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From Page to Screen: A Comparative Study of *Othello* and *Kaliyattam*

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Abstract

This paper attempts to study an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603) into the Malayalam film *Kaliyattam* (1997) by Jayaraj as inter-semiotic translation. Using Roman Jakobson's theory, this paper analyses how the play has been reformulated to suit the medium of film set in Kerala culture and how far Jayaraj has succeeded in handling the span of time between 16th century and the 20th.

Key Words: Adaptation, Inter-semiotic translation, Intertextuality, *Othello*, *Kaliyattam*

Article

The adaptation of Shakespearean plays is an interesting area of research. The themes of the Bard's plays have been adapted into movies and cartoons in different languages. The play *Othello* had been adapted into a Malayalam movie *Kaliyattam* by Jayaraj of the 20th and 21st centuries. The original play staged for the Elizabethan medium-the film-by director hailing from different linguistic cultures. The film has made impact to the respective audiences not only because of the universality of the theme, but also because of the unique way in which they have been adapted. This paper applies the ideas of Roman Jakobson's inter-semiotic translation to an analysis of the cinematic adaptation of the play originally written for the theatre i.e. Shakespeare's play *Othello* and also focuses on the setting and characters to study how they have been modified and even reformulated to suit the medium of film.

.Plot of the Film

The Story of *Kaliyattam*¹ revolves around Kannan Perumalayam(Suresh Gopi), a theyyam artist, and Thamara (Manju Warrior), the beautiful daughter of the village head. While Unni Thampuram hates Kannan because he had a crash on Thamara, and Paniyan (Lal), who plays a koomali (Joker character in Theyyam) is jealous because he has the coveted role of Theechamundi which is held by Perumalayam. Paniyan plants the seeds of doubt on Thamara's fidelity in Kannan's mind making him suspect that Thamara and his assistant Kanthan (Biju Menon) are having an affair. Kanthan spots a silk robe, which he had presented to Thamara, in Kanthan's hands.

Kannan out of grief and anger of Thamara kills her by suffocating with a pillow. On the same night, Paniyan plans to get Kanthan killed by Unni Thampuram, but the plan goes haywire and Thamburan gets killed. Between all these, Kannan overpowers Paniyan and crushes his legs with a big stone and let him live his rest of life an alive meat. Kannan Peumalayam, gives the Theechamundi title to Kanthan and embraces the ritual fire to Theyyam to death.

According to Roman Jakobson, "Inter-semiotic translation or transmutation is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of non-verbal sign system".² It operates on different description levels, selecting relevant aspects from the source and recreating them into target. Relatively little attention has been paid in translation studies to the idea of inter-semiotic

translation-translation which moves between media such as photography and literature. Being the most popular medium, movies are made for audiences. Movies require a broad multiplicity of observers, all of them viewing the work together in relatively large congregations, the lot of them watching the work unfold at a steady, single pace.

While doing inter-semiotic translation, the cultural aspects have an important role. The most common difficulty in translation studies has traditionally been the dilemma between the historical and synchronic approaches in the analysis and description of culture of translation. The possibility of multiple readings is inherent to literature. This is especially valid for film adaptations of literary works. Here, the text of the film and that of the fictional work on which it is based may present two discourses, different from each other. The reader or spectator may resort to intertextual studies to understand the difference in motives leading to discursive shifts in film adaptations. The spectator is an unconscious participant in the story and he is not conscious of the change brought over him. Unlike the theatre audience, the movie audience is more responsive and vulnerable. The script-writer must have a clear perception about his audience and must adapt his theme in tune with their needs and likes. How these challenges have been taken up by Jayaraj forms the subject of the paper.

Intertextuality and Film

Intertextuality signifies the relationship between a literary work and other texts or the structures of the medium itself. It has deep roots in the literary scene. It is the shaping of a text's meaning by other texts. It can refer to an author's borrowing and transforming of a prior text or to a reader's referencing of one text in reading another. The term 'Intertextuality' has been borrowed and transformed many times since it was coined by poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in 1966. For Kristeva, "the notion of intertextuality replaces the notion of inter subjectivity", when we realize that meaning is not transferred directly from the writer to the reader, but is mediated through or filtered by "codes" to both the writer and the reader by other texts. As critic William Irwin says, the term "has come to have almost as many meanings as users, from those faithful to Kristeva's original vision to those who simply use it as a stylish way of talking about allusion and influence".³

According to Graham Allen,

Texts, whether they be literary or non-literary, are viewed by modern theorists as lacking in any kind of independent meaning. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all other to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations.⁴

Umberto Eco defines Intertextual Dialogue as "the phenomenon by which a given text echoes previous texts".⁵ Eco has in different articles written about the nature and functions of intertextuality in films. Eco emphasizes that there are many types of intertextual dialogue, most of which he is not interested in and therefore does not exemplify. The focus in Eco turns to the explicit and recognizable intertextual quotations.⁶ For the purpose of analysis, this study resorts mostly on such references that are apparent.

Despite the value of film adaptations, their very nature, being based on often very well-known, popular and impressive works of literature makes them horizontal to criticism. Traditionally, it concerns with the film's degree of

‘fidelity’ to the work it is based on, but more and more the notion of the genre’s ‘specificity’ is coming to the front, often along with a call for the use of genuinely cinematic strategies to ‘translate’ the literary work into the new medium.⁷

One crucial difference between literature and film is in their modes of production. While a novel is usually written by a single author in a flexible amount of time, the production of a film involves many people with differing backgrounds, qualities, opinions and interests. It is created by the combined effort and influence of a large group of people, from the many specialized professionals who lend their skills to script-writing, production, and post-production, to those who finance the project and more or less determine its restrictions and opportunities.

Adaptations are not a new phenomenon at all in film making. Intertextual studies show that stories always seem to derive from other stories. But the adaptation proper, wherein a specific work of literature is retold in a multimodal medium—a film, or perhaps a video game—is a modern feature. In film adaptations, there is the prestige involved in the film’s close relationship to literature, especially literature by authors of high standing. In the adaptation process, we concentrate on comparing the two discourses on a strictly narrative level. This direct comparison is possible because the film script basically is to a literary form.⁸

The cinematic performance is bound to differ from the theatrical one because the two rely on different repertoires. The question which arises whether there are any essential differences between two media, or art form, which give rise to the different models and norms. The cinema shares two important constituents with the theatre are the *misenscene* (the term referring to everything situated in front of the audience or camera-setting, actors, costumes etc) and sound (dialogue, music, various noises). It differs from the theatre in its use of photography, including shooting from low, moving the camera from place to place.⁹

The most significant difference between the cinema and the theatre is how they depict reality. A film can create an effective illusion of a real world. The camera can be taken to real world. In the theatre it is more difficult to create an illusion of a real world. Reality cannot be brought to the stage. Reality in the theatre is often presented artificially and schematically.

The film *Kaliyattam* shows many instances of Intertextuality. *Kaliyattam* retells the play *Othello*.¹⁰ *Kaliyattam* is set in an early 20th century village in North Malabar. The tragic hero, Kannan Perumalayan, played by Suresh Gopi, is the chieftain entitled by the ruler to play the Theechamundi in the realistic art form of North Kerala, the Theyyam. The war between Venice and Cyprus in Shakespeare’s play has been substituted by Theyyam; a complicated ritual dance religiously conducted for the prosperity of the kingdom. The ruler and the village look upon Perumalayan as their God and hero, just like Othello is treated by Venetians. Balram Muttanor’s script has faithfully followed the play sequences of events. M.J. Radhakrishnan’s camera captures the mood of the film in the dim-lit interiors. Through the film, the director shows that this film is about how ritual and tradition can shape and often destroy people’s lives. In this context the notions of intertextuality are used here to understand the varying ‘texts’ of “Othello” as in Shakespeare’s play and *Kaliyattam* as in Jayaraaj’s film. If Othello is a Moor, Perumalayan is an untouchable, his face disfigured by small-pox scars. Here the director has made use of the caste concerns of the Indian society and the associated prejudices to develop the suspicious nature of the protagonists. It is characterizations that make the movie distinct and different. The first appearance of Perumalayan is remarkable in the sense that he is shown playing the Goddess in Theyyam costume. The angry father of Thamara is seen addressing his daughter’s abductor as “Devi” and laments that his daughter has been enticed and abducted. Perumalayan is God when he performs and this ennobles the character.

Shakespeare's play is originated in a specific cultural system: 16th century English theatre. In performing a play, either Shakespeare or other, the slanting point for both the theatre director and the filmmaker is the original written text. Shakespeare wrote *Othello* to be staged. He wrote the play according to the stage setting. While Jayaraaj made it as a film, he made more changes. Every performance, theatre director and the filmmaker is the original written text. One turns it into a stage performance, theatrical or other into a film. Every performance, theatrical or cinematic implies an interpretation of the play. The very fact that living actors read the dialogue, using intonation and body language, involves interpretation theirs or the director's-even if the script used is very close to the original play.

Iago is the most sophisticated and complex of Shakespeare's villains. He is jealousy personified and his malignancy is not without movie. He is jealous of Cassio, of the marital bliss of Othello and he even suspects an illicit affair between his wife Emilia and Othello. The adaptation of this character in the films does not seem to be as effective and convincing as the original. This is because of the relative limitations of film in contrast to drama.

The most notable spectacle in *Kaliyattam* is the Theyyam. Since it is both a ritual as well as an art form, it has divine implications. Othello's aside of his inner conflict is presented in *Kaliyattam* as Perumalayan demanding the Gods to answer the doubts in his mind regarding his wife. At his powerful call, we see the gods in Theyyam attire coming before him. They retreat without a word and this seems to suggest that it is not God's will that caused the fall of the mighty artiste, but his tragic flaw. The end is astoundingly moving when we see the dejected Perumalayan, in Theechamundi's attire, running into the fire after declaring Kanthan as his successor. The strength of the character and his willingness to accept punishment for his sin is seen when we see his silhouette bravely enduring the flames. He does not fall down or run out, but continues to dance in the fire.

While dealing with Shakespeare's play, it should be taken into consideration that they were originally intended for the Elizabethan theatre. This means that the theatrical models used were very different from contemporary ones. The play *Othello* is divided into five acts but in the film there are no divisions and film made it as a two hours entertainment. The use of settings and decorations were minimal. The spoken words supposed to activate the imagination of the audience. All performance by young took place during the day, and if the enacted events were set at night or in a dark place, the darkness has to be imagined. Women were not allowed to act on stage, and their roles were performed by young boys whose voices hadn't changed yet. From the point of view of a modern speculation, in this theatre and in contemporary performance which try to stimulate it the lack of realism.

From the 16th to the 20th Century

A discussion of cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's play must take into account not only the transformation of a play written for theatre into the film and the shift from English culture to other cultures but also the time that has elapsed since the creation of the source text. Shakespeare wrote *Othello* in the 16th century but Jayaraj did the film in the 20th century. This made the source text relevant.

Jayaraj has only taken the story line from *Othello* for his film *Kaliyattam* and the entire culture and situations made according to Kerala culture, especially of the North Malabar culture i.e. Jayaraaj made film in the background of Theyyam. Kerala people considered Theyyam as an idol and in every year Theyyam festivals take place in North Kerala. The nature

has gifted Kerala with a lot of unique features both geographically and its culture. Jayaraj made the film according to Kerala culture for their understanding.

One possible way to approach this question is to view the film in the light of the elements which regard as central to a Shakespearean tragedy are the magnitude of the heroes, their suffering and the catharsis experienced by the spectators. Their presence in the film depends on interpretation and emotional response to it.

Jayaraj did the film *Kaliyattam* with different situation, different costume and different background from the source text. While analyzing the film and play one sees the central theme of the film is same as that of the play. The costume and makeup too have an important role in the film. In *Kaliyattam*, the director uses apt costume and makeup that indicate Kerala culture. The manipulation of lighting forms an important contribution to the impact of an image. It helps to create a certain atmosphere and shapes and highlights objects by creating highlights and shadows.

The music (Indian film is incomplete without its music)—in much of the film, is subservient to mood and tone, and without detracting from realism, underscores how oral Indian cinematic traditions are, and how much they borrow from local folk theatre and dance. Music also has a strong effect on the viewer's emotional response to the film. In *Kaliyattam* Jayaraj uses four songs.

In this film the narration happens through the director's point of view. Adaptation suggests moving an entity to a new environment and altering its structure or function to make it fit. When reading the play, *Othello* and comparing it with the film version, one notices many differences between the source text and the target text. There are so many differences between the film and the drama. Film maker must choose what to include and exclude from the literary source material as well as what to highlight or downplay. Emotional involvement is more important in film than in literature.

Kaliyattam is an interesting film—declares its lineage at the very beginning, and the comparison with Shakespeare's *Othello* sets the tone of the film. While defining feature of the film is not its plot—but the characters and the overall mood.

Suresh Gopi's Perumalayan (the chief of the tribe of Malayans) an overweight artiste (true enough to be real) who is however regarded highly for his 'theyyam' skills, and famed for his expertise in *Kaliyattam*, the ancestor of 'kathakali', Kerala's premier dance form. Gopi's character has none of the sexual appeal of *Othello* (the stuff of much racist stereotyping) and is instead a rather ugly-looking man, remarkable for his artistic virtuosity and little else. It is therefore almost incredible why Thamara (Desdemona, played with a quiet strength of conviction by the underrated Manju Warriar) should fall in love with him, defy her community, and marry him for the sake of an illogical love. The movie's realism underscores this and a distraught Perumalayan's inner complexes stem as much from his wife's unparalleled beauty and high status (strange casting, because Warriar is no Helen of Troy, but shines forth as a rather homely though eloquent beauty) as from his own poor looks and lack of self-worth.

Thus the film maker makes the distance between the past and the present appeal small and increases the films appeal to a contemporary audience. Cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have been an important part of the history of cinema from its earliest days and have attracted researchers from various disciplines. This paper has approached the subject from a translation studies perspective. Through the adaptation we found to vary how film is different from drama or a

theatre, two distinct media which use different semiotic languages and rely on different genres and in how they handle the span of time between 16th century and the present. Thus the purpose of this paper is to offer a framework for dealing with cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare's play as an inter-semiotic translation rather than to provide an exhaustive history of Shakespeare on screen.

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