

Indigenous Shakespeare: A Study Focusing on *Kaliyattom*, the Visual Translation of *Othello*

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ABSTRACT

The concept of intersemiotic translation reveals a current and relevant area of discipline. It is a major focus of literary and film studies which couple these two relevant disciplines. The paper discusses how film adaptation becomes a mode of intersemiotic translation focusing on *Kaliyattom*, an adaptation of *Othello*, a Shakespearean play. It has been a point of discussion when it becomes a cross cultural communication. The story written in a context is re-written in another form and so it can be called as intersemiotic translation. Various aspects of *Kaliyattom* like theme, plot, medium, narration, symbols are analysed in the paper.

KEYWORDS

Othello; Intersemiotic Translation; Film adaptation.

Adaptation has been central to the process of film making since almost its beginning and could well maintain its dominance into cinema's second century (Welsh xiii). The word adaptation has close relation with the transfer from one state to another. Literary adaptations are now being analysed as products of artistic creativity caught up in the ongoing whirl of intertextual transformation (Maraciniac 60). Generally adaptation is seen as a secondary activity as the creative writers always claim that it is less creative than literary writing. But it has now become a creative activity equal to the literary writing or other creative methods. It tries to give a new perspective of the existing theme in a new format. Even though the theory of adaptation has a long back history of nearly fifty years, the current relevance of it's inter disciplinarity brings it to the main stream of discussions.

An adaptation as an interpretation does not have to capture all the nuances of the book's complexity, but it has to remain a work of art, an independent, coherent and convincing creation with its own subtleties of meanings (61). The rift between aesthetic approach of literary studies and the analytical approach of cinema studies marked adaptation studies to stand isolated from film studies. Adaptation studies continued to take literary aesthetics as its canonical stone and canonical works and authors as its organising principal. Adaptation is usually framed as translation. Peter Torope defines it as a special and identifiable form of semiosis.

The literary adaptation has been an on stream literary phenomenon even from the early times onwards. The legendary epics are adapted with different perspectives. Miltonian version of the human race can be analysed as an

adaptation as it gives a different concept of the story. The perspectives of stories change with time and necessity. It is the society that demands certain differences. In India also we can see different versions of epics and legends during different ages. The origin and development of the Bhakti movement was during 15-17 centuries, need to be read along with this as it became important with the changing social aspects of life. The differences in Vishnu and Shiva bhakti are such changes. Most of the literary and art forms in India were influenced by the Bhakti movement, which sprouted in South India and spread to North India. Sankara Deva and Mahadeva were the chief pioneers of this movement in Assam. In Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and various other parts of India, the Bhakti movement also influenced the literature and many other art forms. During the 12th century, the elite Brahmin Namboodiris conquered the whole of Kerala and there came a strict caste system, as we know that insisted on four castes or Varnas namely Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, Sudras. They all interpreted the gods differently based on their cultural structure. The Ezhava Shiva idolised by the reform leader Sree Narayan Guru is an example of this.

Film adaptations took idea of the different aspect form the then existing literary adaptations. It has been a point of discussion when it becomes a cross cultural communication. The story written in a context is re written in another and it can be called as inter semiotic translation. Film adaptations can be: from novel to film, from drama to film, from film to film. In novels the medium and style of the story narration is different. The semiosis plays a major role in developing an adaptation environment to the film. Roman Jakobson discusses on the three kinds of translation are to be differently labelled:

- Intralingual translation
- Interlingual translation
- Intersemiotic translation

The intralingual translation or rewording is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of other signs of the same language. The Interlingual translation or translation proper is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language. The third which is Intersemiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of the verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems (Jakobson 1). The third type of translation attains relevance in adaptation. It can be interpreted using the semiotic theory of language. Semiotics is usually regarded as the study of system of signs in which the communication happens through signs or symbols. Saussurean concept of sign is also a point of discussion in this context. Everything is a sign according to him. The sign is formed by the combination of signified and signifier. In his *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Eco (46) reminds us of the basic but often expediently forgotten fact that a sign is not only something which stands for something else (the scholastic dictum, a liquid star pro aliquo), but that in order for it to be a sign it must also function as a sign, i.e., be interpreted, at least potentially (Gorlee 91). The interpretations and definitions of sign differ with the time and space.

The semiotic levels of adaptation of a cinema has its corns and flaws. The narrators of the novel are usually left out in the film and it paves way to voice overs. The symbolic elements can be included in a visual medium using certain images and it needs to be explained in a novel. The background and the context of the film are subject to change and it makes a different effect on the viewer. This effect cannot be made easily in the novel. The language of the film is a spoken language and it affects the viewer. It is difficult to make language effective in the novel as a film. The dialogues and scenes are to be changed according to the plot and the scenes of the film. The adaptation of *Tristram Shandy* is

cited as an example. While coming to the Malayalam film industry, the movies like *Chemmeen*, are novel to film adaptations.

In plays or drama on the other hand, the medium is much similar to film. The dialogues and actions are well defined in a play. The narration of the plays and the film are similar and it can be adapted easily. The visual effect can be given to both film and drama. The setting and the structure gives a problem in the drama as it cannot be changed easily and quickly. It needs to have some curtains and props to feel the change of place. The language also does not have much difference in both. The adaptation of Shakespearean plays into Hollywood films are examples for this. The plays of KPAC turned to be films in the early times in Malayalam film industry. There is an adaptation from film to film. It can be a kind of re making of an old film into a new one. This has also differences during different time. The Indian film industry witnessed the re making of a Malayalam film *Manichitrathazhu* into different languages in India. When it becomes *Chandramukhi*, it absorbs the culture of Tamil in its script and presentation. Apte Mitra is another different version of it.

Julia Kristeva's idea of intertextuality can be read along with this. Kristeva thinks the interpretation that a particular reader generates from a text will then depend on the recognition of the relationship of the given text to other texts. Thus, for example, our understanding of a film adaptation of a novel will depend on our reading of that novel, or conversely our understanding of the novel is now framed by having seen the film. Intertextuality may be understood as the thesis that no text exists outside its continuing interpretation and reinterpretation. There can then never be a definitive reading of a text, that itself becomes part. (123-24, Edgar).

Kaliyattom, the Malayalam film directed by Jayaraj, is a version of

Shakespeare's *Othello* is analysed. *Othello* is a tragedy written by William Shakespeare around 1603. The play tells the story of a powerful general of the Venetian army, Othello and he marries Desdemona, a beautiful rich young girl by eloping with her. Iago employs a story of treachery of Desdemona and the love story of Desdemona and Cassio, the friend of Othello. Othello kills his wife due to this with the advice of Iago. Finally when he was convinced of the play of Iago, he has already killed Desdemona. He stabs himself and falls dying next to Desdemona.

The plot of *Othello* is restructured in a Kerala folklore cultural context in the film *Kaliyattom*. The name is taken from the Theyyam practice of Kerala. Theyyam is a folk art form of Kerala directed by Jayaraj. The story revolves around the story of Kannan Perumalayan and Thamara in the place of Othello and Desdemona. Kannan is a Theyyam performer and the military environment of Othello is transplanted to the cultural environment of Theyyam, which also has similar hierarchy. Unni Thampuran loves Thamara and is jealous of Kannan for marrying her and seeks the help of Paniyan to sow the seeds of doubt to crush their relationship. Paniyan is synonymous character of Iago. Kanthan is another character who is the friend of Kannan and he is in the shadow of doubt that he has a relationship with Thamara. Kannan kills Thamara and later came to know from Paniyan's wife that Thamara is innocent and Paniyan has played trick. He cuts the hands and legs of Paniyan as revenge. Giving his position to Kanthan, he jumps into the Theyyam fire and ends his life.

Kaliyattam basically means the Play of God. It is a traditional social ceremony with tremendous religious importance which had been in existence since ancient times, mostly practiced in the Northern part of Kerala. *Kaliyattam* is a term that can be used for festivals in temples and other sacred places. *Kaliyattom* is conducted for

propitiating god and goddess to bless the family or community. There are particular communities for performing Kaliyattom. It is rather curious that Kaliyattom which is performed for all sections of people in Kerala from Brahmins downwards, the persons authorised to assume Kolams are from the untouchable classes, like Malayans, Peruvannans and Velas.

There are various aspects while analysing the film like theme, plot, medium, narration, symbols. The theme in drama is usually called the central as it is made by the author himself in relation with the socio cultural existence of his time. It changes with the change of time. It can be fundamental ideas related to a social set up. It is either stated through dialogues, situations or embedded in the entire performance. Theme usually refers to the meaning of the play that carries a social subject. This has close relation with the element of thought mentioned in the Aristotlean *Poetics*. *Othello* thematises family relation in the light of sexuality and friendship. The racial wrangle also silhouettes the play which results in the jealousy. *Othello's* overwhelming jealousy becomes the falling action of the play. Iago's revenge towards *Othello* becomes a major theme of the play. The conflict between appearance and reality is clearly depicted by Shakespeare. It emphasises an audience's perspective towards the theme and the characters. Kaliyattom on the other hand thematises the family relation in the background of Theyyam. The traditional beliefs and attitudes of the folk environment are clearly depicted in the film through symbols and beliefs. Kaliyattam also depicts the notion of caste or jaati consciousness that is prevalent in Kerala. The concept of race in *Othello* is displaced by jaati or caste. The theme of ugliness is also a backdrop of the film. Kannan Perumalayan in the film reveals this through his dialogue. It is mentioned during the first part of the film that she loved him seeing his internal beauty.

The plot structures of the two works are almost the same. The death scene of *Othello* and Kannan Perumalayan is much different which is structured based on the plot. *Othello* dies by stabbing himself whereas Kannan Perumalayan jumps into the fire. These differences can be analysed in a cultural backdrop as stabbing with sword can be regular death of a soldier. Kannan's death also is depicted as fire plays a major role in Theyyam. There is a belief in the film that if the wife cheated her husband who is a Theyyam performer, the husband will have fire burn during Theyyam performance. The plot indirectly gives this message in the film.

The medium of both are different. The play has a literary medium which has to be read and understood by the reader deliberately alone whereas the medium of the film has a universal acceptance where the effect of the emotions can be expressed through techniques like visual images, sounds, camera angles etc. The visual image of the Theyyam plays a major role to express emotional vigour of Kannan. The shots of the marriage of Thamara and Perumalayan exhibit a mood of suspense and love which is successfully coated through the film. The death scene of Thamara has a peculiar way of lighting which emotionalises a mystery. The alternate scenes of Theyyam add to the emotional rigour of the film.

"Narration is the way in which a story is told" (48). Philip Rayner's words stress the relevance of narration focusing on the story. A story is the sequence of events as they happen in a temporal and spatial structure. The sequence of events denotes a continuity which has to begin then move chronologically with nothing left out. A story has to have a beginning and an end arranged in a chronology. The narrative style of the play and the film is almost the same except the use of symbols that suits the narration.

The symbols of the play and the film are given differently. Othello gives a handkerchief to Desdemona as symbol of the tradition of their family where as it is changed as a silk in the film as handkerchief has little relevance in an Indian culture. The appearance of different kinds of Theyyam characters in the film adds to the emotional set up of it. The image of fire during the end of the film has also a cultural connotation. In the play the symbol of sword is used for Othello's death. As a soldier he can be killed with the sword and it is changed in the film as fire. The symbol of song is shown in both to expose the emotional conflict of the characters before the climax.

Adaptation happens to be a creative activity which is clearly exposed through the film of Jayaraj. The paper attempts to study the adaptation techniques used in the film in a general sense focussing on the theoretical opinions of various scholars. Jayaraj through the film was successful in the creating adaptation of the Shakespearean play. Satyajit Ray describes the differences he feels in both the languages as:

In his supposed omniscience, he can describe the innermost workings of his characters' minds, while evoking the

surroundings in the smallest details. The reader sees only what the author chooses to describe. It may be just factual description or it may go beyond where the author adds his subjective comments to it...

A film on the other hand, presents information in lumps, as it were. At any given moment, the image on the screen may be filled with plethora of details, each carrying information (Assadudin 64).

It could be said that the film tried to strike a balance between art and commercial superfluity. Shakespearean universalised culture attains a novel version through the film. The film has been adapted in an experimental set up which gave an Indianised perspective to the Shakespeare. To conclude this adaptation thus becomes an intersemiotic and cultural recreation which gave a different identity to it.

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