

From Text to Screen: The Metamorphosis of *King Lear* to *Ran*

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Abstract: *Ran*, the film is a cultural reconstruction of *King Lear*, where Akira Kurosawa attempts to give a Japanese version of *King Lear*. This study focuses on the differences in *Ran* from the source *King Lear*, its relation to the source, the influences which shaped the work and the message it intends to convey through the deconstruction and recreation. This adaptation also attempts to fill in the fissures in the original and highlights the fact that adaptations can be influenced by culture, politics and history of the author or his age. *Ran*, though against the interests of the original author, appeals to the tastes and perceptions of the audience. The work has an independent identity though it is intrinsically linked to the original. Whether *Ran* conforms to the notion of fidelity to the original is analysed here to deduce the validity of the conventional notion of 'fidelity criticism'.

Index Terms – Adaptation, Fidelity, King Lear, Originality, Ran.

Cinema, from its very inception, has had a fascination for popular texts and an interminable desire to transform them into celluloid versions. Julie Sanders in her work *Adaptation and Appropriation* defines adaptation as a transpositional practice, an act of reconsideration by casting a specific genre into another generic mode. She says, "Adaptation is a specific process involving the transition from one genre to another: novels into film, drama into musical, dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or the inverse movement of making drama into prose narrative" (19). Adaptation studies focus more on the cinematic versions of canonical plays since they provide a manifestation which is common and easily understood.

Studies on film adaptation mainly focus on the question of fidelity, as if the only task of a film were a mimetic re-presentation of the written text. But such faithfulness is often impossible because a text and a film are two entirely different genres. George Bluestone in his *Novels into Film* describes the major difference in transference of a story from a written form to a film. "The film, then, making its appeal to the perceiving senses, is free to work with endless variations of physical reality where the moving picture comes to us directly through perception, language must be filtered through the screen of conceptual apprehension" (3-5).

A word by word adaptation would be too unexciting as it would only give the impression of a whole text being read out aloud. A film may employ certain techniques to present the effects of a written text that may vary with language, culture or age. How words printed on a book's pages are transformed with a satisfying equivalency on to the screen is the major concern here. To accommodate the new medium, there may be changes in the form as well as the content of the text. The 1985 Japanese- French film *Ran*, co-written and directed by the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa is an adaptation of the Shakespearean tragedy *King Lear*. Kurosawa has not only adapted the story of *King Lear* into a different language, time, place and culture, but also into a different genre. The film was made in such a way as to suit the contemporary sensibilities with several changes from the core text.

Shakespearean works, especially tragedies, have always influenced film directors of every era. Akira Kurosawa, the Japanese director has successfully transformed two great tragedies of Shakespeare to popular films in Japanese. His first Shakespearean adaptation was the *Throne of Blood* based on *Macbeth* and the second was *Ran* inspired by *King Lear*. Kurosawa's replacement of Shakespearean stage with a Japanese background makes the film a standout among various adaptations of *King Lear*.

Sometimes, the process of adaptation becomes more preoccupied with culture rather than focusing on a close reinterpretation of the source text. Adaptations may sometimes comment on the politics of the source text or those of the background, or both, usually by means of modification or addition. In *Ran* Kurosawa finds a new interpretation of *King Lear* with the aid of Japanese culture and its traditional practices like Samurai Warfare and Noh acting style. *Ran* is set in the medieval sixteenth century Japan, characterized by civil wars, political instability, dominant patterns of ambition and treachery. The title of the film also signifies this, as it means rebellion and chaos. The film centers on an ageing warlord Hidetora Ichimonji, patriarch of the Ichimonji clan, who decides to abdicate as a ruler in favour of his sons Taro, Jiro and Saburo. While his sons Taro and Jiro, manipulated by Lady Kaede turn against him on receiving the power, his honest son Saburo, whom Hidetora had banished comes to his rescue. The ending of *Ran* corresponds to the ending of *King Lear* with the death of all major characters thus marking the end of Ichimonji clan.

Japanese influence can be seen in the acting style of certain characters in *Ran*. Characters of Hidetora and Lady Kaede are influenced by the Japanese Noh Theater which emphasizes the passionate, callous, single-minded nature of these characters. Long intervals of static motion and silence followed by impetuous and wild change in manner and the heavy ghostlike make-up of Hidetora resembles the masks of Noh performers.

In this reinterpretation of *King Lear*, Kurosawa intends to communicate his opinions, influences and messages to the world and comment on contemporary events. The centerpiece of the film *Ran* is the battles in it. When Taro and Jiro combine their forces and attack the old Lord and his followers without a warning, a horrific massacre follows. Hidetora's bodyguards fall in the battle, some others are shot, two of his concubines kill each other and the castle is set on fire. In the Hachimanfield, Jiro's army was demolished by arquebus fire from Saburo's army, who had moved into the woods for cover. Samurai warfare was revolutionized by the introduction of arquebus firearms. Bows, arrows and swords were replaced by muskets, arquebus etc. This new kind of warfare spreading total destruction is illustrated in the battle of Hachiman field. Kurosawa himself reveals his film to be a metaphor for nuclear warfare and the anxiety of the Post-Hiroshima age.

Kurosawa's interests in the Samurai tradition developed from his education in martial arts. He found parallels between the Samurai tradition and the world he lived in and chose the social settings and ethics of the warrior culture to represent the nuclear warfare and destruction of his times. He is of the opinion that all the technological progress of the twentieth century only helped the people to learn to kill each other more efficiently. Bert Cardullo quotes Kurosawa's words in *Akira Kurosawa: Interviews*, "All the technological progress of these last years have only taught human beings how to kill more of each other faster. It is very difficult for me to retain a sanguine outlook on life under such circumstances" (93). This nihilism is evident in *Ran* from the beginning, when Hidetora hunts down a boar and refuses to eat it to the last scene of Tsurumaru. *Ran* portrays life as an unending cycle of suffering. A person is either a victim or a villain or both. Saburo, the just warlord dies futilely and the upright characters like Lady Sue also submit to the violence and treachery around them. The immoral characters like Jiro and Lady Kaede are never given a chance to apologize or make amends before their death. About the pervading nihilism and the tragedy of *Ran*, Kurosawa says that "the gods or the God or whoever it is observing human events is feeling sadness about how human beings destroy each other and powerlessness to effect human beings behaviour" (Lexi).

Chaos, being the central theme of the film, is employed to highlight the absence of gods. The title is an allusion to the disorder and destruction awaiting the Ichimonji clan. Using characters like Lady Sue, the most religious character in the film, Tsurumaru and Kyoami, the Fool, Kurosawa denies the existence of gods. Sue is eventually killed despite her belief in love and forgiveness. In the last shot, we see blind Tsurumaru stumbling towards the edge, on top of his ruined family castle. He has a narrow escape from falling down, but accidentally drops the scroll of Buddha Sue had given him. He stands there all alone. Tsurumaru represents the modern concept of the death of god and through his alienation he characterizes modern humanity unaware of his closeness to disaster. Kyoami, the Fool, at one point claims that gods either do not exist or are the cause of human suffering. Tango responds saying “[The gods] can’t save us from ourselves” (02:32:19). In *King Lear*, in Scene I of Act IV, Gloucester says that “As flies to wanton boys, are we to gods; they kill us for their sport (270). In *Ran*, god never interferes. It is the humans who kill cruelly and bloodily before a sad and silent god.

Kurosawa first got the idea of *Ran* from the parable of a Japanese General, Mori Motonari and his clan during the Muromachi period. According to the legend, Mori has three sons. Once each of the sons was given a single arrow and was asked to break it and they do the same. Then they were given three arrows together, but in unity nobody could shatter them. In *Ran* Kurosawa deconstructs this parable. He illustrates his plan to divide his kingdom with a parable of Mori Motonari. He gives one arrow to each son and orders to break it. Each one breaks it with ease. Then he gives three arrows together to each son and orders the same. Taro and Jiro tries to break the arrows but they fail. Hidetora then explains that one arrow can easily be broken, but not three arrows together. However, Saburo, the only son who truly cares for his father smashes the three arrows together using his knee. Though there were similarities with *King Lear* in *Ran* from the beginning itself, Kurosawa acknowledged it much later only. Kurosawa skillfully merges in *Ran*, the stories of *King Lear* and Mori Motonari and replaced Shakespeare’s daughters with male siblings. Like Lear, Mori also repeats the same mistake of rewarding the two wicked children and banishing the loyal one. The good and loyal child is banished by the king/warlord as they fail to please him with praise like the elder children. In *King Lear*, it is Cordelia, along with Earl of Kent, who is banished for disagreeing with Lear and in *Ran* it is Saburo and Tango. Hidetora’s sons prove to be more cruel and wild than Regan and Goneril. In *King Lear* as well as *Ran*, the third child who is banished comes to the aid of lord/king. Thus both the adapted text as well as the adaptation deals with the conflict between authority and challenge within the family where the kings/ warlords/ fathers represent the authority figure whose power is questioned by the subjects or children.

Kurosawa deals with the individual conflicts in *King Lear* in a political way. Lear points to the ruthless animal passions that have replaced the human values in his daughters. Kurosawa moves away from the source because Shakespeare’s Lear was not a warrior like Hidetora of *Ran* who holds on to power through the destruction of his enemies in his lust for supremacy. Shakespeare’s Lear on the other hand is governed by emotions and is the representative of every abused parent who believed in his children’s continued love.

The embodiment of rigid ritualization, rigorous order and Samurai culture of sixteenth century in Kurosawa’s film differs from *King Lear*. While in *King Lear*, the values and stability of an ordered feudal world give way to modern set of voracious priorities, in *Ran*, individual courage and fighting skill of Samurai is overtaken by technological advance. As all warriors do, Hidetora justifies the devastation he wrought by saying that it is the nature of war. What befalls him is also in the nature of revenge.

It is often said that adaptations are made to fill the fissures in the original. Kurosawa was concerned of the absence of any reflection on Lear’s past in *King Lear* which he sees as a big deficiency. He felt that there has to be a reason for his madness and therefore took effort to make a past for him. He portrays Hidetora as a tyrant holding great powers, on the loss of which he lose his

sanity. Thus Shakespeare's play presents a situation which moves to the future, commencing with the king's urge for his daughters to express their love for him. Kurosawa presents an action which has its roots in the past. Kurosawa gives a detailed past of the misdeeds of Hidetora while the characters in *King Lear* lack a personal history.

There are no exact equivalents for the subsidiary *King Lear* characters in *Ran*; rather there is a distribution of character qualities among the supporting characters. Earl of Kent and Lear's Fool find their counterparts in *Ran*. But there is no secondary Gloucester plot in Kurosawa's film. The character of Edmund, the illegitimate son of Gloucester, has profound influence on the character of Jiro for his bitterness of his elder brother's significant inheritance. Saburo stands for Cordelia. Sue also possesses certain qualities of Cordelia. More than Hidetora's own sons, Lady Kaede, Hidetora's daughter in law unleashes destruction on him in revenge for the conquest of her family castle by the warlord. She is also parallel to the character of Regan by her overwhelming and immoral attraction to Jiro which corresponds to Regan's passionate sexual craving for Edmund. Kurosawa has created Lady Kaede by merging Cornwall with the cunningness of Edmund. Also by this gender reversal Kurosawa tries to raise the issues of female power and authority. But unlike Lady Kaede, neither Cornwall nor Edmund have suffered at the hands of the characters they aim to destroy.

There are several common themes and motifs in *King Lear* and *Ran*. A major theme of *King Lear* is blindness, which is embodied by Tsurumaru in *Ran*. He has the dimensions of blinded Gloucester and his legitimate son Edgar. In *King Lear*, though there is only a passing reference to hunting, the hunting motif is an essential indicator of interaction. Kurosawa uses hunting as a major theme and discloses it in the opening sequence itself with Hidetora hunting down a boar. From a hunter he later becomes the hunted. The boar hunt also signifies the interaction between natural world and human world, place of human being in the natural world and legitimacy of man's behaviour to others of his own species. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare employs the storm, nature's chaos, to represent the disordered mind of his character. In *Ran*, the forceful wind replaces the tempestuous storm and it asserts the importance of creating domains to seek protection from nature's rage. The central chaos in the film is not represented by storm as in *King Lear*, but by epic battle scenes which transcends the limitations of stage. At the same time, in *King Lear* there is no detailed description of war.

Kurosawa's perception of the world and life was changed by the evil and madness of humanity, warfare and violence around him. His views of human character as ruthless, barren and wild and life as a circle of endless suffering made him believe that the problems to be addressed are spiritual ones. Kurosawa professes the resistant attitude of the world to reformation and the inability of artists to compel such change. In an interview with Cardullo, Kurosawa says, "I believe that the world would not change even if I made a direct statement: do this and do that. Moreover, the world will not change unless we steadily change human nature itself and our way of thinking. We have to exorcise the essential evil in human nature, rather than presenting concrete solutions to problems or directly depicting social problems" (140).

This realization led Kurosawa to make his masterpiece tragedy that shows the human suffering and destruction as if from the eyes of a detached god watching from above. Kurosawa has successfully uprooted the story of *King Lear* from the west and has constructed an eastern equivalent. *Ran* do not have either Shakespearean dialogue in English or a direct translation, but it proves to be a Shakespearean adaptation through the efficient treatment of Shakespeare's universal subject and theme of *King Lear*.

An issue highly discussed in adaptation is fidelity to the original, the source text. Fidelity has been for many years the primary measure of analyzing these revisions. Literary texts are often considered as the sources and films as a mere copy of the original. But this film version of *King Lear* proves that the conventional notion of conforming to the fidelity of original is no longer applicable. Julie Sanders argues that "it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most

creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place” (20). Therefore the major concern of film adaptation is not to maintain literal fidelity, but to give a good cinematic equivalent of the text.

An awareness of the clear relationship between the source text and adaptation alone can give a full impact of the film adaptation to the audience. In this expectation, many formal adaptations bear the same name as their source text. Also an understanding of the similarities and differences are crucial in this regard, and it is here the intertextuality comes into play. “Adaptation studies are then not about making polarized value judgment, but about analyzing process, ideology and methodology” (20), says Julie Sanders.

In all categorizations and definitions of adaptation, what remains crucial is the pleasure principle. John Ellis argues that adaptation enables an extension of pleasure connected to memory; “Adaptation into another medium becomes a means of prolonging the pleasure of the original presentation, and repeating the production of a memory” (4-5). Thus films have a vital role upon our experience of canonical literature. Kurosawa through his film *Ran* has elevated the position of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in literature. Thus this study proves the conventional notion of ‘fidelity criticism’ as outdated and explores the wide scope of adaptation studies in the modern scenario of technological development in every fields.

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