

Revisiting Shakespeare: Adapting *Hamlet* in the 21st Century

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Abstract

The plays of Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet*, have been appropriated and adapted worldwide. These adaptations serve various purposes for the adapters. The main and most important purpose is that it draws parallel between the play in question and the relevant situation of a given country, which subsequently addresses contemporary problems of the later. Therefore, this paper focuses on the 21st Century *Hamlet* and the ways in which it has been appropriated, adapted, and used for the purposes of social reformation. It further looks into the potential of the play to address relevant respective contemporary problems/issues of a given country. This paper also probes into the question that why do adapters revisit (appropriate and adapt) Shakespeare in general and *Hamlet* in particular. Essentially qualitative in nature, this paper uses Greenham's (2018) close reading techniques and further makes use of Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation (2012).

Keywords: Appropriation, Adaptation, Performances, Media Reports, Contemporary Problems,

Introduction

There is a play tonight before the King:

One scene of it comes near the circumstance

Which I have told thee [Horatio] of my father's death (3.2.75-77)

For murder, though have no tongue, will speak (2.2.589)

There are numerous scenes and dialogues in *Hamlet* that have become a touchstone of criticism. According to Ko (2005), apart from 'to be or not to be' and Frailty thy name is woman, the Mouse Trap scene in *Hamlet* is one such instance. It is also referred to as play within the play. It is one of the most frequently analysed scene in the play. It has its own importance in the play as well as in analysis of Hamlet and *Hamlet*.

In this scene Hamlet asks the performers, who have come to perform at the court, to stage a play in front of the king and queen, especially the former. They prefer to perform the play *The Murder of Gonzago*, whose situation is similar to that of Hamlet. This play is selected for the reason that it has similarity with the situation that Hamlet is in, and that he wants to observe the reaction of the King when he watches it. Hamlet wants to observe and catch the guilty conscious of the King, who might feel reactionary to scenes of the death of his brother, Hamlet's father. Hamlet even adds a few lines to the already scripted play, *The Murder of Gonzago*. The lines are added to further appropriate the play to Hamlet's situation. 'You could for a need study a speech of some dozen or sixteen lines, which | I would set down and insert in't' (2.2.535).

Having said that, the researchers argue in this paper that the first and foremost adapter is Hamlet himself, who appropriates and adapts the play *The Murder of Gonzago* to serve his purpose. He appropriates and adapts the play to replicate and voice the murder of his father at the hands of his uncle, Claudius. This adaptive version of the play replicates the incidents that Hamlet thinks is cause and reason of his father's murder. By doing so he wants to observe his uncle's guilt, and, subsequently, exact his revenge on him and those involved in his father's murder. He wants to confirm what the ghost has revealed to him and find the truth about his father's murder. 'I'll have these players | Play something like the murder if my father' (2.2.590-591) and 'I will observe his looks' (2.2.592). He even asks the performers to 'suit the action to the word | the word to the action' (3.2.17-18), and further stresses that the added lines and the subsequent action must be as 'twere the mirror up to nature.' (3.2.23). Hamlet not only adapts the play *The Murder of the Gonzago* for the said purpose, he even asks the performers to be the best replica of the incidents that have occurred to fit best the situation. In short Hamlet wants to use the play for his purposes and to voice and address his own issues/conflicts/problems.

Therefore, similar to that of *The Murder of Gonzago*, this paper probes into the potential of *Hamlet* to address and voice various problems when and where it is appropriated and adapted around the globe. This paper probes into the research questions: Why are the plays of Shakespeare in general and *Hamlet* in particular appropriated, adapted, and performed across the globe? *and* what is it about *Hamlet* that makes it one of the most appropriated and adapted plays of Shakespeare? By doing so this paper highlights and determine the potential of the play to give voice to problems that

are otherwise unheard or hard and challenging to address. Essentially qualitative in nature, the papers use David Greenham's (2018) close reading techniques as a method and adopts Linda Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation (2012) as a theoretical framework.

Literature Review

According to Kott (1974) 'Hamlet is like a sponge. Unless produced in a stylized or antiquarian fashion, it immediately absorbs all the problems of our time.' (p. 49) Although this argument is presented around 50 years ago, it is still relevant in modern day. The various and numerous adaptations of Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet*, proves that the argument presented by Kott (1974) is still relevant. *Hamlet* alone has been appropriated and adapted in thirty different countries with various and numerous purposes to serve. All these adaptation focuses on different facets of the play and the subsequent purpose it relates to (Partovi, 2013) These adaptations address various contemporary problems of the given country. With a serious and important purpose to serve, the number of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, especially *Hamlet*, has increased immensely around the globe.

According to Fischlin and Fortier (2000),

As long as there have been plays by Shakespeare, there have been adaptations of those plays. For almost four hundred years, playwrights have been taking Shakespeare's works and remaking them, in an overwhelming variety of ways, for the stage. (p. 1)

This huge number of adaptations of the plays of Shakespeare is not merely for the purpose of entertainment. They serve a far more serious and important purpose, that is, give voice to unheard problems and nuisances around the world. With such a serious and huge purpose to serve, new fields like Shakespearean studies and Shakespearean cultural studies have emerged. According to Lanier (2006),

In the past fifteen years the offspring of Shakespeare studies and cultural studies, what we might call "Shakespearean cultural studies", has emerged as one of the most robust areas of Shakespearean criticism. There are several indications that this critical field has come of age. Sessions on contemporary adaptations are now regularly included in the programmes for international and regional Shakespeare conferences. (p. 228)

With appropriations and adaptations on top of the list, new and newer perspectives to approach Shakespeare are introduced in the world of Academia, film, and theatre. According to Joughin (1997), 'we live within the shifting boundaries of a shrinking world, where particular localities and

cities are integrated via computer, networks and electronic media which bypass national frontiers.' Joughin (1997) argues that with the advancement of technology and internet, Shakespeare and his play, which are part of the virtual world, crosses regularly crosses over the boundaries. As a global village concept, Shakespeare has become a global phenomenon. To consider one such example, the globe theatre took Shakespeare (*Hamlet*) across the world, where it was performed 293 times in a total of 197 countries. It was staged at 202 different venues. It was and still is referred to as Globe to Globe Project. This tour took 2 years, and started as well as ended at the Globe Theatre.

In similar line of argument, numerous projects have been undertaken that further expand the notion of the global Shakespeare (and his plays). *Multicultural Shakespeare in Britain 1930-2012* is another example of such projects which speaks volumes regarding the subject at hand. This project is funded by Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). It is an umbrella project and has various other sub projects in it. One of the sub projects under it is *British Black and Asian Shakespeare*. This project traces and maps out the role of non-white actors/performers and directors in the development of British cultural life as well as the role they played in the reinterpretation/retelling of the plays of Shakespeare.

Similarly, these projects that involve reinterpretation, appropriation and adaptation of Shakespeare is not limited to the UK only but spreads across the world. The BBC documentary series, *Living Shakespeare*, is dedicated to Shakespeare and his plays. In one of the documentary, Heslehurst (2016) claims that 'they [Plays of Shakespeare] are here in Chinese, Russian, Japanese, Hindi, and the impact of Shakespeare's works around the world can be proven in more than a thousand translations.' According to Kennedy (1993), the plays of Shakespeare have a universal approach and appeal and that is the reason why his play easily and frequently crosses national and linguistic boundaries. He further argues that the foreign adaptations have more powerful message to convey and that they have a direct access to the power of the plays. The language may be lost but the message they convey is equally powerful which compensates for the language. These foreign performances are so powerful that terms appropriations and adaptations have become frequently associated with Shakespeare and his plays. They have become a strong part of Shakespearean criticism across the globe.

Discussion and Analysis

The new criticism related to Shakespearean appropriation and adaptations create a parallel world in which his plays are revisited and retold. Their contexts changes drastically with a specific purpose to serve in a given a country. This parallel is called heterocosm by Hutcheon (2012) in her Theory

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of Adaptation. It is pertinent to mention here that these adaptations have become some popular and significant that we see specific theories of such adaptations and appropriations. Hutcheon's Theory of Adaptation (2012) is one such example of it. In this new heterocosm, the plays of Shakespeare take a new dimension and give an entirely newer meaning to the text.

Bohannan (1998), an American anthropologist, visited African tribes and there she was asked to tell a story from her country as per the custom of the tribes. She decided to tell the story of *Hamlet*. While she was narrating the story, the chieftain and other elders interrupted her for various reasons. For instance, when the ghost was mentioned by Bohannan, the tribesmen called it an omen rather than any hallucination of Hamlet. Similarly, they questioned Hamlet's motives and considered Claudius' marriage with Gertrude as an obvious tradition as per tribal customs. Towards the end, the chief told Bohannan that

Sometime ... you must tell us some more stories of your country. We, who are elders, will instruct you in their true meaning, so that when you return to your own land your elders will see that you have not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and who have taught you wisdom. (p. 36)

This strongly suggests that when the plays of Shakespeare cross boundaries, they are revisited and retold with a new meaning. Thus a new heterocosm is created. In this revisit, the plays of Shakespeare, in this case *Hamlet*, never lose their originality; however, the meaning of it changes as in accordance with the cultural and social understanding of that of the readers/audience. According to Rich (1972), adaptations interpret any given text from a new angle.

Having said that, Desmet and Sawyer (1999) presents an analysis of a short story *Gertrude Talks Back* which is written by Margaret Atwood. They note, 'it is a monologue that rewrites Hamlet's closet scene from the perspective of Gertrude, its passive auditor, and ends with a witty twist: "Oh! You think what? You think Claudius murdered your Dad? ... It wasn't Claudius, darling. It was me".' (p. 9). Similarly, *Hamlet Wakes Up* is another example of such adaptations which is written and directed by Mamduh Adwan. In this adaptation, Hamlet is shown as a drunkard and Ophelia as a prostitute. It is a political satire and retells the story of the politics corruption and the unrest of the Arab world (Syria). It is pertinent to mention here that the problem that these adaptations address is of paramount importance. The problems that are otherwise hard to address due to the censorship and strict discipline of the authorities, Hamlet (any Shakespeare's play) provides a safe way of criticism to address the same. Similar techniques are used by adapters to use Shakespeare's plays, especially *Hamlet*, to address their contemporary modern day problems.

Similar to argument of Desmet and Swayer (1999), Kalki Koechlin, who is a famous Bollywood actress, points out the importance of Ophelia in *Hamlet*. While celebrating the 400 years of Shakespeare, in a documentary *Living Shakespeare* (2016), she emphasizes the importance of the role Ophelia and relates her to the real-life Indian women. She expresses that Ophelia, like any typical Indian woman, is expected to be subordinate to the men around her. She is a sweet sister (to Laertes) and breeder of sinners (to Hamlet); she is expected to be obedient to her father. She claims that there are a lot of parallels between Ophelia and modern-day Indian women. She even draws parallels between Ophelia and Jyoti Singh, who was raped in a bus by 6 men in 2012. She further points out that there is a necessity to understand Ophelia and real-life women of the subcontinent. She wants to use Ophelia and *Hamlet* as a tool of empowerment so that women do not commit suicide like the former but swim across the river in order to survive and live.

This takes and reminds us of a real-life girl, Saba Qaiser, whose life is retold in an Oscar Award-winning documentary *A Girl in the River* (2015) by Sharmeen Obaid Chinoy. Saba is a real-life girl who survives honour killing. After being shot by her relatives, left for dead, her body was thrown into a river. She survived. *A Girl in the River* is her story retold to the world where she becomes an advocate for the victims of honour killings. A comparison between Saba and Ophelia gives a new dimension to the play *Hamlet*. It provided a new meaning to the text and a different yet powerful look to Ophelia. Therefore, the researchers argue that *Hamlet* becomes a powerful and significant medium to address the issue of honour killing and equally becomes a supporter of women empowerment. Through *Hamlet*, Ophelia speaks for women like Saba and Singh.

Similarly, *Let me tell you* by Paul Griffiths retells the story of *Hamlet* but from the perspective of Ophelia. Ophelia narrates the whole story of *Hamlet*; thus, provides a complete new dimension which is in par with *A Girl in the River*. Having said this, the plays of Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet* has been appropriated and adapted numerous times with similar new dimension and meaning. There are a total of 1247 different adaptations of the plays of Shakespeare since 1890 as per the record of the data base of the British Universities Film and Video Council (BUFVC). These adaptations are in the form of film medium only. *Hamlet* is the play that has been adapted the most, that is, 259 times. Since 2000, through the film medium alone, *Hamlet* has been adapted 72 times. Some of these adaptations are in local languages, such as: Turkish, Hindi, Farsi, Urdu, etc. Such a huge number of adaptations speaks volumes of the popularity as well as the potential of the play to address contemporary problems of around the world.

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According to Sinclair (2015) 'There are always interesting new angles through which to approach Shakespeare's plays, just as there are always new ways in which to present them on stage or screen. Mirko Ilic's and Steven Heller's book *Presenting Shakespeare: 1,100 Posters from Around the World* (2015) is yet another example and record of the different adaptations of *Hamlet*.

Having said that, *Hamlet* has evidently been used as a constructive play that address contemporary problems; be it anywhere in the world. Even *Hamlet* has been used and performed in prisons too. *Shakespeare Inside; Hamlet in South African Prison, Shakespeare Behind Bars* are two out of many examples where Shakespeare in general and Hamlet in particular have been used inside the prison as a medium of social reformation as well as entertainment. *Prison Shakespeare: For the Deep Shames and Great Indignities* (2015) by Rob Pensalfini is yet another example of Shakespeare in prison projects. This book contains all the information about the projects, script, performance and other details of each project performed inside the prison. *Hamlet Behind Bars* is one of the recent examples of this project. *Hamlet* is used as a constructive play for the purpose of social reformation of the inmates. The purpose behind this to 'help them [inmates] leave behind criminal behaviour and become responsible members of our society again.' (*Hamlet Behind Bars*, 2016) Thus, it takes a new whole meaning.

Conclusion

With the introduction Shakespearean studies and Shakespearean cultural studies, appropriations and adaptation has emerged as a sub genre in literature. The adaptations of Shakespeare have a life of its own and with the passage of time it has become a touchstone in Shakespearean criticism. All the plays of Shakespeare have been appropriated and adapted. Whether it is *Romeo and Juliet* or *Macbeth*, their respective adaptive version has created a space for themselves. According to the data base of BUFVC, *Romeo and Juliet* has been filmed (mostly adaptations) 209 times since 1890, which is second after *Hamlet*, which is 259 times. These adaptations are not limited to English language but are performed in as diverse language as Urdu, Hindi, Turkish and Farsi. For example, Hindi *Haider*, Turkish *Hamlet in Colour in Turkey* (2004), Persian *Hamlet narrates Hamlet* (2009) are few of the examples of such adaptations. These titles are in their local language but have been translated into English by the researchers. Thus, through these and the above mentioned adaptations it is evident the Shakespeare's plays, especially *Hamlet* has the potential to address contemporary problems of a given country. It also has the potential to act as a medium for social reformation as evident from the discussion on Shakespeare in Prison Projects. Furthermore, this paper recommends an in depth study of any other play of Shakespeare, apart from *Hamlet*, for the same reasons.

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