with the Indian Caste system



The Slave narratives are a part of the American history and a history has to be remembered despite the fact that it had hidden certain horrible things. If we remember the past, if we learn from it then the chances are there that our wisdom would allow us not to repeat them in the future. Slave narratives offer the possibility to speak to the oppressed people for themselves. This is important as Spivak, the famous post-colonialist critic has already told us repeatedly.

And understanding of slave narratives are also important in today's context when we are looking at a multiracial presence throughout the world everywhere. We are looking at the differences based on ethnicity, race, gender, cast and creed etc., and wherever these differences create difficulties slave narratives work as a reminder. When the filmmakers wanted to translate this memoir into the medium of a film, they had several challenges before them.

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Challenges for the Film Makers

- How can a 160 year old autobiography possibly hold its own against the 21st century cinematic industry with its veritable warehouse of emotional and technical tricks and treats for the modern viewing audience?
- Released in 2013, with Steve McQueen directing the John Ridley screenplay; the movie is remarkable for its convincing and violent portrayal of Northup's experience.
 - Carried by a fantastic Chiwetel Ejiofor in the lead role and supported by several other great performances, the movie is generally true to the storyline both in fact and in spirit.
- Foregoing any voice over narration – a challenge with an autobiography as source material – the movie struggles at times to maintain emotional tension or dramatic arc, choosing to emphasize the horrific torture scenes instead.
- Technically rich

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It was an autobiographical memoir; it was an autobiography which was 160 years old. So was it possible to make it into a popular film version in the 21st century cinematic industry with its veritable warehouse of emotional and technical tricks and treats for the modern viewing audience. What would be the receptivity status of the movie in terms of its present day viewers; however, when the movie was released in 2013, audience simply adored it.



They found it not only technically rich and capable of presenting the ideas basically intended by the narrator but they also found it strangely moving and appealing. The main part was enacted by Ejiofor who was in the lead role and he was supported by several other great performances and in general we can say that the movie is true to the storyline factually as well as in spirit also.

The technique can be seen in the beginning particularly in the presentation of the settings and the lightings.

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Setting and Lighting

- Antebellum South, Recreate Plantation life in Louisiana
- Lingered shots of the plantations—glimpses of fieldwork that characterizes the life of slaves
- Use of props that are also symbolic:
 - Bible (use of religion to promote slavery); ropes; whip; name tags worn by slaves (reduction to property); pen and paper (Solomon's education sets him apart as a black freeman unlike others born into slavery who were illiterate)
- Sunsets, seasonal changes—passage of time
- Soft lighting v/s darkness, shadows
- Movie is set over a period of 12 years
- Cinematography captures the natural beauty and serenity and juxtaposes it with scenes of deprivation, brutality and inhumanity

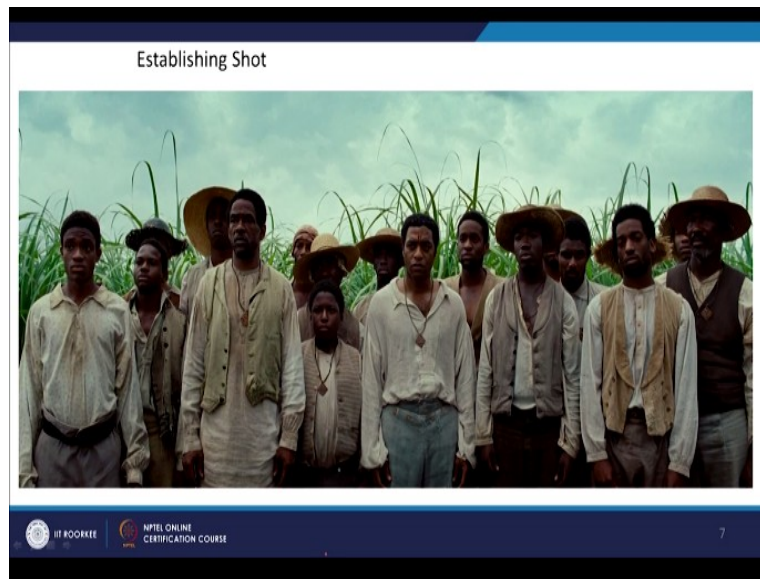
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The movie had to produce the scenes of Antebellum South and it also had to recreate the Plantation life in Louisiana. The lingering shots of the plantations give us a glimpse of the fieldwork that characterizes the life of the slaves. Different types of props and symbols have also been used throughout the movie. For example, the symbol of the Bible has been used to promote slavery and also to explain to somehow to the slaves that they have to bear up with their existence.

At the same time, we find that the props of ropes and whips and name tags have also been used repeatedly not simply as props but also as symbols which reduce human beings or slaves to the property of the white owner. At the same time, the symbols of pen and paper have also been used to differentiate the status of Solomon from other slaves because Solomon was an educated person, a person who was already free before being abducted and sold into slavery.

Sunsets and seasonal changes suggest the passage of time, lightening as we see in the movie has been very effectively used to suggest different moods and different levels of existence. Set over a period of 12 years, we find that the cinematography has been very beautifully done and it can be seen in the very initial establishing shot of the movie.

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Mise-en-scene-- Framing, Shots and Setting

- Establishing scene--middle shot, a group of slaves, lingers on them as the plantation overseer passes instructions
- Setting--Sugarcane plantation, the film begins in medias res (in the middle); plunges directly into the institution of slavery
- The beginning sequence sets the tone for the film--use of visuals and mise-en-scene to show rather than tell the brutality and horrific nature of slavery
- Showing v/s telling; showing is more impactful--more visceral


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In this establishing shot, we find that the focus is on the group of slaves, the shot lingers on them as the plantation overseer passes instructions. The background of the sugarcane plantation brings us directly into the institution of slavery and these images suggest the torture which the slaves had undergone instead of depicting them we find that the movie has been able to show them directly.

Different types of natural sceneries which have been described beautifully and evocatively in the movie also depict the passage of time.

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Natural beauty and serenity--the languid wind, sunset depicts the passage of time. Use of soft and ambient lighting. These shots intersperse the narrative, thus, comparison with the beautiful world of nature and those who inhabit this space is called for




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And at the same time they also suggest the contrast between the beauty of the nature and the atrocities which the slaves had to face in their life.

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Use of darker tones and shadows to dwell on the suffocating, congested life of slaves
Shared dwellings for both male and females; minimum sustenance--a life of deprivation



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The tones and the shadows of lights which have been used in the movie throughout suggest the contrast of two different life patterns which were being let simultaneously in the plantation. The facts of misery of the slave's life are contrasted with the lives of the slave owners. These darker tones and shadows dwell on the suffocating and congested life of the slaves, the slaves had shared dwellings men and women used to stay together with a minimum sustenance.

They had a life of deprivation and the cinematic images capture them in darker tones in a highly suggestive and evocative manner.

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Compare this shot of the palatial home and porch with the shots which focus on the slaves' dwelling--the stark difference in the color palette is reinforced throughout.

A long shot of Mrs Epps and Platt: Visually the shot reinforces the hierarchy between the two. As the mistress of the house, Mrs Epps towers over Platt, the property of her husband.



11

The darker tones of these previous shots can be compared with this light shot of the palatial home and porch which focuses on Mrs. Epps, the wife of the slave owner and Platt, that was the name which was given to Solomon as a slave. So we see that it is not only the light and the happy sounding tones which have been projected through this image but also we find that the hierarchy of the status has also been pinpointed.

Because as mistress of the house Mrs. Epps is towering over Platt and we find that Platt is standing in a dejected manner which shows that he is the property of her husband and this existential difference is very well portrayed by a single shot here.

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Use of wide, middle and close shots of slaves in the cotton/sugarcane fields: These shots show the labour intensive work, the hardships, the monotony, the fear of whipping and punishment--the Overseers whipped those who couldn't keep up.



12

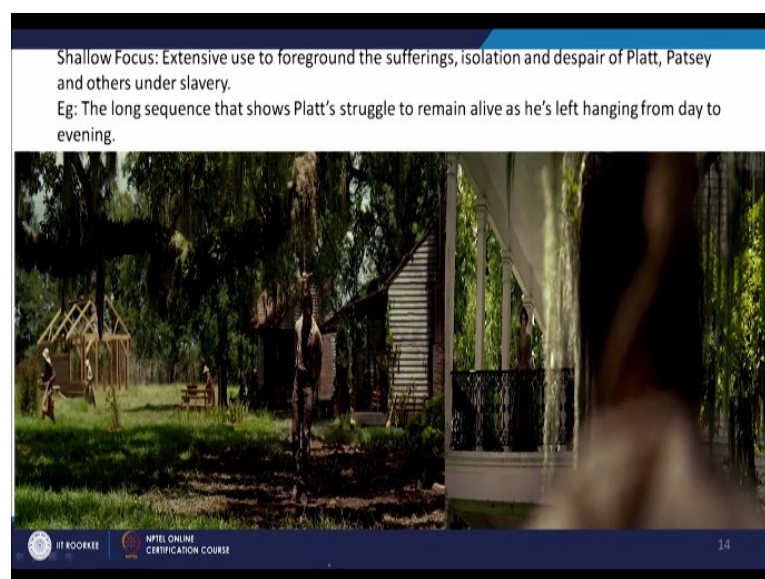
So we find that the use of wide, middle and close shots of slaves in the cotton fields as well as in the sugarcane fields is also very effective as these shots portray the intensity of the labour, the hardships faced by the labour here and also the fear of being whipped by the overseer is also palpable in the kinesic images which have been captured beautifully in the movie.

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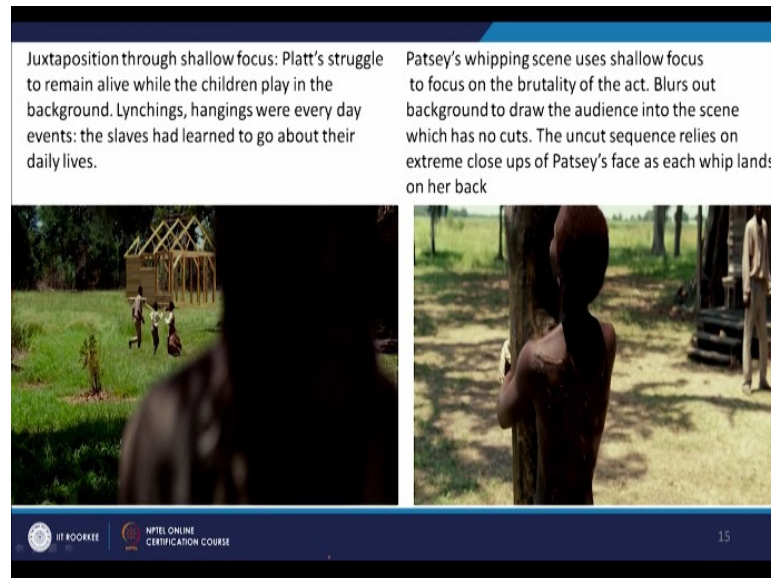
In the close-ups also we find that the moments of fear, anger, pain, despair and hurt as well as dejection have been very vividly portrayed. Particularly, we find that in the scene which has been captured in the middle of the slide we find that a particular woman slave is being whipped, so the pain and the sorrow the despair and at the same time acceptance of fate is written large on the face of this actress.

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At the same time, we find that in certain images the use of the shallow focus has been done to highlight the atrocities on the one hand and at the same time the contrast with the existence which goes on as if nothing is happening to certain individuals on the same plantation in a very vivid manner. In this particular scene, we find that Platt is struggling to remain alive as he has been left hanging from a tree from day to evening but at the same time, we find that the rest of the work is going on as if it is a daily occurring.

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In this shot also we find that the juxtaposition between Platt is struggling to remain alive while he has been left out hanging from a tree and also the way the children are still playing in the background tells us to the depravity of human being. Similarly, in the second shot we find that it is a repeat of the same whipping scene which we have discussed earlier. So Patsey's whipping scene has also used shallow focus to focus on the brutality of the act.

It blurs us out to the ground to draw the audience into the scene which has no cuts and this uncut sequence relies on extreme close-ups of the face of this actress as each whip lands on her back creating, pain, agony and distress.

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Mise-en-scene-- Costume

- Period movie--set in 1840s-1850s
- Antebellum era
- Costume designer Patricia Norris undertook extensive research that included studying artwork from the era to get the right costumes for slaves and their masters. Lack of photographs of slaves was an impediment. Relied on books, etchings
- With eight weeks to create the wardrobe, costume designer Patricia Norris collaborated with Western Costume to compile costumes that would illustrate the passage of time while also being historically accurate.
- Using an earth tone color palette, Norris created nearly 1,000 costumes for the film. She took earth samples from all three of the plantations to match the clothes
- She also researched the temperature on each plantation, to authentically portray minute details.
- The filmmakers also used some pieces of clothing discovered on set that were worn by slaves.

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So we see that photography as well as mise-en-scene has been used very effectively in this movie. As it is based on a slave memoir, it is period movie which is based somewhere around 1840s and 1850s, it is the antebellum era which has been depicted by the movie. So the costume designer Patricia Norris had a very tough task. She had undertaken an extensive research which included studying different type of art work from this era to understand the patterns of the costumes which were used by slaves as well as by their masters.



The paucity and a literal absence of photographs of these dresses was also a difficulty for Patrice Norris. So she largely relied on books and etchings also. She had only 8 weeks to create the wardrobe and then she also used the earth tone color palette creating almost 1000 costumes for the film in such a short time.

She also took samples of the earth from these 3 different plantations where the film had to be actually shot so that the earth tone matches the clothes. She also researched the temperature of each plantation to authentically portray minute details.

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Dress and Architecture

- Costumes: dirty, worn out and ill-fitting tunics and pants are characteristic of slaves.
 - Clothed only so that they could live to work. Functionality is the key.
 - Compare this to the way the masters' dresses; Epps and his wife wore the clothing that was prevalent in the time(1841-52) that the movie is set in.
- Recreated the look of 1820s and 30s for the costumes of Platt and Patsey.
 - Why? Clothing provided by masters'—often hand-me-downs
 - Slaves also wore tags engraved with the names of their master—treated as property
 - As a freeman, Solomon wore the same kind of clothing as the whites—three piece suit and hat
- Architectural details are accurate.

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So we find that the dress as well as the architecture which has been depicted in the movie makes it to be a very effective representation of the memoir on which it is based. The misery of the slaves, the hardships of their status is communicated in a visual fashion with the help of not only the acting but also with the help of the dress, the lights, the photographs, the sceneries which have been projected in the movie.

The costumes which have been presented throughout the movie are the dirty, worn out, ill-fitting tunics and pants which are characteristics of the slaves, it suggests that they have been clothed only that they can work. Functionality is the only key of their dress. In comparison to that we find that the slave masters or the owners of the slaves are dressed in a very rich fashion. Slaves also used to wear tags which were engraved with the names of their masters.



And they were treated as the property of their master. As a freeman, Solomon used to wear the same kind of clothing as whites used to wear in his contemporary era that was before he was kidnapped and sold.

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Costumes




- Flashback sequence
- Glimpse into his life before he was kidnapped and sold into slavery
- Solomon with his wife and children
- Dressed as any other white family
- Clothes are an indicator of his status as a freeman
- Very different from the tattered and drab clothes he is given as a slave
- Costume as an indicator of the emotional and psychological state of Solomon under slavery--his clothes get increasingly dirty and tattered with the passage of time





18

He used to wear 3-piece suit and hat as displayed in this still from the movie. So costumes are an indicator of the emotional and psychological state of different people. Before he has been abducted and sold into slavery, we find that the rich texture of his clothes also suggests a happy life and in contrast we find that the rags which he had to wear during his slavery also project the hardships of his life.

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Costumes: Patsey wears simple frocks and gowns (hand-me-downs). Mrs Epps wears fashionable contemporary styles--expensive fabrics, head-pieces, elaborate layers of skirts etc. She asserts her superiority through her clothes. Compounds Patsey's misery as Mrs Epps is jealous of her husband's weakness for a slave girl whom he exploits physically and sexually





19

The difference in the costumes can also be seen in these two contrasting pictures. One of Patsey who wears simple, handmade gowns and frocks and the costumes of Mrs. Epps. So we find that costumes have been very effectively used in this movie to capture the historical timeline depicted in the memoir and also to project the moods of different characters. In the movie, we find that the use of religion by the slaves as well as by the slave owners has been depicted in a very significant manner.

In the memoir also, we find that it plays a significant part and this aspect has been kept intact in the movie version also. So we find that Master Ford uses Bible to preach Christian values to posit slavery as a benevolent institution. And at the same time we find that Master Epps uses Bible to assert his own superiority as the lord and the master. So we find that the Bible has been used selectively to justify the cruelty on the slaves.

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Over the shoulder shot between Platt and Mr. Bass, an abolitionist. He listens to Platt's remarkable tale and eventually helps out (at great risk to himself) Platt by informing his family about his whereabouts and circumstances.



The image shows a scene from the movie '12 Years a Slave' where Brad Pitt, as Mr. Bass, is shown in an over-the-shoulder shot, listening intently to another man. The scene is set outdoors with trees in the background.

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Similarly, we find that in this over the shoulder shot between Platt and Mr. Bass who is an abolitionist. We find that it suggests the deconcentration with which Mr. Bass is listening to the difficulties of Platt and later on convinced by Platt's depiction he also helps him to move out of the slavery later on.

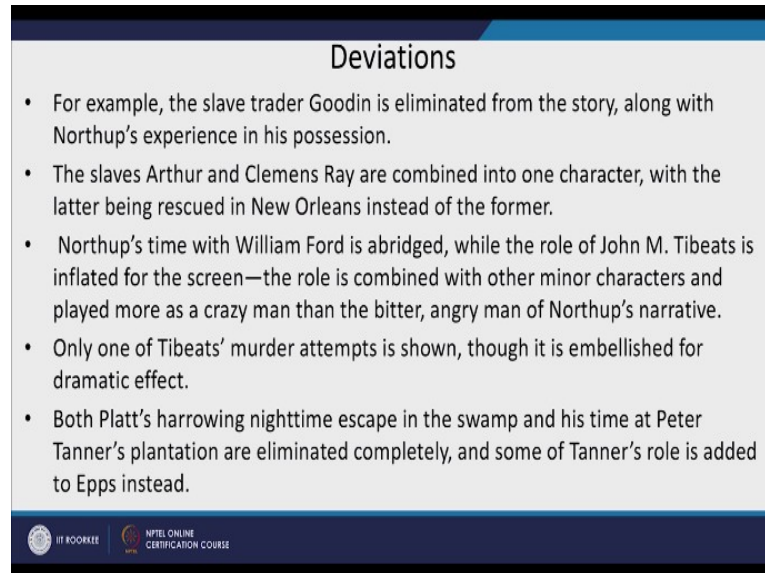
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- The film is generally faithful to Northup's memoir as a whole, even lifting some dialogue directly from the memoir, including Freeman's heartless reasons for not selling Emily to William Ford.
- Out of necessity, though, the movie is not as concerned with factual detail as Solomon Northup was.
- This results in shortcuts of storytelling and a muddying of facts that are often found in book-to-film adaptations.

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So we can say that the film is generally faithful to Northup's memoir as a whole, even lifting some dialogue directly from the memoir. However, out of necessity, we find that there are many positions of the memoir which have been cut out.

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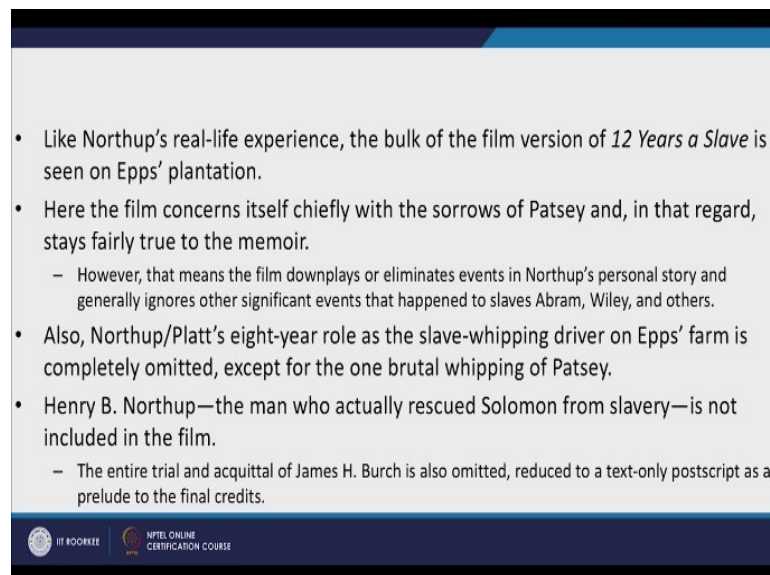
Deviations

- For example, the slave trader Goodin is eliminated from the story, along with Northup's experience in his possession.
- The slaves Arthur and Clemens Ray are combined into one character, with the latter being rescued in New Orleans instead of the former.
- Northup's time with William Ford is abridged, while the role of John M. Tibbeats is inflated for the screen—the role is combined with other minor characters and played more as a crazy man than the bitter, angry man of Northup's narrative.
- Only one of Tibbeats' murder attempts is shown, though it is embellished for dramatic effect.
- Both Platt's harrowing nighttime escape in the swamp and his time at Peter Tanner's plantation are eliminated completely, and some of Tanner's role is added to Epps instead.

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And we find that there are various characters who have been left out as we have listed in these two slides and at the same time we find that the identity has been changed, the number of people has been changed.

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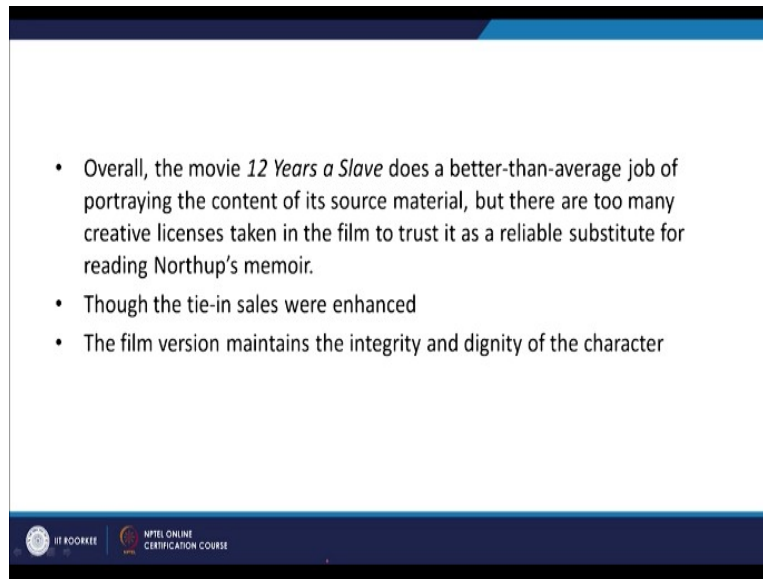


- Like Northup's real-life experience, the bulk of the film version of *12 Years a Slave* is seen on Epps' plantation.
- Here the film concerns itself chiefly with the sorrows of Patsey and, in that regard, stays fairly true to the memoir.
 - However, that means the film downplays or eliminates events in Northup's personal story and generally ignores other significant events that happened to slaves Abram, Wiley, and others.
- Also, Northup/Platt's eight-year role as the slave-whipping driver on Epps' farm is completely omitted, except for the one brutal whipping of Patsey.
- Henry B. Northup—the man who actually rescued Solomon from slavery—is not included in the film.
 - The entire trial and acquittal of James H. Burch is also omitted, reduced to a text-only postscript as a prelude to the final credits.

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And certain sequences have also been changed but let us say that this was a compulsion to fit a detailed memoir into the small time available to the movie.

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- Overall, the movie *12 Years a Slave* does a better-than-average job of portraying the content of its source material, but there are too many creative licenses taken in the film to trust it as a reliable substitute for reading Northup's memoir.
- Though the tie-in sales were enhanced
- The film version maintains the integrity and dignity of the character

Overall, we can say that it is a very satisfying movie because it does not take much liberty with the source material and even though there is some pruning which is involved we find that artistically it has been able to maintain the integrity and dignity of not only of the character but also of the basic tone of all the slave memoirs. We had talked about the tie-in sales which exist between the release of a movie and the sales of the novel of the book on which the movie is based.

In this case of *12 Years A Slave* also we find that the tie-in sales were also enhanced. So overall we can say that the adaptation of a literature piece particularly a novel into a movie has its own challenges but ultimately if it has been able to do justice to the spirit of the novel it can also recapture the appeal which the original novel when it published had towards the audience.

However, being a very subjective assessment of the novel, we find that a lot still depends on the sensitivity of the filmmaker and also the sensitivities of the viewers. Thank you.