

EXAMINING THE HUMAN RIGHTS IN TERMS OF THE FILM OF STRAW DOGS

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Abstract

The movie "Straw Dogs" which was directed by Sam Peckinpah has been probably one of the most controversial films in film history.(Peckinpach, 1971).On one hand, all elements that make the film watchable and attractive to the audience such as excitement, sensation, violence, thrill and sexuality are presented in the film. In addition to that, the movie makes you release adrenaline and it –in Freudian terms– increases libido. On the other hand the movie was banned for years by England which has been accepted as the cradle of civilization and democracy and which should be away from any limitations , restriction and censorship. This case also makes the movie charming and interesting. This study analyzes the subject matter "human rights" which hasn't been examined that much. The fact that this film was banned in England is analyzed in terms of human rights throughout this study.

Keywords: Human Rights, Straw Dogs, Movie

1. INTRODUCTION

Human beings have been trying to protect the values, moral and material gains and fund of knowledge in their adventure of living and existing. They have struggled to live honestly, independently and equally. After years of struggle, they have gained individual rights such as particularly right to life, right to freedom of thought and religion, right to privacy of personal life and immunity of domicile. They have also gained superiority of law, presumption of innocence and right to be judged which fundamental elements of a modern and democratic society are. These rights have become untransferable and inalienable. These values and rights have entered into the constitutions of all modern and democratic governments beginning from 20th century and have been put under protection by naming them as "Fundamental Rights". In Straw Dogs, the struggle of man to protect the rights which he owns is shown.

1.1. Human Rights and Cinema

1.1.1. The Perspective of Human Rights

Human rights, without any discrimination or differentiation, is the whole of rights that people have by birth just because they are human beings. To describe these rights as legal terms, to express them in written way, to adopt these rights with legal documents and to secure them with constitutions have been taken years of struggle in pursue of equality, freedom and justice

In 1215, Magna Carta Libertatum (The Great Charter) limited the powers and authorities of the king in England. This was the first document which had ever restricted the absolute powers of rulers in the world which has been accepted as an important progress in the democracy and human rights. Before Magna Carta was passed , the powers of king unlimited in terms of taxes and military had been unlimited. In addition, this document made clear that no one could be arrested and put in prison without court decision and legal basis.

Constitution of the Commonwealth of Virginia enacted on June 12th, 1776 and Virginia Declaration of Rights which was in the first part of this constitution were the first documents to list individual rights and freedoms and to regard them as superior provisions of law. In the following years, Virginia Declaration of Rights stood as an

example for other governments to prepare their own constitutions and declaration of rights. The United States Declaration of Independence enacted on July 4th, 1776 defined the principles of certain rights and freedoms such as political equality, pursuit of life, pursuit of freedom and pursuit of happiness. With this historical document, these rights were put down in black and white. As a result of American Declarations, the beliefs that government had to protect and secure some rights with laws and constitutions were put in practice. These rights were ones that every person has by birth and are named as "principle rights" by philosophers.

Both individual rights, political elements and constitutional principles that form modern government were manifested in 1789 The Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. Along with individual rights, such principles as national state, supremacy of law and secularism started to find place in the constitutions of various countries beginning from 19th century.

In spite of the developments in democracy and human rights, two world wars took place in 20th century caused millions of death. Because of the economic fall, dearth, famine and poverty appeared in the countries which involved in the war or didn't involve in the war. These miseries of 20th century showed how important the human rights were for all countries and peoples. In order to prevent such miseries from happening again, international organizations were formed from the second half of 20th century on. The most extensive, important and effective organization – United Nations – was founded in 1945.

United Nations approved The Universal Declaration of Human Rights on December 10th, 1948. The idea of human rights reached an important point with this declaration in 20th century. Furthermore, some control mechanisms were formed like Council of Europe (1949) founded to protect human rights internationally, European Convention on Human Rights (1950) to which countries are obliged to stick and European Court of Human Rights (1959) accepted to prevent human rights violations. Again, the scope of human rights widened in 20th century. Social, economic and cultural rights such as social security, health, education, rest, entertainment and holiday rights gained importance and were secured by law. Some new rights called as right to solidarity like right to environment, right to peace, right to improvement and right to respect the common heritage of humankind were brought to agenda.

1.1.2. Cinema and Human Rights

There are lots of films in cinema history which deal with human rights directly or indirectly. This study mentions about just three of them; *On the Waterfront*, *Spartacus*, *Dersu Uzala*, *The Conversation* and *Mississippi Burning*.

The film *Spartacus* (1960) is based on the story of slaves who rebelled against Roman Empire in order to be able to live independently and freely in the First Age (71 BC). (Kubrick, 1960). This film is also important in terms of the time period when the story was made into the film. Dalton Trumbo who is the screenwriter of the film was accused of being communist in 1947 when McCarthyism was dominant in the US, he was blacklisted and sentenced to imprisonment. Screenwriters blacklisted like him used pseudonym and worked with pseudonyms. For the first time in this film, Trumbo's real name was used and the restriction imposed by McCarthyism was flouted this way. Kirk Douglas played a huge role in flouting this rule. He insisted that Trumbo's name should be shown on the screen in generics. (*Spartacus*, Wikipedia, acc.2014)

On the Waterfront (1954) tells the story of struggle against the gang (a syndicate master) who exercises power over dockers and tries to exploit them in McCarthyism and Cold War periods. (Kazan, 1954). It is one of the best films made on resistance to oppression. The film emphasizes that it is crucial for workers to cooperate, act together and use the right to unite in industrial society.

Dersu Uzala (1975) shows how the relationship between nature and people is important. The film focuses on love of nature, the meaning of nature and friendship, responsibility for nature while industrialism and urbanization are increasing. It also gives importance to live in accordance with nature. Toward the end of 20th century, in 1982, because of the damages made by technological and scientific developments, United Nations approved some rights and included them into human rights category. These rights were right to environment, right to peace, right to improvement and right to respect the common heritage of humankind which are called right to solidarity. Taking into consideration that the film was shot before that date (1975), it can be understood that Akira Kurosawa is so sensitive to the protection of nature and right to environment.

The movie *The Conversation* (1974) was shot right after Watergate Scandal had occurred in the US in 1972. The movie focuses on the right to privacy. (Coppola, 1974) Harry who is an expert in following people and

monitoring them secretly is assigned by somebody mysterious and quite powerful that he has to follow a young couple and spy on. Harry begins to record the couple's talk on tape. He gradually gets involved in their life, feels that these people will be victims of murder and starts to question his job. This film represents paranoia and uneasiness about being monitored and listened in American domestic politics and social life after Watergate Scandal occurred in 1970s. In this film, the fear of "somebody is watching us", "we are being monitored and listened" can be seen obviously and the irony that being watched while watching is presented to the audience.

Mississippi Burning (1988) is based on the discrimination which continued in America till the second half of 20th century (till 1970s). (Parker, 1988). The film shows what the two FBI agents do after three black men who supported civil rights were killed by Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi in 1964.

2.THE MOVIE 'STRAW DOGS'

2.1. The Movie 'Straw Dogs'

The film Straw Dogs, especially with its final scene (the last 30 minutes), has been remembered with its violent scenes and criticized because of these scenes. David who is a foreigner living in one of the villages of England is said : " I heard that bad things are happening in the US. Bombings, revolts, assassinations, blacks are being killed, they say that it is almost impossible to walk on the streets. 'That's why, it is important to take into consideration that the film is an Hollywood film shot in America. Political and social movements and violent protests in the period when the film was shot are crucial while analyzing the film.

2.1.1.America at the Time That the Movie Straw Dogs was Shot.

Before this movie was turned into a screenplay in 1971, there were lots of political and individual acts of violence in America which shook all the world in 1960s.

These are some of the acts of violences : US President John Kennedy (1963), Martin Luther King (1966) who was an human rights activist and supporter of freedom of blacks, senator Robert Kennedy (1968) were assassinated. The other one was My Lai Massacre which happened during Vietnam War and resulted in hundreds of civilian deaths by US soldiers.

Here are two examples of individual violence acts happened at the same period which effected America and all the world: in 1960, Boston Strangler (Albert DeSalvo) killed a number of women by strangling them and he became the symbol of serial killer cases. Charles Manson and his four followers killed actress Sharon Tate who was two weeks from giving birth and her friends (1969).

Because of all these shocking events, American people began to be pessimistic and hopeless. The song "The Sound of Silence" (Simon,1967) was regarded as a silent protest and reaction to the violent events that were sweeping American Society.

2.1.2. Why was the Film Straw Dogs Banned in England?

These violent events happen in Twickenham which is in the west of England and is near to London. There is a connection between that the places shown in the movie were chosen from England, not from the US and that the film was banned in England for years. The screenwriters and director might be emphasizing that these violence events can happen in any part of the world, not just in America. Furthermore, such rights like right to life and immunity of domicile might be disregarded, violated and not be safe even in England which is the cradle of democracy. This very point can explain why the film was banned in England for years. It was banned because it was thought that these kind of violations and violent acts couldn't happen in England at the end of the 20th century.

2.1.3. The Plot and Storyline of the Film

David Summer (Dustin Hoffman) a mathematician goes to the town where his wife Amy (Susan George) was born and grown in order to be able to write his book in a quiet place. It seems that this town in the west of England and close to London is a quiet and calm place. They decide to stay in a house outside of the town.

There is a garage next to the house and its roof needs repairing. David makes a deal with Charlie Venner (Peter Vaughan) with whom Amy has had an emotional affair and his three friends. Repairing takes a little longer than expected. Newlywed and 22 years old Amy has disappointments during this period because she expects love, emotional and sexual response from her husband. However, David is not aware of it. He tries to adapt himself to the new environment and focuses on the studies in his field. Amy wears erotic clothes and behaves seductively which seduce the people in the town and especially the four men repairing the roof. One of these men, Charlie who has had a relationship with Amy before and Charlie's friend Norman plans to rape Amy. These four men invite David to hunt in the forest, but they leave him there alone. Charlie comes home and rapes Amy. At first Amy resists Charlie. She feels quite complicated and then gives up resisting Charlie and they make love. While they are making love, something that Amy doesn't want and Charlie doesn't expect happens; Norman also rapes Amy. Shocked and shaken, Amy argues with David and calls him "my hero" sarcastically. Beware of nothing, David fires the four men who delays repairing.

Later on, they go on living in this calm town. One day, Amy and David participate in a night party where an annual tradition is celebrated. Disturbed by being in the same place with the men who raped her and annoyed by their behaviours, Amy wants to leave the party early. David and Amy leave there for their home and get on their car. The road is quite foggy and dark. The car moves slowly.

While they are going, another dramatic event happens in the other part of the town. A young girl who gets bored of the party takes a mentally retarded boy Henry Niles to backroom. She tries to seduce and make love with him whom she has been trying to seduce for a long time. Henry is a mentally retarded boy and reminds of Lennie in *Of Mice and Men*. (Steinbeck, 1937). When Henry hears that the girl's parents are looking for her, he panics, closes her mouth with his hand and most probably causes her death. (It is ambiguous in the film whether she dies or not and it looks like this is done on purpose.) When her father, drunkard Tom and his friends cannot find her, they get mad. They begin to attack everything not only because they cannot find the girl but also they are drunk. Henry throws himself to the street. He is terribly scared and doesn't know what to do. He looks for a safe place to hide. Henry driving slowly in the dark road hits Henry. Out of fear and hurry, they get off the car, take Henry to their house for treatment. David and Amy are unaware of everything and they call the townspeople to say that Henry is with them. Tom and the four men worked to repair the roof want to find Henry quickly and sentence him. They go to David's house and want him to give Henry to them. From this moment on, film turns into one which is full of violence and takes another form.

David doesn't want to give Henry in to these men. Because He is wounded and mentally disabled. In addition to that, it is not clear whether he is guilty or not. David, first of all, wants him to be treated and then to be given in to the town judge. For this purpose, he wants commander who is responsible for the laws in the town to come. When he comes home, a fight starts and Tom shoots him during the fight. At that moment, David understands that law is gone, tyranny, violence and bullying reign in this town. He knows that if he lets assailants take Henry, he will be lynched and there is no chance for Amy and him to live here anymore. He has to do everything to save his wife Amy and Henry. In this struggle, even his wife Amy doesn't support him. She fears and is in panic. She thinks that if they give Henry in, they will be safe again and get rid of these men. That's why she wants to give Henry in to these vulgar and brutal assailants. One way or another, David convinces Amy who has difficulty in thinking reasonably out of despair and fear. They do everything to stay alive. These men look down upon David from the very beginning. They think he is a weak and pathetic man. But they are shocked and go crazy when they see that he defends himself, his wife and Henry mercilessly and decidedly. They start destroying and burning everything. These very scenes in which fight and struggle are going on have turned into one that have been most controversial. The result is that everything is burnt and destroyed in and out of the house, the men are killed and there is blood everywhere.

3.THE VALUES THAT ARE HANDLED IN THE FILM

3.1.Supremacy of Law and Human Rights

In this film, some rights like supremacy of law, presumption of innocence, right to be judged, right to life, immunity of domicile, the right to privacy, to protect the disabled and responsibility towards nature and other living things are handled and overviewed.

When their cat is killed, Amy worries and says ; "We had better leave the town". But David says no. With these statements, it is emphasized that nobody can be accused without enough proof (presumption of innocence and

the right to be judged). David adopts the same attitude when it comes to give Henry Niles in to the assailants. Amy says ; "I don't want him to stay here". David replies; "He will stay here till doctor comes!" And he doesn't let assailants take Henry. In his attitude and words, such values as to protect the disabled, wounded and defenceless are emphasized.

When three of assailants enter David's home to get Henry, he resists them by saying; "I am responsible for him because this is my house. Until doctor and police come, he will stay here with me." Amy answers ; "Let them take Henry" .David says; "they will kill him". When Amy says that she did not care, David replies that he cares, this is where he lives and this is how he lives, and he will not let them damage this house. With his words, it is understood that he is determined to protect another person's right to life, immunity of domicile and right to privacy.

When commander John Scott who is responsible for the law in town comes, he says that all assailants are drunk. David says by insisting that he knew and John had to do whatever is required according to the laws (supremacy of law)

3.2.The Conflict between Rural and Urban Values

David is found odd, looked down on and mocked by townspeople since he arrives at the town where Amy is born and grown up. In the beginning, he denies all these and wants to focus on his studies. Town seems calm and quiet. However, on the very first day, David witnesses Tom's vandalism in the bar who is a well known drunkard and trouble maker. Tom behaves in a very brutal and cruel way. On the contrary, David is an intellectual, cultured and educated man. The difference between urban and rural values, the feeling of teaching urban people their place and hatred toward an outsider are the main causes of all these violent acts. David experiences the same cultural conflicts and disagreements with his wife who is also from this town. Their difference appear in the very moment that their life is at risk and their security of life threatened by the men. David acts with his common sense and reasonably. However, Amy thinks that they can get rid of the men by giving Henry in to the men.

3.3. Straw Dogs and Woman Rights

Both the film and its director has been criticized harshly because of it depiction of Amy. Besides violence, his approach to women's role in society, seductive clothes Amy wears and erotic scenes and her indecisive attitudes when she is raped have been criticized and discussed heavily. However, Amy's attitudes and acts are not that much consistent throughout the movie. She is newly married and 22 years old. She is not satisfied emotionally and sexually. She is from rural. She is lack of education and culture that David has. All her confusion while she was raped, her indecision, her instability and her contradictory behaviours and why she refuses to defend herself during the fight is understandable when her background is taken into consideration. That's why, since 1971 (the film was produced) and all the social events that were going on when the film was shot, this character (Amy) can be evaluated in a temperate way. While doing so, it is crucial to take into consideration that how far women rights have come.

4.REMAKE OF THE FILM, STRAW DOGS (2011)

This work analyzes the film which was made in 1971. The other and newer version of the film was shot in 2011. 2011 version is different from 1971 version of the film. In this movie, events happen not in England, but in America.⁽¹⁰⁾ The main character, David, is not a mathematician but an scriptwriter. This was done on purpose. In this version, David writes a script. His scenario and plot of the film are related to each other. What he writes and what values the film tries to emphasize coincide in the sense of human rights and certain values. David works on the Battle of Stalingrad happened during World War II in 1943. David is asked why he writes a scenario about Russians. He replies in these sentences: "I don't agree with that statement. I think this is an universal concern and fight in order to survive. The determination to resist and the belief changed the whole course of events in history. The Nazis invaded 90 % Stalingrad but Russians defeated the Nazis thanks to Russians' perseverance." The scene where David struggles to defend himself, his wife Amy and the disabled boy Jeremy (1971 disabled man Henry Niles, was named Jeremy Niles in this film 2011) is shot in front of the photographs which depict the Battle of Stalingrad. This scene is symbolic obviously which associates David's struggle with the battle.

The values on which the movie makes emphasis are given more clearly in 2011 version. In the beginning of the film, David refers to the townsmen and says ; They are like straw dogs. According to an antique Chinese ritual, straw dogs are sacrificed to Gods. They respect the dogs during the ritual. However, the dogs are thrown away and left when the ritual is over. People whose football career is over experience the same thing. Don't offend, it does not have anything to do with you, you are not one of them, at least no longer. "

On the other hand, the values that dominate the town are expressed by the characters in these words :

"We watch over everyone whoever is on our side." (Charlie tells to David)

"This must be global warming that you educated men are always talking about." (a character tells to David during hunt). Besides, respect to the nature, environment and other living things is shown clearly in these scenes where hunting ban is violated.

In one scene, David leaves the church early. When Charlie realizes that, David tells him ; "It is not for me, that's all. Religion, god, Flood Myth (Noah Flood), Gomorrah, Kirat or others. All of them are meaningless for me." Charlie threatens David because he thinks that David looks down on his traditional values. Charlie says ; "Let me tell you something! You had better not think that you are better than everybody in this town. But if you think that you are better than God, this is another think, dud. I tell it for your own good."

In summary, human rights and supremacy of law, the conflict between urban and rural are among the subjects given in the scenes and dialogues of 2011 version of the film Straw Dogs. However, it can be said that this new version of the film is far from the naturality of the 1971 version. Also it does not reflect the depth and essence of the older one.

RESULT

Atilla Dorsay,(1971) who has a big role to improve movie criticism in Turkey, said concerning Straw Dogs ;

"Violence is the biggest problem in modern societies, especially in the West. The first country that is effected by violence is America, indeed. A crazy night in which David has to defend himself, his wife and an innocent boy against a violent mob can show how a calm person can turn into a fearless, cruel and wild one under the guidance of his instincts. Peckinpah puts emphasis on the basis the violence. He indicates how violence erupts, how the smallest thing become larger and how violence can show itself even in modernest places. The film 'Straw Dogs' is an important film with regard to its plot, subject matter, language."

As the study tries to prove from the very beginning; it analyzes the subject matter "human rights" which hasn't been examined that much. The fact that this film was banned in England is analyzed in terms of human rights throughout this study. The scriptwriters of Straw Dogs aim to give that message; In a democratic society and government which is based on supremacy of law , all human rights such as right to life and immunity of domicile has been gained as a result of long-lasting struggles. Any person should fight to protect his/her rights regardless of where she/he is or what conditions he/she is in. For that reason, probably, there is this sentence in the very beginning of the film;

"All places, characters and event in this photoplay are fictional and any similitary to any actual persons, living or dead, or to any actual places and events is purely coincidental and unintentional."

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