



AN INTERTEXTUAL STUDY OF MICHAEL RADFORD'S MOVIE THE
MERCHANT OF VENICE (2004) AND SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY THE
MERCHANT OF VENICE.

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Abstract:

This article engages in exploring an intertextual relationship between Michael Redford's adaptation of movie The Merchant of Venice (2004) with Shakespeare's original play The Merchant of Venice. The paper comes with the argument how an intertextual study can be understood from the diverse point. This relationship helps us to understand how two different poles of things make connectivity between each other. This connectivity or relationship could be based on thematic, genre, language discourse, etc. and other such levels.

The paper draws an intertextual study through the medium of cinematic representation. In the attempt of adaptation by Redford several changes are made which brings new aesthetics to the text. The visual production of the movie spreads Shakespeare's message among the masses, who cannot access him in textual mode. The raw material in the process of adaptation remains the same, but cinematic adaptation makes it more magnificent and innovative. The discourse of racism acquires new meaning in this whole process.

Keywords: *Intertextuality, Adaptation, Race, Hegemonies, Domination.*

Introduction:

Michael Radford's movie *The Merchant of Venice (2004)* is an enormously brilliant project taken by him. The movie is adapted from Shakespeare's original play *The Merchant of Venice*. The process of re-contextualization and modification transforms the text. Michael Redford's presentation of *The Merchant of Venice (2004)* can be found similar to original text at different levels. But, the visual version differentiates it from the original and gives new meaning to the text. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak describes the new method of reading the text through the cinematic procedure as under when she states: Theatrical adaptation is an intertextual apparatus, a system of relation and citation is not only between verbal texts, but between

singing and speaking bodies, lights, sounds, movements and all other cultural elements at work in theatrical production.ⁱ

Redford's production brings several changes through edited dialogue. The prologue of the original text comes at the commencement of the movie which helps to understand the time as well as politics in which the story is set.

It takes the modern audience into the historical time of Venice 1596 as projected in the movie. This projection demonstrates the social and cultural aspects of the era. The truth of intolerance of the Jews in the 16th century in Venice is depicted which is considered as powerful and liberal city-states in Europe. It makes the reader to sense the presence of racial stereotype in the society. The audience perceives the fights, apprehension, abhorrence between Jews and Christians in visual form. The writer Lyotard describes this hatred towards the Jews as he states:

One converts the Jews in the middle ages, they resist by mental restriction. One expels them during the classical age, they return. One integrates them in the modern era, they persist in their difference. One exterminates them in the twentieth century.ⁱⁱ

The atrocity between Jews and Christians is depicted in the intense form. Both, Jews and Christian can be found in the movie looking each other with hatreds in their eyes. Director marks the distinction between Jews and Christian by giving 'Red Cap' which symbolizes racial segregation. The scene of fire oozing from 'Firelight' reveals the presence of some burning issue in the movie. The natural scenery becomes the natural stage which differentiates it from the open stage setting of the Shakespeare's time.

In Shakespeare's era, the presence of fire, blood, rivers was felt by the audience through the words. On the contrary, the cinematic reproduction makes the natural setting and symbols animate. The marvelous cinematography of the movie is enjoyed by the readers. The employment of ambient sound of the wind, water soothes the ear of the audience. The background music reinforces the mood or emphasizes the action to the audience. The character's costume in the movie resonates the old classical text which takes the reader into the past.

Throughout the movie, the conflict of racial hatred between Jews and Christian is sustained. The spitting by character Antonio, Gratiano and then Bassanio on the face of Jews reflects the hatred between two different religions or community. In cinematic representation 'spitting' comes naturally and not by words.

The movie gives an opportunity of decoding the text from the different perspective. The reader creates their own text by their own understanding. The gloomy background of the movie



resembles the darkness in the social aspect of Venice, where one community thinks itself as more superior as compared to other. This portrayal of hatred between Jews and Christian reminds us of the caste conflict in Indian society or conflict between 'Hindu' and 'Muslim'. Similarly, the movie echoes the racial stereotype in American society where "afro- American" discovers them as excluded or "other" in the society.

The movie also gives freedom to women by liberating them into open space where women characters are played by women, who remained absent in theater in Shakespearean time. The movie through a moving mode "shows" the story instead of telling by "words."

The camera's high-quality close shoot capture expression for the audience which remains impossible to grasp in theatrical production. The addition of scene by the director has enhanced the beauty of the movie. For example, the addition of the scene in the market where flesh lies on the balance and Shylock buys flesh brings a new kind of context to the audience. The readers, who are unaware of the context of the play, can assume that Shylock grasps the thought from there to take flesh from Antonio's body.

Shakespeare's play *Merchant of Venice* also resonates racial discourse present in his another play *Othello*. Roland Barthes argument can be considered as right when she articulates "*any text is intertext, other texts are present in it*".ⁱⁱⁱ The portrayal of racial hatred towards 'Jews' in *The Merchant Of Venice* and 'Moor' in *Othello* makes the reader possible to connect the two texts together. *The Merchant of Venice* in contrast with *Othello* illustrates a motive behind Shylock's malignity. The following Speech of Jews in the play *The Merchant of Venice* is a pungent attack on the nation and institution which executes discrimination between the individual on the basis of race, religion and other such factors.

Shylock: "I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, and passion? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapon, subject to the same disease, healed by the same means, warned and cooled by the same winter and summer as Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you In the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge! If a Christian wrongs a Jew, What should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge! The Villany you teach me I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction."^{iv}

This dialogue articulated by Shylock undoubtedly explores the presence of bigotry on Jews by Christian where they are perceived as 'Foreigner' and consider as the outsider in the system. It was William Hazlitt, who observed that, although Shylock was "*the depository of the Vengeance of his race whose bitterness has hardened him against the contempt of mankind.*"^v

Jessica, the daughter of Shylock also becomes the victim of Christian's ruthlessness like her father, who can't be accepted by a Christian suitor.

Similarly, the movie illustrates the racial stereotype through other incidents. For example, the incident of the inability of opening the right casket by 'black suitor' from Morocco reveals a relief on Portia's face. This could be read as a relief of feeling opportunistic from marrying a black suitor.

The portrayal of such racial stereotype can be also found in Shakespeare other text. For example in *Othello*, Brabantio's incapability to accept Othello as the husband of Desdemona reveals how race or color of skin becomes more relevant in the society. This distinction becomes a marker to include someone in the category of the subject and excludes other from the definition of subject. The color of Othello's skin erases the highest position and talent which he holds in the society. This makes us think how the roots of such stereotype between man vis man is the bitter fact of our culture in the society.

Michael Redford's movie helps the audience to shift their paradigm from Elizabethan to today's contemporary time where such conflicts still exist in the society. Susan Bennett's argument in *Performing Nostalgia* gives the relevance of cinematic performances in contemporary time as she states:

What all these reworking of the classical texts of theatrical tradition illustrate is a contemporary obsession with staging old texts, to explore the possibilities of performance in the present, to explore the present itself.^{vi}

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