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Rupert Goold's Eponymous Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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Abstract: William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, a Scottish play, is one of his most adapted plays in 20th century. One of its major themes is rebellion, based on the female characters of the play, i.e. Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters. The present paper focuses on the interpretation of the characters of three Witches in director Rupert Goold's cinematic adaptation of *Macbeth* in 2010. While focusing on their characters, it discusses the sexual politics presented in the film. His adaptation makes it clear that Macbeth is just a puppet acting upon the commands of the three Witches who, in this 2010 movie, undertake various disguises, e.g. hospital nurses and house servants. Continually regulating the situation and prompting Macbeth from behind the scenes, they play a greater part than in Shakespeare's play. This paper also argues that how their demonstration offers an explanation of the sexual politics in society and how the cinematic techniques have been used to emphasize the characters of these Witches. Apart from this, it will also be discussed how the setting of the story, special focus on the costumes, use of colour and lighting has contributed to this adaptation. Although, Goold's *Macbeth*, like Shakespeare's play, focuses on variety of dramatic and historical events, yet his film is more modernized in the sense that it concentrates on gender roles in the society, makes use of historical figures from the 20th century and includes significant references of World War II. The paper tries to depict how Goold's film provides us with a comment on the gloominess of post-modern world.

Key words: Cinema, Sexual Politics, Witches, Modernization.



Whenever a writer writes a story, by taking background of a central story, he deals with the beliefs, prejudices, influences and sentiments of the cultural background of the author. In case that story is thus adapted, to keep the story acquainted with the audience, or in order to make it more and accessible, the themes, world, events, motivations, characters, points of view, contexts, imagery, symbols, etc. that views and beliefs which most deeply helped influence and construct, are at first and most commonly altered and adapted to match and adaptor's requirements, or an audience's needs. The aim behind this is to remain true to the central theme of the story, because the story is common attribute, and its theme is transferred to various genres and media. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, this central theme is morality and loyalty. In order to move this theme across cultures, a writer who is adapting the story must take into note that the adaptation, like the story being adapted, is always set in the background of a culture and a society and not in a vacuum. He must be well aware of the culture and society in which he is setting his adaptation so that his adaptation can be successful, since it will certainly alter and influence his adaptation. Cultural adaptations are the most complicated of all adaptation, since if an adaptation is too close to story being adapted, it disappoints. And if the audience disagrees with the cultural observation of the author, the adaptor can be criticized for failing to create a movie or adaptation which is true to that culture.

Director Rupert Goold's adaptation *Macbeth* (2010) is very close to Shakespeare's original *Macbeth*, and Western audience can easily understand Goold's work once they are made familiar with the setting. Goold makes use of Shakespeare's exact language while setting his film during World War II in a country which is never termed but apparently shaped after Nazi-Germany. It is apparent from the fact that the artwork and decorations of the banquet hall where Macbeth encounters ghost of Duncan largely looks like Nazi propaganda artwork.

Lady Macbeth (brilliantly played by remarkably talented Kate Fleetwood) is largely manipulative. She is never afraid of getting angry, mocking at Macbeth like one is bullied in a school. Macbeth is like a toy in Lady Macbeth's hands. He is keenly in lover with Lady Macbeth



and he can do anything to make her lady happy. In the scene when he argues with himself over a prediction, he feels apparently anxious and troubled to betray Duncan. But he is more afraid of denying Lady Macbeth than betraying Duncan and murdering him. Although, he talks to Lady Macbeth, “We will proceed no further in this business,” yet his words and manner of his speaking doesn’t show any conviction. Thus, we can consider from the very moment he utters it, in spite of the debate between them not yet started, that he is going to lose this battle and he himself is aware of this fact. He shivers and fiddles like a baby who is telling his mother very first time that he is going to do something as opposite to asking, keenly waiting for reply to see if he can hideaway from it. Patrick Stewart’s Macbeth is not willing to do this act of betrayal since Duncan trusts him more than anyone else and showers great favours on him. But his loyalty is hollow from inside and it is easily torn to pieces by Lady Macbeth which shows that in Western world, traditionally, family is the first priority and the loyalty towards one’s master comes afterwards. Lady Macbeth makes use and misuse of this fact. She wickedly accuses Macbeth of being a coward, being afraid like “the poor cat in the attic.” Along with this, she doubts his love and faithfulness towards her and challenges his manhood saying “when you durst do it, then you are a man.” By such means, she succeeds in convincing Macbeth and he, without any delay, willingly agrees to murder Duncan in order to make her happy and to prove his faithfulness as a husband and man in his wife’s eyes. In Western society, when the masculinity of a male is questioned and doubted by a female, especially by his own wife, it is considered an insult. Moreover, if he does not respond to this question with some revenge, it further evidences lack of masculinity on the end of that man. For this reason, Lady Macbeth’s approach of mocking at Macbeth is highly successful to convince him to murder Duncan and achieve his goal. Lady Macbeth is a very skillful woman who knows very well how to control and operate her husband and her approach of manipulation is highly based on the cultural background of Western society.

Goold’s *Macbeth* also includes the growth of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s madness and consequent fall from power. The major reason behind Macbeth’s madness and departure is the guilt, his fear and power journey brought to him through proving his masculinity in the eyes of his wife



and everyone else as well. His fear is due to the fact that though he is courageous and brave, he is still afraid of death. His madness is brought to him by the fact that he is engrossed in accumulating the power. While the madness of his wife, Lady Macbeth, takes place when she loses control over everything what belongs to her world. She made use of her husband in order to rule over the societies and ages where women had no power and rights. But now that Macbeth himself has lost control over his mind and deeds, Lady Macbeth also loses control over him. It is not that she is feeling guilty for having Duncan murdered by her husband which makes her washing blood stains from her hands again and again, rather she is disturbed by the guilt that she has put her husband into this madness by putting him at a stake to achieve her goal. She repents and longs for her past days when they were content in whatever they used to have.

Apart from the above observations, Goold's *Macbeth* can also be assessed as a reflection on postmodern gloominess. It opens at an operation room of a filthy hospital with white tiles which looks like an electroshock compartment of a mental asylum. In this scene, the Three Witches, who are posing as nurses, are given a tempting appearance on this restoration of desire, murder, and betrayal. The injured army man has given the information of battlefield to Duncan and Duncan gives him in the skilled hands of nurses who inject an unknown serum into the blood of sergeant and watch him shivering who soon dies on the stretcher. Now, it is up to the audience to decide whether this act of killing the sergeant in such a way is mercy for an injured man or mercilessness for an army man. Whatever it is, it sets the stage for *Macbeth*. Goold does not only numb his audience with the manifestation of violence and gloominess, his film exposes the moral failures of modernity. His design and themes are based on futurist totalitarianism; the demonstration of ordinary worldly habits; and the presentation of witches soaked in technology and despair.

Goold has provided his film with Stalinist Russian setting which includes images of quickly moving tanks, soldiers trooping in military displays, and enthusiastic crowds gathered at essential political rallies, which all point at a futurist theme focused upon technology, speed, and violence. *Macbeth* criticizes the risks of using aesthetics to convey political belief without decreasing it to a



responsive form of preachy informative art. Goold's acceptance of the dangers of totalitarianism is depicted by presenting Ross as technocrat who is engrossed in the war of the fighting parties and is made to choose one side. We are provided with three sides of Ross in a small period of time: his pain and self-preserving confession towards the nature of Macduff's escape and location of Lady Macduff, his fated effort to give warning to Lady Macduff and her children about their coming death, and his guilt-ridden confession to Macduff that his family has been murdered by Macbeth. As a government middle manager, he believed that he was beyond the chaotic penalties of building an empire. His this folly offers a detailed explanation of current argumentations on the use of agony and limiting the public freedoms in the middle of global war on fear.

One of the major things to be noticed about this production is that it is continuously unsettling. A few things spread throughout the film create discomfort and tension which make the total effect frightening and unsettling. The absurdly domestic habits are exposed to horrify and distance the audience. One of such things is food which is used most commonly, generally compared with disturbing events, altering the triviality of a sandwich into horrifying. Throughout, the food is presented in such a way that it appears disgusting. It is a setback of the normal human nature to be drawn to eatables, similarly like all good and bad looks overturned or jumbled in Macbeth. Good is bad and bad is good, and our normal nature is so changed that Macbeth's cooking a sandwich is at the same time revolting and horrifying. The red soup being served at the banquet, immediately after the murder of Banquo, is absolutely disgusting since we realize that it looks like the blood of murdered. Thus, Goold alters the dullness of food into one of the most disturbing element of the play.

In spite of the presence of extensive political themes, the consumption of food on the stage offers a more rigorous reproduction of the human condition. This decision of Goold provided the audience with humour when they watch an actor stops on a dialogue because his or her mouth is filled with food or drink. But the overall effect of this is quite alarming. At the moment when Duncan declares Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth turns his eyes towards his half-



finished beer as if it has been freezed before drinking it. After that, Lady Macbeth reveals the ugliness behind the sacred taboo of coldness when she forced Macbeth to kill Duncan at their home while she adorned raspberry torte. In another significant moment, Macbeth arranged the murder of Banquo while normally making a sandwich. The consequence of showing food within *Macbeth* is that it kept worldly reality at the front the thought- foodstuffs offer us life, but they also remind that there is no escape from death. The present absence of Banquo from the banquet takes terrible vitality not only because of the use of dining table as a fashion runway of postmodernity but also because of the fact that like hunger and thirst Banquo's death is also the result of human need.

Along with this, the film also provides the audience with a blend of and unequal, absurd mixture of old and new costumes, technology, props, architecture throughout the film. To examine the dresses, we see that one character is dressed in such a way like he is a paper boy of 1920's while the other before whom he is standing is dressed in such a way like he has walked out of a GQ catalog. The director has made use of odd technology and props including the PA system, the sinks, the modern steel refrigerator etc. If we try to understand what times they are trying match we'll encounter too many contradictions. In my words, it is done decisively to confuse the audience into overlooking the uncertain time they are in and pay attention to the dialogue. I can say that had the film been set in a time closer to the 17th century, a great deal would have to be lost and the film would perhaps be interesting to attract the audience.

Besides the above details, Goold's direction of the Three Witches (Played by Sophie Hunter, Polly Frame, and Niamh McGrady,) is also remarkable. They are also very unsettling, largely because they are omnipresent and apparently normal until they are rapidly changed from nurses or ordinary servants into something else completely. It seems like they have clearly chosen to reverse the order to better depict what the political conditions were at the beginning of the play. Thereafter, they reveal themselves from behind the masks and arrange meeting with Macbeth. It is completely unpredictable and completely frightening.



As mentioned above, these Three Witches are everywhere: in the dresses of nurses in the hospital, cooking food at the arrival of Duncan, treating Lady Macbeth, serving food in the hall, and being with Macbeth at the time of battle. Their presence at everywhere is upsetting since their behaviour is extremely unexpected and horrifying. Their over-modest servant dresses are also frightening. Playing as nurses, room maids, mortuary workers, and cooks, they are the inevitable mortality of human condition with their connection with filth, blood and excrement.

Whenever the Witches are shown on the screen, various sorts of extraordinary effects are used to mix the natural and supernatural. Some mixtures of fast-forwarding and jump cuts show that they can increase and decrease the speed of their actions. Sometimes, they can jump from one place to another without moving a bit. Another major effect used in this direction is an extraordinary synthesizer in order to distort the voices of the Three Witches when they chant. These Witches are also certainly gifted with reanimation and here the director Rupert Goold has blurred the edge between science and magic. Thus, these Witches, being supernatural and omnipresent, are so powerful that they are capable of controlling almost every major action of Macbeth and he is nothing but a puppet playing upon the fingers of these Witches. Thus the roles played by these Witches and Lady Macbeth as well demonstrate the sexual politics present in the Western society. Together they show how a man like Macbeth cannot do anything on his own and how he becomes a toy in the hands of his wife and the Witches. Macbeth, according to me, without the Witches, would have been going along pleased at the honours done to him for his successes in the war. Not only this, he could have earned more and more. But once the thought of becoming a king is lodged in his mind, he can't help but work out in order to turn this thought into reality and where he lacks conviction his wife fills him with the enthusiasm.

The setting of the film is the real representation of the gloominess of the modern world. Most sets of this production are like underground tunnels or cellars with kitchen appliances of industry. It serves as a very affective visual metaphor. The elevators are used to go down into the earth, which is exactly like falling into Hell. The location is filthy and moist. Paint is unwrapped



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from the walls, water is dripping from the pipes, footsteps echo while walking on concrete. Whole place is surrounded by devastating fear and bleakness. Even the bedrooms are not provided with the touch of comfort or humanity. But, it makes no sense a rational setting since the King of Scotland needs not to live in a damp underground tunnel. But Goold decides to prefer visual metaphor to rational setting. And it worked most probably.

Thus, given the scene of estrangement, discomfort and terror set, I turn to Macbeth and other major characters. Macbeth, which is played by extremely talented actor Patrick Stewart, is very daring from the starting of the film. He does not give any sign of being a good guy. In fact, his coldness is almost very much because he seems like such a man who will not have much difficulty murdering Duncan. His thoughts make him able to make plots in order to achieve his goals. For example, in the dagger scene, Macbeth seems fascinated but not frightened at all by his hallucination. He draws his power not from being a compassionate villain, but from being an influential portrait of evil, fascinating but not pleasant. His relation with Lady Macbeth is also not a relation founded on love but complete enthrallment. His wife, Lady Macbeth, is quite younger to him. But she possesses a very influential sexual attraction. He is preoccupied by her and almost depends upon her and he is not capable of denying her. Lady Macbeth is such a kind of woman who could operate this kind of control over him. In fact, she is evidently the dominant half of their relationship, until she falls under his control towards the end, observing when her husband performs the murders of Lady Macduff and Banquo without her. Though her madness, as explained above, is beautifully done by the director, but it does not provoke much sympathy in the audience. Throughout the movie, they keep their hands on top of each other in order to walk forward, commonly when they are ascending a new stage. The way of holding hands and assuming this position is very illuminating since it reveals the state of their association at a particular time. First, Lady Macbeth keeps her hand up and her husband Macbeth unwillingly follows her. But towards the end, he seizes her hand and nearly drags her away. It is not depict the breakdown of their relationship. Rather it depicts the essential shift in power dynamic. This is why he becomes less fascinated by the power of his wife as he gains more power of his own.



In this production of Goold, Stewart gains the exact image of Macbeth. He starts with coldness, distance and indifference and develops these qualities as the movie goes on. As the film progresses, he becomes completely isolated from audience, until he is brought back into humanity all of a sudden. He is so much shattered that he is left with only one possible choice that is nihilism. It seems like an act of humanizing a terrible man.

Apart from Macbeth, the Porter (played by Christopher Patrick Nolan) also has a significant part in this film. He has been one of murderers who killed Banquo. He is evidently considered to be one uninterrupted character through all these scenes. He also shares the inhuman quality of the Three Witches. Through the focus of the camera on the background of the tunnel he is in, he mixes the foreground just to look back into existence when the focus of the camera is changed. This fading effect provides him with his inhumanity. Besides, his presentation is also very frightening. He is filthy, demonic and immoral. His coming into Lady Macduff's room with a saw is the apex of his inhumanity. In fact, he is the perfect porter to take you into hell and to prepare Macbeth for his final battle.

The character of Ross (played by Tim Treloar) is also worth mentioning here since he is one of the few noble characters of the film. He is evidently separated from the starting of the film and focus is drawn to him on various occasions. Unlike others, he does not wear military dress, and is more aged than most of the other characters and looks more like a teddy bear than commander. The very first scene wherein he actually stands out is where he talks to Lennox (played by Mark Rawlings) about the present state of Scotland. Generally, Macbeth's praise by Lennox is sarcastic and satirical, but at this time, he is questioning about the whereabouts of the Macduff from the bound Ross. Although, it surely changes the complete meaning of the scene, yet it is effective. At this point, Ross defies hopes with his firm denial to voice support for Macbeth, and afterwards allies himself evidently with Macduff and Malcolm.



Apart from the above characters, the story of Macduff has also been told very efficiently and it serves as a fine story for the merits of understatement. The role of Lady Macduff has very sweetly been done by Suzanne Burden and her mother-figure has largely endeared her to the audience even in the short period of time. She also substitutes Lennox for the first part of the scene where Macduff comes to know about the murder of Duncan. Thus she is not an unpredictable character. Goold presents the murder Macduff family very excellently. There is no doubt that it should be horrifying. But the most effective way to achieve horror is to provide a clue about it and leave the rest to the work of imagination. And this is what has been done in this case. There are two murderers on the screen, evil-figure Porter and Macbeth, who are near him and then suddenly the view is shifted to the scene terrified Ross is peering around the corner and departs in horror. The audience are shown the executed head of the doll of her daughter and the heel of her foot. But the reaction of Ross reveals everything else to the audience what they need to know. The audience are not provided with the horror in its full face, but they are free to understand what has happened from the face of Ross. We can say that the imagination always comes up with better atrocities than the screen can. The reaction of Macduff is also performed very well. His devastation is depicted more effectively in his eyes and trembling lips than his breaking down and sobbing. His line “All my pretty ones, did you say all?” is considered to be one of the most disturbing lines of Shakespeare and it needs to be packed with a punch. Macduff, masculine and strong Macduff, puts forth the same questions again and then leaves the room without any other word. This is extremely effective which makes the audience feel sympathetic towards the Macduff family.

Conclusion

Hutcheon, in *A Theory of Adaptation*, correctly says that “adaptations are often compared to translations. Just as there is no such thing as literal translation, there can be no literal adaptation.” *Macbeth*, adaptation of Goold, is not an entirely literal adaptation of Shakespeare’s text, because then it could not be called an adaptation but a reproduction of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Moreover, the world has changed to large extent from the time of Shakespeare and the way we observe certain



stories and values has also been changed. Goold, while remaining true to the core of Shakespeare, has brought in essential changes which are available to his audience. His alterations are effective in a way that he has adapted Shakespeare's play for a modern Western culture. In order to make the story more approachable for his modern Western audience, he has placed it in the twentieth century and to put it lightly within the setting of World War II is really very influential since almost everyone in Western countries has learnt about this in history classes. The motivations and terrors of his Macbeth are more real and applicable since he is put in such a time and situation wherein many people can relate themselves to these conditions because this is why a number of Western countries were effected. But Goold does not openly say which side of the tussle Macbeth is on. And by doing that, he abolishes the danger of developing any kind of hatred or prejudice on the part of the audience.

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