GEOFFREY WRIGHT’S MACBETH: A STORY OF CRIME RETOLD IN THE POSTMODERN CRIMINAL WORLD

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Abstract

Shakespeare is undoubtedly the most adapted dramatist of all times. His plays are adapted till now and will be adapted in future. Plays are adapted according to the sociopolitical and spatiotemporal conditions. Macbeth’s adaptation by Geoffrey Wright in 2006 is the best example in this regard. The research in hand studies it through the lens of adaptation theories and look for the postmodern elements in the adaptation. The research questions were about its kind of adaptation and its interpretation as a postmodern audience. The postmodern elements like diffusion of reality, dominance of crime, nudity and loss of trust is visible. The language used needs appropriation and some elements like nudity need to be reduced to make it more convincing.

Keywords: Macbeth 2006, Adaptation, Postmodernism, Criminology, sociopolitical, spatiotemporal.

1. Introduction:

Shakespeare is undoubtedly the most adapted dramatist of all times. His tragedies, comedies and tragicomédies are adapted by different directors and their teams at different times of history during the last four hundred years. Hamlet is the most adapted play, at least for the silver screen, with 79 versions in circulation. There are also 52 different versions of Romeo and Juliet and 36 versions of Macbeth. Others are also in good numbers. Shakespeare’s plays are used to support cinema in its infancy and now cinema is supporting to keep Shakespeare work alive and Macbeth’s 2015 movie testifies it. There will be many more versions/adaptations coming in future which will range from the most faithful one to the most radical ones. Adaptations have always played an important role in promoting and sustaining interest in literature (Corrigan, 2012).

The most beautiful thing about Shakespearean adaptations is the variety in which they are conceived and presented by different directors and screen play writers. Shakespeare’s Richard III is projected as a Nazi (Loncraine, 1995)

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The play ‘The Tempest’ adapted as science fiction (Wilcox & Nayfack, 1956) and as a Greek travelogue (1982). Prince Hal and Falstaff were projected as homosexuals in Portland.

King Lear presented as a samurai drama (Kurosawa & Hara, 1985) and a true representation of Shakespeare’s play (Eyre, & Buckley, 2018) and two different “Romeo and Juliet” about ethnic difficulties in Manhattan, ‘West Side Story’ (1961) and ‘China Girl’ (1987). I have never seen anything remotely approaching the mess that the new punk versions of ‘Romeo & Juliet’ and ‘Macbeth’ make of Shakespeare's tragedies. One is a great success with the business of around $147.6 million. ‘Romeo & Juliet’ directed by Australian director Baz Luhrmann was presented in the cinema in 1996. It received mixed criticism but became popular in teen/ young audience and did accumulated business and fame. The critics reviewed the film with different interesting titles that are suggestive of their moods like: ‘Shakespeare Worthy’, ‘Beautiful Modernization of Shakespeare's Classic Play’, ‘An eye-catching, starkly bold and breathtaking update of Shakespeare's greatest work’, ‘Modernized Without Losing the Shakespeare’, ‘Shakespeare made sexy for the teen generation’, ‘Shakespeare that ANYONE can enjoy!’, ‘A contemporary twist to a classic play’, ‘great movie’, ‘A horrible remake of a classic story’, ‘Oh Please!! The 1968 version is a whole lot better than this crap!’, ‘A Travesty’, ‘the most ridiculous version I have ever seen’, ‘No’, ‘Very surprisingly very good’, ‘Excellent’, ‘To modernized’, ‘Don't see it’, ‘This movie is a mutt’, ‘Unwatchable trash’, ‘MTV meets Shakespeare’, ‘Shakespeare would roll in his grave’ (Ebert, 1996). The reviewers had divided opinions but the film success is a big reality. The same kind of opinions are found for ‘Macbeth’ directed by again an Australian director Geoffrey Wright in 2006. Dray (2006) compared the original Mcbeth with the movie directed by Wright and opined that although the adaptations are good but in case of failure we acknowledge the genius of original. Ebert (1996) criticized on the adaptation of Romeo & Juliet and illustrated that the movie was good but it cannot fade the influence of original drama written by Shakespeare.

Geoffrey Wright, by following the footsteps of Baz Luhrmann, (1996) changed the spatiotemporal settings of Shakespeare’s Macbeth from the Middle ages of Scotland to the present day crime world, ganglands of Melbourne, Australia. King is replaced by drug lord, the hit men and thugs represented lords and nobles of modern times decorated with guns, luxury cars, expensive motorcycles, televisions, security cameras and mobile phones. The world seems to be a fashion world with fancy dresses, hairstyles and other accessories. It seems a futuristic attempt by the director. The research will explore different theories of adaptation in the background section followed by characteristics of postmodern life. It will also explore the issue of auteurship, inclusion of witches and the sensibility of third world viewer and literature student like Pakistan about the expectation from Shakespearean adaptation. The research in hand will try to explore the following elements in the film:

1. What kind of adaptation it is?
2. Who is the ‘auteur’?
3. What is contemporary or postmodern about it?
4. What is the role of language?
5. What is the importance of witches and scenes related to them?

2. Background/ Literature Review

The research in hand will analyze the adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth presented in 2006. It was directed by Geoffrey Wright. The writer/director, Geoffrey Wright, is specialized in making films on tough and controversial issues of Australian society. He was born in 1959 in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia. Geoffrey graduated from the Swinburne Film and Television School with a Diploma of Arts in Film and Television. He worked as a movie critic for both the "Melbourne Age" and Radio 3AW. His debut in film making was with a short film ‘Lover Boy’. It won awards at prestigious film festivals of Melbourne and Sydney. Geoffrey gained recognition from his powerful and controversial ‘Romper Stomper’, which received mixed reviews, but was a substantial box office hit. It also launched a super star, Russell Crowe, in the powerful role of Hando. This film won several awards too. Then he directed ‘Metal Skin’ and couple of other projects and won Best Director award for ‘Cherry Falls’ and then he attempted revamp of ‘Macbeth’.

‘Macbeth’ is all Australian cast film. Some basic information about the film is as under:

Directed by Geoffrey Wright
Victoria Hill (screenplay)
William Shakespeare (play)
Geoffrey Wright (screenplay)

Cast
Chloe Armstrong 1st Witch
Kate Bell 2nd Witch
Miranda Nation 3rd Witch
Sam Worthington Macbeth
Victoria Hill Lady Macbeth
Steve Bastoni Banquo
Hanna Griffiths Angel
Lachy Hulme Macduff
Matt Doran Malcolm
Gary Sweet

It won two awards at Australian Film Institute for ‘best production design’ and ‘best costume design’. It was nominated for three awards, ‘best cinematography’, ‘best sound’, and ‘best original music’. It was not able to do flourishing business at the box office. Its figures of business are not known.

The film portrayed Macbeth as a member of underworld mafia gangs of Melbourne. He was honored by the mafia lord, Duncan, after successful killing of double crossing agents and arresting the culprit of this scheme. It involved graphic gunfight and resultant bloodshed. Duncan honored Macbeth by announcing to visit his house as a guest to celebrate his success. Before that in intoxication of drugs and alcohol, Macbeth met beautiful and sensual school girl witches who made prophecies about the future achievements of Macbeth and Banquo. One of the prophecies proved to be true when Duncan announced Macbeth as thane of Cowdor. This started the bloody journey of Macbeth which involved killing of women, children, and friends. At last Macbeth was killed by Macduff who was not born of a woman as he was untimely ripped from his mother’s womb. The film is interesting but as a Shakespearean adaptation it lacks content. It will be analyzed in the analysis and discussion section.

The tradition of storytelling is as old as the human history. Stories are told and retold in different cultural settings with little differences and continue to survive the test of time and space. This phenomenon is known as adaptation. Adaptation is done by authors, playwrights, directors, composers, choreographers, and designers since the beginning of civilizations. Film adaptation is a genre in its own right (Cartmell, 2010; Leitch, 2008). Adaptation theorists like Linda Hutcheon (Hutcheon, 2013) declares adaptations as ‘repetition without replication’. Hutcheon defines three modes of engagement “telling”, “showing”, and “interactive”. The three modes are then described in terms of “forms”—by which she means genres such as opera, musical theatre, film, video games, and so on. Each genre because of its unique features tries to meet the expectations from the adaptive work (Welsh & Peter, 2007; Shepherd, 2009; Mohsin & Takseen, 2015). This means the change in genre brings with it certain changes that are unavoidable. Drama when adapted for film screening should go through definite changes like compromising on the number of scenes and dialogues due to time constraints, etc. The analysis and understanding of adaptations require creativity and knowledge of context (Hutcheon 2013; Leitch 2008; Venuti 2007; Stam 2005; Elliott, 2004)

Hutcheon discusses adaptation in two ways: as a product and as a process. As a product, if it is to be called an adaptation maintains the source’s fundamental ideas. But it should not remain entirely faithful to its original text. Adaptation must differ enough from the original text so that it is a repetition without replication. She compares it with translation where literal translation can never deliver the meaning because their contexts are different. Adaptation as a process becomes an art of appropriacy. It tries to give new meaning or more understandable meaning in the context. Therefore, novelty gives adaptation its worth. Adaptations are intertextual and keep on growing as
the number of adaptations of the same story grows. As a result, all previous adaptations become part of our understanding of all later adaptations. This suggests that there is a need to produce something new with considerable amount of effort.

It is really hard to decide about the adaptation as a success or failure whether we consider it a mode of communication or a kind of movie. The basic problem is about judgment because how-so-ever the foundation of judgment is clear or based upon theory, there would still be questions about its validity because it was an adaptation (Burke, 2012). Adaptation is based upon the imagination of the director because the movie is the not the Xerox of original novel or drama so there could be an anarchy of imagination that can destroy the whole idea and can also present it from another angle (Fassbinder, Toteberg, & Lensing, 1992).

Adaptations can be faithful, innovative and radical. There are many terms used to mention them like faithful, loose, divergent and so on but they mean almost the same. Faithfull adaptations are very close to the original text and mostly use the similar settings, characters, plot, language, etc. Loose or innovative adaptations try to follow the plot but make compromises to make adaptations; different settings, varied incidents and changed characters etc. These changes are done according to the will of screen writer or the director. The third kind is radical where only theme of the text is followed but delivered to the audience with different plot, characters, settings and language.

This also brings the discussion of the ‘auteur’ in faithful adaptations where the author of the original text is the auteur while in loose adaptations the decision is based on who has contributed more in making the current conveyed meaning. The major contributor is the auteur. In radical adaptations director or screen play writer or even the actors can be the auteur. It all depends who has contributed more in the meaning making process of adaptations. In the present day adaptations, the question of auteur is difficult to address as the complexity of these adaptations is multifaceted.

The contemporary postmodernism in which researcher is interested for the sake of analyses of Macbeth 2006 has the following features. Firstly, the world feels and talks about them but there is very little evidence available. Secondly, there are certain features which were a taboo in most of the societies but becoming a norm because of this quick paced, globalized, hyper computerized, factionalized, corruption-laden, hyper-real and dehumanized world. Adaptations should be sensitive to the cultural changes (Elliott, 2014).

Corruption and crime are on the rise and distinction of right and wrong is diluting as the distinction between the truths and lies. Now there is no single truth rather truths. Postmodern man has taken crime as an acceptable norm of the society. Every house has a story of theft, every person has a story of mobile snatching and stealing. Huge scandals like wiki leaks, panama leaks and multimillion scandals are becoming stories of every day.
Drugs, nudity and extramarital relationships are becoming the symbol of fashion and ultra-modern lifestyle. Media is playing a huge role in promoting this and making it an acceptable norm. Programs like ‘bold and beautiful’, ‘dating in the dark’, fashion shows, beach parties, etc. are making these a norm. Now even class distinction is removed because these ‘commodities’ are made cheaper or the corrupt sources of income attracting more and more people towards them.

Personal guards are killing their masters, bank security is involved in bank robberies, law enforcing agencies are supporting law breakers, brothers are killing each other, and teenagers are stealing from their own houses. This is postmodern world we are living in. Trust has died away as people are not ready to trust each other.

Last century was laden with wars, terrorism, and killing of every sort. The violence has increased so much that there is hardly any day when we do not listen and watch an act of brutality, violence and terrorism. There is so much bloodshed on the screen that our immunity to graphic imagery has increased manifold. Now we do not feel much looking at the news of few bloody killings and accidents.

In this postmodern world where globalization is at its peak, language is one of the tools to create globalization as lingua franca. But the language and identity is also emerging as an important factor. People are identified by the kind of language they use. Within language, registers, level of formality, accents, pronunciations, and slang define identities which are very important for the people.

Human beings have taken the role of witches in the postmodern world. Just like the witches of Macbeth. Witches have played an important role in igniting the ambition in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and giving false confidence to Macbeth for his unconquerable reign over the territory. In this confidence and ambition Macbeth commits heinous crimes. The witches were portrayed differently and their numbers also change in different adaptations. Previously they were depicted as old hags but currently they were also depicted as nurses in the hospital, policemen, and school girls to create the same effect.

3. Methodology

It is a research paper that explores Geoffrey Wright’s Macbeth for its appeal to the postmodern audience. The elements of adaptation and elements of postmodernism in the story and direction of the film are also studied. The role of witches in the form of teenage school girls and use of Shakespearean language are also explored.

It is a qualitative study where the researcher has to make judgments on the basis of the criterion of adaptation and aspects of postmodernism discussed in the previous section. It is the movie analysis in the framework of ‘adaptation’ and under that considering the elements of ‘postmodernism’ in the story and techniques used by the director in this particular film.
Film: Macbeth (2006), Directed by Geoffrey Wright

The analysis will focus on the research questions. It will explore which kind of adaptation it is? For this it will consider the three types of adaptation; faithful, loose, radical. It will try to find its auteur after considering the elements of the film. It will study the elements of postmodernism discussed in detail in the section above. It will explore the role of language and the role of witches too.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Q#1: What kind of adaptation it is?

Apparently, it seems a radical adaptation as there is spatiotemporal shift in the story. The setting is altogether different from the original play. The world of kings, queens, and lords is replaced by underworld of mafia lords. Characters are no more the nobility but the rich drug dealers who themselves are addicted to drugs and sex. There is a lot of bloodshed visible which is written but always happened back stage in the original text. The witches which were old hags are replaced by voluptuous school girls. Swords are replaced by modern day weapons. Dresses and locale are also different. But having said all that there are similarities too. The language is of the original text. Plot, which is the mainstay of film, is same as the original text. All incidents and dialogues are true to the original text. This made the choice a little difficult. Keeping in view the above discussion it is stated that if we consider the journey from faithful adaption to radical adaptation as a continuum then this adaptation is between loose and radical adaptation. It seems that it is a futuristic work which will appeal the audience after ten to twenty years. If we compare it with Luhrmann’s Romeo and Juliet it lacks the understanding of the audience. The audience focused by Luhrmann were teenagers as both the main characters were teenagers and the emotional drama was suitable for that age. That was why the film had a reasonable success but the audiences focused by Wright were middle age men and women who were in a flux. They were true to their traditions and had high opinion about Shakespeare and they did not enjoy deviations from the original masterpiece. They were living in the postmodern era with a mindset of previous generation. All this glamour, world of sex and drugs is not enjoyable to them at the moment but it will be in future. If this film will make its way to the cinema now it will definitely appeal the audience and would make a lot of business. To conclude its an adaptation between ‘loose’ and ‘radical’ type.

4.2. Question # 2: Who is the auteur?

If we relate this question to the previous one then again there is a hard decision to make. The changes are radical but the plot and language is the same. The researcher believes that all three are the auteur of this film, Shakespeare, Geoffrey Wright, and Victoria Hill. It is because the framework is provided by Shakespeare and flesh is provided by Wright and Hill. The life style of underworld, big cars, heavy bikes, branded clothes, fancy hairstyles, camera work, lighting, violence, drugs, nudity etc. make Wright and Hill as the rightful auteur.
4.3. Question # 3: What is contemporary or postmodern about it?

This is the most important part of this discussion and analysis. The elements of postmodernism are discussed above and now the researcher will look for those elements in the film. Let’s divide the main question into sub questions:

4.3.1. Why world of crime is chosen?

It is because of two reasons. Firstly, the earlier adaptations also adapted the world of Shakespeare as crime world. Secondly, the world of crime is becoming important and becoming a norm in the postmodern world. Now the reign of kings and queens is over and the world is governed by businessmen although we live in illusion that it is governed by political leaders. And the business world is full of criminals. The business of drugs, human trafficking, money laundering, weapon smuggling, and contract killing are run by big and influential businessmen. The power is in the hands of rich at the moment so the equivalence of royalty and grandeur of Shakespeare can be only found in the crime world. The postmodern man has also accepted it as a norm now. So Wright is right in using his postmodern sensibility by interpreting Macbeth as the lord of the underworld. This drama is about crime so here is world of crime for you. Again huge houses, expensive wines, luxurious interior of the house, fleet of expensive cars, briefcases full of money and drugs, stylish guns, ball rooms are all the examples of royalty in modern times. The world today can identify more with the underworld then the world of kings and queens. So Wright makes the story more believable for the postmodern audience. They can understand the theme ‘crime doesn’t pay’ more comfortably through this setting rather than the original setting.

4.3.2. Why drugs, nudity and extramarital relations are portrayed?

The film is ridden with drugs of all sorts. There is nudity and sex related scenes in abundance too. Every character including female characters were addicted to drugs or heavy doses of valium like medicines. Witches are schoolgirls and main source of nudity. Lady Macbeth and other female characters also had their share of nudity. It seems that characters were taking it as a norm and suggesting to the audience that it should be taken as it is. Macbeth’s encounters with witches were unpalatable specially the cauldron scene where the ingredients were shown lying on the table. In the postmodern sensibility of drugs, nudity, extramarital relationships are a norm now. The access to drugs is very easy, nudity is all around if not it is just a click away, thanks to high speed internet. Extramarital relationships are more convenient to make. As portrayed in almost all media productions of television and cinema. Now this term will be obsolete soon as these are the relationships with nothing ‘extra’ about them. These aspects are particularly added to make the film more enjoyable to the postmodern audience. This all makes the world more real in the modern times. This is portraying the spirit of the age.
4.3.3. Why there is loss of trust?

The trust is murdered in the play. Duncan came to Macbeth out of trust and Macbeth brutally betrayed it. No one trusts anyone here. Duncan’s son fled soon after the death of their father, Banquo was not ready to attend the party thrown by Macbeth, Macduff left the party and many others gossip about the killing of Duncan. It is replica of postmodern world which is full of intrigues, plotting, lobbying and conspiracies. The trust is the lost commodity. Nobody trusts anybody. Innocence, purity, loyalty, and truthfulness is hard to find. So the film is the true replica of the postmodern world.

4.3.4. Inclusion of bloody scenes

The inclusion of bloody and graphic scenes in the movie is also depicting the modern world. Duncan is killed with repeated stabbing when one or two are enough. The sound and repeated stabbing is too much. The scenes of killings and gunfights with blood splashing out and dead bodies lying around are abundant. The cauldron scene where the ingredients of recipe are shown lying on the table, fingers, eyes, ears, heart, guts, etc. Again the postmodern man has seen so much of violence and bloodshed that the immunity to observe graphic imagery and bloodshed has increased many fold. Now little bloodshed does not affect the postmodern audience. So having violence on screen is no more a taboo.

Whole of the above discussion suggests that this film is a postmodern interpretation and adaptation of Shakespeare’s Macbeth. It is made to appeal the postmodern audiences but it is a little ahead of time. The blurred imagery, thin lines between natural and the supernatural, dream and reality, trust and mistrust, belief and suspicion, truths and lies, apparent richness and inner hollowness and so on are depicted convincingly in the movie.

4.4. Question #4: What is the role of language?

All settings are changed but the Shakespearean language is retained which sounds pretty artificial from the Australian actors’ mouths. Crime world has its own set jargon and register. It would have been more enjoyable if the language is also manipulated to suit the settings. The themes or plot can be followed but language sounds artificial in the current setting of the film. In 2015 adaptation of Macbeth which is England based movie actors were provided with accent training to deliver the Shakespearean language properly. Here nothing of this sort is done so the dialogues sound more artificial. So like postmodern concepts identities are mashed up. All is ambiguous with no clarity. The concept intertextuality is valid here. Language to the researcher is the weakest link of the movie.

The language as an identity marker of local association and as marker of global citizenship is a dilemma again but the language of a particular group need to be included to make it more acceptable and meaningful for the audience.
4.5. Q# 5: What is the importance of witches?

Witches play very important role in Shakespeare’s Macbeth. Adaptations follow the same, witches play important role in all adaptations but their number and appearance were different. They appear as male characters of policemen in Indian adaptation and as nurses in another adaptation and their number increases in 2015 adaptation with inclusion of infants and children. But in 2006 adaptation they were presented as teenage school girls. They appear as school girls in first scene vandalizing the monuments in the cemetery suggesting their evil nature. They are cute sensual figures. The evil has new shape in the postmodern world. What used to be the symbol of innocence is now the embodiment of evil so all the set concepts are challenged. So what is true and what is not, is hard to decide. Now the evil is not ugly like old crooked hags, it is attractive and charming like teenage girls.

Evil has new ways to attract and convince people. It is no more ugly now rather it has all those features which are required to entangle postmodern man. The dehumanization of postmodern man is evident from this. We know that these witches are creation of Macbeth’s mind and he thought evil as horrible, repelling and dreadful so he imagined them as old hags. But the modern Macbeth consider evil as attractive, voluptuous, and enjoyable so he imagined them as beautiful, seductive teenage school girls. Again, a very postmodern portrayal of man.

5. Conclusion:

This Macbeth’s adaptation by Geoffrey Wright is an interpretation of the postmodern reader of this crime laden play. The technique of camera recording which is done by police to record the activities of this mafia group also blurs reality and it seems at one point that the action is live. At points it seems that it had already happened and someone, most probably police, is revealing it again. No difference of illusion and reality. The camera within a camera also depicts the technique of ‘epic theatre’ where audiences are continuously reminded that they are watching a play and there is no need of ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. The pleasure here lies in knowledge and understanding, not in catharsis in Aristotelian terms.

The film is a futuristic attempt to depict Macbeth’s true spirit. The postmodern audiences will enjoy such adaptations but they need to be more rigorous in terms of their target audience analysis and don’t need to overdo the things. Like drugs, nudity and graphic scenes are over used. There should be more work on the language of the actors.

References


