

War and Womanhood as Palimpsests: Adaptation and the Female Protagonists in *Gone with the Wind* and *Cold Mountain* *

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Abstract

*This paper examines film adaptations of *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and *Cold Mountain* (1997), particularly how their female protagonists, Scarlett O'Hara and Ada Monroe, respectively, are transformed by war and survival. With Linda Hutcheon's concept of adaptation as a layered process, as discussed in *A Theory of Adaptation*, this paper explores how the films inscribe new ideas over the novels, yet continue to leave the source texts visibly imprinted, exactly like a palimpsest. The American Civil War serves as the backdrop for both texts, which portray war as a transforming force that breaks and changes socially accepted gender norms, rewriting female identity, emotion, and agency in ways that typically reconfigure or soften the contentiousness of these original characters. Concluding that adaptation is not just replication or a mere copy, but a layered process of cultural redrafting that mirrors shifting historical, ideological, and gendered perspectives.*

Keywords: adaptation, palimpsest, war, womanhood, gender norms, identity

Introduction

Intertextuality offers the most comprehensive understanding of adaptation, as each retelling preserves elements of the source text. According to Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation*, a palimpsest is a new layer that is placed on top of the old, allowing the older forms to be seen underneath. This enables adaptations to change the original texts while maintaining their essential ideas (Hutcheon 33). To substantiate, Padmanabhan adds, each text carries traces of prior texts and holds potential for future interpretations. This paper explores such layered retellings through the characters of Scarlett O' Hara from *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell and Ada Monroe from *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. Both the books are set in the backdrop of the American Civil War (1861-1865), a period when women's identities were mostly limited to domesticity, reliance, and moral guardianship, and gender roles were rigidly established. These identities were drastically upended by the war, which compelled women to perform physical labour, be emotionally strong, and take on civic responsibilities. The decline of plantation society meant that Southern women like Scarlett would no longer have social standing or economic clout. Women like Ada, who were isolated in rural locations, had to rely on themselves after the war took away their privilege and safety. Through the prism of this historical rupture, both characters are reconstructed in the film adaptations as women who were changed by the redefining of 19th-century womanhood as much as by war. War narratives often

focus on large-scale events, which include cannon blasts, military strategy, and tactical developments. However, beneath the thunder of battle, quieter stories unfold: Conflict leads to a quiet metamorphosis in women whose lives are torn apart and then carefully reassembled. The heroines of the selected movies do not hold muskets in their hands but fight for survival through powerful and paradoxical methods. The two stories extend beyond women enduring wartime, as the war's profound influence redefines femininity through these narratives.

The screen adaptations of the stories undergo interpretations and adjustments from their original text forms while also becoming layered with various emphases and omissions as they reflect as palimpsest. Despite their differing tones and structures, both *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and *Cold Mountain* (1997) place their heroines at the heart of national trauma and utilize war as both setting and dynamic force that serves as character and catalyst while simultaneously driving erasure and renewal. To address the research gap, there is a lack of academic exploration into the transformation of female character arcs that interweave survival, femininity, and trauma through the adaptive use of palimpsest theory proposed by Linda Hutcheon. McCallum states that characters in adaptations function as narrative canvases that undergo continuous revision and reinscription as they interact with time, culture, and the cinematic perspective. This paper examines how war serves as a narrative power and adaptation as palimpsest to reveal the multifaceted process of identity formation that establishes Scarlett and Ada as fictional characters and depictions of war-touched womanhood.

Theoretical Framework

Adaptation, as emphasized by Linda Hutcheon, is a mode of narrative transformation shaped by cultural context, temporal distance, and creative reinterpretation of both the mechanism and the reception, precisely mentioning the nature of adaptation as “palimpsestic doubleness” (Hutcheon 120). The application of a palimpsest metaphor proves essential for understanding the transformation of these women through war's social, emotional, and physical effects. According to Hutcheon, adaptation functions also as a translation method that enables the rethinking and reframing of narratives between different historical and cultural settings while generating new meanings that respect the original work's core identity as corroborated by McCallum. Adaptations are inherently intertextual, drawing on multiple sources and traditions beyond the immediate original” (Stam 64).

These novels move beyond historical retelling of war to explore the intertwined themes of loss, resilience, and trauma. The emotional depth of the original work transfer into adaptations, which aim to depict the psychological and emotional war-induced trauma affecting individuals. War's emotional dimensions continuously influence how the women characters are portrayed. War causes women to develop unique identities that can be seen through the differing responses of Scarlett and Ada. The war rapidly transforms Scarlett from a protected and privileged woman into an independent survivor who places family survival ahead of romantic dreams.

When analysing the portrayal of female characters in war narratives, we need to include gender as an essential element alongside historical and emotional aspects. The movie adaptations of *Gone with the Wind* and *Cold Mountain* faced challenges related to evolving standards for female representation in film and literature. The adaptation process demonstrates current gender role perceptions by showcasing the expected behaviour of women during transformative and critical events. The film adaptations demonstrate Scarlett and Ada's struggle with their feminine identities and their survival tactics in a society ruled by men, which mirrors their outer and inner experiences. The representations in these adaptations often hide essential feminist elements from the source texts while transforming them into more traditional female images, despite the novels demonstrating gender norm subversion through their main characters' defiance of expected roles.

Hutcheon's theory demonstrates that war affects both character formation and their subsequent remembrance and reinterpretation throughout history. These film adaptations reveal their palimpsestic characteristic and influence the presentation of female characters' endurance and traumatic experiences.

Methodology

This study incorporates qualitative textual analysis to compare the literary and cinematic representations of *Gone with the Wind* and *Cold Mountain* based on Linda Hutcheon's concept of palimpsest from *A Theory of Adaptation*.

Scarlett O'Hara: Palimpsest of Survival and Femininity

Margaret Mitchell portrays Scarlett as a typical Southern belle who epitomizes beauty and charm, unaware of the political and economic factors that affect her existence. *Gone with the Wind* is a reflection of nostalgia, and adaptation, critically juxtaposing the past with the present, while highlighting the impossibility of return while also depending on previous experience (Kennedy-Karpat). Scarlett must face not only the war's battle-induced chaos but also the reality that she must redefine her identity in a world that denies her previous role. The way Scarlett changes both the novel and its movie version demonstrates how war acts as a palimpsestic force that superimposes new identities over the original while keeping remnants of the past self. This quote shows her transformation: "Somewhere along the long road to Tara, she had left her girlhood behind her. She was no longer plastic clay, yielding imprint to each new experience. The clay had hardened... Her burdens were her own and burdens were for shoulders strong enough to bear them" (Mitchell 281). The driving force behind Scarlett's transformation stems from her instinct to survive can be seen through this quote: "We're not wheat, we're buckwheat... When a storm comes along, it flattens ripe wheat because it's dry and can't bend with the wind. But ripe buckwheat's got sap in it and it bends... That, my child, is the secret of survival" (Mitchell 482). It offers a complex portrayal of Scarlett O'Hara, who defies traditional gender roles and embodies resilience and determination in the face of adversity.

The war devastates the South, which forces Scarlett to leave behind her old priorities of wealth and beauty, and social standing to focus on more practical objectives. The core transition in Scarlett's character development involves her mastering manipulation of her surroundings and people to protect herself and her family through deeds that challenge conventional feminine roles.

Scarlett's transformation represents a layered evolution where survival mechanisms intertwine with aspects of femininity. War acts as a catalyst for her to cast off the societal roles that previously defined her womanhood. Transforming the novel into a film demonstrates the continuation of this process. The cinematic version of Scarlett demonstrates her tenacity and instinctual drive to survive, yet diminishes certain harsh elements found in the book's characterisation. Scarlett frequently acts out of self-serving motives to protect her wealth and social position, which makes her appear harsh and unfeeling. The film adaptation transforms Scarlett's character to deliver a more compassionate representation. The character utilizes survival tactics which remain visible but the narrative frames these actions to reveal her emotional fragility through her unreciprocated love for Ashley. The adaptation showcases palimpsestic qualities through Scarlett's character development by maintaining her essential attributes yet enhancing her narrative with deeper emotional layers which redefine her survival role (Gall, Miller, and Sharrad 1112).

Scarlett's transformation becomes clear when we understand that the war serves as the mechanism through which she demonstrates a new meaning of womanhood. Scarlett survives by rejecting the traditional feminine role since she refuses to conform to passive womanhood

during her era. She assumes an assertive role by accepting traditionally masculine responsibilities such as running a business and dealing with challenging social and economic situations.

“There was no going back and she was going forward” (Mitchell 287)

War moulds Scarlett’s emotional and psychological development by forcing her to confront her inner desires and limitations through the trauma and loss she experiences. The war acts as a physical and symbolic force that removes Scarlett’s previous layers of identity to expose a stronger version of herself.

The film transformation of Scarlett’s character from *Gone with the Wind* both strengthens these themes and alters her depiction. The film employs visual storytelling and narrative techniques to highlight Scarlett’s emotional depth and internal struggles while showcasing her fortitude to build a more multidimensional and sympathetic character. The movie emphasises Scarlett’s strong-willed nature and ingenuity through scenes that show her leadership in keeping her family alive. The film depicts Scarlett’s survival instincts from the novel alongside her emotional vulnerability that appears prominently through her interactions with Rhett Butler and Ashley Wilkes. Scarlett’s silhouette against the flames in the blazing scene of Atlanta, which features both wide-angle and low-angle images, is among the most famous instances. By elevating her form, this dramatic arrangement makes her a visual representation of rebellion and tenacity. This scene’s lighting, with its stark contrasts between firelight and darkness, reflects her inner power and conflict. Close-ups of her deliberate facial expressions are also used throughout the movie to graphically convey her capacity to project control and repress vulnerability. The adaptation reveals its palimpsestic nature through Scarlett’s transformation from a practical survivor into a character with inner emotional conflicts while preserving her fundamental personality. The story of Scarlett shows how the war robs her of her social identity and compels her to redefine herself as a woman by action and tenacity. Her basic power is preserved in the film version, which softens some of her more acerbic qualities while presenting a traumatised yet emotionally complex lady. Her tale becomes a testament to vulnerability, tenacity, and survival.

Ada Monroe: Palimpsest of Fragility and Strength

“This journey will be the axle on which my life turns” (Frazier, 29)

Ada Monroe starts off as an emotionally sheltered, well-educated Charleston woman who is more suited to poetry and piano playing than to farming and surviving. In contrast to Scarlett, who faces war with external defiance, Ada must gradually unlearn privilege and reliance in order to develop inner strength. There prevails a drastic difference among these characters. The war pushes Scarlett toward physical survival tasks while Ada develops through emotional maturation and discovers her inner power. Ada’s initial state at the novel’s start shows her fragility as a well-educated yet delicate Charleston woman who lacks preparation for the toughness of farming life and war violence. When her father passes away and war follows her to North Carolina’s rural mountains Ada faces isolation which forces her to deal with her vulnerabilities and a world without comfort or safety. Through her survival journey Ada undergoes a transformation which examines how feminine vulnerability meets unexpected strength when faced with wartime adversity. Her narrative illustrates both her survival against physical odds and an emotional endurance, which transforms her sense of self over time.

"She had watched the turned ground passing... and had snatched up three partial arrowheads... Looks like not much, she said. It takes faith..." (Frazier 211)

Ada transforms through her bond with Ruby, a mountain woman who teaches her essential survival and self-reliance skills. Ruby’s influence on Ada is profound. Ada gains knowledge about physical survival techniques like food cultivation and shelter building through her relationship with Ruby while also developing emotional resilience. While Ruby represents a

more traditional, active form of strength, Ada's transformation highlights a different aspect of survival: The capability of adjusting both emotional and cognitive states to environments where former identity beliefs and agency concepts become irrelevant (McCallum). The process unfolds slowly as Ada overcomes her fragile self-image to discover she can survive independently despite intense grief and isolation.

Ada also goes on a silent psychological journey as she deals with the loss of her former life and her father's passing. Although her loss makes her feel lonely, it also helps her grow emotionally. Through lengthy close-ups and muted tones that highlight her loneliness and desire, the movie visualises this change. Ada gains endurance by finding calm in her surroundings rather than by controlling them.

Ada's journey focuses on her ability to endure rather than taking active steps. Ada survives by enduring difficult situations without losing hope, instead of engaging in large-scale acts of defiance or victory. Her transformation demonstrates how women in war need emotional resilience to survive both in reality and fiction. Ada's ability to find peace and strength in a world that has been shattered by war reflects a different kind of femininity: Ada's strength stems from internal balance rather than public demonstrations of power during times of loss.

Ada's inner peace and rejuvenation are externalised in the movie adaptation through the utilisation of natural scenery and soothing lighting. Ada's peaceful reading, gentle smiles at Ruby, and farm care scenes portray emotional stability instead of ostentatious behaviour. Nicole Kidman's understated portrayal shows how war has changed her in subtler, more enduring ways rather than hardening her. The film version of *Cold Mountain* presents Ada's transformation in a more subdued manner compared to the original book. Natural lighting, subdued colour schemes, and framing that places Ada in isolation all visually depict her development. In contrast to subsequent shots of her working next to Ruby, when lighter hues and more open compositions signify emotional recovery, the usage of prolonged close-ups on her face at times of loss and introspection is used. Nicole Kidman's portrayal of Ada's metamorphosis is mostly based on controlled body language and emotion, using subtle, pictured endurance rather than dramatic action. The novel explores Ada's emotional journey through her internal conflicts and her developing strength while the film adaptation concentrates more on her visual transformation. Ada's vulnerability receives emphasis during the beginning of the film while her connection with Ruby becomes central to her survival. The adaptation juxtaposes Ruby's active strength against Ada's subtle spiritual survival method. This change in storytelling demonstrates how adaptations operate as palimpsests because emotional depth gets simplified or modified to meet the demands of both visual storytelling and narrative requirements. However, despite these changes, the core of Ada's transformation remains intact: Ada transforms quietly into a resilient survivor who adapts to a world that has stripped away the comforts of her former life.

Ada's character demonstrates palimpsestic layering throughout the film by showing how her emotional resilience supports her physical survival. Through Ada's journey readers witness a detailed representation of survival that examines women's emotional work alongside physical endurance during dire situations. Ada's identity development throughout *Cold Mountain* reveals a palimpsest of femininity that offers a deeper complexity and multiple dimensions beyond standard female representations in wartime stories.

Comparative Discussion: War, Gender, and Adaptation as Palimpsest

Despite having different reactions to battle, Scarlett and Ada both paint complex pictures of female survival. In both books, the Civil War serves as an agency that dismantles and reshapes femininity rather than just a background. The changes that each woman undergoes are a reflection of both her own struggles and larger cultural concerns about the roles that women are compelled to play at times of national crisis.

Adaptation does not simply retell the story; it reshapes gender narratives based on the values of the time. Scarlett's deceptive survival tactics are minimised in the movie, making her more likable to a wider audience. Conversely, Ada's quiet strength is preserved, but her internal complexity is simplified through a visual lens. These changes highlight the tendency for movie adaptations to put emotional readability ahead of psychological ambiguity.

Scarlett is physically strong, assertive, and combative; she leads, oversees plantations, and makes morally dubious decisions to survive. In contrast, Ada's power is internal and emotional; she gains survival skills via quiet resilience, self-reliance, and patience. These characteristics are layered differently in the film adaptations: Ada's emotional development is physically highlighted, but her underlying psychological complexity is reduced, while Scarlett's harshness is softened to arouse pity. When seen as a whole, these depictions demonstrate how conflict rewrites women through various but equally potent endurance narratives.

The divergent character arcs of Scarlett and Ada demonstrate how they each adopted different approaches to gender roles and societal expectations during wartime. The way Scarlett survives involves her refusal to adhere to traditional Southern womanhood norms. She demonstrates male-oriented resilience by performing traditionally male roles, including plantation management and business operations, while using manipulation and force to protect her family's interests. The character's rejection of traditional femininity remains central throughout the narrative, and the adaptation portrays her choices as both empowering and tragic. The adaptation shows Scarlett as a complex character because she survives by constantly changing herself to fit new circumstances during wartime.

Ada embodies a conventional femininity that remains subversive in nature. Ada gains her power from cultivating internal strength and resilience instead of outward rebellion. Ada's transformation demonstrates how war alters a woman's identity by emphasizing her emotional and psychological endurance as she navigates grief and survival to gain empowerment.

Conclusion

The adapted versions of Scarlett and Ada's stories demonstrate how war not only changes female identity but also complicates its remembrance and retelling. However, there are interpretative limitations when moving from page to screen. For visual effect or audience reaction, the nuances of internal turmoil, psychological pain, and changing agency are frequently reframed. These intricacies may be softened, compressed, or recoded in film adaptations, especially when showcasing feminine power in the context of historical suffering. Although adaptation's palimpsestic quality fosters the emergence of new meanings, it also runs the danger of sacrificing narrative complexity in favour of emotional accessibility. In the end, these representations show not just how women survive war, but also how society decides to recall that resilience, layered, broken, and filtered through the prism of shifting media and eras. This analysis supports adaptation studies and encourages further research into war narratives and gender transformation through the palimpsestic process.

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