



Pratidhwani the Echo

A Peer-Reviewed International Journal of Humanities & Social Science

ISSN: 2278-5264 (Online) 2321-9319 (Print)

Impact Factor: 6.28 (Index Copernicus International)

Volume-VI, Issue-II, October 2017, Page No. 151-156

Published by Dept. of Bengali, Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: <http://www.thecho.in>

Adaptation: An Introduction

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Abstract

Since the early ages, as far as traceable, adaptation has been an essential part of creation. Artworks have always drawn from various existing sources but in literary world the term adaptation is subjected to harsh criticism. However, it is obvious that creation is always an adaptation of the pre-existing ideas or works. This tradition of 'drawing from' is carried further by the authors of every era, be it Geoffrey Chaucer or Thomas Stearns Eliot, adaptation never ceased to exist in the literary world. Considering the intrinsic relation between adaptation and creation, the paper intends to explain adaptation from different theoretical perspectives and concentrate on the creative aspect of adaptation.

Keywords: Adaptation, Creation, Postmodern, Original, Text.

Adaptation is a familiar term in the field of biology. It is considered as “the heart and soul of evolution” (Eldrege 33). Adaptation refers to the process which an organism undergoes for surviving. This process includes a gain or loss in its feature which is instrumental in making them fit for survival. Similarly, in literature adaptation plays a significant role in creation and texts “are built from systems, codes and traditions established by previous works of art” (Allen 1). Adaptation is not new and it has been an integral part of creation in every form of art. From the ancient times, art often borrowed from the pre-existing sources and transformed it to create a new piece according to the taste of the audience. Even the famous Greek dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripedes “have their roots in the muthoi (myth or stories) which were expressed in the other narrative epic poems” (Lane 157). Adaptation is essentially a part of every creation, in this context Robert Brustein points out:

“...even scriptures, in previous times, was susceptible to interpretation and adaptation. Just as the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were adapted by medieval guilds in the Passion plays, so the Homeric myths - which constituted scripture for the Greeks - have been in a constant state of development and change. The Electra story, for example, was dramatized by Aeschylus, then by Sophocles,

and then by Euripides, each treatment a brand-new departure when reflected each writer's own religious, social, and psychological obsessions" (187).

Today in the postmodern world, adaptation is prevalent with more works at disposal. According to Linda Hutcheon, "adaptation has run amok" (Hutcheon XI). The postmodern society is consciously or unconsciously entangled in the cobweb of adaptation. Movies, music, paintings, literary pieces, various electronic media, theme park, history enactment shows and virtual reality experiments contribute equally as a product of it. With the help of critical theories, especially in postmodernism, adaptation is being explained from diverse perspectives. In *Modern Shakespeare Offshoots*, Ruby Cohn states that "adaptation involves the addition of new material alongside substantial cutting and rearrangement" (Cohn 3). Cohn's explanation emphasises on the addition and subtraction of elements whether it be form, plot, character or any other attribute. This process of transformation or modification allows the author to suit any idea in a convenient manner. The involvement of the pre-existing sources by various artists in different period of time is also marked as "borrowing, stealing, appropriating, inheriting, assimilating ... being influenced, inspired, dependent, indebted, haunted, possessed ... homage, mimicry, travesty, echo, allusion, and intertextuality" (Poole 2). Apart from borrowing and transforming adaptation is also instrumental in renewing the literary tradition or immortalizing the significant works of the past.

To offer a concrete definition of the term adaptation is generally misleading. It is a dynamic process. Various critics and theorists are enhancing the paradigm with the help of theories. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon explains adaptation from three perspectives:

"First, seen as a formal entity or product, an adaptation is an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works. Second, as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re)creation; this has been called both appropriation and salvaging, depending on your perspective. Third, seen from the perspective of its process of reception, adaptation is a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations (as adaptation) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (7-8).

Hutcheon's explanation significantly foregrounds the co-relation of texts and the interdependence of one on the other. Contradictorily, it is interesting to note that after the process adaptation, the newly created text may also exist independently or as a palimpsest of the older text. The inter-relation can only be understood if the audience is familiar with the pre-existing sources. The correlative approach mentioned not only portrays the idea of intertextuality but also rejuvenates the age old debate of fidelity. To this denomination Wetmore expresses that the importance of fidelity loses its context when the "audience has no referent to which to compare it for fidelity" (Wetmore 626).

In *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation*, Margaret Jane Kidnie explains “adaptation as an evolving category is closely tied to how the work modifies over time and from one reception space to another” (Kidnie 5). From the explanations given, it can be drawn that adaptation involves in the process of transformation through which old texts are altered and reconstructed to create a new text. Though “art is derived from other art; stories are born of other stories” (Hutcheon 2) adapted works are never treated as good as the original and the acceptance of the work is always derived from comparing the newly created work with its adaptive source. Generally adaptation is subjected to harsh criticism and “often put down as secondary, derivative, belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior (Hutcheon 2). Even the most innovative adapted works are considered a duplicate copy of the work from which it is created. Adaptations are normally assessed on the basis of its fidelity so it is never looked upon as a creative piece with its own uniqueness.

From the theoretical perspective it can be said that every creative piece is a product of adaptation and it is transposed from a source or multiple. In the postmodern world, it will be perhaps misleading “to speak of originality or the uniqueness of the artistic object, be it a painting or a novel, since every artistic object is so clearly assembled from bits and pieces of already existent art” (Allen 5). In *Tradition and Individual Talent*, T.S. Eliot specifically emphasizes on the creative aspect of literature along with the importance of a historical sense in author which includes “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (Eliot 37). The presence of past in the present affects the dynamics of originality. Here it can be said that every creative process engages in this involvement of the past in the present and “the writer thinks less of writing originally, and more of rewriting” (Said 135).

The past plays a significant role in shaping the creation and hence it cannot be undermined in the process of adaptation. Instead it can be said that the past reappears with its own uniqueness to re-define the present. In adapted works, the context is often referentially recalled and then it is transformed to develop the meaning re-contextually accommodating the connoted perspectives. From this it can be understood that a process of re-contextualization exists in every adaptive or creative work but the engagement remains hidden to those who are ignorant of the sources involved. Due to this inter-relation of texts or literary works it can be said that “no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (Eliot 37).

Ferdinand de Saussure explained that language can be possibly understood in its relational aspect. Words exist in relation to other words and the meaning also depend on it. Referring to the idea of *langue* proposed by Saussure, sentences are formed by combining words in a specific combination which are hardly altered and this is followed by most of the users of every language. So, the meaning depends on the relational aspect as well as on the combination of words. In a similar way Graham Allen states:

“Authors of literary works do not just select words from a language system, they select plots, generic features, aspects of character, images, ways of narrating, even

phrases and sentences from previous literary texts and from the literary tradition.... in reading literature we become intensely aware that the signs deployed in any particular text have their reference not to objects in the world but to the literary system out of which the text is produced” (11).

On the other hand, the meaning of a literary work varies according to the reception. From the perspective of reception, adaptation is an inter-textual engagement. The understanding of a literary work also alters when it is adapted and presented to a different socio-cultural background other than the one in which it was earlier presented. The context of the source text as well as the socio-cultural parameters plays a major role in shaping the meaning of the adapted text. Similar to the dialogical aspect of language, Julia Kristeva states that text is:

“... a productivity, and this means: first, that its relationship to the language it is situated is redistributive (destructive-constructive), and hence can be better approached through logical categories rather than linguistic ones; and second, that it is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another” (36).

From this it can be assumed that all texts are created and received on the basis of intersexuality. Due to the inter-textual nature, it cannot be said that a text possesses a self-contained coherent meaning. Hence to develop an understanding, it is important to understand the inter-play of texts as well as the ideological struggles prevalent in the socio-historical context. The concept of intertextuality clearly depicts that texts cannot exist in isolation and creation is impossible without borrowing from other texts. Every text is created by adapting from other texts, so, it is a product of adaptation.

Roland Barthes alters the perspective of intertextuality and shifts the projection on receptive approach. With Jacques Derrida’s idea of de-centering, Barthes dislodges the author from the authoritative hierarchy. He further expresses that author cannot continue to hold the authority of defining meanings. Here, the meaning making process takes a discursive twist but this also includes Bakhtin’s idea of addressivity and Kristeva’s intertextuality. Considering the inter-relative aspect of texts, Barthes decentres the idea of originality in terms of receptivity. In this context it can be said that the “author function is historically specified and changes over time”(Milton 55). Interestingly, the socio-cultural aspect remains significant but the perspective shifts to the reader. “The modern scripter, when s/he writes is always already in the process of re-writing. The meaning comes not from the author but from language viewed intertextually” (Allen 74). Referring to the roles of author and reader Barthes explains:

“a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where the multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author.”(148).

In these lines, the authority of the author is challenged. Barthes elaborates that a text is created by drawing from different texts and the reader is the space where all the quotations are deciphered. Here, the meaning of a text depends on readers. The text comes alive and interpreted according to their mental register. The ideological struggle embedded in the text is deciphered as per the cultural affiliation of the readers. From the perspective of adaptation it can be said that the readers adapt as per their own knowledge and unfold multiple layers of meaning accordingly. The dialogical nature of the text enables the readers to interpret the meaning which may or may not coincide with the authorial intention. Explaining the prominence of the reader Barthes concludes:

“The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without a history, biography, psychology; he is simply someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted... the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author” (148).

In terms of adaptation, fidelity debates were centered on paternity or originality but with the birth of reader the significance of paternity becomes partially insignificant as the reader is playing the role of the creator. Hence, the meaning of the text which is being deciphered by the reader does not possess the authorial servility. Considering Barthes’ approach, adaptation depends on the reader who is free to engage in any inter-textual association as per his/her own socio-cultural context.

From the postmodern perspective, the idea of originality is negated and texts do not pretend to be original. Intentional use of old literary forms, genres and different kinds of literature are prevalent. In postmodern world, adaptation is open and declared, authors emphasize on bringing forth the source texts to offer a contradiction or re-shape it to develop their own text through allusions, quotations and other means. This transformation alters the meaning pertaining to a different cultural and historical context. There is a difference as well as an amalgamation of the past and present through which the ideas are presented. Inter-textual engagements often recall the pre-existing texts and this initiates the process of recontextualization. However, it is not necessarily an inversion of ideas expressed in the source text. Adaptations can also be parodically employed to emphasize the significant aspect of postmodern life. Considering the commercial aspect adapted works often appear as a safe bet. Economic motivation can be considered one of the most important factors of adapting an old text which is already familiar with the audience or readers.

“Adaptation, like evolution is a transgenerational phenomenon” (Hutcheon 32). Theoretically every creation is a product of adaptation. In contemporary world, adaptation is everywhere: movies, television shows, music, drama, novels, comics, video games. The hierarchical debate of being original and authentic is obsolete; instead, adapted works are now looked upon with interest due to their pluralistic nature. Considering this it can be said that adapted works even surpass the source text and it accommodates different perspectives

along with the pre-existing works of art. Cinematic adaptation of novels, comics and video games can be found to be increasing every year. The main reason behind it is due to the vast outreach of the source texts which makes the adapted works more marketable. On the other hand, from the perspective of reception, the audience finds it interesting to experience the old work which is presented in a new way. The adapter not only adapts from the source text but also improvises it with the contemporary aesthetics of the prevailing society in which it is being presented.

From another perspective adapted works are also used to foreground the ideological debates which the adapter wants to portray intentionally. Due to the outreach of the source text and its marketable capability, the adapted works can be considered an easy way to reach maximum number of audience. In the postmodern modern world, different psychological and ideological question are put forth through the adapted works. For instance, Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* can be considered an adapted version of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* but a closer look may suggest that through the presentation of this play Stoppard has emphasised the dull monotony of human life which is veiled in the useless pursuit of reason. Similarly, it can be assumed that the adapted works are not only re-presentation or re-writing of old texts. It is a creative re-creation with its own unique quality. Hence, adaptation plays a significant role in re-shaping as well as creating new texts.

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