

## **Narrating Cultures Narrating Resistance: A Look at Cinematic Adaptations of Shakespeare**

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### **Abstract**

The paper seeks to argue that adaptation is an act of re-writing and re-visioning which is at once a liberating, progressive and subversive exercise especially when it involves texts that are revered across cultures as symbols of art/ literature's 'universality'. Not only does adaptation challenge the notions of hegemony within the domain of art and culture but can also develop into a form of cultural resistance and re-presentation. The paper probes the cultural and ideological functions of adaptations of canons showing how it is an extremely political exercise.

One can safely acknowledge the fact that Shakespeare is one of the central figures of the western canon representing the cultural and linguistic reach of the Empire around the globe. In our own contemporary age too Shakespeare continues to remain one of the most adapted and appropriated literary figures across mediums and genres. Hence one has to ask how and why does Shakespeare capture the imagination of audiences that are temporally or culturally far removed. What strategies of rewriting revisioning during the process of adaptation are employed that helps to render Shakespeare within newer concepts and meanings.

Hence for this purpose the paper will take into account certain important film adaptations of Shakespeare's plays. Films as a popular medium have often been accused of being one dimensional especially in their treatment of canonical literatures in a sense that they often reaffirm the inherent cultural concepts/discourses of the 'original'. However the selected adaptations of Shakespeare not only liberate the text but also seek to liberate their own cultural and political histories thus opening ways to engage with textual and social history in their own cultural context and that of Shakespeare's.

The paper will look into film adaptations like Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* 1964 and *Karol Lir* (1971) Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) as well as polish director Andrzej Wajda's *Siberian Lady Macbeth* (1962) based on Russian novelist Nikolai Leskov's novella *Lady*

*Macbeth of Mtsenk* (1865) and Jocelyne Moorhouse's *A Thousand Acres* (1997) based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by American author Jane Smiley.

**Keywords:** Adaptation, Cinema, Canons, Discourse, Ideology, Trans Cultural, Revision, Rewriting.

One can safely acknowledge the fact that Shakespeare is a powerful symbol within the western canon denoting the cultural and linguistic reach of the Empire around the globe. However, it is also true that the idea of a universal, pure unadulterated Shakespeare today is no longer attainable. This paper will discuss certain film adaptations of Shakespeare across national cultural and temporal boundaries.

The films taken into consideration are Grigori Kozintsev's *Hamlet* 1964 and *Karol Lir* (1971), Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) as well as polish director Andrzej Wajda's *Siberian Lady Macbeth* (1962) and Jocelyne Moorhouse's *A Thousand Acres* (1997) . The paper will try to focus upon the desire and need that informs thy process of adaptation or revision of texts. The idea then is to read not only Shakespeare but as, cultural critic Raymond Williams suggests, all human cultural activity as an interaction between tradition and the immediate lived experience, to place texts in relation to their historical contexts as well as place them within a larger continuity with "other works and ideas" as well as a "variety of actual experience" (38). Further, we also know that discourses carry within them ideologies, certain selective interpretations, and perceptions of reality are legitimised over others which are then sold as cultural truths. Hence the task of an informed reader or viewer becomes to be conscious of this very important connection between power and ideology and how it influences the process of meaning-making. The given phenomenon of adaptation can be seen as a form of re-visiting and re-visioning texts like that of Shakespeare, wringing them out of their fixed positions, engaging with them to create a dialogue with the dominant cultural and ideological currents in the society.

The first set of films that the paper will discuss are the two adaptations of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* by the soviet director Grigori Kozintsev whose fifty-year long career began during the years of the First World War and the Bolshevik revolution going through the dramatic rise and fall of the Soviet regime, the Second World War and the cold war period. During this time, the director donned many hats, from working closely with the state initially for helping the socialist cause to later working against it to criticize the rampant corruption and authoritarianism of the party. Early on in his career Kozintsev with other revolutionary filmmakers was a pioneer of experimentative Avant-Garde cinema, which was influenced by new wave movements in Europe where the idea was to introduce new modes of narrative and representation of reality. However soviet film

industry was soon nationalised, the party was quick to realise how powerful cinema could be in extending its ideological control over a population with a seventy-three percent illiteracy rate, and hence soviet cinema became the "handmaiden" (Conroy 94) of communist party propaganda.

In this atmosphere, filmmakers were forced to find their way around the totalising state-driven narratives. According to Tiffany Conroy, in order to avoid censorship, exile, or worst execution by the government, soviet artists and intellectuals were forced to lead a "double life" (124), adopting oblique ways to register dissent and critique of the party. Such ways included self-funding and self-publishing of sensitive material for private circulation or adopting techniques of defamiliarization that required situating plots and storylines in distant settings to critique the political and social climate of contemporary times, and this is where the genre of adaptation came to the rescue. Kozintsev's adaptations of Shakespeare ensured a way to communicate dissent through his art and provided him with an opportunity for a critical re-reading of the Shakespearean thematic universe.

*Karol Lir*, Kozintsev's adaptation of *King Lear*, stays mostly close to the original but deploys a new culturally specific way of looking and representing. Considered by many as a critical commentary on post-war Russia, this film is saturated with bleak imagery and famously shot on the shores of the Baltic sea to perhaps capture the politically fragile relationship between the USSR, Estonia, and other Baltic states during the period of the cold war. The bleak and hopeless ending of *Lear* reflects the devastation of an entire historical era and social order with the fall of communism.

Similarly, as critic Alfred Thomas very rightly points out, in Kozintsev's *Hamlet* too, the film's imagery draws out a likeness between claustrophobic and prisons like Denmark and the ideological and physical impenetrability of the Russian state under Stalin (73). The character of Hamlet is an individual who stands against the state and strives to bring transparency and truth to an opaque imprisoning system that thrives upon impenetrability. Kozintsev's critics have even likened Hamlet to a Christ-like figure who throws his title and life in jeopardy in his quest to reach the truth and seems to have much more courage and willpower than what he is usually given credit for.

In Japan, in both theatre as well as film adaptations, there was a natural resistance to the idea of a western Shakespeare, the spirit of pre-existing eastern art forms of the Japanese theatre along with historical folk and mythological narratives had to be incorporated within Shakespeare to make it more accessible to the Japanese population just like the case of Indian adaptations of Shakespeare.

In Kurosawa, we find a conscious blending of aesthetics with social issues and a critical understanding of human nature and condition again. The period in which Kurosawa chooses to set

both his adaptations is the period that constituted the middle ages in Japan. The era was marked by civil war and infighting amongst various clans and ruling families lacking centralized power. This period became a significant choice for the director. One reason for this could be because it reflected the feeling of political uncertainty and chaos that determined Shakespeare's own context for his political plays during the Elizabethan- Jacobian era. The other important reason could be that it represented the anxieties of his age the clash between traditional feudal social structures, the militaristic nationalism of the nation, and its quest to become a world superpower that culminated into the apocalyptic destruction during the second world war.

Both *Ran* and *The Throne of Blood* portray societies that are at once defined by violence, greed, and a desperate struggle for power and identity but, at the same time, are also deeply embedded in tradition and hierarchy. However, these systems prove to be extremely fragile and are repeatedly eroded by the quest for power and control. Kurosawa shows how the nature of violence is also cyclical in human history. In *The Throne of Blood*, it is pointed out that lord Tsuzaki who stands for Shakespeare's King Duncan in the film and who's murder Washizu and his wife as lady Asaji is planning, has resorted to similar violent means in his ascent to power similarly in *Ran* Kurosawa's *Lear*, Hidetora has a similar violent history as a tyrannical ruler who wiped out clans and families including that of his daughter in law and hence has no right to play "a man more sinned against than sinning" (*Lear* 2.3.64).

Lastly, I come to the two female-centric adaptations of Shakespeare, which, even though written from the perspective of Shakespeare's female characters, turn out to be vastly different from each other. Shakespeare's heroines and anti-heroines display complexities and often walk the tightrope of patriarchy, coming across as potential active agents that either flip the narrative of patriarchy or inhabit ambivalent spaces. It is these ambivalent spaces which have the potency to challenge patriarchal structures that feminist criticism and rewritings of Shakespeare have tried to explore.

Wajda's *Siberian Lady Macbeth* adapted from Russian novelist Nicolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsenk*, revolves around Katrina Lvovna Izmailova's life. She chooses to rewrite her own life by murdering an old neglectful husband and an abusive father-in-law to be with her lower-class lover but is soon betrayed by him for another woman. On the other hand, Jocelyn Moorhouse's adaptation of *King Lear*, based on the novel of Jane Smiley, is set in Iowa, USA. At the heart of this story is a land dispute between Larry Cook and his three daughters however, the land in the story soon becomes synonymous with the bodies of women in Larry's life whom he wants to possess and literally violates, Smiley here, introduces the angle of incest and sexual abuse of the two eldest daughters at the hands of the father.

While Leskov's novel and Wajda's film end in the suicide of Katrina, having been betrayed by her lover, Moorhouse and Smiley's adaptation of *King Lear* tries to create an alternative version of *Lear* where the daughters are not demonised, and mothers are not obliterated. Hence, while one adaptation reaffirms the patriarchal structures of the society where the woman's (Katrina's) death comes as a punishment for her sexual and moral transgressions, the other makes an attempt to retrieve the absent voices of women. *A Thousand Acres*, both the novel and the film are narrated in the first person from the perspective of the oldest daughter Ginny who ultimately frees herself from the systematic violence, abuse, and trauma of years through the act of recounting, remembering and telling her story.

Texts evolve with time: being products of culture, they are condemned forever to remain in flux, invented, and reinvented to appeal to the demands of the present. Hence whether literary, dramatic, or cinematic, they have within them a power to create/represent and negotiate cultural meanings and furnish identities. At the same time, as critic Henry Giroux points out, our position as subjects within the system is never "coherent or unitary, rational source of self-knowledge, but rather a historical and social construction temporarily formed across a shifting range of multiple and often contradictory discourses" (85).

The attempt of the paper through the study of all these narratives of adaptation was hence to see how adaptations negotiate with the literary, cultural, and historical pasts, at times, the discourses of the past are reaffirmed in the present. Still, there are also moments when the act of rewriting or re-interpreting becomes an act of rejecting the totalising grand narratives in history for alternative versions, which bring to the forefront things which were once unseen, unheard and untold.

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