

Shakespeare adaptation by Kurosawa: A comparative Study

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Abstract

The discovery of the visual medium and the propagation of movies happened during the early 19th century, while literature and written form of literature has a long history which can be traced back to 13th or 14th century. From the very invention of movies literature and literary works has influenced and been influencing all movie makers alike to make their movies. Most characters of William Shakespeare have been adapted in the silver screen in different forms and famous Japanese director adapted three of Shakespeare's tragedies in a beautiful visual form. Kurosawa took Shakespeare's Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear and brought them into the Japanese atmosphere. Mostly Kurosawa made samurai movies and two among these adapted works are samurai movies. Kurosawa's visual adaptations excelled over other visual treatments of the same due to its efficient way of narration and blocking. The actors of the director also played a crucial role in bringing out the Shakespearean tragic heroes in an effective manner

Keyword: Visual medium, Movies, Silver screen, Tragedies

Akira Kurosawa is a renowned Japanese film director, who through his movies talked about universality though in a traditional Japanese note. Kurosawa was born on March 23 1910, and made his film entry through an action film *Sanshiro Sugata*. He directed a total of 31 movies over a span of 57 years. His most famous movies include *Rashomon*, *Ikiru*, *Seven Samurai*, *Ran* and *Dreams*. In 1990 he got the academy award for lifetime achievement.

Apart from being a master director Kurosawa was a tricky screenwriter and a beautiful painter, he used to do the screenwriting part in most of his movies and also created painted storyboards for his movies. Most of his movies are well known for its universal storyline, though they're narrated through stories familiar to the

Japanese audience. Kurosawa movies brought back the long-lost traditional samurai concepts into visual medium. His movie *Ikiru* is considered to be one of the finest movies ever made. *Rashomon* of 1950 became a revolutionary film as it discussed the most psychologically questioning topic of perspectives and became critically acclaimed soon after its release. The movie brought a huge number of discussions among the audience that a new psychological concept was introduced with the term “Rashomon effect”, as the seed of thought was derived from the movie *Rashomon*. Kurosawa’s made his last movie was *Madadayo* (1993) which did not bring him much collection also was not a great movie in his far stretching filmography. Akira Kurosawa died at the age of 88 in September 6 1998. Still the legendary filmmaker is being taught and studied not only to film students but also to students of other disciplines all over the world.

Kurosawa being the most effective director that Japanese film industry ever had took three of Shakespeare’s works reworked them and made them more meaningful and understandable to the Japanese audience. He took two of the three works and reworked and transcribed them into Samurai stories which made them quite more beautiful. The bloodshed and wars that Shakespeare displayed to the Elizabethan audience was recreated by Kurosawa through his movies. He used the magic medium of visual storytelling to inject the Shakespearian ideals to the modern movie lovers. It is quite remarkable that human and human instincts haven’t changed throughout the passage of time. Similar to the Shakespearian heroes Kurosawa’s heroes too were noble births and possessed their own tragic flaw, though the master director made the stories of Shakespeare more flexible and plotted the characters into the land of Japan. Even the legendary film maker Stephen Spielberg quoted about Kurosawa the pictorial Shakespeare of our time. Kurosawa adapted Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* into the feudal conditions of Japan, that was his first adaptation of Shakespeare. The movie was named *The Throne of Blood* which was released in 1957. Later he took the rotten postwar state of his nation and placed Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* as the central setting of his story making an effective and his only non-samurai movie of Shakespeare, *The Bad Sleeps Well* of 1960. After a long gap of 25 years Kurosawa turned towards Shakespeare for one last time adapting *King Lear* into the glorious *jidaigeki* epic, also adding some of his autobiographical elements to make one among the visually stunning movie of the entire film history, *Ran* 1985.

Kurosawa read and enjoyed almost all literary works, thinking of a way to transcribe the same into the visual language and Shakespeare being the most favorite writer of him. When asked in an interview Kurosawa mockingly said that those who went to elementary school would know Shakespeare. Kurosawa saw the universality of Shakespeare and made movies with them which made him and his movies universal. The Shakespearian war and bloodshed was more suited to the Samurai movies of Kurosawa than any other films or filmmakers. Hence the movies made by Kurosawa out of Shakespeare got more critical acclaim than majority of his counterparts who worked on the seeds sown by Shakespeare. Kurosawa’s camera often travelled with the characters similar to the writing style that Shakespeare followed often placing the audience into the head of the protagonist hence justifying the actions of the hero, as exploring his tragic flaw in a visually

beautiful manner. Kurosawa never relayed on dialogues, he through his blocking and mise-en-scene effectively made the audience fit into the shoes of his hero making him one among the best filmmaker the world has ever seen. Kurosawa successfully accomplished in transmitting the fire lit by Shakespeare without any lesser to his audience.

Macbeth holds the prime position in Shakespeare's five great tragedies. Shakespeare through his noble tragic hero Macbeth conveyed the alarming aftereffects of swelling ambitions in human life. The Shakespearian Macbeth was a chivalric war-lord who along with his friend Banko on his way back home after defending his countries pride and winning a war against intruders meets 3 witches who manipulates the mind of Macbeth and injects the seeds of ambition into his head by stating that one day Macbeth would become the King of Scotland. The prophecy makes Macbeth turn against his king Duncan. The king who was not expecting his loyal watchdog to turn against him dies a cruel death. The play *Macbeth* showcased the world the most cunning anti-hero ever in the world, the female anti-hero who became immortal throughout the rigorous passage of time, Lady Macbeth. She added up to the prophecies often giving Macbeth guts, ideas and arms to kill others hence protecting his position. Macbeth who continues his killing spree encounters guilt and paranoia at certain point and recalls most of his decisions wrong, though things go out of his hand as most of his enemies join together to fight Macbeth. On the final fight Macbeth dies a pitiful death from the hands of one of his enemy. Macbeth occupies pinnacle position in the history of tragedies as the human flaw of ambitions is most common to people in and around the globe. The play gives an alarming message to the entire human race to control their swelling ambitions. It is said that Shakespeare took the idea of *Macbeth* from the story of King of Scotland Duncan and Macduff.

When Kurosawa visually transcribed the same into frames, he followed the same pattern as Shakespeare the movie started from the war and return of Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banko). Toshiro Mifune and Isuzu Yamada enacted the roles of Macbeth and lady Macbeth respectively. Apart from the other adaptations of *Macbeth*, the work of Kurosawa excels other works as the samurai storyline and cultures perfectly blended together to convey the depth of Shakespearian bloodsheds and violence. After serving loyal to his lord the thought of becoming the lord himself makes the mind of Washizu corrupted and ultimately into his downfall. He through the advices of his wife Asaji kills his lord and his most loyal friend Miki. Kurosawa effectively composed the supernatural elements of Shakespeare in a profound manner as the three witches were replaced by a single prophet, who predicts the future of Washizu. When the Shakespearian Macbeth was converted into Kurosawan Washizu, the character suffered more dilemma and had possessed more human attributes. He realizes his guilt more easily. Different from the Shakespearian Macbeth, Washizu does not blames his wife to the end of the story, he well understands that his wife Asaji too suffered much. Kurosawa made his hero more human though he gave his hero a more tragic end than Macbeth, Washizu gets betrayed by his own soldiers and gets killed by an arrow aimed at him by his fellow fighters. The soldiers to the end questions their lord, finding him guilty for killing their former lord. This shows the fall of the monarch which

could be considered as the epitome symbol of democracy which Kurosawa has seen though Shakespeare was not able to witness. The movie was shot in Mount Fuji, Kurosawa through his brilliant cinematography techniques captured the beauty of the landscape much effectively. The spider castle and the spider web forest that the director took as his inputs proved fruitful as the movie provided more space than the play for the forest and its trees to be the plot points towards the climax of the movie. Undoubtedly *The Throne of Blood* could be considered the best adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* could be considered as the play which explored the human mind from every nook and corner, even touching unexplored the dark corners. *Hamlet* is the longest play of Shakespeare consisting of 29,551 words. The story and plot of *Hamlet* revolves around the young prince of Denmark Hamlet, who infuriated by the spirit of his father (ghost) seeks revenge from his uncle Claudius who murdered his father and married his mother attaining the throne of Denmark. Hamlet decides to murder his uncle and get the nation and throne back to his control. Apart from other heroes of Shakespeare the tragic flaw of Hamlet is his procrastination. Hamlet delays his actions, as he is constantly stranded between his thoughts about right and wrong. This fatal flaw often confuses him and at the end leading to his own collapse and downfall. Shakespeare derived the story of *Hamlet* from the legend of Amleth. *Hamlet* is a well written and executed play of Shakespeare that shows the audience a hero who often gets confused in course of action and ends up his life avenging his father. The play ends with a massacre as most characters including Hamlet is killed during the final act of the play.

Kurosawa kept the subtlety of Shakespeare when he shot the movie, this is Kurosawa's closest adaptation to Shakespeare. The movie stands very much close to the play, Kurosawa placed the *Hamlet* into a working-class Japanese man. Kurosawa induced the elements of colonial systems and post-war struggles as different layers of the movie carefully. The central character of the movie is played by Toshiro Mifune who acts a young man who sets out to avenge his father's death. The movie follows the scenic pattern similar to the play as the central character delays his actions due to dilemma and moral questions. The movie ends with the death of the central character and Kurosawa portrays the tragic scenes beautifully in black and white frames adding to the fatal deepness of the tragedy. The movie was well celebrated and acclaimed throughout the world as Kurosawa transferred the Shakespearean war elements into the contemporary Japanese life and not just confining the theme into a Samurai movie.

Shakespeare's *King Lear* is a tragedy which focuses duality and the confusing aspects existing between human relationships. The plot of the play revolves around an old King Lear who measures the love of his three daughters, and trusts two of them blindly deposing the third one from his castle and making her exile from his country. Mayhem ensues when the king retires and leaves his positions to his daughters. They kick Lear out

of the castle and make him suffer the tremendous wind and rain. Lear with a broken heart encounters madness and suffers badly. Shakespeare entwines the story of another lord of the country along with the story of Lear. Lord Gloucester similar to Lear blindly believes his adopted son Edmond over Edgar and suffers for his act. Gloucester is blinded and made exile from the country.

Edmond along with the other two daughters faces the wrath of the third daughter and her husband (the king of France), who comes to the rescue of her father. The final act of the play comprises of the war between the good and the evil. Even though the battle ends in a positive note, King Lear and his third daughter Cordelia is murdered by the evil plans of Edmond, ending the play in a tragical note. Lear is that character of Shakespeare who suffers the most, both physically and mentally among the other tragic heroes. Lear suffers betrayal and storm alike. The downfall of Lear is written by Shakespeare with extreme precision, the man who once ruled the country was made to exile and gets stranded by a cave during the storm. Lear becomes insane at the ending part of the play on encountering his younger daughter and finally is happy to find genuine love as he is reunited with her. Shakespeare makes his audience think by letting his characters haunt them, such a magic could be found in his tragic play King Lear. Lear and his daughter Cordelia stood as a horrific and depressive sight in the minds of audience.

Kurosawa leaves his autobiographical marks when he took the Shakespearean legend Lear and transformed that into his character HidetoraIchimonji. Ran was a movie which came out of the master director during the end phase of his career. Kurosawa himself was very much similar to Lear, he had nothing else to do than to dethrone and leave his kingdom for his successors. The film has a huge fanbase among the movie lovers across the globe as it captures the most stunning visuals a film has ever captured. Kurosawa who was in the verge of blindness during the shooting period of Ran, completed the shooting process using hand drawn storyboards. Kurosawa treated the Shakespearean epic in a different aspect as he cut short the story of Lord Gloucester and added that themes into the story of

HidetoraIchimonji. Ichimonji had three sons with whom he divided his kingdom and suffers the same fate as Lear, though Kurosawa add more commercial spaces into the movie by injecting more elements of betrayal and war in the movie. HidetoraIchimonji gets betrayed by his friend whereas the elder son gets betrayed by his brother, who betrays his wife taking the advice of the wife of his elder brother. The film follows a mass amounts of murders and betrayals, though towards the end the youngest son Saburao reunites with his father. Their happiness is cut short when Saburao gets killed by gunmen appointed by his brother. HidetoraIchimonji dies of his sufferings and broken heart. Kurosawa depicts the world a hellish place full of betrayal and fake love. The fate of viewers is well captured by the filmmaker towards his final frames as the final frame comprises of a blind man confused about his path in the top of a cliff. The audience of the movie also suffers the same fate as they're left with the thought of what to trust and what to believe in a hellish world. King Lear and Ran differs in many ways though Kurosawa took the central idea of the play to depict a hopeless world. Ran is the Shakespearean adaptation of Kurosawa which is shot in colour medium. The world of literature and

movies are filled with characters from Shakespeare, though magical adaptations could be found when a true master-craftsman meets them. Kurosawa is one among the very few directors who with their own vision transformed the Shakespearean ideals into visual medium.

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