



Litera

Journal of Language,
Literature and Culture Studies

Dil, Edebiyat ve
Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi

Special Issue
Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation

Volume 35 • Issue Supplement 1 • Year 2025



İSTANBUL
UNIVERSITY
PRESS

Litera

**Dil, Edebiyat ve
Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi**

**Journal of Language,
Literature and Culture Studies**

Volume/Cilt 35 • Issue/Sayı Supplement 1 • Year/Yıl 2025

Indexing & Abstracting
Dizinler

Web of Science Core Collection - Emerging Sources Citation
Index (ESCI)
SCOPUS
TÜBİTAK ULAKBİM TR Dizin
DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals)
MLA International Bibliography
ERIH PLUS
EBSCO Communication Source
EBSCO Central & Eastern European Academic Source
SOBIAD
Gale Cengage
Ulrichsweb



Owner Prof. Sevtap KADIOĞLU
Sahibi
Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Istanbul, Türkiye
İstanbul Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İstanbul, Türkiye

Responsible Prof. Mahmut KARAKUŞ
Manager
Sorumlu Yazı
İşleri Müdürü
Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Istanbul, Türkiye
İstanbul Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İstanbul, Türkiye

Correspondence Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters
Yazışma
İstanbul Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi
🏠 Department of Western Languages and Literatures 34134, Laleli, İstanbul, Türkiye
☎ +90 (212) 455 57 00 / 15891
✉ litera@istanbul.edu.tr
🌐 <https://litera.istanbul.edu.tr/>

Publisher istanbul Universtiy Press
Yayıncı
İstanbul Üniversitesi Yayınevi
🏠 İstanbul Üniversitesi Merkez Kampüsü, 34452 Beyazıt/Fatih, İstanbul, Türkiye
☎ +90 (212) 440 00 00
✉ iupress@istanbul.edu.tr
🌐 <https://iupress.istanbul.edu.tr/>

Publication Periodical
Type
Yayın Süreli
Yayın Türü



Authors bear responsibility for the content of their published articles.

Dergide yer alan yazılardan ve aktarılan görüşlerden yazarlar sorumludur.

The publication languages of the journal are German, French, English, Spanish, Italian and Turkish.

Yayın dilleri Almanca, Fransızca, İngilizce, İspanyolca, İtalyanca ve Türkçe'dir.

This is a scholarly, international, peer-reviewed and open-access journal published biannually in June and December.

Haziran ve Aralık aylarında, yılda iki sayı olarak yayımlanan uluslararası, hakemli, açık erişimli ve bilimsel bir dergidir.



Editorial Management

Dergi Yazı Kurulu

Editor-in-Chief
Baş Editör

Assoc. Prof. Özlem KARADAĞ

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
okaradag@istanbul.edu.tr

Prof. Mahmut KARAKUŞ

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of German Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
mahkarakus@istanbul.edu.tr

Associate Editor
Yardımcı Editör

Research Assist. Ph.D. Aslı DAMAR ÇAKMAK

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Contemporary Greek Language and
Literature, Istanbul, Türkiye*
asli.damar@istanbul.edu.tr

Guest Editor
Konuk Editör

Dr. Aleks SIERZ

*Boston University, Study Abroad, Faculty Member Universität Paderborn, English and
American Studies, Faculty Member Boston, USA*
sierz@btinternet.com

Guest Co-Editor
Yardımcı Konuk Editör

Assoc. Prof. Işıl ŞAHİN GÜLTER

*Firat University, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Department of English
Language and Literature, Elazığ, Türkiye*
igulter@firat.edu.tr

Editorial Management Board
Member
Yazı Kurulu Üyesi

Prof. Mahmut KARAKUŞ

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of German Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
mahkarakus@istanbul.edu.tr

Prof. Nedret (ÖZTOKAT) KILIÇERİ

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of French Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
nedret.oztokat@istanbul.edu.tr

Assoc. Prof. Özlem KARADAĞ

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of English Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
okaradag@istanbul.edu.tr

Assoc. Prof. İrem ATASOY

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of German Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
irem.atasoy@istanbul.edu.tr

Assoc. Prof. Sinem YAZICIOĞLU

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of American Culture and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
sinemyaz@istanbul.edu.tr

Lecturer, Ph.D. Seldağ BANKIR MESÇİOĞLU

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of French Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
seldag.bankir@istanbul.edu.tr

Assistant Professor, S. Seniz COŞKUN

*Istanbul University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Spanish Language and Literature,
Istanbul, Türkiye*
seniz.coskun@istanbul.edu.tr



Editorial Advisory Board

Danışma Kurulu

- Prof. Hürriyet Özden SÖZALAN** *Istanbul Bilgi University, Faculty of Social and Human Sciences, Department of English Language and Literature, Istanbul, Türkiye*
ozden.sozalan@bilgi.edu.tr
- Prof. Kubilay AKTULUM** *Hacettepe University, Faculty of Letters, Department of French Language and Literature, Ankara, Türkiye*
aktulum@hacettepe.edu.tr
- Prof. Ali Osman ÖZTÜRK** *Necmettin Erbakan University, Ahmet Keleşoğlu Faculty of Education, Department of German Language Teaching, Konya, Türkiye*
aozturk@erbakan.edu.tr
- Prof. Metin TOPRAK** *Kocaeli University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of German Language and Literature, Kocaeli, Türkiye*
mtoprak@kocaeli.edu.tr
- Prof. Aslı TEKİNAY** *Boğaziçi University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Istanbul, Türkiye*
tekinay@boun.edu.tr
- Prof. Füsün SARAÇ** *Marmara University, Atatürk Faculty of Education, Department of French Language Teaching, Istanbul, Türkiye*
fsavli@marmara.edu.tr
- Prof. Dr. Colette FEUILLARD** *Paris Descartes University, Paris, France*
- Prof. Nacira ZELLAL** *University of Algiers 2, Bouzareah, Algeria*
- Prof. Armando ROMERO** *University of Cincinnati, Ohio, United-States*
- Prof. Gérald SCHLEMMINGER** *Karlsruhe University of Education, Karlsruhe, Germany*
- Prof. Paola PARTENZA** *"G. d'Annunzio" University of Chieti, Department of Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures, Pescara, Italy*
- Prof. Sanela MEŠIĆ** *University of Sarajevo, Faculty of Philosophy, Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina*
sanela.mesic@ff.unsa.ba
- Assoc. Prof. Catherine KIYITSIOGLOU VLACHOU** *Aristotle University, Thessaloniki, Greece*
- Assoc. Prof. Toth REKA** *Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, Hungary*
- Assoc. Prof. Roberto MONDOLA** *Università degli studi di Napoli "L'Orientale", Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati*
rmondola@unior.it
- Assoc. Prof. Ksenia KUZMINYKH** *Georg August University of Göttingen, Faculty of Philosophy, Göttingen, Germany*
ksenia.kuzminykh@uni-goettingen.de



İçindekiler

Table of Contents

Special Issue: Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation

Introduction	
Introduction	viii
Aleks Sierz	
Research Article	
“Social Relations between the Sexes in Athena Farrokhzad’s <i>Morals According to Medea</i> ”	1
Pelin Doğan Özger	
Research Article	
From <i>Macbeth</i> to <i>Dunsinane</i> : Appropriation as Practice and Process	16
Dilek İnan	
Research Article	
“Finally she speaks”: Toni Morrison’s <i>Desdemona</i>	25
Neslihan Köroğlu	
Research Article	
Suffering and Grotesque Parody in Howard Barker’s (<i>Uncle</i>) <i>Vanya</i>	40
Enes Kavak	
Research Article	
Alienation in Kafka’s the <i>Metamorphosis</i> (on Stage): From Steven Berkoff’s Vision to Lemn Sissay’s Interpretation	51
Hakan Gültekin	
Research Article	
Appropriation of Churchill’s <i>Owners</i> and <i>Top Girls</i> against Capitalism in Lucy Kirkwood’s <i>Tinderbox</i> and <i>NSFW</i>	63
Elvan Karaman Mez	
Research Article	
Resisting Translation and Tomson Highway’s Rez Cycle Plays: Building Community Through Cree Language in <i>The Rez Sisters</i> and <i>Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing</i>	75
Raphaela Pavlakos	



| Research Article

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in Nineteenth-Century Istanbul: Appropriation and
Performance as Trauma Narrative/Cure in Çağan Irmak's *Creature* (2023)

88

Özlem Karadağ

| Epilogue

"From My Clay To Mould Me": Romantic and Regency Literature in Pastiche

Aleks Sierz



Introduction

Aleks Sierz¹ 

¹ (PhD) FRSA, Boston University Study Abroad, London, England

At the start of 1955, the British critic Kenneth Tynan began an article, which was published in the Observer newspaper under the title “Convalescence”, about his country’s new drama, by saying: “Night-nurses at the bedside of good drama, we critics keep a holy vigil.” About 70 years later, this metaphor is still going strong, and critics, commentators and academics can still find themselves in the position of tending theatrical drama as if it was a patient whose recovery they have to supervise. We gather around the sick person’s bed, and try to console their relatives. We whisper to each other our views on how bad their condition is. We mutter about the reasons for their decline: lack of funding, poor audiences and competition from younger and healthier media. Behind us the life-saving machines bleep and blink; nurses appear and then leave. At the same time, we wish ardently for the patient’s recuperation, seeing hopeful signs from each movement, however small, of the theatre’s body.

Amid this rather gloomy picture of contemporary British theatre, some rays of sun do shine in through the patient’s window. As the online conference, *Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation* (held on 8-10 December 2023), made clear, this aspect of the subject exhibits a rude health. At what was a very memorable and intellectually stimulating event, the keynote speakers were Professor Benjamin Poore, Dr Catherine Rees, Professor Julie Sanders and Dr Aleks Sierz. Using examples drawn from the early work of Caryl Churchill, as well as more recent plays including James Graham’s *Best of Enemies* (2021), Poore analyzed the subject of appropriation, intermedi-ality, and the problem of history, by examining the question of identifying the difference between the intermedial practices of adaptation and those of the contemporary history play. History — the name that we give to our attempts to order and make sense of the overwhelming chaos of the past — is, he argued, on one level quite different from a novel or a film as a source text for stage adaptation. On another level, the same questions of fidelity and storytelling apply. On the other hand, Rees explored ways in which we can use textual adaptation as a metaphor to understand and approach other acts of appropriation and adaptation in the wider society, in this case the so-called Culture Wars. Looking at Patrick Marber’s *Don Juan in Soho* (2006), itself an adaptation of the famous masculinist myth, as means to explore how cultural heritage becomes part of our national cityscape, and how we as a society understand, process and celebrate so-called heroic achievement. In addition, Sanders looked at the ways in which Shakespeare is currently being adapted in debates about contemporary questions of social justice in a range of transnational contexts. Using the giant puppet *Little Amal* (2021), which engaged with impromptu audiences to tell a story of migration and displacement, this example looked specifically at her arrival on London’s Bankside — itself a Shakespearean geography — greeted by a Pericles-associated community theatre production. Lastly, Sierz examined two recent adaptations by playwright Martin Crimp, namely *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other* (2019) and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (2019). with the aim of showing that although the idea of being faithful to the original work remains a very strong aspect of public taste, it is productions which depart most radically from their source that



are the most aesthetically interesting, and the most successful in generating new meanings from the adapted material. Moreover, the freedom of creativity that this approach produces results in the most memorable theatrical experiences.

While these keynote contributions illustrate how adaptations are a central feature of contemporary British theatre, the following articles in this excellent volume — which Sierz co-edits along with Dr Işıl Şahin Güler and Dr Özlem Karadağ — have a welcome international and historical aspect, looking at a much wider canvas than just insular new plays. To explore these ideas, the contributors to this volume engage deeply with the interconnected themes of adaptation and appropriation. Two foundational texts shape their approach. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as an “acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works”, emphasizing that adaptations captivate audiences by evoking both pleasure and critical reflection. Viewers and readers draw on their familiarity with the source material to appreciate the nuanced relationship between the original and its adaptation. Adaptations are often enjoyed because they breathe new life into familiar stories, presenting them through fresh formats, genres or media. They also offer the opportunity to recontextualize a work, highlighting its relevance in new cultural or historical settings. However, this inherited literary practice can be controversial. Adaptations are frequently overshadowed by their source texts, criticized for lacking originality or dismissed by audiences and critics as derivative. A further complication lies in the relationship between adaptation and appropriation. While adaptation typically maintains a closer connection to the source material, appropriation involves a more transformative process — borrowing ideas or elements to create something entirely new. In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Julie Sanders argues that acts of appropriation are often motivated by political or ethical intentions. Julia Kristeva’s concept of intertextuality further illuminates this process, describing texts as “a permutation of texts” in which multiple voices and references intersect and interact.

Despite their overlap, adaptation and appropriation are not interchangeable. Sanders offers key distinctions: appropriation often entails a more significant departure from the original, producing a work situated within a new cultural or critical framework. Through acts of interpolation, critique, and genre-shifting, appropriation frequently breaks or conceals the organic link with the source. As Sanders notes, appropriation “clearly extends far beyond the adaptation of other texts into new literary creations, assimilating both historical lives and events”. Still, both adaptation and appropriation are inherently interpretive and may reveal tensions within the texts they engage. Audiences often navigate these layered relationships, seeking to identify echoes, deviations and parallels between the old and the new. The act of translating a text also constitutes a form of adaptation. Translators must grapple with the challenge of conveying culture, history and character across linguistic and temporal boundaries. In many cases, translation necessitates process of adaptation, particularly when cultural or geographic shifts are involved. Thus, a successful translation often functions simultaneously as a compelling adaptation, reshaping the original to resonate within a different context.

In this context, the contributors to this thought-provoking volume have all engaged successfully with these themes. Dr Pelin Doğan-Özger explores power relationships and the way they construct the idea of “nature” in Athena Farrokhzad’s *Morals According to Medea*, a 2021 two-hander play which both adapts and interrogates Euripides’s *Medea*. Taking a feminist perspective, this chapter focuses on the dialogues between Medea and Morality to show how Medea challenges traditional discourses of motherhood, and at the same time is an example of resistance and of a refugee

outsider. If ancient Greek tragedy offers good examples for this kind of adaptation and appropriation, the same is true of Shakespeare. In “From Macbeth to Dunsinane”, Dilek İnan shows how David Greig, one of the least insular of British playwrights, uses the tragedy of Macbeth in his *Dunsinane* (2010), set after the action of Shakespeare’s play, to comment on clashes between Englishness and Scottishness while simultaneously criticizing the West’s intervention in the Middle East. Continuing this fruitful engagement with Britain’s national playwright, Neslihan Köroğlu looks at Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012), in which the voices that are silenced in the original get a chance to speak out: Desdemona, her missing mother M Brabantio, her African nanny Barbary and Emilia. Morrison provocatively creates a postcolonial feminist space which enables her to talk back to Shakespeare.

As well as Shakespeare and Greek tragedy, European modernism is also a literary arena which theatre has mined extensively. In “Subverting Realism”, Enes Kavak examines how Anton Chekhov’s 1899 play, *Uncle Vanya*, has been adapted, with a postmodern twist, by both Howard Barker in 1993 and Simon Stephens in 2023. Like Chekhov, Franz Kafka is an emblematic figure in European modernism. Hakan Gultekin also looks at two interpretations, this time of Kafka’s short novel *Metamorphosis*, in versions by Steven Berkoff (1969) and Lemn Sissay (2023). In doing so the different historical contexts of the two plays illuminate their content. Next comes an analysis of the work of British playwright Lucy Kirkwood, by Elvan Karaman Mez, who shows how her plays *Tinderbox* (2008) and *NSFW* (2012) can be read as appropriations of the work of the modernist Caryl Churchill’s drama, whose politics are highly critical of the development of capitalism from the 1970s to the 2010s.

The final two chapters of this collection take journeys, both literally and metaphorically, to even more distant places. Raphaela Pavlakos takes us to the world of indigenous communities to demonstrate how the use of non-colonial language can create a sense of inclusion and help to build community. The example of Tomson Highway, whose first language was Cree, and who created the *Rez Cycle* plays, *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, written and produced in Toronto. This work raises questions not only about theater as a space of resistance, but also about how much we need translation to make sense of indigenous languages. Finally, Özlem Karadağ investigates the 2023 Turkish Netflix series *Yaratılan (Creature)* by Çağan Irmak, which is inspired by Mary Shelley’s 1818 classic *Frankenstein*. Seeing this version of the myth as an imaginative reappropriation rather than a literal adaptation, this chapter discusses pandemics, trauma, memory, bio-ethics in a work that was inspired by Shelley’s original, but also talks directly to our contemporary preoccupations, despite, or because, of the fact that it is set in the 19th century.

To finish this Introduction, I would like to thank the members of Theatre and Drama Network, first for their generosity in inviting me to participate in their conference, and then for the honour of co-editing and introducing this collection of excellent work. For the past 70 years, this network has done outstanding work in an international context. I would also like to especially thank Dr. Işıl Şahin Gülter, Dr. Özlem Karadağ, and Dr. Mesut Güneş, for their hard work and for guiding me through the process of this publication. If I have both appropriated as well as adapted some of their insights, I am sure that this is all in a good cause. As far as this volume is concerned, I can report that the patient is in extremely good health.

References

Hutcheon, L. (2013). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.

Sanders, J. (2016). *Adaptation and appropriation*. Routledge.



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi
Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

**“Social Relations between the Sexes in Athena Farrokhzad’s
Morals According to Medea”**



Pelin Doğan Özger¹  

¹ Munzur University, Faculty of Letters, English Language and Literature Department, Tunceli, Türkiye

Abstract

This paper explores how patriarchal power relations construct the idea of “nature” in Athena Farrokhzad’s *Morals According to Medea* (*Moral enligt Medea*, 2022), an adaptation of Euripides’ classic play *Medea* (431 BCE). The analysis will concentrate on Medea’s subversion of patriarchal “appropriation” tactics from a feminist perspective, particularly through ideological codes embedded in the dialogues between Medea and Morality, the only other character in the play. By doing so, it seeks to understand women’s position in relation to patriarchy through a materialist feminist lens, with particular attention to the conflict between Medea and Morality. The focus will also be on how Medea challenges traditional discourses of motherhood, constructed within male-dominated societal structures. The study will further discuss the ways in which she raises her voice in resistance, both as a local and as a refugee, within the spaces where she is either confined or expelled. The discussion will be framed within the context of the theory of social relations between the sexes highlighting the specific impact of women’s resistance and militancy in examining the mechanisms of sovereignty.

Keywords

Materialist feminism • Medea • Athena Farrokhzad • social relations between the sexes • adaptation studies



Citation: Doğan Özger, P. (2025). “Social Relations between the Sexes in Athena Farrokhzad’s *Morals According to Medea*”. *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*–*Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1607825>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Doğan Özger, P.

 Corresponding author: Pelin Doğan Özger pelindogan@munzur.edu.tr



Introduction

Canonical works of classical literature have long served as a profound source of inspiration for writers, stimulating their creative processes and encouraging them to revisit, refashion and engage with timeless themes and ideas within the broader field of adaptation and appropriation studies. In her *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon accentuates the “palimpsestic” (2006, p. 9) nature of an adaptation and offers a general description of the concept as “an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works”, “a creative *and* an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging” and “an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work” (2006, p. 8). Literary adaptations are, thus, cultural products that refer to a wider world and contain aesthetic pleasure. Julie Sanders argues that the act of adapting and appropriating is heavily reliant on the common denominators of canonical narratives within the mythical universe, with their reference points to a shared memory of characters, themes, and insights. Myths have been a wellspring of inspiration for literary adaptations, with their nature transcending cultural boundaries and renewing every time they cross borders (Sanders, 2006, p. 45). What is particularly alluring about the adapted or appropriated works is that they give pleasure via acts of recognition and reminiscence (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 4). However, the act of adapting or appropriating “is not an act of sly plagiarism; it is a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to engage with an original text and offer a new approach or direction” (Rees, 2017, p. 3). Rees further argues that the act of adaptation and appropriation is inevitably a “political act where the new dramatist seeks to challenge or critique either the assumptions of the earlier text or their own national and cultural environment” (Rees, 2017, p. 179). Thus, adaptations recontextualise the source material to offer new ideological, or ethical or artistic investments and purposes (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 28; Sanders, 2006, p. 2; Rees, 2017, p. 3). The adapted or appropriated product is relocated in a new social and cultural territory on each occasion. The palimpsestic character of this reformulation unquestionably opens up a space for the reader/audience to seek for political purposes.

This paper scrutinises Athena Farrokhzad's play *Morals According to Medea*, which is an adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. The powerful mythic archetype of Medea has been revisited by many authors who have sought to rework or reimagine her story. Euripides' *Medea* transformed this myth into a canonical literary work that has inspired numerous adaptations. In the original myth, Medea kills her brother and leaves her country for the sake of her love for Jason. After fleeing to another country, Medea first kills the woman (the king's daughter) for whom her husband Jason has abandoned her and then murders her own children to take revenge on Jason for his betrayal. The character of Medea has been reimagined across different centuries and geographies within varying cultural and political contexts. In some of these adaptations, Medea is portrayed as a tyrant, held accountable by the patriarchal judiciary. In others, she is depicted as a victim with weak-willed traits. In contrast to these versions, some 20th- and 21st-century adaptations¹ signify the resistance of the oppressed, expose power relations, and critique systems of exploitation (Yetim, 2019, pp. 56–59). Farrokhzad's *Morals According to Medea* reinterprets Euripides' play with substantial modifications, offering a fresh take on the classic tragedy. The new narrative is structured in the form of an imagined conversation between Medea and Morality in the aftermath of Euripides' *Medea*. After having murdered her own children, Medea engages in this discussion with Morality, personified on stage as a reflection of societal norms. The play, which begins where Euripides leaves off, is highly influential as it chooses to re-interpret Medea from the margins. In her adaptation, Farrokhzad changes, condenses, and shifts the focus of Euripides' *Medea*. *Morals According to Medea* adeptly examines the tension between Medea's pride and anguish as a woman,

¹For instance, in the context of Turkey, two adaptations of Medea were staged simultaneously during the 2024 season: Athena Farrokhzad's *Morals According to Medea* (2022) and Hanane Hajj Ali's *Jogging* (2018). Seemingly, Medea's story and words still resonate today, delivering a potent political message on women's rights and representation.

highlighting her defiance of social norms and the disruption of the established order, while embodying the nuanced suffering that comes with resisting the prevailing social structure.

This study will trace how Medea challenges the “appropriation” tactics of patriarchal domination that are deeply entrenched in the ideological codes of the conversation between Medea and Morality in the play. Drawing upon the conceptualisation of ‘social relations between the sexes,’² the discussion will explore Medea’s subversion of the motherhood discourse constructed within social structures shaped by the patriarchal mindset. According to Daniele Kergoat (2022, pp. 123–124), this concept is fundamentally based on the fact that the power relations that produce observable social practices use biological determinism as their justification. Social relations between the sexes signify a kind of class relationship organised by gender relations that are ideologically constructed at the discursive level. This class relationship between men and women reveals itself through the reduction of women to the position of material objects. Against this backdrop, this study aims to understand the ‘materialist feminist’ origins of women’s struggle against patriarchy through analysis of Medea’s counter-discourse. In other words, the aim is to examine how Medea’s clash or tension with Morality reflects constitutive relational dynamics between male and female classes and to understand how exploitation and its legitimation (rooted in notions of nature) are articulated through Morality. From a materialist feminist perspective, Colette Guillaumin (2005, pp. 76–80) relates the reduction of women to the idea of nature as a fundamentally ideological construct. The idea of nature, which serves as the source of legitimacy for the patriarchal order, is reflected in the discourses embedded within social relations. These discourses are both inclusive and pervasive, ranging from the description of female social actors by their gender to the characterisation of various social roles through gendered identification. Ultimately, these discourses reflect everyday power relations between men and women, manifesting in complex and ambiguous ways. Drawing on Danielle Juteau’s insights (2022, pp. 262–263), a materialist feminist perspective—which can be seen as a critique of the concept of nature in its most basic form—views male dominance as a historical social relationship in which women, as a class, are exploited by men, another class. It interprets the identities of women and men, built within this exploitative relationship, as deeply interconnected. This social relationship—between male and female classes—is not determined solely by economic factors; materialist feminism offers a reading practice that includes the exploitation of women’s paid labour but also extends beyond it. This relationship, conceptualised as gender-based slavery, involves the appropriation of the body, time, bodily products, space and sexuality.

The discourse of nature under male domination tends to position women as a kind of property to be owned. The patriarchal order, which builds property relations on the objectification of women, operates an ideology of gender-based slavery. In a relationship of slavery, it is assumed that individuals within gendered or racialised social groups inherit and retain specific social characteristics throughout their lives, from birth to death. This assumption is reinforced by positivist science, which is shaped by power relations. Women are portrayed as underdeveloped, prone to being owned, lacking a consciousness of freedom, and possessing an intuitive, control-oriented mind, thereby reducing them to mere “objects”. According to this concept of nature, the functioning of the world order relies on the male class’s appropriation of women, as “evidenced”

²Danielle Kergoat, a French academic and feminist sociologist, along with her colleagues, represents the school of social relations between the sexes. While this theoretical perspective emerges from the tradition of materialist feminism, it offers a distinct viewpoint from that of Christine Delphy and her circle, who are associated with the journal *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*. Despite deep theoretical connections and significant continuity between the two schools, they diverge in two fundamental ways. First, the school of social relations between the sexes places the con-substantiality of patriarchy—or its articulated, relational structure—at the core of its theoretical framework. Second, it argues that domestic labour is not merely exploited; it generates ideology, culture, and the very routines that shape everyday life (Acar Savran, 2022, pp. 7–22). The representatives of the theory of social relations between the sexes introduced the French term “rapports sociaux de sexe”, previously translated into English as “social relations of sex” (Adkins and Leonard, 2005, p. 15). However, as Adkins and Leonard point out, “this translation loses the oppositional flavour of the phrase in French” (Adkins and Leonard, 2005, p. 23). Drawing on Acar Savran’s insights in her introduction to *Cinsiyetler Arası Toplumsal İlişkiler ve Kesişimsellik [Social Relations Between the Sexes and Intersectionality]* (2022, pp. 7–22), I prefer to use the phrase “social relations between the sexes.”

by heredity, supported by scientific or social thought, and reflected in the “inner nature” of women. For this reason, women’s resistance to this appropriation, both as individuals and as a class, is seen as going against what is considered “natural,” and their resistance is thus deemed “perverted” (Guillaumin, 2005, pp. 89–94). In *Morals According to Medea*, Medea’s objection to Morality clashes with this idea of nature. Medea, who breaks away from the natural roles assigned to women by the dominant patriarchal order, also bears the marks of being stigmatised as deviant in her language. Militantly seeking to dismantle gender relations constructed socially rather than biologically, Medea’s tension with patriarchal domination or patriarchal law (Morality) generates a sense of endless ambiguity in both readers and audience, until she buries Morality beneath the stones and concludes the drama.

Morality’s Construction of Woman Versus Medea’s Construction of Woman

I am a woman, a refugee, a mother, and a child killer.

A criminal despised by humanity.

(Farrokhzad, 2022, p. 5)³

The way men relate to their children is one of the most visible indicators of power dynamics. While the mother is held responsible for the child’s care, upbringing, and safety, the child—being the product of the female body—is considered to be the property of the father. Children represent the father’s lineage and take his surname. According to customs, traditions, norms, and laws, the privilege of ownership belongs to man. However, it is not only the child who is reduced to the status of a material object; the mother, who is responsible for the child’s care, is also considered to be the property of the man. Women are compelled to dedicate their time and labour in accordance with an unwritten contract, which is essential to sustaining the man’s comfort zone and the status quo. This phenomenon manifests as a form of social relationship. What renders this phenomenon a constitutive element of everyday life are ideological discourses such as “the mother understands best the care of the child” (Guillaumin, 2005, pp. 76–78). In this context, Medea’s response to Morality’s questioning of her motherhood is significant:

MORALITY: There are plenty of hungry mothers who do not kill their children.

There are plenty of cheated women who do not feel that they are entitled to be master over both life and death.

There are plenty of refugees who do not steal other refugees’ rights in the world.

[...]

MEDEA: Show me a country where children are not within the borders of the woman.

Tell me, have you ever heard the expression: women and children?

It is mostly used to describe a disaster:

“An unacceptable attack on women and children...”

“Civilians, including women and children, have been shot in recent wars...”

“Women and children were reported to have been killed by snipers...”

“Among the victims there are many women and children...” (Farrokhzad, 2022, pp. 18–19)

³Throughout the paper, all translations of the play from Turkish into English were done by the author, as no English translation of the play was available.

Medea's emphasis on the co-existence of women and children can be evaluated from two perspectives. First, Medea engages in a power struggle over the children, who are the products of her own body but have been appropriated by men. According to her, children belong to women because it is women who give them life. Consequently, children are born through women and, in times of war, often die alongside them. Medea's statements can also be assessed in the context of discourses that construct and sustain patriarchy, which reduce women to the status of material objects. Patriarchy, while defining gender roles, obscures the specific qualities of women as individuals (Guillaumin, 2005, p. 74) and leaves them with only one generic social identity: being a woman. Masculine power structures that dictate what it means to be a woman continuously build their discourse on the objectification of womanhood. As can be understood from Medea's response to Morality, a woman is also like a child. A child cannot possess any quality other than simply being a child; it has no profession, ideology, or belief. However, a child has an owner and a ruler. In the patriarchal order, women are closely aligned with their children. Women do not own children; like children, they are anonymous and are responsible for the child's care. Perhaps this is why, in wars, they are not recognised as militants, guerrillas, soldiers or civilians but only as women and children. In this context, what does a woman have within the system? What does the system provide to women to enable their existence? And what happens to a woman if the system takes away what it gives her? Medea's rebellion in the opening scene of the play can be interpreted through this lens:

MEDEA: [...] What becomes of someone who has lost everything?
 What can desperation drive a woman to do?
 What is the final act of a mother before she leaves the stage?
 Humanity had certain questions, and I answered them carefully.
 [...]
 Now no one will wriggle in doubt.
 But what drama will unfold when the play ends?
 What will happen when I kill my children and my rival?
 When I have fulfilled my duty and the crime is completed,
 what drama will begin? (Farrokhzad, 2022, p. 5)

Medea's sense of remedy and despair, along with the underlying issues of human existence, are all rooted in patriarchy. This system gives women the illusion of possessing everything they have, while in reality, it reduces them to mere property within an ownership dynamic. Patriarchy, as a system of social structures where women are objectified, deprived, and exploited for male use, systematically permeates social relations (Walby, 1991, p. 40). This system arises from the interrelated dynamics of autonomous structures such as production relations, labour exploitation, state domination, male violence, gender-based slavery and cultural norms (Walby, 1991, p. 40). Ultimately, the patriarchal system continually reconfigures itself within each societal structure, sustaining its dominance through both continuities and distinctive characteristics, from the primitive tribal organisation to the contemporary global order shaped by neoliberalism (Gültekin, 2021, p. 119).

In the context of gendered social relations, materialist feminism posits that women's sexuality is also controlled by male dominance. For women, sexuality is often framed as a duty or responsibility, while for men, it is seen as something that enhances the value of women. This dynamic creates an asymmetrical exchange, establishing a social relationship where one party is positioned as the provider and the other as the receiver. The male recipient in this exchange participates by providing the woman with money, status, or

his surname (Tabet, 2022, p. 157). Medea's involvement in an unequal exchange and the exploitation of her labour start when she flees with Jason, who then becomes the central force shaping her life. With Jason, she loses everything—her homeland, her family, and eventually her children. The only thing that transforms her nothingness into revolutionary uniqueness is her rebellion against her husband, who owns her and acts as her master. Medea's depiction as a helpless woman can be understood as representing her loss of status, both as a property and as a woman without a husband or master. According to Christine Delphy (2022, p. 80), within the patriarchal order, a woman who belongs to her husband possesses nothing of her own; her only possession is the control exerted by the dominant man, which is essential for her existence within the system. Consequently, a married woman is inherently powerless and has lost everything. Medea is also aware that this system renders her children as mere extensions of her husband. As will be explored, Medea's response to social judgement goes beyond mere individual defence and resistance:

MORALITY: Medea first killed her brother.

Then she killed her rival.

Next, she killed her children.

Then she killed the remnants of decency.

Now she wants to kill Morality.

(Medea begins to place stones on top of Morality's body.)

MEDEA: To become a feared refugee, I had to kill my brother.

To be branded as an unwanted madwoman, I had to kill my rival.

So that they wouldn't have a murderous mother, I had to kill my children.

I killed them to prevent anyone else from harming them.

To create a story for us, I had to kill my children.

To establish my place in world history, I had to kill.

And now, to free myself from the drama, I must kill Morality.

Medea will rise from the ashes of the dead.

Medea, the child of the sun and the mother of myth, will outlive everyone.

This is the beginning of Medea.

A beginning for Medea.

A beginning according to Medea.

The beginning of the world thanks to Medea. (Farrokhzad, 2022, p. 31)

Apparently, Medea recognises that the patriarchal system assigns men the power to both give and take life. According to the "idea of nature," which forms the ideological foundation of patriarchy, the children are regarded as the product of Jason's sexual act. Therefore, it is seen as Jason's right to determine their fate, including banishing them from the new country where they have sought refuge with their mother. For this reason, Medea's act of murdering her children directly challenges the "idea of nature." By doing so, she strips the patriarchy of her sexuality, creativity, and motherhood. Medea understands that this attack on the "idea of nature" comes at a significant personal cost, and she is keenly aware that she will be judged by societal norms, in addition to the burdens imposed on women. Morality represents these norms; it functions as a powerful contract, consensus, and law between society and its rulers. Throughout the play, Medea attacks

this contract. While she sometimes feels regret and reflects on the pain of her actions, she consistently seeks to undermine Morality and, in doing so, reconstructs her own womanhood.

In addition, women experience various forms of oppression, rendering their experiences diverse. A materialist feminist approach to the theory of social relations between the sexes views gender-based social relationships as a specific yet horizontally evolving structure. Therefore, this structure of gender-based subjugation can intersect with and integrate other social relationships. Women's experiences differ based on factors such as ethnicity, economic relations, sexual orientation, and citizenship status, which shape the specific forms of their oppression. However, underlying all these diverse forms of oppression is the fundamental reality of gender-based subjugation, or the ideological influence of the male class's "idea of nature" (Juteau, 2022, pp. 244–247). As a woman who voices shared experiences of oppression, Medea is also conscious of the distinctive nature of other ideologically constructed, hierarchical and differentiated social relationships. In Euripides' *Medea*, Medea speaks to the Chorus of women as follows:

MEDEA: I'd rather take my stand behind
a shield three times than go through childbirth once.
Still, my account is quite distinct from yours.
This is your city. You have your fathers' homes,
your lives bring joy and profit. You have friends.
But I have been deserted and outraged –
left without a city by my husband,
who stole me as his plunder from the land
of the barbarians. Here I have no mother,
no brother, no blood relative to help
unmoor me from this terrible disaster. (Euripides, 2008, p. 13)

The underlying reality of her problem is connected to her being a woman, and this reality is defined not by biology but by male dominance. However, her status as a refugee, her role as a mother, and her lack of economic resources contribute to the multiplicity of her experiences of oppression. Within this complex web of social relations, her identity as a woman constantly reshapes both herself and others. As Jason's dominance expands, the ways in which other women (the Chorus, the princess) experience oppression are either softened or altered. Similarly, in Farrokhzad's adaptation, Medea often articulates similar complaints:

MEDEA: [...] Let those who have lost their land...
Let those who have lost their brother...
Let those who have lost their husband...
Let those who have lost their right to refuge...
Let those who have lost their sanity...
Let those who have lost their chil... chil... chil... children...
Let those who have lost their children cast the first stone. (Farrokhzad, 2022, p. 7)

MEDEA: [...] When I have fulfilled my duty and the crime is complete,
what drama will begin?
Who will take me into their home?
Which children will come after me?
Which man will love me?
Which king will grant me asylum?
Where will I go?

I am a woman, a refugee, a mother, and a child killer—
a criminal despised by humanity.

[...]

From this point, imagining the future is impossible.
It is impossible to foresee any path from this place.
This is the end of Medea.
This is the end for Medea.
This is the end according to Medea.
This is the end of the world according to Medea. (Farrokhzad, 2022, p. 5)

Medea is a refugee who has been betrayed by Jason and then faced an exile decree. Under the male-dominated ideology, she has endured both physical and psychological oppression, with her identity manipulated. Despite fulfilling all the “requirements” of womanhood, Medea initially struggles to comprehend Jason’s betrayal but eventually begins to question it. Her refugee status has further exacerbated her oppression. If she resists, she must seek a new refuge. Medea is keenly aware of the power imbalance between a woman resisting in her homeland and one resisting in a foreign land.

Exploring Constitutive Relationality in the Conflict Between Medea and Morality

Those in power seek to maintain their authority and oppressive practices, while the oppressed aim to dismantle or weaken this power. This conflict between opposing forces is a fundamental aspect of social practices and representation. Ultimately, this conflict represents a dialectical form of social relationship, characterised by contradictions both within and between each opposing side. The theory of social relations between the sexes posits that social relations produce gender and highlights how these relations arise from conflicts between the classes of women and men (Dunezat, 2022, pp. 101–102). In the play, Morality continuously reveals that the opposing classes of male and female are produced by each other, and that the idea of nature on which gender roles are based necessarily arises from this relationship, that is, from the processes of material life:

MORALITY: How could you be so reckless
as to betray your family and forsake your country?
How could you kill your own brother just to help a stranger escape?

How could you follow a stranger into enemy territory?

How could you believe in the permanence of his love?

That he would always protect you?

How could you forget that the most dangerous thing for a woman is to follow a man? (Farrokhzad, 2022, pp. 8–9)

In judging Medea, Morality bases its assessment on the reified “nature of men and women.” It views a man’s betrayal of the family as entirely natural, while a woman’s betrayal is deemed unusual. Moreover, Morality considers love within the marital relationship to be primarily the man’s domain. A man’s love is seen as dangerous, deceptive, and transient, while a woman’s love is deemed insignificant in itself. Its value is determined by the protection and ownership of a man. A man can end this ownership bond at any time, and the woman’s objections are disregarded. Medea also accepts her position as property within the dynamic of ownership as “natural,” as she says, “He should not have any other woman but me,” and again, “How could he prefer that woman over me, the one who bore his children?” (Farrokhzad, 2022, p. 9). Therefore, it is clear that in the original play, Medea’s conflict with Jason is not an effort toward liberation; rather, it is the result of fear, anger, frustration, and a desire for revenge resulting from the loss of ownership or male dominance. Medea believes that she has fulfilled all the requirements of being a woman. She has confronted her family and killed her brother for the sake of a man’s ownership. She has left her country and, as a refugee wife, dedicated her time and labour to Jason. She has surrendered both the sexual use of her body and its products, namely her children, to the man’s domain. However, Jason’s betrayal causes her to question what it means to be a woman. In Euripides’ *Medea*, Medea’s appeal to the Chorus can be interpreted within this context:

MEDEA: My husband, who was everything to me—

how well I know it – is the worst of men.

Of all the living creatures with a soul

and mind, we women are the most pathetic.

First of all, we have to buy a husband:

spend vast amounts of money, just to get

a master for our body to add insult

to injury. And the stakes could not be higher:

will you get a decent husband, or a bad one?

If a woman leaves her husband, then she loses

her virtuous reputation. To refuse him

is just not possible. When a girl leaves home

and comes to live with new ways, different rules,

she has to be a prophet – learn somehow

the art of dealing smoothly with her bedmate.

If we do well, and if our husbands bear

the yoke without discomfort or complaint,

our lives are admired. If not, it’s best to die.

A man, when he gets fed up with the people
at home, can go elsewhere to ease his heart – he has friends, companions his own age.
We must rely on just one single soul.
They say that we lead safe, untroubled lives
at home while they do battle with the spear.
They're wrong. I'd rather take my stand behind
a shield three times than go through childbirth once. (Euripides, 2008, pp. 12–13)

Understanding the socially constructed representations of women and men also necessitates examining the practices associated with these representations. Trying to interpret the meaning emerging alongside actions reveals the constructive power of interactions between groups (Dunezat, 2022, pp. 102–105). In the aftermath of Jason's betrayal, Medea begins to reassess how power relations are woven into the fabric of daily life. She critiques the appropriation practices of the dominant male and reveals her desire for liberation. By highlighting that giving everything to a man leads to a pitiable condition for women, Medea challenges the dominant system's construction of "gender-based slavery." The statement "we buy a master for our bodies" reflects the concept of the "material appropriation of the body," as discussed by materialist feminism in its analysis of gendered social relations. After losing Jason, Medea begins to question the reduction of women to objects, their subjection to direct physical appropriation, and ultimately their commodification. In a patriarchal system, being abandoned by a man feels like being left exposed, and with nothing left to lose, Medea turns towards complete liberation and militancy. When she says, "I'd rather take my stand behind a shield three times than go through childbirth once," Medea reveals her yearning to overturn traditional gender roles (Euripides, 2008, p. 13). Confronted by a man exercising his privilege of divorce, Medea refuses to be seen as a flawed woman; instead, she raises her voice in resistance.

As previously noted, Euripides' *Medea* primarily focuses on Medea's anger and her quest for revenge against Jason. Medea cannot understand why Jason would choose to marry another woman and abandon both her and their children. She sacrifices everything for Jason, leaving her homeland, killing her brother, accepting a life of exile and statelessness, and bearing him two children. By dedicating her time, body, labour and identity to Jason, she has become increasingly deprived of her own sense of self. Her only social value lies in her relation to a man, and even that is ultimately taken from her. In response, Medea takes revenge by murdering Jason's new bride, the bride's father, King Creon, and her own children. Farrokhzad's adaptation continues Medea's rage through her clash with the new character, Morality. The dialectical dimension of this conflict is evident throughout the play. What creates Morality or masculine judgement is Medea's resistance. Just as there is a dialectical relationship that continually reconstructs itself between the classes of women and men, there is also a dialectical relationship between Medea and Morality. Medea's words are crucial for understanding this dynamic interplay:

MEDEA: I will begin by killing the Chorus.
They must not continue telling the story.
I want to stop the course of history, to escape from the drama.
I wish to control the flow of time and the fate of the world.

My children have already died enough for you to prove your righteousness.

To demonstrate that you are superior to me.

That I am a dangerous criminal.

That I cannot distinguish right from wrong,

and that I am the antithesis of reason.

To show that my husband's choice of me was foolish.

That a relationship with a refugee woman would end this way.

That I am a threat to be eliminated.

I exist as your terrifying example—the deviant you must fight against.

You gave me poison to gain from the drama.

You had my children killed to prove your own greatness.

And now you will judge me, will you?

You are the executioner. (Farrokhzad, 2022, pp. 25–26)

Medea recognises that Morality, which proclaims itself as the source of truth, correctness and knowledge, is inherently a manifestation of power. The discourses of Morality are upheld by complex and interwoven power structures. To strengthen itself, Morality needs a deviant—a woman who is cast as a figure of monstrosity. Medea assumes this role of the monstrous figure that Morality requires. According to Rosi Braidotti (1994, pp. 80–81), in a patriarchal system that relies on binary oppositions, the figure of the enemy or the monstrous woman is not merely a problem but a structural necessity. Associating women who are already deemed worthless with “immoral” or “deviant” situations is crucial to constructing the image of the “monstrous woman.” Narratives about monstrous women are also important in understanding the obedience of marginalised women to those in power. Ultimately, the demonisation of women enables men to reshape their laws. Even when a man betrays, he remains aware that he can retain his virtue, as his laws dominate. This perspective helps explain Jason's justifications for his betrayal in Euripides' *Medea*:

JASON: (...) As for my marriage
to the princess, which you hold against me,
I shall show you how I acted wisely
and with restraint, and with the greatest love
toward you and toward our children – Wait! Just listen!
When I moved here from Iolcus, bringing with me
disaster in abundance, with no recourse,
what more lucky windfall could I find
(exile that I was) than marrying
the king's own child? It's not that I despised

your bed—the thought that irritates you most—
 nor was I mad with longing for a new bride,
 or trying to compete with anyone –
 to win the prize for having the most children.
 I have enough—no reason to complain.
 My motive was the best: so we'd live well
 and not be poor. I know that everyone
 avoids a needy friend. I wanted to raise
 sons in a style that fits my family background,
 give brothers to the ones I had with you,
 and treat them all as equals. This would strengthen
 the family, and I'd be blessed with fortune.
 What do you need children for? For me, though,
 it's good if I can use my future children
 to benefit my present ones. Is that
 bad planning? If you weren't so irritated
 about your bed, you'd never say it was.
 But you're a woman—and you're all the same! (Euripides, 2008, pp. 24–25)

Jason's words illustrate how binary oppositions operate. The legitimacy of a man abandoning a woman is deemed less immoral and even justifiable compared to the monstrosity of a woman leaving a man. In the patriarchal system, Medea and her children are positioned as property, while Jason is seen as the owner of that property. Jason uses this framework to legitimise his marriage to the king's daughter. According to this view, a man may acquire another woman as property for the benefit of the woman he already possesses. Men are considered to be the embodiment of knowledge, reason, norms, and morality, and their actions are aligned with these values. In contrast, women are perceived as being governed by emotion, distant from reason. Jason's statement, "You would even approve of me if you weren't writhing in jealousy," can be understood in this context. Jason needs Medea, who is jealous and enraged, to establish and legitimise himself as a lawgiver. Medea, along with all other women, had already been demonised even before killing her children: "If everything goes well between the sheets you think you have it all. But let there be some setback or disaster in the bedroom and suddenly you go to war against the things that you should value most. I mean it—men should really have some other method for getting children. The whole female race should not exist. It's nothing but a nuisance" (Euripides, 2008, p. 25). Jason labels the female as responsible for all evil and interprets childbirth occurring in the female body as an anomalous and repulsive condition.

The monstrous emerges in a realm that eludes the boundaries of reason and rationality, existing as a foundational element of discourse. It is not within the boundary but directly engages with it. It shapes the boundary and is simultaneously shaped by it. Monstrosity begins with birth. While the male-dominated order constructs rationality, the fact that women are the bearers of life is both "impossible" and real. This reality is both fascinating and disturbing, as it challenges male supremacy. Women are the first to deviate from rationality through their role as life-givers. The changes in their bodies before birth are central to the concept of anomaly. The female body extends beyond the limits of what is considered "normal" until childbirth, at which point children are handed over to men, who are regarded as their rightful owners. From

the outset, the mother is constructed as monstrous for usurping the life-giving power that is traditionally attributed to men. Ultimately, she remains monstrous because she does not have ownership of her children. While the inadequacy of men and the completeness of women originate in the body, the inadequacy of women and the completeness of men are established within societal structures (Braidotti, 1994, pp. 77-83). For this reason, Jason cannot accept childbirth as a woman's role or as Medea's. Evil, monstrosity, and deviance do not begin with Medea's act of killing her children; they begin with her giving birth to them. Medea attempts to reclaim her body's products from the male lineage by killing her children. She rejects the reduction of her body to a mere object and takes back her body's products (her children) from the male line. Farrokhzad's Medea confronts Morality, which embodies the law legitimising Jason, the concept of nature and rational thought, with a bold challenge:

MEDEA: Since I brought the children into the world, I have the power to end their lives. Since I created them from nothing, it is my right to return them to nothing.

Since I gave birth to mortals, it is within my power to determine their fate.

If mothers are expected to be infallible, then why is the concept of error even necessary?

If the immense effort to keep children alive can be dismissed so easily,
and if one person's fate doesn't concern all humanity...

Since this is what life has given me, I will take back my contribution to life.

If I do not submit to nature, then nature should submit to me.

I have nullified birth and cancelled the cycle of life.

For Medea, justice is defined by what she demands for herself. (Farrokhzad, 2022, pp. 12-13)

As previously mentioned in the introduction, this study seeks to scrutinise the power relation dynamics constructed between men and women by examining the discourse surrounding the conflict between Medea and Morality. Danielle Juteau (2022, pp. 227-252) asserts that a materialist feminist analysis, framed by the theory of social relations between the sexes, must necessarily focus on the dynamic and constantly interlocking structure of these social relations. Only in this way can the similarity and divergence of the forms of oppression and subjugation be examined together. Prior to the intersection of all other cultural identities, womanhood is internally homogeneous and constructed through the concept of nature. This historical and materialist perspective establishes the concept of the "female class." Femininity is at the core of this form of oppression, and it is defined not by biology but as a socially constructed category within the social realm. As stated in the above quote, Medea also voices how being a woman, or in other words, being constructed as a woman, unfolds similarly under a shared form of social domination. It is the woman who is expected to bear children, compelled to take on the ideologically constructed role of motherhood, obliged to care for children, required not to make mistakes, and forced to submit to nature or the concept of nature. Medea is one such woman and she shares this common experience with other women.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Womanhood from Annihilation to Resistance

In *Morals According to Medea*, Farrokhzad endows Euripides' *Medea* with a political consciousness that profoundly changes her understanding of Jason's treachery. While initially she partly associates Jason's betrayal with masculinity as in the original play, she later fully recognises her identity as a woman as constructed, not innate. This newfound awareness and insight deepen her ongoing conflict with Morality. Farrokhzad, through her retelling of the Medea story, illuminates the social dynamics between men and women. In her adaptation, Morality symbolises order, law, the concept of nature and the prevailing ideology.

The interactions between Medea and Morality reveal the implications of a woman breaking free from the societal constraints imposed upon her within the established system. A woman is considered to be reasonable and acceptable as long as she conforms to the prescribed relational norms. For men, however, there is no such obligation; ultimately, each man is a creator of the dominant social relations that inform everyday life. Consequently, a man's act of betrayal does not signify an act against his "nature." A man's love may be fleeting; indeed, he is the one who defines love. For a woman, however, betrayal carries pejorative social connotations because it challenges conventional norms.

This analysis focuses on the theory of social relations between the sexes because it investigates how societal norms and representations of men and women are manifested in everyday practices. This perspective offers a deeper understanding of how gender dynamics shape and are shaped by daily life. However, the motivation for this study underscores the significance of recognising these practices not only through the lens of oppressive patriarchal systems but also by identifying the substantial impact of women's resistance and militancy, celebrating their agency and resilience. In this context, Farrokhzad's adaptation does not deviate from Euripides' *Medea* but rather offers a continuation of the original narrative. Medea carries her past with her, bearing the pain of her children's deaths and the cost of her resistance as she moves forward. *Morals According to Medea* re-examines Euripides' story in every detail; without this reinterpretation, Medea's transformation and the burial of Morality would be impossible. Medea is the creator of Morality; it is the class conflict inherent in her relationship with Jason that brings Morality into existence. Morality relies on Medea and her subversive resistance to assert and justify itself.

Resistance for Medea begins with destruction. Male-dominated ideology obscures Jason's interests and privileges. Medea becomes alienated from herself, her children, her body, her time, and her space. Alongside Jason, Medea is erased, trapped, and compelled to yield. However, her rebellion is not directed at Jason himself but at the ideology that grants him power. Thus, the representations of both Medea and Morality emerge as manifestations of the practices developed within power dynamics. In the play, Morality, as the ideology that legitimises Jason, embodies the "idea of nature," while the narrative ultimately shifts its focus to Medea rather than Morality. The primary concern of the play lies not in moral judgements but in Medea's defiant speeches that call for resistance. Medea is the play's social agent; she is the one who acts, defines, gives life, and takes it away. The play is filled with anticipation of what Medea will say or do in response to Morality. Morality is now exposed, unable to stay hidden, and reduced to predictable statements and a tedious ideology. In contrast, Medea is enigmatic, surprising, and captivating. Medea's allure lies in her unyielding resistance.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details

Pelin Doğan Özger (Assistant Professor)

¹ Munzur University, Faculty of Letters, English Language and Literature Department, Tunceli, Türkiye

0000-0002-6391-3523 pelindogan@munzur.edu.tr

References

- Acar Savran, G. (2022). Sunuş [Introduction]. In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 7–22). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Adkins, L. and D. Leonard. (2005). Reconstructing French feminism: Commodification, materialism and sex. In Diana Leonard and Lisa Adkins (Eds.), *Sex in question: French materialist feminism* (pp. 1–23) Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Braidotti, R. (1994). Mothers, monsters, and machines. In *Nomadic subjects: Embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* (pp. 75–94). Columbia University Press.
- Delphy, C. (2022). Genel bir sömür teorisi için: Yeniden ve doğru yerden başlamak [Pour Une théorie générale de l'exploitation: Repartir du bon pied] In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 69–88). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Dunezat, X. (2022). Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler sosyolojisi: Erkek/kadın ilişkilerinin feminist ve maddeci bir okuması [La sociologie des rapports sociaux de sexe: une lecture féministe et matérialiste des rapports hommes/femmes]. In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 91–118). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Euripides. (2008). *Medea*. (D. A. Svarlien, Trans.). Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Farrokhzad, A. (2022). *Medea'ya göre ahlak* [Moral enligt Medea] (A. Arda, Trans.). Habitus.
- Guillaumin, C. (2005). The practice of power and belief in nature. In Diana Leonard & Lisa Adkins (Eds.), *Sex in question: French materialist feminism* (pp. 73109). Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- Gültekin, H. (2021). Post-Neoliberalism, free market and disillusionment: Anders Lustgarten's if you don't let us dream, we won't let you sleep. In Mesut Güneş & Enes Kavak (Eds.), *New readings in British drama: from the post-war period to the contemporary era* (pp. 115–129). Peter Lang.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*, with an epilogue by Siobhan O'Flynn. Routledge.
- Kergoat, D. (2022). Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişki: Toplumsal ilişkilerin yeniden üretilmelerinden yıkılmalarına [Le rapport social de sexe: De la reproduction des rapport sociaux à leur subversion]. In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 119–141). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Juteau, D. (2022). Maddeci feminist bir kesişimsellik paradigması [Un paradigme féministe Matérialiste de l'intersectionnalité]. In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 253–276). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Juteau, D. (2022). “Biz” kadınlar: Kadınlar kategorisinin ayrıştırılmaz türdeşliği ve ayrışıklığı [“Nous” les femmes: Sur l'indissociable homogénéité et hétérogénéité de la catégorie]. In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 227–252). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Rees, C. (2017). *Adaptation and nation: Theatrical contexts for contemporary English and Irish drama*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanders, J. (2006). *Adaptation and appropriation*. Routledge.
- Tabet, P. (2022). Büyük dalavere: Kadınların cinselliklerinden mülksüzleştirilmesi [La grande Arnaque – Sexualité des femmes et échange économique-sexuel]. In Gülnur Acar Savran (Ed. & Trans.), *Cinsiyetler arası toplumsal ilişkiler ve kesişimsellik* [Social relations between the sexes and intersectionality] (pp. 155–178). Dipnot Yayınları.
- Walby, S. (1991). *Theorizing patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell.
- Yetim, A. (2019). *Modern dünya edebiyatında Medea mitinin görünümlerine arketipsel bir yaklaşım* [An archetypal approach towards the representations of the myth of Medea in contemporary world literature] (PhD Dissertation). Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü.



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

From *Macbeth* to *Dunsinane*: Appropriation as Practice and Process



Dilek İnan¹  

¹ İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, İzmir, Türkiye

Abstract

Appropriation is a creative and artistic practice in which the writer reworks, re-imagines, and rewrites a canonical source text. William Shakespeare's plays have been an important foundation for exploring such approximations. David Greig's *Dunsinane*, whose title distinctly evokes the tragedy of *Macbeth* and the Dunsinane castle set at the end of *Macbeth*, describes a contact zone. Hence, on the one hand, *Dunsinane* becomes a ground for enhancing the cultural relationships between Scotland and England, along with David Greig as a Scottish playwright and the English bard, on the other hand, it simultaneously addresses contemporary conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere. Greig deconstructs Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who has been characterised as a ruthless dictator and usurper, and presents *Macbeth* as a successful Scottish king who has ruled Scotland for fifteen years, a view accepted by most modern historians. While Shakespeare's tragedy proclaims that peace has been reinstated in Scotland under Malcolm's new kingship, Greig's witty play presents the opposite, underlying the fact that Scotland is too complicated, tribally, and regionally diverse to ever be understood by the English. The paper analyses that as a sequel to *Macbeth*, *Dunsinane* is a new work that Greig has appropriated to understand and present contemporary politics and that *Dunsinane* has been written out of its author's need to correct a counter-dramatic and historical "fact". The paper also attempts to explore Greig's ethico-political intentions as a sensible playwright, highlighting the ways in which *Dunsinane* appropriates history and fiction in complex ways. While the play preserves the original framework of *Macbeth*, it creates a contemporary work, with military and (post)colonial discourses creating associations between eleventh-century Scotland and today's international power dynamics.

Keywords

Dunsinane · David Greig · Appropriation · *Macbeth* · British Drama



Citation: İnan, D. (2025). From *Macbeth* to *Dunsinane*: Appropriation as Practice and Process. *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*–*Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 16–24. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2025-1614466>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. İnan, D.

 Corresponding author: Dilek İnan dilek.inan@idu.edu.tr



Introduction

Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre has become an inspiration and a source for adaptation and appropriation in literary history. David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010) and Tim Crouch's *I, Shakespeare* (2012) reconstruct Shakespeare's plays in which minor characters become the major characters so that the audiences experience new plots in the contemporary world. As Lachman (2022) suggests, the readers/audiences are exposed to imagine the accuracy of historical realism and also acknowledge a sense of fictional reflection and speculation. Greig mentioned in an STC interview that long before appropriating *Macbeth*, he wrote a sequel to *The Tempest* as his first play in his undergraduate years, which told "the story of Caliban and Ariel after everyone had left the island and gone home to Milan" (Greig, 2015, para.19).

As Julie Sanders suggests "Appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product...(they) tend to have a more complicated, intricate and sometimes embedded relationship to their intertexts" (2006, p. 35). In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders asserts that "a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's, director's, or performer's decision to re-interpret a source text" (2006, p. 2). Different from adaptation, appropriation is associated with intertextual reference and allusion, reproduction, and "rewriting". In the literary sphere, For Roland Barthes, any text is an intertext as it is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1977, p. 146). To interrelate Sanders and Barthes, this article analyses how Greig reimagines and rewrites the story of *Macbeth* as an appropriation and how the two texts have intertextual liaisons. Greig not only exploits *Macbeth* as a foundation text for his *Dunsinane*, but he also appropriates the original resource material towards a criticism of present political situations in the Middle East.

Dunsinane was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Hampstead Theatre in February 2010. As Trish Reid observes, *Dunsinane* looks "both inward, towards Scotland's past, and outward to comment on twenty-first-century global politics, thus embodying the tension between national and international concerns" (2013, p. 65). The complexity of *Dunsinane*'s rewriting of *Macbeth* also results from the underlying mythological aspect. As Anja Hartl states, both *Macbeth* and *Dunsinane* mythologise and fabulate the historical figure. Therefore, *Dunsinane* belongs to a wider mythological setup which has materialized over the centuries around the character of *Macbeth* (Hartl, 2020). This myth draws a negative image of *Macbeth* as a tyrant and a murderer. *Dunsinane* reconsiders *Macbeth* from a wider mythological perspective by applying an indirect and ambivalent strategy of appropriation, which is understood in Julie Sanders's definition of the term as a cultural practice with "distinct political and ethical implications" (2006, p. 42). In this sense, *Dunsinane*'s intertextual affiliation to *Macbeth* and the mythological connection built around the character of the Scottish king occurs as "dialogical" (Desmet, 2014, p. 42) and mutual rather than one-sidedly manipulative. Similarly, Nick Aitchison observes that "*Macbeth* is a figure of enduring fascination. No Scottish king has captured the artistic and popular imagination as vividly as *Macbeth*" (1999, p. viii). On the other hand, Fiona Watson, in her fictional biography "*Macbeth: A True Story*", suggests that "the *Macbeth* portrayed by Shakespeare bears almost no resemblance to the king who ruled Scotland between 1040 and 1057/8" and that it is therefore "difficult to exaggerate how great an injustice history has inflicted on him (the historical figure)" (2010, p. 2). Hartl remarks that such considerations ignore the fact that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* based on a rich mythological heritage that had already been established centuries ago (Hartl, 2020, p. 6). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that "the evolution of the myth did not end with Shakespeare" (Aitchison, 1999, p. 130), and that the myth has been adapted to different contexts and purposes. Therefore, the modern insights of *Macbeth* must be valued as "based on a complex mix of historical, mythological and dramatic sources" (Aitchison, 1999, p. v). Greig also stages a series of clear reverses of Shakespeare's inspiring version, as he explains, "to some degree for Scottish writers it's always felt a little bit

cheeky that unquestionably the greatest Scottish play was written by the great English playwright” (Wallace, 2013, p. 92).

In *Dunsinane*, Macbeth’s wife, Gruach, is not dead; on the contrary, she has survived the English army’s conquest and became the powerful leader of her clan. In addition, Gruach’s son, Lulach, is the rightful successor to the throne and rivals Malcolm for power. Indeed, in an interview, Greig stated, “I didn’t take Shakespeare’s queen at all. She dies at the end of *Macbeth*. “My Gruach is based on all the knowledge I could find about the real queen, Gruach.” And he continues, “There was a real king Macbeth. Many Scots can tell you that Shakespeare’s portrayal bears no relation to Macbeatha who ruled for a long time and was, quite possibly, a good king. So I wondered about setting my play not in Shakespeare’s world, but in the ‘real’ Scotland of the 11th century” (Greig, 2015, para. 3).

Dunsinane resists the image of Macbeth as a cruel oppressor. Indeed, Gruach depicts a significantly more encouraging and pleasant picture of the figure when she states that

[h]e was a good king.

He ruled for fifteen years.

Before him there were kings and kings and kings but not one of them could rule more than a year or so at most before he would be killed by some chief or other. But my king lasted fifteen years. My king was strong. (p. 32)

Throughout the play, Gruach upsets Siward's attempts at colonial conquest:

SIWARD: Look at you smiling. You smiling and your women laughing at me. Which of us is really the conqueror here and which of us the conquered?

GRUACH: Oh, you’re the conqueror (p. 70).

The most outstanding metaphor is when Siward says I’m England, you are Scotland:

SIWARD: Gruach, what work do you do here in Dunsinane?

GRUACH: Work?

SIWARD: What is your place here?

GRUACH: My place here is Queen. (p. 25)

Dunsinane is divided into four sections based on the framework of the four seasons. The story is narrated via the Boy Soldier’s monologues in letters to his mother in his home country, England. He becomes the symbol of the English soldiers in *Dunsinane*, who are challenged by the crude Scottish landscape. This is the Boy Soldier’s first war, and his letters to his mother enable the readers/audiences to understand the English soldiers’ feelings about the war in Dunsinane. The anonymous Boy Soldier is a generic and archetypical character who feels a sense of estrangement by the alien highland culture and a sense of discomfort and hardship from the severe Scottish climate and barren landscapes:

BOY SOLDIER: I have not been on a boat before

Not a boat like that before

Not on a boat like that

On a sea like that, swells rising about us. (p. 1)

The Boy Soldier’s speech is rather lyrical and poetic. His monologues at the beginning of each act contribute to the aesthetic quality of the appropriation amongst the severe political conflicts. His speech

adds an expressive character with repetitions and various figures of speech. His comic dialogues and his alienation are also reminiscent of the ordinary infantry, the soldiers who fought and died in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, who were also unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the local culture and geography.

Greig employs verbal irony skilfully, especially when the Boy Soldier asks Gruach whether she eats babies. By using verbal irony, Gruach satirizes the foolishness of the English soldiers:

'GRUACH: Have you ever eaten baby meat?

BOY SOLDIER: Me - no.

GRUACH: You should try it.' (p. 55)

By using irony and humorous language Greig in a way transfers the original text into a tragi-comedy. Not only the plot but also the genre is appropriated from tragedy to tragi-comedy. He satirizes the irrationality of foreign invasions in the Middle East and elsewhere by referring to the English intervention in Scotland in the 10th century.

Gruach is an intricately mysterious character not only to the Boy Soldier but also to Siward. Her language is her character, and she survives with her powerful language in the patriarchal and colonial atmosphere. Gruach and her three women refuse to speak English. She complains and makes fun of Siward's attitude towards Gaelic. The language emphasizes their difference and challenges King James' opinion about being united under one language.

According to Clare Wallace, *Dunsinane* is a complex political allegory (2013, p. 97). The play works on various levels: on one hand, *Dunsinane* presents a different portrayal of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Gruach), as well as the conflict between England and Scotland. On the other hand, the play becomes a critique of Western intervention in the East, working at a global level. While the play presents the history between England and Scotland, it also represents current global politics that involve various kinds of injustices and unfair intrusions. Indeed, *Dunsinane* was premiered in 2010 when Britain experienced internal conflicts with Scotland as well as with distinctive issues of global conflicts, aggressions, occupations, and military involvements in conflict regions around the world.

Shifts: Marginal becomes the central

Dunsinane, as an appropriation of *Macbeth*, bears certain shifts in which *Macbeth*'s marginal characters become the central figures. Siward, who has little importance in *Macbeth*, is the major character and Shakespeare's protagonist Macbeth does not exist in *Dunsinane*. Macbeth and Siward are devoted soldiers in establishing a new Scotland, while Macbeth is portrayed as a usurper and Siward is depicted as an occupier. Siward acts under the English Government to shape Scotland, as he also explains to the Boy Soldier: "We set light to the forest. Drove them out and into the hills. Eventually, they'll find their way back to their homes and their farms. We'll set a new king in Dunsinane and then summer will come and then a harvest and by next spring it'll be as if there never was a fight here" (p. 24). In several instances, Siward clearly states his intentions about Scotland. He tells Gruach: "I came here to install Malcolm as king so as to secure England's northern border. My job is to build a new kingdom - not to settle old grudges. So I have to clear away the past now...I want you to renounce your son's claim to the throne" (p. 24).

Another significant shift occurs in terms of the genre, tone, and mood in Greig's play. Shakespeare's tragedy is appropriated into a satirical comedy in *Dunsinane*. The comedic element in *Dunsinane* is fostered by the Boy Soldier's monologues and the dialogues between Egham and the soldiers and between Gruach and Siward. The play's aura is also furthered by Greig's diction, especially in the use of metaphors, symbols, and the Gaelic language to emphasize that Scotland is a disparate country with topographical and regional

differences. The play's aura is unique in presenting the 10th century Scottish atmosphere in association with 21st century politics to suggest the political conscience Greig possesses as a prolific contemporary playwright and to present him as an institutional identity for Scottish drama.

The playwright continues to contribute to Scottish drama and culture by ingeniously and timely appropriating the English play, *Macbeth*. Likewise, Emily Linneman underlines deviation and alteration in terms of the audience's responses and perspectives. She observes that "*Dunsinane* is not the play we thought we knew. [...] At the end of *Macbeth*, we are certain of several things. [...] In *Dunsinane*, most of our suppositions turn out to be false" (2010, p. 2). The case is true for most of the English soldiers in the play whose expectations about the situation in Scotland turn out to be deceiving, as Siward eventually experiences a moment of epiphany and is forced to understand the fact:

SIWARD. You told me she was dead.

MALCOLM. Did I?

SIWARD. You told me she went mad and died.

MALCOLM. Mmm.

SIWARD. You told me the tyrant had lost the support of the chiefs and he had no son and his queen had died of madness and so there would be no resistance to you but on the other hand, we were likely to see a swift and general acceptance and the chance to establish a new and peaceful order. (p. 28)

In this sense, "constructed first and foremost as a challenge to its *audience*" (Linneman, 2010, p. 2) rather than to Shakespeare, *Dunsinane* inquired into the imperative elements of Shakespeare's account of the story by completely involving the audiences in its searches. Diversions, reversals, and shifts are crucial in the process of appropriation. Whereas *Macbeth* ends with a hopeful note amidst a large number of deaths and with the new king Malcolm's declaration that he will establish a new Scotland in affiliation with England, Greig's *Dunsinane* continues with an alternative story highlighting the encounter between the intervening English soldiers and the native Scottish people. Along with the struggle with the external English power, the play also unveils the opposing struggles between the internal forces of the Scottish clans.

Macbeth and *Dunsinane* bear significant variations: while *Macbeth* is written through the lens of imperialistic suggestions, *Dunsinane* is composed in the light of post-colonial undercurrents, addressing contemporary audiences who can associate the play with Western countries' attempts to build nations in Iraq and Afghanistan at the expense of bloodshed. In addition to the shifts mentioned above, there is also a reversal in the characterization. Whereas Shakespeare's characters are trapped and manipulated by the spiritual sights, Greig's characters are as autonomous and free as Scotland. Indeed, Siward describes Scotland's sovereignty and its combative nature:

Scotland has been at war for many years. On either side, there are parties with wounds and each party wants their wounds avenged and each act of vengeance is punished with vengeance and so if you do nothing now the war will continue until there is nobody left alive in Scotland and all that exists is the mountains and the empty land and the grudge that hangs above it. (p. 83)

"Spring

And all of us both knowing and not knowing what lay ahead of us" (p. 9).

"Summer

So you can tell this, mother, to any boys you happen to meet, if they say they're being sent up north to join us - say to them this one thing - tell them - my son says, in Scotland always be careful where you put your feet" (p. 9).

"Autumn

We win because if we don't win - we lose - and if we lose - then what?" (p. 89).

"Winter

And to Siward goes the doubt and to me come the fear and running round and round my head like a mad horse the question I can never ask. 'Why are we here?' 'Why are we here?'" (p. 135)

Michael Billington, in his analysis of the Hampstead Theatre production for *The Guardian*, observes that "Scotland is too complex, tribal and territorially distinctive ever to be understood by the English" (2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/17/dunsinane-review>). The production, however, suggests present 21st century issues about the American and Western armed forces intervening in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the politically correct statement "war on terror". In an interview for the American production of *Dunsinane*, Greig asserts that the play is adjustable to any place worldwide:

I hope the play adapts to whatever context it finds. For example, when we played the show in Moscow the audience felt powerfully that we were describing Ukraine. I expect in America it will have resonance around Iraq. But, who knows, the audience might also be interested in the way a strong woman can play a tricky political hand of cards? (2015)

The play endures versatile and universal interpretations. As Greig mentions, Gruach is more fearless and virtuous, especially when compared to Lady Macbeth. However, many critics have reviewed the play's reputation as denoting compellingly Central Asia and the Middle East involvements. McGlone explicitly relates the play to the Middle East military occupation: "Tragically, the continuing unrest and bloodshed in the Middle East makes the timeless *Dunsinane* even more timely today" (2018, p. 6). Similarly, the Scotsman theatre critic emphasizes the presence of the "British troops in Afghanistan" (The Scotsman). Indeed, *Dunsinane* questions the ethical positions when a more "developed" country tries to control a "lesser" nation. Greig's appropriation, based on Shakespeare's tragedy, can be employed to understand the current political conditions between the invader and the invaded. When he speaks to the parliament, the clansman Moray defines Scotland with the following expressions:

Look at us. Here at the beck of an English commander. Is this Scotland now? Try to see us as our children will see us when they look back on this day in time to come. They would be humiliated. It should shame us to kneel before an invader, but it seems we have no shame left. (p. 82)

Siward is the mouthpiece of the English Government. He cannot negotiate either with the heads of the tribes or the Gruach. His stubborn approach in this land of impossibility is interesting to notice: "You're right, I'm tired, Malcolm. I'm tired of 'appear' and I'm tired of 'seem'. I only have bone and flesh and mud and bog and metal. That's the world my power's in and that's the world I'll fight in, and that's the world in which I'll win." (p. 112). Siward's genuine confessions here underline the pretense that the English rule imposes on Scotland.

Clare Wallace defines Greig's projection as "England's paternal control" (2013, p. 205), reminiscent of the long-held tradition of expanding violence and instability. Towards the end of the play, Malcolm explains the impossibility of storing peace in Scotland through impressive metaphors and analogies: "You seem to think peace is a natural state, Siward, and conflict its interruption, but the truth is the exact opposite. Peace is what the sea looks like in a dead calm—a rare and beautiful moment—something impossible—a glimpse of perfection before the wind comes back again. You can no more force peace into existence than you can wander across the surface of the sea stamping the waves flat" (p. 126).

With such a dystopian projection, the playwright could only finish the play with an unclear view of an unknown place. *Dunsinane*'s final tableau depicts a scene that concludes with a move into a moral and political void. The final tableau of the play is impressive and suggestive:

The Boy Soldier walks.
Everything has disappeared.
There is only the Boy and white.
And then there is only white. (p. 125)

The Boy Soldier resides with Siward until the end of the play. In the final scene of the play, Siward finds Gruach in a chapel in a frozen lake. Siward asks Gruach to be under the rule of Malcolm, which Gruach refuses. She shows a baby as Lulach's son to suggest that Scotland has a king. Siward threatens Gruach to kill the baby; however, Gruach does not give up, asserting that Scotland can always find a new king. The baby also represents independent Scotland. In the final scene, the Boy Soldier gives the baby boy to Gruach and disappears.

SIWARD: Imagine a village—a village in a valley, say—and this valley is fertile and green and young and then one day a cloud that descends on it—Gruach – a black cloud that sucks the life out of the ground and leaves it frozen and hopeless. That's what you are, Gruach—you are winter. (p. 122)

The play ends with Siward's downfall and is graphically presented as he leaves the stage. The stage becomes bare and barren as eventually The Boy Soldier also exits the stage:

The Boy Soldier walks.
Everything has disappeared. There is only the Boy and white. And then there is only white. (p. 138)

The final image with the Boy Soldier depicts a sense of futurity. With the Boy Soldier's departure, the stage is left entirely white, which is the opposite of a traditional blackout. The white stage might also indicate future encounters between England and Scotland. Or, rather, many more possible adaptations and appropriations of Scottish history.

In an interview in 2021, Greig underlines a sense of "doubleness" that Scotland experiences as both wild and outer but also as a means at the centre of the Empire. He states that he tells tough love stories and acknowledges, "that's the way I tell stories. A love story is always about self and other, an opposition but also a potential" (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/c/world-bleak-and-difficult-and-i-give-weight-things-pull-us-apart>). Greig advocates the format of interrogation when writing plays, and one of the responsibilities of theatre is to question its era. "The fundamental question that theatre can ask is: 'What would I do in this situation?'" (2021).

Indeed, the play is an amalgamation of the social and political changes in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the new millennium. The play is a call for reconsidering Anglo-Scottish relations with its references to eleventh-century Scottish history and the geopolitical and linguistic differences between the two countries. The play was written in 2010, yet it depicts a sense of freedom in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the “Yes Scotland” and “Better Together” campaigns. Campaigning for a yes vote, Greig has written a mini kitchen-sink drama on Twitter, the *Yes No Plays*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Dunsinane* is not only an appropriation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, but it also takes its place in a complex mythological web of rewritings. Combining variations in texts and perspectives into dialogue, *Dunsinane* becomes a meeting locus in which conventional beliefs, topics, and narratives are fundamentally distanced. As Anja Hartl conveys, rather than merely confronting or speculating on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* by “developing a distinct counter-story”, *Dunsinane* engages in a more elaborate scheme through a playful manner and at times hilarious undertones (Hartl, 2020, p. 4). The play not only re-imagines the past but also reshapes the present. Graham Saunders’s opinion can “incorporate elements from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and at the same time negotiate between medieval Scotland and recent military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq” (2017, p. 9). While depicting the 10th-century Scottish-English relationships, the play conveys implicit political suggestions with the contemporary situations in the Middle East, which is especially reminiscent of the Western intervention in Afghanistan that has been so graphically presented in the media in various forms and genres.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details	Dilek İnan (Professor)
	¹ İzmir Demokrasi Üniversitesi, Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, İzmir, Türkiye
	 0000-0002-5128-8409  dilek.inan@idu.edu.tr

References

- Aitchison, N. (1999). *Macbeth: Man and Myth*. Sutton.
- Barthes, R. (1977). Death of the Author. In *Image, Music, and Text*. Hill and Wang
- Billington, M. (2010). *Dunsinane*. *The Guardian*. 17 February 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/17/dunsinane-review/>. Accessed 4 January 2025.
- Desmet, C. (2014). Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Appropriation. In Alexa Huang & Elizabeth Rivlin (Eds.), *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (pp. 41–57). Palgrave.
- Fisher, M. (2011). *Dunsinane*. *The Guardian*. 19 May. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/may/19/dunsinane-review/>. Accessed 4 January 2025.
- Greig, D. (2010). *Dunsinane*. Faber and Faber.
- Greig, D. (2015). <https://www.shakespearetheatre.org/blog/an-interview-with-dunsinane-playwright-david-greig/>.
- Greig, D. (2021). <https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/c/world-bleak-and-difficult-and-i-give-weight-things-pull-us-apart>.
- Hartl, A. (2019). Appropriating The Myth of *Macbeth* in David Greig’s *Dunsinane* https://shakespeare-gesellschaft.de/wp-content/uploads/SSO_16_2019.pdf
- Lachman, M. (2022). Staging Dystopian Communities: Reimagining Shakespeare in Selected English Plays Multicultural Shakespeare. *Translation, Appropriation and Performance*, 26(41), 103–118. <https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-8530.26.07>.



- Linneman, E. (2010). A Mistaken Understanding: *Dunsinane* and New Writing at the RSC. *Borrowers and Lenders. The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, 5(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.18274/HEYF9826>
- McGlone, J. (2018). After the Dictator Falls: Tracing the Steps of Gruach. *First Folio: Teacher and Student Resource Guide. Shakespeare Theatre*. Shakespeare Theatre Company. Web. 14 May 2018. <https://www.shakespearetheatre.org/>
- Reid, T. (2013). *Theatre & Scotland*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanders, J. (2006). *Adaptation and Appropriation*. Routledge.
- Saunders, G. (2017). *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama*. Palgrave.
- The News Room (2011). Theatre Reviews: *Dunsinane*, A Slow Air, Top Table. *The Scotsman*. <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/theatre-reviews-dunsinane-a-slow-air-top-table-1676982>
- Scott, M. (1999). *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist*. Macmillan Press.
- Watson, F. (2010). *Macbeth: A True Story*. Quercus.
- Wallace, C. (2013). *The Theatre of David Greig*. Bloomsbury.
- Zaroulia, M. (2011). What's Missing is my Place in the World' the Utopian Dramaturgy of David Greig. In Anja Müller and Clare Wallace (Eds.), *Cosomotopia. Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre* (pp. 32–50). Litteraria Pragensia Books.



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

“Finally she speaks”: Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*



Neslihan Köroğlu ¹  

¹ Izmir Katip Celebi University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages, Izmir, Türkiye

Abstract

Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* (2012) lends a critical twist to William Shakespeare’s *Othello* (1604) by reimagining the source text through monologues, dialogues, and songs of the silenced characters in *Othello*: Desdemona, her ‘missing’ mother M. Brabantio, her African nanny Barbary, Emilia and Othello speak boldly to reveal their untold stories. In *Desdemona*, Morrison challenges Shakespeare’s text in two ways: Firstly, the experimental form of the play suggests a departure from the traditional play since *Desdemona* is a collaborative project involving Toni Morrison as the playwright, Malian singer Rokia Traoré as the musician and Peter Sellars as the director. This collaboration offers the possibility of re-visioning *Othello* on a more democratic ground and interpreting *Desdemona* as an ‘appropriation’, which Julie Sanders (2006) defines as “a decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product or domain” (p. 6). The second critical interpretation lies in Morrison’s taking on *Othello* using the lenses of the dead women: The reader and/or the audience witness Desdemona’s story through fragments from her girlhood and afterlife and now, she encounters Barbary, Othello and Emilia in the world of the dead. This feminist re-vision is enriched by Morrison’s restoration of a voice to Barbary who raised Desdemona with African stories and songs. In addition, reimagining the Barbary-Desdemona encounter to discuss the scars of colonialism creates a postcolonial feminist space through which Morrison ‘talks back’ to Shakespeare. This article discusses the postcolonial and feminist dimensions embodied in *Desdemona* and explores the possibility of reading this contemporary project as ‘an appropriation’ rather than ‘an adaptation’ within the framework of adaptation studies.

Keywords

Toni Morrison · *Desdemona* · William Shakespeare · *Othello* · appropriation

Author Note

The title is borrowed from Peter Sellars’s “Foreword” in *Desdemona* (2012, p. 9).



Citation: Köroğlu, N. (2025). “Finally she speaks”: Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*. *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi-Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1613697>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Köroğlu, N.

 Corresponding author: Neslihan Köroğlu neslihan.koroglu@ikc.edu.tr



"We will be judged by how well we love."

Desdemona, Toni Morrison

Introduction

In his Foreword to Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2012), Peter Sellars declares that William Shakespeare's *Othello* (1604) is "so intricate and ultimately disturbing" (p. 7) as it evokes the themes of "innuendo, misinformation, secrets, lies, self-deception, cruelty, and strangely luminous redemption" (p. 7). This might be the reason for Sellars, why he considers the afterlives of *Othello* as "a kind of puppet show of a brilliant but dangerously mad black man" (p. 7) and throughout its performance history, 'the Moor' has been "framed by a devil on his left (Iago) and on angel on his right (Desdemona)" (p. 7). Following these remarks, it could be assumed that grappling with conventional interpretations of such a historically and critically bound text like *Othello* and opening a new space for it in the realm of literary and cultural studies require a rigorous reworking, particularly when the heterosexual and racist ideology that accompanies *Othello* is apparent. This is what Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* has achieved so far since the play intervenes in the cultural memory of *Othello* and suggests an alternative perspective as an artistic collaborative project of Toni Morrison as the writer, Peter Sellars as the director and Rokia Traoré as the musician. This hybrid narrative openly appropriates its early modern source text since the contemporary reimagination, as Julie Sanders (2006) puts it, implies "the notion of a hostile take over" instead of "perpetuat[ing] the existence of a canon" (pp. 8–9) not only because it reimagines the girlhood and afterlife of 'angelized' Desdemona and thus functions as both a prequel and sequel to the Renaissance play but also through casting a critical eye on *Othello*, it enables us to 'hear' Desdemona and other silenced characters in the text. By reimagining 'the other side of the story'¹ through the voices of Desdemona, her 'missing' mother M. Brabantio, her African nanny Barbary and Emilia, and even Othello speaking for himself, Toni Morrison adds a feminist twist to her revision. Restoring a voice to Barbary who raised Desdemona with African stories and songs in her reimagined childhood constitutes a significant part of this article because the Barbary-Desdemona encounter also opens a postcolonial dimension in the appropriation through which Toni Morrison talks back to Shakespeare. To this end, this article explores the feminist and postcolonial approaches *Desdemona* embodies and searches for the possibilities of analysing the narrative as 'an appropriation' rather than 'an adaptation' in the framework of adaptation and appropriation studies.

The Afterlives of *Othello* and Toni Morrison

In *Rewriting Shakespeare, Rewriting Ourselves* (1991), Peter Erickson acknowledges that the endeavour to rewrite the Renaissance and talking back to Shakespeare after the 1980s² have been major strands in literature and there might be the possibility of articulating more than one Renaissance, apart from the one dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in Europe (p. 124). In this respect, the Renaissance, etymologically connoting re-birth, might refer to other meanings when devoid of its conventional timeline and historical bounds. In a conversation with Gloria Naylor, Toni Morrison redefines the word 'renaissance' to point out the role of contemporary black women writers talking back to the literary canon as she states: "It's a real renaissance. You know, we have spoken of renaissance before. But this one is ours, not somebody else's" (Erickson, 1991, p. 124). Drawing on Morrison's remarks, it might be suggested that feminist reworkings of canonical texts can be considered as the renaissance period of women's writing because they paved

¹Molly Hite's *The Other Side of the Story* (1989) is an influential book about women writers' rewriting practises. Hite suggests that rewriting classic texts from a feminist standpoint enables women to make a critique of the Western masculinist literary tradition.

²Challenging the gendered restrictions of the narrative tradition was on the agenda of women writers, especially after the 1980s, and the movement was called 'opening up the canon'.

the way for the rebirth of women's creative and collective writing practises during the 1980s and beyond. According to this analogy, it is hardly undeniable that Shakespeare plays a functional role in terms of the central position he occupies in the literary canon. In Martin Esslin's words, Shakespeare's plays "provide a multi-focal viewpoint. You can look at the play as it was written. You can treat it as a historical document. You can consider what it means to you as an expression of continuing human emotions and you can look at it as a myth through his ability to be modified" (as cited in Elsom, 1989, p. 26). Maryam Beyad and Ali Salami (2016) remark that "[r]eading and rereading his plays are like the rotations of the prisms, a work we handmade as little children with cardboard and broken glass, every rotation giving a new spectrum. So is the case with Shakespeare" (p. 1). In this respect, the infinite interpretation possibilities of his plays make Shakespeare a common ground for contemporary women writers like Toni Morrison to restore space and voice to the silenced others.

Anon, an important point to bear in mind regarding reworkings of canonical texts by women writers might help to situate *Desdemona* among the critical rewritings of *Othello*. As Peter Erickson (1991) writes, two distinct modes based on the 'aim' of the narrative become evident in the rewriting practises, the first of which is "a conciliatory mode that urges moderation and balance" (p. 167). The conciliation with the writer of the source text, here the case is Shakespeare, secures Shakespeare's position as the cultural capital of the Western canon. To quote Erickson once again (1991), the tendency is "to mitigate the conflict" (p. 167) and reassures the value of Shakespeare in a positive way without casting a critical eye. The second mode of narrative is 'oppositional' and sceptical about seeing Shakespeare as "the dominant artistic force" (p. 167). Following this distinction on the modes of rewriting Shakespeare, *Desdemona* stands as an oppositional rewriting because it, in the first place, through restoring space to the silenced characters in the play—even the title *Desdemona* suggests it—questions the role of Shakespeare's reception as the defining figure of the Western canon. However, such an oppositional standpoint does not mean an overall rejection of 'the Bard'; rather, it might be perceived as the possibility of generating a new perspective using his works. Since the oppositional approach broadens the possibilities for hearing different voices, rewriting Shakespeare through casting a critical eye on him becomes possible by embodying this standpoint. This view on the oppositional approach, in this respect, does not hold the purpose of rejecting or overthrowing Shakespeare; instead, the reworkings like *Desdemona* search for the possibilities of 'reconciliation' on the common ground of a usable past.

As for the case of *Othello* specifically, the Shakespearean tragedy has frequently been of use in contemporary women's rewriting practises during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Ann Marie MacDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)* adds a feminist twist to the source text since the protagonist of the 1988 play, Constance Ledbelly, magically meets Desdemona and Juliet, and this encounter leads her on a journey of self-discovery. Paula Vogel's 1994 play *Desdemona: A Play About Handkerchief* takes on the story of *Othello* through the lenses of three women characters, Desdemona, Emilia and Bianca. Questioning the gender roles attributed to these women, Vogel portrays an assertive Desdemona whose infidelity creates tension in the narrative; nevertheless, she cannot escape her tragic death. Both MacDonald and Vogel respond to Shakespeare from the standpoints of feminism and critique the patriarchal code embedded in the play. Some subsequent afterlives added a postcolonial stance to the source text: Caleen Sinette Jennings's two-play *Playing Juliet, Casting Othello* (1999) lends Shakespeare's text a postcolonial perspective since it dwells on the history of the casting practises of Shakespearean performances by New Vistas Company famous for their multiracial community, thus retaining a racial tension. *Harlem Duet*, the 1997 play by Canadian playwright Djanet Sears, alludes to Shakespeare's *Othello* as it tells the story of an infidel husband named Othello and his wife Billie. A non-chronological prequel and sequel to Shakespeare's play moving across time and space, the play reimagines what if Othello lived today. English playwright Lolita

Chakrabarti’s play *Red Velvet*, which made its debut in the same year, 2012, with Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*, recites the biography of African American 19th century actor Ira Aldrige who takes on the role of Othello.³

One of the reasons for this growing interest in rewriting *Othello* might resonate with the purpose of questioning female agency because *Othello* is populated with female characters acting predominantly in the narrative. Desdemona as the daughter of the elite senator Brabantio, Emilia as the wife of Othello’s third-in-command Iago’s wife and Desdemona’s lady-in-wait and Bianca as a Venetian courtesan in relation to Cassio represent three distinct classes. Despite belonging to different social ranks, all women are unjustly accused of sexual misconduct and portrayed as defenceless against the accusations. As Lisa Jardine (1996) writes of the women in the play, “they yield the identical slur, the identical charge of sexual promiscuity – the most readily available form of assault on a woman’s reputation.” (p. 24). On the other hand, although Desdemona has generally been imaged passively, as the victim of Othello’s jealousy and brutal utterances in various critical analyses, she, at the same time, received attention for offering the possibility of analysing the character as the embodiment of female assertiveness in the Early Modern world. In this regard, Desdemona oscillates between being “both empowered and empowering” (Thompson, 2016, p. 494). To be more precise, as Marianne Novy (1981) suggests, Shakespeare’s ideal woman in his works presents an “ambiguous picture in which [the heroine] emphasises[s] patriarchy and ... female activity” (p. 21). Some tragic characters like Juliet, Cordelia, and Desdemona are the domains of female agency, but they also show a willingness to subordinate themselves, thus they can “harmoniously combine strength and flexibility, individualism and compromise” (p. 21). To elaborate on Desdemona’s female agency in the context of ambiguity, it might be highlighted that she boldly chooses to marry Othello and defends her decision before the Venetian authorities, though she justifies it by saying she is following her mother’s example in marrying her father. She is determined to fulfil her promise to advocate for Cassio, but she lies about the handkerchief. On her deathbed, she defends herself fiercely, but her actions have placed her in a vulnerable position and in the end, Othello murders her. This combination of traits allows critics to both praise and criticize Desdemona, contrasting sharply with Othello’s simplistic view of her, and the ambiguity ultimately leads her to the tragic outcome (Novy, 1981). It is my contention that Toni Morrison’s taking on Desdemona shows relevance with this ambiguity because the appropriated text does not justify Desdemona as a victim; instead, Desdemona is under the critical lenses regarding her relationship with Emily, Othello and Barbary. However, at the very beginning of the play, she claims her own agency, saying “My name is Desdemona ... I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose” (Morrison, 2012, p. 13).

Jo Eldridge Carney (2014) suggests that in the framework of appropriations of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* deserves particular attention because it “offers a more complex and expansive narrative, situating Desdemona within her own historical context and within the homosocial community of women that Shakespeare’s play invokes” (p. 4). Undoubtedly, one of the principal reasons for Toni Morrison’s interest in *Othello* was the writer’s African American identity, which constitutes the core of her oeuvre. Toni Morrison’s body of work meticulously explores complex themes such as identity, race, gender, history, memory and trauma within the framework of the African American experience. The recipient of the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in fiction and the Nobel Prize in 1993 with her novel *Beloved*, Morrison delves into the haunting legacy of slavery functioning as the core theme in her writings. Wajiran and Apriyani (2024) point out that Morrison’s novels provide deep insight into the “complex intersections of race, gender, and

³Ayanna Thompson (2016) highlights the increasing tendency of women writers to reimagine *Othello*. She therefore suggests revisiting the relationship between different temporal contexts, rather than analysing the play solely from the perspective of the present in relation to the early modern past, as Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* does. Thompson asks, what “if Morrison had created intertextual dialogues with not only Shakespeare, but also Vogels, Sears, Jennings, and Chakrabarti?” (p. 505) envisioning that such a present intertextuality would enable us “more radical futures of our readings of Othello, our treatments of appropriations and re-vision, and perhaps even our own futurities regardless of Shakespeare” (p. 505).

identity, especially in the context of African-American history and culture" (p. 1). By restoring voices to the marginalized characters confronting the legacies of oppression in her novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987), Morrison ostensibly illustrates "how the interlocking forces of racism and sexism shape their identities and social roles" (p. 1). In this context of intersectionality⁴, her playtext *Desdemona* is no exception since the strong presence of Barbary as an African American woman is a significant addition to the contemporary reimagining. In Shakespeare's *Othello*, Barbary is a ghostly presence singing 'The Willow Song', which helps to lay bare the sorrow of Desdemona. In other words, she is a footnote to Desdemona's victimization. Yet in Morrison's version, the role of Barbary is expanded to highlight the intersectional framework; that is, she represents the experience of Black women as 'the other', undergoing both racial and patriarchal oppression. Ania Loomba (1989) highlights the interconnectedness of the formation of 'the other' for women and black people, remarking "each hierarchal structure of domination is analogous and linked with the other" (pp. 1-2). The analogy Loomba discusses has long been ignored by mainstream feminism, which has failed to address the struggles of Black women while centring its arguments on the oppression of white women. In this regard, when the critique of intersectionality is considered alongside Morrison's *Desdemona*, the play offers insight into the postcolonial feminist dimension by weaving together the 'unheard' histories of women of colour particularly. In Sellar's words, *Desdemona* "evokes and honors the missing histories of generations whose courage, struggles, achievements, loves, tragedies, fulfilments and disappointments have gone unrecorded, but are still very much with us" (2012, p. 7). Moreover, these unheard stories function as counter narratives and are of crucial importance for Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory⁵ avows that "the view from the bottom may offer insights into why individuals accept their subordinate status in society despite the illogic and inconsistency of the dominant ideology" and thus, it might "provide the basis and catalyst for transformative social change" (Crenshaw, 1995, p. 90). To achieve such transformation, counter narratives play a pivotal role, as Kimberlé Crenshaw (2011) openly states, "tell[ing] stories and counter narratives ... hold the possibilities of broadening rather than constraining the terrain of social discourse" (p. 1346). Aja Y. Martinez (2014) also emphasizes the significant role of counter narratives in Critical Race Theory as she states that their function is to "expose, analyse, and challenge stock stories of racial privilege" (p. 38). Counter narratives, she extends, might "help to strengthen traditions of social, political, and cultural survival and resistance" (p. 38). To this end, choosing *Othello* to create a counter narrative like *Desdemona* is a transformative and political action because as Ania Loomba (1989) writes, "Renaissance patriarchy, like any other, is not a monolith but a shifting alignment of various power structures which are also in conflict with one another. Women, black people and other oppressed subjects are both constituted by and subversive of this authority" (p. 2). In this case, Shakespeare, whom the Western literary canon regards as an authority, provides an extremely suitable ground for challenging the authority and working on intersectionality and Critical Race Theory.

Additionally, although Toni Morrison disagrees that her writing bears the marks of the Western literary tradition, her engagement with Shakespeare is apparent in some of her works. As Chris Roark (2020) argues, in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Pecola Breedlove's characterization shows significant parallels with Ophelia, and Morrison uses *Hamlet* "as a foil in order to critique Western tragedy" (p. 1). According to Malin LaVon

⁴The term 'intersectionality' was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading scholar of Critical Race Theory, in 1989. She used the term "to denote the various ways in which race and gender interact to shape the multiple dimensions of black women's employment experiences (1995, p. 358). Crenshaw divides 'intersectionality' into three categories, the first of which is 'structural intersectionality' addressing domestic violence, rape and remedial reform of Black women. The second category is 'political intersectionality', which examines how anti-racist and feminist politics, in a paradoxical way, reinforced the marginalization of women of colour. The third category concerns the role of intersectionality in the scope of identity politics.

⁵In her Introduction to *Critical Race Theory* (1991), Kimberlé Crenshaw defines Critical Race Theory, which originated in the legal field, as "a movement of left scholars, most of them scholars of color, situated in law schools, whose work challenges the ways in which race and racial power are constructed and represented in American legal culture and, more generally in American society as a whole" (p. xiv).

Walther, *Tar Baby* (1981) is a revisionary writing of *The Tempest* (1611), through which Morrison juxtaposes the ignorant attitudes of Valerian and Prospero (as cited in Carney, 1994). Fukushima Noboru (2023), in “The Transformation in Representation of Shakespeare’s King Lear in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*”, speaks of the intertextual relations between the texts. Beyond her novels, Morrison’s essays, speeches and lectures have significantly left a mark on literary criticism and cultural studies.

Desdemona: The Question of Adaptation and/or Appropriation

It was May 2011 when *Desdemona* premiered at the Vienna⁶ Akzent Theatre, and the audience took their part to see both a concert and theatrical performance including the script of Toni Morrison, actors exchanging monologues and dialogues that have alternated with the songs of Malian singer Rokia Troeré and stage directions of director Peter Sellars (Carney, 2014, p. 1). The production history of *Desdemona* is worthy of mention since the project was mounted on an argument between Toni Morrison and Peter Sellars on *Othello*. More than two decades ago, a heated disagreement unfolded between them when Sellars argued that *Othello* was “a thin play ... poorly crafted, devoid of meaning and had surpassed its relevance” (2012, p. 2). Morrison vehemently disagreed, and consequently the dispute evolved into a creative challenge: Sellars would stage a high-tech adaptation of *Othello*, and Morrison would find a way to respond to Shakespeare critically in a relevant way. In 2009, Sellars realised his part with a four-hour production of *Othello*, choosing a setting full of TV monitors, and imagined much of the action taking place in bed. Sellar’s part met with mixed reviews in Europe and criticism in New York. (Sciliano, 2011). In 2011, it was Morrison’s turn to fulfil her end of the bargain with *Desdemona*. To echo Carney (1994), Morrison endowed *Desdemona* with more “textual depth” (p. 2) that she had long deserved, which previous productions had ignored, and Shakespeare “had not allowed *Desdemona* to tell her full story” (p. 2).

This creative argument between Sellars and Morrison may well be used as a reference point to explore the notions of ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’: Sellar’s faithful approach close to the original codes of *Othello* might function as an example to discuss what ‘an adaptation’ means, whereas Morrison’s reimagining *Othello* with a critical distance might be counted as a cogent example of ‘an appropriation’ since it holds transformative purposes. In their Introduction to *Shakespeare and Adaptation* (2022), Diana E. Henderson and Stephen O’Neill describe the adaptational process drawing on adaptation theorist Thomas Leitch’s botanical imagery that makes a parallel between biology and adaptation: Leitch views adaptation as “a plant in its capacity to replicate, to change and even to blur origin and offshoots” (p. 3). As a tree “develop[ing] a dense, weblike canopy of branches, roots and trunks, intermeshing and supporting each other” (p. 3), the term ‘adaptation’ then, might be reconsidered not as a governing discourse but as an inclusive and transformative environment in which diverse approaches situate themselves in harmony.

Nevertheless, making strict divisions between these concepts is still a contentious business since they intersect with each other.⁷ Lack of fixation in the theoretical realm eventually makes ‘adaptation’ an umbrella term to cover the scope of the array of terms. Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner (2012) suggest considering adaptation and appropriation as “siblings” “if not identical twins” (p. 5). They convey that an appropriation is “the part of the process of adaptation” and the degree to what extent an adaptation could be called as ‘an appropriation’ depends on “the metabolic quality of adaptation as creative and metamorphic process” (pp. 5–6). For Linda Hutcheon, ‘appropriation’ harbours ‘ambiguity’ and it ‘depends on your

⁶*Desdemona* was performed in various settings: Europe and New York, and in 2012, it was staged for the Cultural Olympiad in the World Shakespeare Festival.

⁷There exist a variety of terms and vocabulary at play when it comes to adaptation and appropriation studies, which Julie Sanders (2006) calls “linguistic riff”: “variation, version, interpretation, imitation, proximation, supplement, increment, improvisation, prequel, sequel, continuation, addition, paratext, hypertext, palimpsest, graft, rewriting, reworking, refashioning, re-vision, re-evaluation” (*Adaptation and Appropriation*, p. 3).

perspective” and it can operate as a creative adaptation, that is “(re)interpretation and “(re) creation” (2006, p. 8). Julie Sanders (2006) approaches the concepts according to their relation to the literary tradition and she highlights whether a text is an adaptation or an appropriation, both reworkings have dependence on the literary canon: “They prove complicit in activating and reactivating the canonical status of certain texts and writers”; she writes; however, appropriations, continues Sanders, proves out to be political and they “may be seeking to challenge that very status” (2006, p. 22). Building on Sander’s remark, Toni Morrison’s reworking of *Othello* is an example of an appropriation because it adds a political dimension to the source text through problematizing the very central status of Shakespeare in the literary canon. In an interview on *Desdemona*, Morrison says: “The plays are not these closed boxes that belong to the historians and critics. They’re wide open, not just to reinterpretation by actors and actresses, but to reconceptualization” (as cited in Winn, 2011). As Morrison uses the word ‘reconceptualization’ while rewriting Shakespeare and since the concept is a subjective word open to infinite interpretations, Morrison reactivates the very canonical status of *Othello* because it reconceptualizes the playtext through threading intertextual lines to write beyond Shakespeare. Toni Morrison’s appropriation of *Desdemona* is “a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original”; and it disturbs “contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized culture” (Sanders, 2001, pp. 1–2). *Desdemona*, in this sense, transforms *Othello* in a significant way by moving our gaze from the long-emphasised conflict of Othello-Iago to the domestic conflict of Desdemona - Othello to hear the unheard voices in the source text.

Here, it is important to point out that thinking of the concept of ‘transformation’ along with appropriation may help to illuminate the scope of this discussion as Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams (2010) define ‘transformation’ as a specific form of appropriation. In their opinion, a transformation is

a reworking of a text, such as telling a story from a different perspective and engaging themes and issues that were left out of the previous version, using a familiar plot but varying the setting, situation, and/or characters; updating the source text to reflect a new social, political, and cultural context; or radically transforming a source by using parallel plot events and similar characters without being constrained by the earlier plot. (p. 4)

Mounting on this definition, the new perspective of *Desdemona* engages us with the characters and stories that have not been heard of before. In Sellar’s words, Desdemona’s characterization in Shakespeare’s *Othello* is “the ideal creation—like Dante’s Beatrice, a vision of perfection, a woman offering love and forgiveness in the face of hatred, mistrust and murderous lies. In Shakespeare’s late tragedies, the ideal woman—Desdemona, Virgilia, Cordelia was mostly silent” (2012, p. 9). According to Alan Sinfield (1992), Desdemona is devoid of a character of her own; she is a footnote in the story of Othello, Iago, and Venice. Othello asks, “Was this fair paper, this most goodly book, / Made to write ‘whore’ upon?” (4.2, p. 109).⁸ The writing belongs to Othello, Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, the Duke, and Lodovico—they consider Desdemona as “a blank page for the versions of her that they want. She is written into a script that is organized through the perceptions and needs of male dominance in heterosexuality and patriarchal relations” (Sinfield, 1992, p. 54). However, in Morrison’s text, Desdemona claims her own existence, and she finally speaks. The play starts with her blunt line:

⁸The references to *Othello* are given with page numbers throughout the article since the edition used does not include line numbers.

My name is Desdemona. The word, Desdemona, means misery. It means ill-fated. It means doomed. ... Perhaps being born a girl gave [my parents] all they needed to know of what my life would be like. ... Men made rules, women followed them. ... [my parents] were wrong. They knew the system, but they did not know me. I am not the meaning of my name I did not choose. (p. 13)

The opening lines of the play hint from the very first moment that *Desdemona* is a ‘herstory’, a feminist appropriation of *Othello*, restoring voice to the silenced heroine.

“My Husband knew Iago was lying”: Feminist Discourse in *Desdemona*

The feminist appropriation manifests itself demonstrably with the population of female voices in *Desdemona* since this recognition “expand[s] and empower[s] female community” (Erickson, 2013, p. 5). Emilia, whose vocality is diminished despite her appearance in nearly every scene in *Othello*, emerges with depth and female agency. Morrison’s narrative suggests highlighting her relationship with Desdemona in ways that reveal the dynamics of power and class struggle. According to Ania Loomba (1989), Desdemona’s power in *Othello* “is the confidence of both race and class – of an upper-class Venetian beauty, secure in the attentions of men around her and in the advantages of her position” (p. 57). However, the Desdemona-Emilia encounter in Morrison’s play is marked by the sarcasm apparent in Emilia’s greeting Desdemona in the underworld: “Well, well. If it isn’t the martyr of Venice. Remember me? We died together” (Morrison, 2012, p. 42). However, Desdemona answers bitterly: “Emilia, you confound me. Didn’t you acquiesce to all of Iago’s demands, even the most viled, corrupt ones? ... Your deception, your dangerous, murderous silence led to my death and it led to yours” (2012, p. 42). Consequently, Desdemona knows that Emilia is the only person aware of the truth behind the lie of the handkerchief—capable of speaking up at any time during the play to prevent the injustice and violence that permeates *Othello*. When Desdemona reminds her that they were friends, the conversation shifts into a serious confession revealing Emilia’s true feelings about their relationship: “Unpin me Emilia.” “Arrange my bed sheets, Emilia.” “That is not how you treat a friend; that’s how you treat a servant. Someone beneath you, beneath your class which takes devotion for granted” (2012, p. 43). Thompson (2016) contends that this dialogue between Emilia and Desdemona exemplifies “class tensions to which Desdemona was oblivious while living” and functions as a catalyst for Desdemona to “move from judgment to understanding” (p. 500). Consequently, Emilia and Desdemona succeed in negotiating through constructive dialogue, which is a common feature of women’s revisionary appropriation. Negotiation occurs when Emilia confesses “Like you I believed marriage was my salvation” and recalls her childhood in pain, Desdemona apologizes and says: “Instead of judging, I shall be understanding” (p. 44). The mutual understanding at the end of the encounter thus ends up in reconciliation because of the honesty it harbours. Carney (1994) comments that “Morrison does not rush her characters to facile friendship; they ultimately achieve a measure of mutual understanding, but only after airing their grievances and sorrows. While these truthful encounters give voice to the women individually, they also strengthen female bonds” (p. 13). The scene ends with Emilia’s metaphoric example of a lizard: “One day I saw a tiny lizard dozing in sunlight. ... she shed her dull outer skin; struggled, then finally, crawled out of it, exposing that which had been underneath - her jeweled self. ... That lizard changed my life” (2012, p. 44). Erickson (2013) thinks that this concluding image of the lizard is provoking since it inspires “self-examination that Desdemona must undergo in order to arrive at a position where she is capable of remaking her sense of self” (p. 8). This self-awareness of individual power generated by female bonds also functions as a foil to the ‘brotherhood’ bond in *Othello*.

As noted previously, all characters are portrayed multi-dimensional and in depth in Morrison’s narrative, and *Othello* is no exception. In *Desdemona*, Shakespeare’s ‘Moor’ is restored with a backstory through which the audience/reader learn about his boyhood, and this period of *Othello*’s life was marked by the absence

of her mother and then he was raised by an African woman talented in music, reminding Barbary and their shared African origin in *Othello*. The motives of Othello's faith in Iago's accusations of Desdemona have long been discussed in the traditional criticism of the source text, and to Morrison, it stands as one of the gaps in *Othello*: "My husband knew Iago was lying, manipulating, sabotaging. So why did he act on obvious deceit? Brotherhood" (2012, p. 37) says Desdemona while narrating her encounter with Othello in the underworld. The issue of brotherhood is disclosed when Othello confesses the dark secret held between Iago and himself, the reason for their mutual dependence, their bond, i.e. a disturbing alleged attempt of a rape in a combat, well reveal that they have "an exchange of secrecy" (Morrison, 2012, p. 38). Such an exchange cloaked by violence is one of the possible reasons why Morrison eliminates Iago's presence in her rewriting so that the others could find a space to reclaim their 'own' narratives (Carney, 1994, p. 16). In *Desdemona*, Iago appears only as a name reference; thus, Morrison divorces the play from its racist formula and reverses the manipulative power Iago displays over other characters. In an interview with Jerry Blatton, the writer speaks of her being "dismissive" of Iago:

I refused to do the play unless Peter permitted me to get rid of Iago altogether out because he's everywhere, he's talking constantly, He's gobbling up the flame and no one can just live. ... It was so liberating in the writing to get rid of the character that was manipulating everybody to see what it would be like what would they say to one another if he wasn't there and of course particularly they were all dead and there was nothing, there was everything to learn because it is eternal and there was nothing to lose. (Hay Festival, 2014)

The dismissal of Iago from the dramatic action opens up the possibility of a reflective yet constructive dialogue between Desdemona and Othello regarding their marriage, starting from their first encounter in Venice. In *Desdemona*, the audience/readers find out that by telling stories of adventure as well as stories of blood and horror, Othello catches the affections of Desdemona instantly similar to the plot structure of Shakespeare's play; however, Morrison opts to elaborate on the cause of this instant chemistry since Othello complains Desdemona about being attracted to him because of his exotic image: "You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State" (Morrison, 2012, p. 50). Erickson (2013), however, finds Othello's pattern of critique as self-pity and an indicator of his lack of self-awareness (p. 12), and Morrison seems to critique his elusive response: "You're wrong!" exclaims Desdemona, "You believed a lie" (2012, p. 51). The encounter between Desdemona and Othello functions as a contrast to a romantic relationship; instead, it is 'an act of reconciliation, a mutual understanding that should have taken place at the very beginning of their marriage. "We should have had such honest talk, not fantasy, the evening we wed" (2012, p. 54), regrets Othello and asks for her forgiveness. Desdemona expresses her inability to forgive him for the violence he committed against her and other women. Despite this, she conveys that she can still love him by saying "Honest love does not cringe at the first roll of thunder; nor does it flinch when faced with the lightning flash of human sin" (Morrison, 2012, p. 39) and in the end, she is "sick of killing as a solution" (p. 54). Ultimately, as Rapetti (2020) states, *Desdemona* suggests an "act of deep, focused listening through which a space of reconciliation is created" (p. 252) as an alternative to dramatic action of violence in *Othello*.

Setting and Time in *Desdemona*

Additionally, to question the patriarchal code embedded in the play, Morrison changes the entire setting and time of the source text. *Othello* is set in Venice and Cyprus where 'the Moor' serves as a governor, whereas *Desdemona* takes its setting as the underworld where Desdemona accompanies with 'underwater women' where she stands "in between, between being killed and being un-dead" (p. 14). Morrison speaks of

transposing the setting to the underworld as a conscious choice. That is, she was decisive in violating the constraints of place and time because the underworld and underwater are "a good place to begin to talk. You have timelessness, and you can learn" (Hay Festival, 2014). Anon, 'water' and 'underworld' are usually taken as a feminised element frequently used in revisionary practises of women writers' appropriations. To illustrate, Margaret Atwood's *Penelopiad* (2005) retelling of *The Odyssey* commences with Naiad's advice to her daughter Penelope:

Water does not resist. Water flows...Water is not a solid wall...But water always goes where it wants to go, and nothing in the end can stand against it...Remember you are half water. If you can't go through an obstacle, go around it. Water does. (p. 43)

To this end, taking 'water' as the reference point in *Desdemona* resonates well with the aim of rewriting canonical classics. Likewise, water going around any obstacles to circulate and finding the way to flow, *Desdemona* flows in the literary world, it invites the readers to a journey to an undiscovered realm which belongs to women, and it does so not only by focusing on Desdemona but also by restoring voice to the other silenced characters in the source text.

Morrison's approach to 'time' in *Desdemona* also differs from that of Shakespeare. In the source text, we are introduced to a young Desdemona passively ready for a bond upon the request of his father who sees 'his' profit in the marriage. Yet contrary to the expectations of Brabantio, Desdemona falls in love with Othello. The tragedy spans only two days, it starts on Monday night around 2 a.m. when they elope and then after getting married, the play ends up with Othello murdering Desdemona on their marriage bed on Wednesday night. Considering the very short span in the source text, the victim of the barbarous act has no chance to speak and defend herself. Erickson (2013) contends that "the overall outcome of *Othello* is silencing Desdemona" (p. 3), which is apparent in Othello's chosen method to silence the vocal power of the heroine through prolonging the dramatic action of her murder. When Desdemona pleads, "Kill me tomorrow" (5.2. p. 127), Othello responds: "There is no pause / It's too late" (p. 127). "Not quite dead", he murmurs after Desdemona dies, and when Emilia enters the scene seeing her lady dead, she cries: "O Lady, speak again, Sweet Desdemona, oh sweet Mistress, speak" (p. 129). Of that scene, Erickson comments that the vocal voice passes to Emilia; however, as a silenced character, she too dies without gaining her female agency, meaning the finality of female speech in Shakespeare's text (2022, p. 3). Yet this finality is foiled by challenging the time constraint in *Othello*, since Desdemona and other silenced characters surpass the boundaries of time conveyed in Desdemona's famous line in Morrison's text: "'Late' has no meaning here. Here there is only the possibility of wisdom" (p. 55). In this context, Desdemona's wiped-out verbal authority in the source text, symbolically illustrated by her swift death, is contested by hearing her untold stories and repressed feelings surpassing time and space, and these stories are used to build a connection with other silenced characters.

"I will never die again.": The Postcolonial Dimension in *Desdemona*

In Act IV, Scene III in *Othello*, Desdemona remembers her mother's maid Barbary right after Othello visits her bedroom and accuses her of betrayal. Disturbed by the accusation, Desdemona tells Emilia that she cannot take a song out of her mind, one that Barbary used to sing when she was a little girl:

My mother had a maid called Barbary.
She was in love, and he she lov'd prov'd mad,
And did forsake her: she had a song of 'willow,'
An old thing t'was, but it express'd her fortune,
And she died singing it. (pp. 116–117)

The evocative imagery of the 'willow song' in these lines offers Toni Morrison the interpretive gaps and silences to reimagine *Othello*, enabling her to "critique the narrative, restructuring its orders and priorities by focusing on specific issues of female identity and its oscillations" (DuPlessis, 1985, p. x). To challenge the suppressed female identity and agency in *Othello*, Morrison intentionally makes use of mother figures in *Desdemona*. The mention of the word "mother" is particularly significant because the Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences were familiar with the absence of mothers in plays. In *Othello*, the line "My mother had a maid called Barbary" is only the second reference to Desdemona's mother, "a tangential one" Peter Erickson calls such a presence, in the entire play.⁹ (2013, p. 5). In Morrison's *Desdemona*, we 'hear' Desdemona's mother during her encounter with Othello's mother, Soun, in the underworld, introducing two mothers united in sorrow. M. Brabantio tells Soun, "I prayed to Mother Mary for help when your son slaughtered my daughter," to which Soun replies, "A waste. I spoke to my gods for guidance when, in remorse, my son responded with suicide" (Morrison, 2012, pp. 27–28). However, M. Brabantio in *Desdemona* adheres to the Elizabethan code of wifely obedience, embodying the ideal of female submissiveness for her daughter: "My mother was a lady of virtue whose practice and observation of manners were flawless," Desdemona maintains (p. 17). Ultimately, Desdemona finds comfort and safety in her relationship with her nurse, Barbary, as she narrates: "My solace in those early days lay with my nurse, Barbary. ... She was more alive than anyone I knew and more loving" (p. 18). By bringing Barbary to the forefront through monologues, dialogues, and songs, Morrison frees *Desdemona* from the constraints of the plot of the source text, allowing for a feminist and postcolonial reinterpretation.

Desdemona introduces Barbary with a long monologue by Desdemona. Barbary is depicted as the sole individual capable of nurturing Desdemona's yearning for freedom:

Barbary alone conspired with me to let my imagination run free. She told me stories of other lives, other countries. Places where gods speak in thundering silence and mimic human faces and forms. Where nature is not a crafted, pretty thing, but wild, sacred, and instructive. Unlike the staid, unbending women of my country, she moved with the fluid grace I saw only in swans and the fronds of willow trees. To hear Barbary sing was to wonder at the mediocrity of flutes and pipes. (p. 18)

It is worth highlighting that singing holds significant importance in *Desdemona*. This element not only disrupts traditional dramatic conventions by transforming the play into a hybrid form akin to musical theatre—aligning with the concept of appropriation that challenges authority in both form and content—but also serves as a key action to reimagine Barbary through her singing. Rochelle Smith (1994) argues that female singing embodies a seductive power as she says, "Desdemona's [willow] song does not simply function as a lyrical expression of her emotional state" (p. 313); but it provokes patriarchal anxiety when linked to seduction. Building on this perspective, Morrison and Traor 's reimagining of the canonical text, incorporating songs and lyrics, subtly evokes Barbary's African legacy on stage. This choice auspiciously

⁹The absence of maternal figures in Shakespeare's works raises questions about the missing female agent, a topic famously explored in Copp lia Kahn's 2011 article "The Absent Mother in King Lear"

dismantles the female anxiety and tension fostered by Western patriarchal and colonial ideologies. The thematic weight Morrison attributes to singing in *Desdemona* seamlessly brings African context into the play, particularly apparent in Barbary’s assertive reclaim of her own agency. When they eventually meet, Desdemona excitedly expresses her affection: “Barbary! Barbary, come closer. How I have missed you. ... We shared so much” (2012, p. 45). Yet Barbary sharply rejects this sentiment, replying: “We shared nothing. I mean you don’t even know my name. Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage” (p. 45). When Desdemona recalls their bond, calling Barbary her “best friend,” Barbary responds coldly: “I was your slave ... So, you don’t know me. Have never known me” (pp. 45–46). Thompson (2016) argues that Desdemona’s claim ‘we shared so much’ “sound[s] like many contemporary white liberals” (p. 501). It might be argued that Desdemona, as a white woman, suffers under the patriarchal rule, but initially she is unaware how race further compounds oppression for Barbary. Their dialogue openly reveals the power imbalance between them since Desdemona benefits from privilege due to her whiteness, while Barbary faces the dual burden of marginalization as a Black woman. That is why Desdemona’s memory is deconstructed as Barbary refuses to participate in Desdemona’s narrative. Prioritizing her own voice and identity, Barbary continues to claim her African name, ‘Sa’ran’ that symbolizes her rejection of being tied to her colonial past. In Rapetti’s (2020) view, Desdemona and Barbary’s relationship is “far from authentically intersubjective and mutual” but “hugely asymmetric” because Barbary, “not only did she lend herself to the embodiment of a Black otherness Desdemona could fantasize on, but she also tended to her material needs” (p. 250). Therefore, Rapetti (2020) comments that their relationship “was based on a social construct of racial difference that was ideologically crafted and discursively articulated to maintain White privilege by generating inequality, domination and exclusion” (p. 250). In this regard, analysing *Desdemona* through the lens of intersectionality allows us to challenge the patriarchal and racial codes interwoven in historical discourses.

Despite this tension, Desdemona and Sa’ran ultimately rediscover their connection through mutual understanding: “You blame?” (p. 48) asks Desdemona Sa’ran, and her reply can be considered the aim of rewriting *Othello*: “I clarify!” (p. 48) responds Sa’ran. Their interconnectedness in terms of female experience in the patriarchal order is apparent in Desdemona’s forthcoming lines: “Sa’ran. We are women. I had no control over my life than you had. My prison was unlike yours but it was prison still” (p. 48). Particularly in the shared memory of the willow song, they once decide to sing together, but Sa’ran now suggests a new song with lyrics including: “What bliss to know I will never die again” (p. 49), and Desdemona echoes her: “We will never die again” (p. 49). Valentini (2024) underlines that by echoing each other, both Sa’ran and Desdemona “acknowledge the injustice they have had to endure” because they have been “both locked up in prisons which constrained them to social norms they did not choose; both were killed by the men they loved” (p. 223). Morrison knows that she cannot “change the past, but to transcend it in the afterlife: they will no longer just be victimized women. Mutual revelation, and then acceptance, is a prerogative of the female characters” (Valentini, 2024, p. 223). According to Rapetti (2020), Desdemona and Sa’ran’s resolution in the end is a “newly found proximity” which is “not forced, but a forged one ... it is grounded on mutual acknowledgement of the other’s suffering and sorrow” (p. 251). Ultimately, their reconciliation signifies mutual recognition, as their bond is redefined through empathy, moving beyond victimhood.

The appearance of Barbary in *Desdemona* adds depth to the discussion of the postcolonial and feminist approaches the play embodies. The term “Barbary,” commonly used to refer to the northern coast of Africa and a subject of interest in England during Shakespeare’s time, first appears in *Othello* as an insult by Iago, conveying Othello’s supposed animalistic and othered nature: “you’ll have your daughter covered with a Barbary horse” (1.1, p. 26), says Iago to Brabantio. Peter Sellars (2012) points out that the word ‘Barbary’ “triggers surprising associations” in the source text because “Barbary meant Africa” (p. 8). In the seventeenth

century London, continues Sellars, the Barbary pirates, were hijacking British vessels, enslaving the white crews and these stories were circulating in mercantile London (2012, p. 8). These exotic and adventurous stories of another world were undoubtedly appealing for the playwright “who called his theater ‘The Globe’” (p. 7), and references to Africa in *Othello* reflect the Western colonial dream.

In *Desdemona*, Toni Morrison transforms Barbary’s lack of presence into a creative narrative and intertwines postcolonial and feminist perspectives. Dismantling the unjust systems of the past while exposing the imperialist and patriarchal ideologies underpinning the Empire, the writer embroiders the narrative with the upbringing of Desdemona with Barbary—a white child whose consciousness and emotional state are deeply influenced by African songs and lullabies—and highlights her genuine bond with Barbary. As is generally known, non-white, specifically African women who are given references but never actually appear on the Shakespearean stage have increasingly been of scholarly discussion in the field. Barbary exemplifies these absent women. Morrison disrupts this absence and the supposed idea of exclusivity of the elite Venetian social order and makes a broader critique, extending to the Western world, which often turns a blind eye to global conflicts and systemic oppressions. Thompson (2016) reminds us that there exists “the ultimate utility of re-visioning *Othello* for progressive dialogues about African women” (p. 496) to overlap the postcolonial question and the feminist one. Both postcolonialism and feminism aim to revise and challenge the unfair modes of the past and disclose the imperialist and patriarchal notions of the Empire. Morrison challenges the constructed boundaries of privilege and complicity, calling attention to the interconnectedness of cultural histories and injustices.

Morrison ends *Desdemona* with a critical but reconciliatory mode echoing her postcolonial and feminist standpoint and moves our focus to the possibility of transformation. The focus is on hope for solidarity, as the lyrics of her last song suggest:

If it’s a question
of working together
on the task,
I would be happy to take part
Whether we are from the same place or not.
Whether we are from the same culture or not.
Should we celebrate this moment?
It would fill me with joy. (p. 56)

The lyrics evoke the feelings of the promise of change and pave the way for a possibility of reconnection and understanding. From a broader perspective, this possibility of reconnection with the literary past occurs only when writers engage themselves in a dialogue with the past and see the past as a usable source to heal the scars of colonial and patriarchal oppression.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* is a transformative reimagining of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, blending feminist and postcolonial perspectives to challenge the patriarchal and imperialist frameworks permeating throughout the Renaissance text. By restoring the voices of the silenced characters, particularly Desdemona and Sa’ran, Morrison creates a space for dialogue, reflection, and reconciliation. This re-vision disrupts the Western mode of historical and patriarchal superiority that manifests itself through oppression and silencing of diverse voices, while simultaneously celebrating the resilience, interconnectedness and solidarity of

marginalized voices. *Desdemona* also offers a vision where intersectional identities take the centre stage. Through the lens of intersectionality, *Desdemona* highlights the layered oppressions that women face—not only as victims of patriarchy but also within racial and class structures.

Morrison’s collaboration with Rokia Traoré and Peter Sellars exemplifies the possibilities of creative appropriation as a democratic process. Thompson (2016) argues that their collaboration “renders authorship a contested ground” that openly “decenters Shakespeare’s primacy as the ‘original’ author, rendering revisions as necessarily global and cross-cultural dialogues” (p. 498). Both drawing on Thompson’s argument and Julie Sanders’s (2006) remarks about the characteristics of an appropriation as she suggests that “a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to reinterpret a source text” (p. 2), I conclude that the hybrid and collaborative nature of *Desdemona*, in the first place, pushes the narrative into new and creative realms. This blending of theatrical, musical, and cultural elements allows Morrison to create a play that not only critiques but redefines its source text. It also incorporates African songs and perspectives to dismantle Eurocentric frameworks and reclaim cultural space for African identities. In this way, engaging itself with feminist and postcolonial standpoints, *Desdemona* reflects its political commitment because *Desdemona* is a deeply political and transformative project. As noted in the article, Morrison maintains that Shakespeare’s plays are subject to reinterpretation and reconceptualization, and *Desdemona* now functions as an influential example of this idea by offering a space for voices historically excluded from the narrative tradition. The concluding emphasis of the play on mutual understanding and collaboration reinforces its reception in the adaptation studies as an appropriation since it favours transformation through casting a critical eye and fosters hope for a more inclusive future.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details

Neslihan Köroğlu (Lecturer, PhD)

¹ Izmir Katip Celebi University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Foreign Languages, Izmir, Türkiye

 0000-0002-1287-3381  neslihan.koroglu@ikc.edu.tr

References

- Atwood, M. (2005). *Penelopiad*. Conangate.
- Beyad, M., & Salami, A. (2016). Introduction: Relocating the East and the West in Shakespeare. In M. Beyad & A. Salami (Eds.), *Culture-blind Shakespeare: Multiculturalism and diversity* (pp. 1–8). Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Retrieved from ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Carney, J. E. (2014). Being born a girl: Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*. *Borrowers and Lenders*, 9(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.18274/PMOA1912>
- Crenshaw, K. W., Gotanda N., Peller G., & Thomas K. (1995). *Critical race theory: The key Writings that formed the movement*. New Press.
- Crenshaw, K. W. (2011). Twenty years of critical race theory: Looking back to move forward commentary: Critical race theory: A commemoration: Lead article. *Connecticut Law Review*, 43(5), 1253–1353. Retrieved from https://opencommons.uconn.edu/law_review/117
- DuPlessis, R. B. (1985). *Writing beyond the ending: Narrative strategies of twentieth-century women writers*. Indiana University Press.
- Elsom, J. (1989). *Is Shakespeare still our contemporary?* Routledge.
- Erickson, P. (1991). *Rewriting Shakespeare, rewriting ourselves*. California University Press.
- Erickson, P. (2013). ‘Late has no meaning here’: Imagining a second chance in Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona*. *Borrowers and Lenders*, 8(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.18274/MMYT1982>
- Frus, P., & Williams, C. (2010). Introduction: Making the case for transformation. In P. Frus & C. Williams (Eds.), *Beyond adaptation: Essays on radical transformations of original works* (pp. 1–18). McFarland & Company. Retrieved from ProQuest Ebook Central.



- Hay Festival. (2014, May 28). *Toni Morrison of her re-imagining of Othello* [Video]. Youtube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-k-O2yLYOo&t=5s>
- Henderson, D. E., & O’Neill, S. (2022). Introduction: Plugging into adaptation. In D. E. Henderson and S. O’Neill (Eds.), *The Arden research handbook of Shakespeare and adaptation* (pp. 1–22). The Arden Shakespeare.
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Jardine, L. (1996). *Reading Shakespeare historically*. Routledge.
- Loomba, A. (1989). *Cultural politics: Gender, race, Renaissance Drama*. Manchester University Press.
- Martinez, A. J. (2014). A plea for critical race theory counterstory: Stock story versus counter story dialogues concerning Alejandra’s “Fit” in the academy. *Composition Studies*, 42(2), 33–55. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43501855>
- Morrison, T. (2012). *Desdemona*. Oberon Books.
- Nicklas, P., & Lindner, O. (2012). Adaptation and cultural appropriation. In P. Nicklas & O. Lindner (Eds.), *Adaptation and cultural appropriation: Literature, film, and the arts* (pp. 1–13). DeGruyter. Retrieved from ProQuest Ebook Central.
- Noboru, F. (2023). The transformation in representation of Shakespeare’s King Lear in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*. *Cultures and Communication*, 43(1), 41–55. https://doi.org/10.57300/cac.43.1_41
- Novy, M. (1981). Demythologizing Shakespeare. *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 9(1), 17–27. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00497878.1981.9978552>
- Rapetti, V. (2020). ‘I was your slave’: Revisioning kinship in Toni Morrison and Rokia Traoré’s *Desdemona*. *Journal of Adaptation in Film and Performance*, 13(3), 237–257. https://doi.org/10.1386/jafp_00030_1
- Roark, C. (2020). My mother’s fussing soliloquies: Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and Shakespeare. *Borrowers and Lenders*, 7(2), 1–29. <https://doi.org/10.18274/KXJN1303>
- Sanders, J. (2001). *Novel Shakespeares: twentieth-century women novelists and appropriation*. Manchester University Press.
- Sanders, J. (2006). *Adaptation and appropriation*. Routledge.
- Siciliano, E. (2011, October 25). ‘Desdemona’ talks back to ‘Othello’. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/26/arts/music/toni-morrison-desdemona-and-peter-sellarss-othello.html>
- Sellers, P. (2012). Foreword. In T. Morrison, *Desdemona* (pp. 7–11). Oberon Books.
- Sinfeld, A. (1992). *Faultlines: Cultural materialism and the politics of dissident reading*. University of California Press.
- Smith, R. (1994). Admirable musicians: women’s songs in Othello and the maid’s tragedy. *Comparative Drama*, 28(3), 311–323. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41153706>
- Shakespeare, W. (1994/1604). *Othello*. Penguin Popular Classics. (Original work published 1622)
- Thompson, A. (2016). Desdemona: Toni Morrison’s response to Othello. In Dymphna Callaghan (Ed.), *A feminist companion to Shakespeare*. (2nd ed., pp. 494–506). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118501221.ch27>
- Valentini, M. (2024). I will not charm my tongue, I am bound to speak: Toni Morrison’s *Desdemona* as an expansion to the interpretation of *Othello*. *Memoria di Shakespeare: A Journal of Shakesperean Studies*, 11, 205–231. <https://doi.org/10.13133/2283-8759/1898>
- Wajiran, W., & Apriyani T. (2025). Race, gender, and identity in Toni Morrison’s novels: Relevance to contemporary Black women’s struggles in America. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 12(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2024.2442803>
- Winn, S. (2011, October 20). Toni Morrison adds twist to ‘Desdemona.’ *The Chronicle* Retrieved from <https://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/toni-morrison-adds-twist-to-desdemona-2326767.php>



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

Suffering and Grotesque Parody in Howard Barker's (*Uncle Vanya*)



Enes Kavak¹ 

¹ Gaziantep University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, English Language and Literature, Gaziantep, Türkiye

Abstract

Howard Barker is a playwright known for his unconventional approach to the theatre with his own dramatic concept, the Theatre of Catastrophe, which challenges the traditional boundaries of reality and aesthetics. Barker's plays delve into various subjects such as longing, mortality, sexuality, suffering and existential crises, aiming to provoke and shock the audience. His parodic adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* exemplifies this by transforming the sense of ennui and mental suffering into a manifestation of revolt and self-determination. In *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), Nietzsche posits that tragedy ascends from a profound understanding and approval of the conditions of one's own existence, viewing inherent pessimism and suffering in life not as a hindrance but as a vital constituent of human resilience and resolve. Barker advocates art to be challenging and provoking, thus forcing audiences to confront the inherent complexities and contradictions of life. Deliberately or not, Barker appears to align with Nietzsche in his deconstruction of *Vanya* by emphasising the place of suffering in tragic human life. Barker's adaptation (*Uncle Vanya*) (1991) upholds Nietzschean reasoning in transforming the characters' existential struggles into an exploration of human agency, questioning, and a quest for meaning. This article thus explores the representation of suffering and grotesque aspects in countering the characters' existential crises by looking at Barker's dramatic strategies in a parodic attack on the Chekhovian world.

Keywords

Howard Barker · (*Uncle Vanya*) · Suffering · Nietzsche · Chekhov



Citation: Kavak, E. (2025). Suffering and grotesque parody in Howard Barker's (*Uncle Vanya*). *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*–*Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 40-50. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1505931>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Kavak, E.

 Corresponding author: Enes Kavak eneskavak@gmail.com



Introduction

A prolific playwright, poet, painter, and intellectual, Howard Barker has written a comprehensive body of plays and postmodern adaptations along with theory books on theatre and dramaturgy. His early plays, such as *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), *The Castle* (1985), *Women Beware Women* (1986) and *Gertrude - the Cry* (2002), brought him fame with adverse criticism and publicity. After his plays were staged by The Royal Court Theatre, Royal Shakespeare House and The Adelaide in London, the playwright decided to start The Wrestling School, a private theatre company to permit him substantial artistic and individual autonomy, achieve his radical potential and “establish a unique voice” (Shaughnessy, 1989, pp. 269–270). This daring move allowed him to stage his vision of theatre and write provocative works without fear of institutional interference and other constraints. The company produced fourteen of his plays between 1993 and 2004 and continued stage productions in the succeeding years (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 42).

Barker's vision of theatre embraces the disruption of utilitarian and naturalistic drama, rebuking the narrow-minded world of morality and politics, and denigrating the mimetic tradition in dramatic art. He has developed a distinct theory of drama, which can be traced in his plays, which feature violent, sexual, cryptic, or poignant human subjects and their struggles with the meaning of existence, individuality and autonomy. For instance, in *Scenes from an Execution* (1984), Galactia, a female painter in Venice during the Battle of Lepanto, is commissioned to create a public mural praising the Venetian victory and venerating the violent triumph of the Crusaders by the Doge of the city. Galactia, on the other hand, chooses to produce an art piece that describes the violence and bloodshed of the war. Her imprisonment for treason and revolt against patriarchal politics marks how she embodies a feminist and individual stance, highlighting her integrity as an artist and her desire to claim her agency against the coercive ideology of her times. In this play, Barker demonstrates how he defends artistic autonomy, as well as a key concept of the Theatre of Catastrophe: the rejection of conventional representational forms, offering us a rereading of the history and a postmodern overhaul of traditional dramaturgy, in which reality and imagination are merged to create a timeless story of artist's moral dilemma generated by social norms and political impositions. Barker thus claims to build a form of artistic legitimacy in the dramatic realm, fashioning human contradictions and conflicts in a personally authentic and innovative stage. His plays delve deeply into the complexities of human desires, crises, and self-exploration in a tragic and, at times, hyperbolic world, aiming to astonish, shake, and push the audience to the extremes of emotions, isolation, self-doubt, and reevaluation of their beliefs. David Ian Rabey clarifies the theatrical implications of Barker's ingenuity along these lines: “This theatre becomes a space which is resistant to social pressures and necessities; and the suspension of these forces and promises entails anxiety, rather than more conventional forms of pleasure” (Introduction, Gritzner & Rabey, 2016, p. 13). It thus opens a space for reflection and uninhibited artistic imagination beyond the ennui, drabness of life and the partiality of moralising dictates.

Barker revolts against clarity alongside moral correctness and other pledges of conventional tragedy. His theatre promotes a calculated degree of ambiguity and inaccessibility, which indicates that autonomy and subjectivity are forms of self-assertion and liberty from ideological art. In “On Naturalism and its Pretensions,” he defends that art must be inaccessible, espousing a stance against public expectations, market demands, and critical denunciations. (Barker, 2007, p. 291). He insists that “Naturalism is infinitely accessible. Accessibility is one of those terms beloved of politicians, theatre critics, dramaturges, and educationalists, which perhaps fits best Nietzsche's dictum about the bad odour of moribund concepts ...” (Barker, 2007, p. 291). His pledge to construct ambiguity and inaccessibility upholds his artistic purpose of creating a parallel and often imaginative, dramatic world in which the aesthetic concerns and conceptions matter more than the legitimacy and verifiability of his stories and characters. In *Arguments for a Theatre*, he claims that there

is an agreement in the humanist theatre that the audience should leave the performance feeling uplifted and strengthened. According to him, such a theatre dictates that art must be understood, unity must be celebrated, and the production must be accessible (Barker, 2016, p. 72). As a response, in the Theatre of Catastrophe, he insists that

the audience cannot grasp everything, nor can the author. We quarrel to love. The critic must suffer like everyone else. The play is important. The audience is divided and goes home disturbed or amazed. (Barker, 2016, p. 73)

Barker's theatre is not didactic in nature and does not strive to be understandable, entertaining or manipulative. This makes the Theatre of Catastrophe a challenge to the idea that art must be understood and consumed effortlessly. The Catastrophic Theatre presents enigmatic and provoking art that startles viewers with a barrage of attacks on reality and human emotions, often deemed too much to digest. He offers this with anti-mimetic authenticity, in which each viewer is free to construe his/her own perceptions and confront his/her sense of self. Barker argues, rejecting Aristotelian aesthetics, that "tragedy exists simply because the pain of others, and subsequently our own, is a necessity to witness— not to make sense of, not for a utility value, but as something for itself." (Barker, 2016, p. 113; Roberts, 2014, p. 262). The events unfolding in his plays create a sense of uncertain/unreliable reality and subjectivity since some have bearings with authenticity, while others stimulate illusion and creative imagination.

Barker's rejection of moral foundations for dramatic art prioritises suffering and desire. This phenomenon can be better understood in light of Friedrich Nietzsche's historical and fictional account of human suffering and tragedy. His seminal work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872)¹ probes the emergence of tragedy in ancient Greek society, its decline after the collapse of Greek ideals, and its philosophical reincarnations in the modern world. Nietzsche explains how Greeks fashioned suffering and tragedy in their times, which not only reflects the pessimistic worldview of Athenians but also, paradoxically, is a testimonial to the human condition and prospects in the modern age. Nietzsche describes Greek tragedy as an art in which pessimism transcends the boundaries of existence, which turns into a state, facilitating humans' recognition and appreciation of the human condition and turbulent nature (Agada, 2021, pp. 2–4). He acknowledges that life is beset with agony and suffering, but he does not see this as a hindrance to our will to endure and prevail. Thus, metaphysical suffering offers human resourcefulness and strength, most not in the form of "being" but mostly in "becoming." As Agada puts it, "Nietzsche radically subverts the traditional notion of an eternal immutable being that constitutes the ground of change and replaces it with the notion of becoming" (2021, p. 1). In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche embraces suffering and transformation as a part of human nature and fate, positing it as key aspects of adapting to the order of life (Nietzsche, as cited in Pippin, 2006). Humans may use suffering as a process of empowerment and self-actualisation and, thus, assume the idea of constant transformation or a process of becoming (Nietzsche, as cited in Pippin, 2006). This suggests that humans continually and inescapably oscillate between internal and external forces. In this state, pessimism rising from constant suffering is paradoxically excruciating but redemptive. Nietzsche states that the "chasm of oblivion separates the world of everyday reality from that of Dionysian reality. However, as soon as that everyday reality returns to consciousness ... an ascetic mood which negates the will ... In this sense, the Dionysian man is similar to Hamlet" (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 46). In other words, suffering and its psychological reverberations make humans more self-aware and passive amidst hollow existence and the disenchanting order of life. As Nietzsche sees it, human resilience is the capacity to navigate between

¹The following edition of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) will be used and referred to in the text henceforth. Nietzsche, F. (2000) *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Douglas Smith. Oxford University Press.

extremes of self-control. “The Apollonian impulse” offers clarity, self-control, and a means of surviving suffering, while “the Dionysian impulse” forces a confrontation with the abyss of life’s meaninglessness and chaos. Thus, human resilience encompasses two sides of understanding and experiencing the world congruently without succumbing to despair and oblivion (Nietzsche, 2000, pp. 46, 53, 56).

In his adaptation of Anton Chekhov’s celebrated *Uncle Vanya*, Barker depicts a modern world of existential suffering, self-questioning, and longing for autonomy, transforming Chekhov’s dramatic stalemate and psychological boredom into a discussion, which can be better reread through the Nietzschean account of tragedy and human suffering. Barker reforms this world through a postmodern overhaul of the tragic characters in (*Uncle*) *Vanya*. He constructs a series of mental and physical sufferings in the characters’ lives that force them to go through a course of ennui, pessimism, rebellion, and acknowledgement. Among all other characters, this transformation or new “becoming” appears necessary for Vanya to reclaim his self-worth and address his existential crisis pervading the original play. His change becomes a catalyst for the transformation of Chekhov’s entire dramatic world into a(n) (in)decipherable text, where individual autonomy and free will collide with Chekhov’s parodic participation in this tragic world as both a creator and character. In this light, this article aims to look into the ways in which Barker adapts Chekhov’s *Uncle Vanya* to the contemporary stage in his (*Uncle*) *Vanya*, revealing a crisis of existence and suffering in a grotesque parody of the stasis and denial inundating the Chekhovian Theatre.

Nietzsche’s Concept of Suffering and Greek Tragedy

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche posits that suffering is a reality of human existence, reverberating from ancient to modern times. Daniel Dienstag clarifies, “If the most immediate and direct purpose of human life is not suffering, then our existence is the most ill-adapted to its purpose in the world” (2001, p. 924). This perspective aligns with Arthur Schopenhauer’s claim that human life inherently carries deficiencies and unmet longings, whose brief fulfilment leads to a cycle of dissatisfaction and self-degradation, ultimately causing an inclination to withdraw from life. Nietzsche also notes that for Schopenhauer, “the knowledge that the world, that life can offer no real satisfaction and as a result do not merit our devotion: this is the essence of the tragic spirit - it leads accordingly to resignation” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 10). For Schopenhauer, the will is unappeasable and recurrently pushes individuals toward goals and desires, dwindling the chance of contentment, ensuing more desires and, ultimately, more suffering. Unlike Schopenhauer’s resignation from life, Nietzsche sees that humans can defy inherent suffering by embracing life’s chaotic and disenchanting nature. (Dienstag, 2001). Nietzsche assumes that “the weaker (human) is persuaded by its own will to serve the stronger because it wants to be master over what is still weaker: this is the only pleasure it is incapable of renouncing existence” (Nietzsche, as cited in Pippin, 2006, p. 89). In this, he sets out to classify humans into two archetypes: the strong ones hold and acknowledge life wholly, and the weak ones insist on affirming conventional values and norms, highlighting their degeneration, which involves mental strives and physical torments demanding an optimistic outlook on life. He also notes that “enchantment is the precondition of all dramatic art. Under the influence of its spell, the Dionysian enthusiast sees himself as a satyr, and as a satyr, he, in turn, beholds the god, that is, transformed in this way he sees a new vision outside himself” (Nietzsche, 2000, p. 50). For him, tragic art enables individuals to engage with suffering in a constructive and life-affirming way. His view of tragic humans envisions a deeper grasp of their state and role in life by recognising the human capacity to adjust, amend and take on life as an indomitable but creatively metaphorical stage.

The Birth of Tragedy seeks to elucidate the rise of Greek tragedy and its decline, particularly its traditional form after Euripides. Nietzsche famously suggests that the introduction of a rationalistic philosophy by Socrates and its further development by Plato eroded the cultural foundations necessary for Greek tragedy

(Nietzsche, 2000, p. 77). Nietzsche associates pessimism with the pre-Socratic philosophers, positing that their ideas encapsulated the fundamental nature of early Greek culture. For him, “tragedy is the outlet of mystic-pessimistic knowledge” (Deinstag, 2001, p. 926). This philosophical pessimism served as the foundation for the works of Aeschylus and Sophocles, embodying the wisdom that the pre-Socratics possessed. However, this wisdom was eventually denied and forgotten by later generations. Socrates’ optimistic philosophy is identified as the pivotal agent responsible for this significant cultural and intellectual shift.

Nietzsche’s account of Dionysus and Apollo also shows how humans reflected suffering and the subsequent pessimism in artistic engagements in Athens. He associates the aestheticisation of suffering in tragedy with the ideals and conditions of ancient Greek society. Dionysus and Apollo represent contrasting aspects of life in Greek mythology. Dionysus, the God of wine and revelry, symbolises chaos, irrationality, and primal instincts, whereas Apollo, the God of the sun and reason, represents order, clarity, and rationality. Ancient humans overcame various ordeals and hardships through recognition and confrontation, much like the ancient Greeks did. The creation of Apollo signifies that while humans cannot avoid suffering, they can transmute hostile experiences to gain insight into life’s inherent meaninglessness and discover their power to endure and proceed (Nietzsche, 2000, pp. 31, 157).

Nietzsche explores this duality in *The Birth of Tragedy*, suggesting that Greek tragedy emerged from the interplay between Dionysian passion and Apollonian wisdom, reflecting the complex nature of human experience.

[T]he demise of Greek tragedy was the result of a remarkable tearing as under of those two original artistic drives: a process accompanied by degeneration and transformation of the character of the Greek people, something which requires that we think seriously about how necessarily and inextricably entwined the fundamental connections are between art and people, myth and morality, tragedy and state. This demise of tragedy was, at the same time, the demise of myth. Until then the Greeks felt spontaneously compelled to relate all their experiences to their myths, and indeed, to understand their experiences only in terms of this relation [...]. But the state immersed itself as much as art in this current of timelessness, in order to find respite from the burden and craving of the moment. (2000, p. 124)

He acknowledges the central place of suffering by defining art as a genre that promotes duality, conflict, and resolution by describing various forces and ravages of time. His work consequentially connects ancient life with the modern world, contending that suffering is intrinsic to human existence and asserting that the moral walls shaped by Christianity are imminent to collapse. Thus, Nietzsche’s preference for “becoming” over “being” is clearly a progressive effort to understand and sustain humans’ desire to know, reflect upon life and normalise the concept of death. Dionysian pessimism embraces life’s inherent chaos and irrationality. Rooted in worshipping Dionysus, it inherits and actively endorses life’s darker and tumultuous aspects. “The elemental force, the will to power, that puts being in a constant state of becoming need not be conceived as having a specific end, since the process set in constant motion involves destruction; it is arbitrary and chaotic.” (Nietzsche, 1968, p. 278; as cited in Agada, 2021, p. 2). Nietzsche links this idea to tragic knowledge, where one recognises and accepts human reason’s liability to suffering and limitations, finding profound meaning in this acceptance and his artistic creativity (2000, p. 124). Greek tragedy inherently proves the inevitability of suffering and pessimism while revealing a more profound existential significance beyond its physical representations.

Howard Barker's Portrayals of Tragic Suffering and Grotesque Parody in *(Uncle) Vanya*

Barker's adaptation play *(Uncle) Vanya*² was written in 1991 and premiered in 1996 by The Wrestling School. Although Barker places Chekhov's eponymous character, Vanya, at the centre of his adaptation, he puts the character's reduced identity as uncle in parentheses in the title by disengaging with the underlying meaning and characterisation of Chekhov's work. For Barker, Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* not only replicates but also endorses social reality as an element of social discipline. Vanya, as a character in Chekhov's play, has a life hopelessly wasted. He has thrown away his life to serve Professor Serebryakov, the spouse of his late sister, and has led a drab existence, working during the day at the farm and reading at night to help the Professor. He now understands that the man he has looked up to is unworthy of his assistance, but it is too late. Barker claims that the play is a dance macabre in "Notes on the Necessity for a Version of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*" because he believes that Vanya should act freely, shoot at his target, and most possibly, die (as a choice) (Barker, 2011, p. 9). He announces, "I remade Vanya because I loved his anger, which Chekhov allows to dissipate in toxic resentment. In doing this, I denied the misery of the Chekhovian world, where love falters in self-loathing, and desire is petulance" (Barker, 2011, p. 9).

Barker defends the act of rewriting or dissecting another work of art in "Murder and Conversations: The Classic Text and a Contemporary Writer," where he raises ethical concerns about entering another writer's territory and claims that "invention requires at times to be stimulated by obstinacy, irrational will or a heroic repudiation of our fear and piety" (Barker, 2016, p. 179). Prior to *(Uncle) Vanya*, Barker appropriated and adapted several famous dramatic works, including *The Bite of the Night* (1986), which tells the story of Helen of Troy, *Women Beware Women* (1986), which is an adaptation of Thomas Middleton's play of the same name, and *Seven Lears* (1989), which is a reworking of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. These adaptations manifest moral ambiguity and propose other realities by reworking and subverting the classics. In his opinion, "smearing a public property" or confronting an authority figure like Shakespeare or Chekhov shocks the audience. (Barker, 2016). However, it also constitutes "an act of reverence" more profound than an absolute believer's knee homage because it requires "the investment of will" (Barker, 2016, p. 167). In this way, by reworking the mythical and celebrated works as a challenge, Barker demythologises and destabilises their grandeur, putting them in the valley of cultural and artistic imagination, subjective reconsideration and questioning. His desire to rework *Uncle Vanya* stems from its being the most "Chekhovian", most misguided and widely acclaimed play by Chekhov (Barker, 2016, p. 187).

Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya* portrays free will as an alternative to Chekhov's conundrum, in which a world of disenchanted characters is in constant stasis and self-pity. Adapting Chekhov's Russian setting to contemporary times shows that modern life is permeated by the same sense of suffering, which is fraught with adversities, disillusionment and futility, prompting individuals to seek avenues that mitigate pain and distress. Some of these characters find relief in questioning and complaining. Astrov, a doctor of medicine, delivers his rationale on the human responsibility for his tragedy, reminiscent of Nietzsche's point that humans struggle with the unassailable forces of life, enduring and eliminating their own sufferings. He says, "Man is endowed with reason and creative power so that he can enhance what he has been endowed with, but up till now he has been destroying but not creating [...]" (Barker, 2011, p. 13). Astrov believes that humanity's failed ambitions and activities damage the modern world. Extrapolating this portrayal to real-world context emphasises the repercussions of human negligence and indifference, exacerbating perpetual and collective suffering. Drawing parallels between Barker's revision of an isolated group of Russian bourgeoisie at the turn of the twentieth century and the contemporariness of the motif of the man-made

²The following edition of Howard Barker's *(Uncle) Vanya* will be used and cited in the text henceforth. Barker, H. (2011). *(Uncle) Vanya*, in *Howard Barker Plays Six*. Oberon Books.



catastrophe suggest the universality and timelessness of self-inflicted tragedies in human history. In Astrov's protest, nature is conceptualised both physically and emblematically. It is the culmination of human actions and struggles between themselves and the external world. He accuses the human race of being the cause of their own catastrophe and the perpetrators of a self-inflicted tragedy. Astrov has lengthy tirades and monologues on the worth of nature and human failure to safeguard it. This reaches a level in which the culture/nature dichotomy reflects a failure of balance on the side of humanity and humans' reluctance to rebuild this equilibrium. It is evident from Astrov's tragic but static character that Barker does not intend to exaggerate the universal and moral role of his character but reminds the audience that human damage is self-inflicted and self-excruciating. The only way out of this state of existence is to regain consciousness and the will to change and act.

Another character, Sonya, positions the modern human amidst a chaotic cultural and commercial scheme because he cannot prosper in a larger system of cultural victimisation, financial domination and market demands. She declares, "Our paralysis is nothing more than the reflection of our economic crisis, the decline of rents, and the aggressive style of capitalism in a backward economy" (Barker, 2011, p. 28). Sonya also describes Chekhov's realm as a world of melancholy and paralysis. Sonya's father, Serebriyakov, who is widowed after her mother's death, pursues a young and attractive wife, leaving her behind in the country with her uncle, Vanya. Her only hope is that Astrov may respond to her love for him. However, Astrov also adores Helena, her father's mistress. In Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, her monologue, illustrative of melancholy and personal misery, exemplifies the Chekhovian preference for stagnant realism and an atmosphere of self-inhibition and impotence.

What can we do? We must live out our lives. [A pause] Yes, we shall live, Uncle Vanya. We shall live all through the endless procession of days ahead of us and the long evenings. We shall bear patiently the burdens that fate imposes on us. We shall work without rest for others, both now and when we are old. And when our final hour comes, we shall meet it humbly, and there beyond the grave, we shall say that we have known suffering and tears, that our life was bitter. (Chekhov, *Uncle Vanya*, 1922, p. 83)

Reading Sonya's monologue, it is helpful to remember that her suffering never quite reaches tragic proportions because she does not have Vanya's self-realisation and longing for free will and agency in Barker's adaptation. She prefers to relieve her suffering through a commitment to the greater good of others and appreciates their restlessness and suffering as a side-effect of being a conscious being. On the other hand, Barker sees that fulfilment and self-realisation are driven by free will and human agency rather than moral integrity or selflessness. In Chekhov's play, for instance, Vanya's musings on how his will to live independently and happily is undermined by his guilty surrender to mental suffering, which weakens his agency and determination. Vanya's abrupt and comic assertion of individuality and autonomy in Barker's adaptation exemplifies Barker's contemporary reaction to Chekhov's misrepresentation and misconception of suffering and human agency.

This grotesque deconstruction of a world of multiple portrayals of suffering saturates Barker's adaptation. To clarify, the grotesque produces different artistic styles oscillating between various forms of repugnant or distorted dialogues and comical or even farcical characterisation. Grotesque is, therefore, intertwined in the opposing and often concentrated polarisations of the real and unreal, credible and fantastic, normative and distorted or severe and caricatured. Ondrej Pilny states, "The grotesque is primarily defined by the blending of radically incongruous elements, together with the simultaneous repulsion and fascination it triggers" (2016, p. 3). The grotesque parody featured in this play offers a creative space for

Barker to provide his characters with a non-normative and aesthetic setting where they can speak and mock themselves and others freely by embracing ironic detachment from reality.

As a creative concept, death is also a central element of the grotesque representation of suffering. Although the play can be deemed a tragicomedy, it features the imminence and pervasiveness of death as a grotesque element, showing the incongruity between the deeds and beliefs of the characters. The grotesqueness of Vanya as a restless character makes him an agent of “becoming” in Barker’s meta-dramatic world, where Chekhov is a character resisting the change and defiance in his art. Death is frowned upon in Chekhov’s world as a disturbing consciousness and confusing state of mind. According to Barker, since death is intimate and enigmatic, nobody is sure of how to behave in the face of death. He forces readers and audiences to confront the reality of mortality by implying that death is imminent right there on stage (Barker, *Death, The One, and the Art of Theatre*, 2004, pp. 3, 7, 28). In Barker’s adaptation, Vanya’s bullet strikes Serebryakov in the first act, altering the play’s initial comical/absurd course and giving it an ironic but tragic atmosphere. This pivotal moment allows the character to break free from his captivity in the void and indecisiveness. Along with Serebryakov, Astrov is also killed by Sonya by the end of the act and returns to the stage as part of the chorus, just as Serebryakov does after being killed by Vanya. As a result, the order established by Chekhov is overturned and deconstructed in an imaginative world, which allows the suffering caused by the gravity of death to turn into a celebration of dramatic creativity and the aestheticisation of tragedy for the playwright.

In the second act, Chekhov comes from the sea. As they stand, the characters are arranged in a row, hanging their heads down like apologetic individuals (Barker, 2011, p. 62). The symbolic moment here is that the God of this universe dies, and his last words invite a philosophical challenge that the truth itself is lost, as Nietzsche asserts. Instead, Vanya’s revolt fails to liberate him from his existential torpor in the original play and transforms into a state in which he relishes this newfound freedom and the will to take action in a universe where the authority vanishes, and the dramatic crisis is solved as a means of salvation for Vanya, transcending the physical borders of the tragic world. This is a vestige of “eternal recurrence” in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which showcases that instants and experiences of existence repeat themselves perpetually, and the individual overcomes himself by appreciating and overcoming the eternal recurrence of life unfolding around them. Resilience comprises suffering and awareness of it as an attached element of our existence (Nietzsche, 1968; Pippin, 2006, p. 178). By the play’s conclusion, the surviving characters appreciate the course of their liberation; dead characters are freed from the limbo of anguish and non-existence, and the living return to their chaotic lives, finding an existential purpose to carry on and endure a recurrent sense of listlessness. Barker’s dramatic world presents instances of escape and relief as temporary and transient, as does the people’s existential angst and apathy, which rematerialise and remind them of the overwhelming power of the surrounding world.

The gun plays a central role in Barker’s creation of climactic action and Vanya’s grotesque assertion of self. Barker problematises Vanya’s self-denial as Chekhov created him against becoming an independent being, and he is forced to live as a character with no control over his actions. Barker thus sets Vanya free, handing him a gun and consenting to his agency and mutiny in the adaptation

Vanya: [...] I have a gun. For so long now, I have had a gun. This gun I clean most nights. I clean it with oil in the light of the moon. This is undoubtedly the habit of an assassin. (Barker, 2011 p. 14).

Vanya: I HAVE A GUN (p. 18).

[...]

Astrov: Oh, shut up about your silly gun—

Vanya: WAS GIVEN ME BY CHEKHOV. (Pause.) And having given it to me, he was profoundly sorry...
(p. 19)

Consequently, Barker breaks the aesthetic and moral walls of the Chekhovian world, which not only releases Vanya but also revises the play's aesthetic mood of stasis and stark realism. In Barker's adaptation, Vanya's killing of Serebryakov is both the cause and outcome of a character's discontent and revolt, whereas in Chekhov's play, Vanya's attempt to kill Serebryakov results in a tragi-comic restoration of the status quo. Here, Barker denotes explicitly the theatrical concept of "Chekhov's gun", a dramatic principle coined by Anton Chekhov that describes every element in a play that should contribute to the whole. Vanya becomes intentionally and thankfully disobedient against Chekhov's warnings that the melodramatic interlude of the gun upsets the delicate nature of characterisation and the surrounding morals. Later in the second act, Chekhov admits to having misused the gun himself. He regrets this, admitting, "The gun was always an error. The gun was always false...[...] As Vanya knows" (Barker, 2011, p. 71).

For Barker, the use of the gun is intentional and artistically functional. He believes it is the very object of liberation. However, in the original play, Chekhov's gun does not contribute to Vanya's salvation but aggravates his suffering. As he states in the "Notes for Necessity", Barker rescues Vanya from his miserable mood and constant suffering (Barker, 2011, p. 9). Andy Cornforth states that Vanya "rarely, if ever, speaks alone on stage; much of what he does say is apparently not heard or ignored by other characters" (2018, p. 29). The climactic act releases him to take control of his life. In fact, in *(Uncle) Vanya*, the characters seem to perform "extreme versions of their involution" (Rabey, 2009, p. 62). Vanya is the character most aligned with Barker's idea of the mutiny of characters that can be linked to Nietzsche's argument on the human struggle with unexploited potential and unfulfilled life. He is in a conundrum due to the loss of meaning resulting from his dedication to Professor Serebryakov's academic aspirations and pursuits. He is alone in the grasp of his truth. His entrapment echoes Nietzsche's criticism of morality and the social edifices suppressing human potential. Vanya's frustration arises from his failure to assert his will and reduced state as a passive bystander in his own life. In Nietzschean terms, Vanya's failure to fully embrace revolt stems from his inability to transform his suffering into a creative force. He, however, fails to achieve a genuine reevaluation of values. His inability to assert his own will results in an existential deadlock, which channels into an active, rebellious spirit—one willing to revolt against external authority and societal norms, as embodied by Chekhov himself in Barker's adaptation.

Conclusion

In *(Uncle) Vanya*, Barker offers a grotesque and ironic presentation of Chekhov's lack of initiative and belief in the human power to endure and revolt in the original play, calling into question the very nature of Chekhovian drama. He challenges Vanya's fixity and constraints in the melancholy of an unlive life and self-murder. He does so by combining his idiosyncratic violent humour with "a fully articulated spectrum" (Rabey, 2009, p. 67). Barker's character personifies Nietzsche's emphasis on the need for revolt, though human ordeal and suffering appear not to be resolved in the play. Vanya is disenchanted with life and particularly feels restrained by his existence's ennui and unsatisfied potential. He sees himself as a victim of his creator, Chekhov. Nietzsche's idea of true freedom requires not rejecting external authority but a pledge to self-creation and self-overcoming, thus embracing the idea of becoming. Barker's play, in this respect, becomes

an affirmation of human agency. While he endows his characters with endurance and autonomy, Barker claims his metadramatic autonomy and artistic departure from the conventional theatre in his adaptation.

Nietzsche's concept of free will charges and destabilises traditional interpretations of human agency. It resists the role of authority and human inadequacies in the path of reaffirming human will to power. For Nietzsche, a free human feels a desire for power and control over himself. He overcomes and transcends the circumstances of his existence, so his revolt is an essential sign of freedom. For Nietzsche, Vanya's exasperation and later revolt can be deemed an existential crisis, originating from a failure to affirm and embrace his power to confront and control himself.

The tragic hero's journey involves confronting suffering directly. The hero must face the "abyss" of existence, recognising that suffering is not an anomaly to be avoided but a fundamental aspect of being (Nietzsche, 2000). For Nietzsche, the conception of tragedy situates art as a means for the human expression of self. Tragedy emulates the complexity of the human spirit and endorses the human capacity to endure. Barker's adaptation of *Uncle Vanya*, in this respect, does not present a faithful retelling of the original play, but instead, it reimagines its characters' struggles through an existential lens. The play explores themes of wasted potential, frustration, and the crushing weight of unfulfilled desires, which are all captured in the philosophical conflict between determinism and autonomy.

Barker transforms the stagnant suffering into an active tragedy where suffering and reconsolidation are enthusiastically met by the characters endowed with a recognition of their role in a larger scheme of conflict, which aligns with the fact that Nietzsche commends the tragic hero, who tackles suffering with self-awareness, affirming their agency and courage to change. Barker's play thus signifies the downfall of old dramatic traditions by actively seeking to establish a new order in the modern world. Vanya's course of "becoming" presents an ironic parody and deconstruction of Chekhov's assertion of the truth of the human condition and tragedy, showcasing the self-overcoming and existential revolt of the characters against the creator of this dramatic world.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details	Enes Kavak
	¹ Gaziantep University, Faculty of Arts and Sciences, English Language and Literature, Gaziantep, Türkiye
	 0000-0003-2501-2553  eneskavak@gmail.com

References

- Agada, A. (2021). Nietzsche and Ramose on being and becoming: an exercise in cross-cultural philosophising. *Journal of World Philosophies*, 6(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.2979/jourworlphil.6.1.01>
- Barker, H. (2016). *Arguments for a Theatre*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Barker, H. (2011). *(Uncle) Vanya*, in *Howard Barker: Plays Six*. Oberon Books.
- Barker, H. (2007). On Naturalism and its pretensions. *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 27(3), 289–293. https://doi.org/10.1386/stap.27.3.289_3
- Barker, H. (2004). *Death, the One and the Art of Theatre*. Routledge.
- Chekhov, A. (1922). *Uncle Vanya*, Brentanos. Digitised: 18 April 2008.
- Cornforth, A. (2018). Kissing Holes for the Bullets: Consciousness in Directing and Playing Barker's *Uncle Vanya*. In *Performance and Consciousness* (pp. 25–45). Routledge.



- Dienstag, J. F. (2001). Nietzsche's Dionysian pessimism. *American Political Science Review*, 95(5), 923–937. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3117722>.
- Gritzner, K., & Rabey, D. I. (Eds.). (2016). *Theatre of catastrophe: new essays on Howard Barker*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Nietzsche, F. (1968). *The Will to Power* (W. Kaufmann, Ed. & Trans.; R. J. Hollingdale, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Nietzsche, F. (2000). *The Birth of Tragedy* (D. Smith, Trans.). Oxford University Press.
- Pilný, O. (2016). *The Grotesque in Contemporary Anglophone Drama*. Springer.
- Pippin, R. (Ed.). (2006). *Nietzsche: Thus, Spoke Zarathustra*. Cambridge University Press.
- Rabey, David Ian. (2009). *Howard Barker: Ecstasy and Death*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Roberts, M. (2014). From Pain, Poetry: Howard Barker's "Blok/Eko" and the Poetics of Plethoric Theater. *Comparative Drama*, 48(3), 261–276. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2014.0022>.
- Shaughnessy, R. (1989). Howard Barker, The Wrestling School, and the cult of the author. *New Theatre Quarterly*, 5(19), 264–271. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X0000333X>.



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

Alienation in Kafka's the *Metamorphosis* (on Stage): From Steven Berkoff's Vision to Lemn Sissay's Interpretation



Hakan Gültekin¹  

¹ Artvin Çoruh University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Artvin, Türkiye

Abstract

This study examines the phenomenon of alienation in two different theatre adaptations of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. The adaptations examined in this study are *Metamorphosis*, written and directed by Steven Berkoff, which premiered at the London Round Theatre in 1969 and *Kafka's The Metamorphosis*, adapted by Lemn Sissay for the Theatre Royal Plymouth in 2023. The phenomenon that Marx claimed that capitalism distances people from themselves, their labour and their environment, and theorized as alienation, remains a persistent thematic core in the two theatre adaptations, as in the original text. These productions not only reaffirm the alienation experienced by the protagonist Gregor Samsa, but also extend this condition to other members of the Samsa family, reflecting broader dimensions of alienation shaped by the patriarchal form of the society. Considering that the Berkoff version of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, which was first published in 1915, was created in 1969 and the Sissay version was created in 2023, it is obvious that capitalism has undergone a great change in the intervening 108 years by expanding its geographical and economic sphere of influence. The main subject of the study is to examine the economic and social realities of their periods in the Berkoff adaptation of the late 60s, when the footsteps of neoliberalism were heard, and the Sissay adaptations, which are the product of the post-neoliberal period. Using the historical-comparative method, the study comparatively examines the alienation processes of the characters by placing the original text and the 1969 and 2023 adaptations in their historical contexts.

Keywords

The Metamorphosis • Alienation • Franz Kafka • Adaptation • Contemporary Drama



Citation: Gültekin, H. (2025). Alienation in Kafka's the *Metamorphosis* (on Stage): From Steven Berkoff's Vision to Lemn Sissay's Interpretation. *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*–*Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 51-62. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1607655>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Gültekin, H.

 Corresponding author: Hakan Gültekin hagultekin@artvin.edu.tr



Introduction

Texts have circulated in various contexts for many years. From this perspective, texts occupy a role in social life as non-dogmatic, active and dynamic entities. They constantly evolve, gaining new meaning through these changes. Within the historical framework, one text that significantly contributes and nourishes this concept is Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*. This seminal work from the last century has influenced countless stories, poems, films, novels, comics, and even television productions through its textual structure. The theatre productions examined in this study are adaptations of Kafka's iconic work created on different dates. The works include *Metamorphosis*, described by Steven Berkoff as "a kind of modern kabuki" (1995, p. 11), and Lemn Sissay's *Kafka's Metamorphosis*, produced in 2023.

These theatrical adaptations from different historical and economic periods, and like all literary works, are shaped by their historical contexts. However, they remain closely connected to the original text, incorporating the events experienced by the Samsa family and the psychological, economic and social crises that the family fell into. One prominent theme is alienation, particularly the alienation of the novel's protagonist, Gregor Samsa. Gregor's willingness to go to work even as an insect, if permitted by his superior, exemplifies his existential alienation and his inability to embrace his true self. His transformation into an insect is the destruction of his true self, highlighting the loss of individuality in an automated emotionless and hopeless lifestyle. The current study examines in depth the concept of alienation, the key theme of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*.

The study focuses on two primary inferences. First, it suggests that Gregor is not the sole character subjected to alienation. Second, the study reveals that the state of isolation experienced by alienated characters, especially Gregor, manifests differently across various economic realities in different play adaptations. While alienation is undoubtedly one of the main themes of the novel; it is observed at different levels of alienation in various economic contexts. This study considers David Harvey's reinterpretation of Marx's theory of alienation within the framework of the contemporary neoliberal order as its theoretical basis. The analysis also stresses the fact that alienation operates at the intersection of class dynamics, familial structures and gender-based hierarchies.

In her book, *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon asserts that "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (2006, p. 7). She states that adaptations often repeat the same plot points, characters, and perhaps themes from the original work, but they process without necessarily replicating it exactly. Instead, adaptations create a new literary work or piece of art that possesses its own unique character, making it fresh, new, and interesting. Accordingly, "adaptation is a subset of intertextuality – all adaptations are obviously intertexts, but it is much less obvious that all intertexts are adaptations" (Leitch, 2012, p. 89). Julie Sanders defines adaptation as a "a highly specific process involving the transition from one genre to another: novels into film; drama into musical; the dramatization of prose narrative and prose fiction; or the inverse movement of making drama into prose narrative" (2015, p. 24).

Each adaptation of a text inherently becomes a new text in itself. However, it is also a continuation of a previously created text, building on its foundations and bringing its narrative or thematic elements into new contexts. Thus, "Adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7). The multifaceted nature of adaptation highlights the complex relationship between specificity and persistence; New interpretations and presentations breathe new life into existing works while preserving their ties with their origins. For example, a remake of a popular film reflects the spirit of the original story while being enriched with contemporary technologies and narrative techniques. These processes ensure both the preservation and renewal of the literary and artistic heritage, offering audiences and readers familiar yet fresh experiences.

Catherine Rees states that “the adaption is not an act of sly plagiarism; it is a deliberate and self-conscious attempt to engage with an original text and offer a new approach or direction” (2017, p. 3). Rees (2017) also suggests that adaptation increases artistic pleasure. To fully appreciate this pleasure, the audience must have a clear understanding of the origin of the new text. For instance, enjoying Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1967) would be unfeasible without recognizing its connection to *Hamlet* (2006), as the two works are intertwined through shared characters and plotlines. Actually, it might be nearly impossible to fully engage with the work unless one understands its source, yet the audience cannot fully enjoy the wise jokes, the sense of irony and fate that form the crux of Stoppard's comedy, and the inverted perspective of focusing on the hapless side characters rather than the main characters.

Social and historical contexts play a key role in text adaptations. Major literary works vary according to each period's historical climate and social events. In these adaptations, the themes and characters of the work are reshaped according to the historical context of that period. Likewise, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) tells the strange and fascinating adventures of a young girl, Alice, in a fantasy world that she enters by following a white rabbit. In this world, absurd events replace the rules of logic, and Alice interacts with the interesting characters she encounters on the other hand, *Alice in Wonderland* (2010), directed by Tim Burton, is a direct adaptation of the novel. As Kamilla Elliot (2010) reports, the movie scenes are surprisingly verbatim, but Burton has reflected Alice's adventures in different places and with different characters in the novel on the big screen in a “videogame structure” (p. 5). This adaptation reflects the sociological climate of the 2010s and addresses the real soul of the new millennium when video games were the major entertainment tool for people. This adaptation draws the audience directly into the utopian world of the novel while also addressing the contemporary concerns of modern audiences.

Julie Sanders states that “a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's, director's, or performer's decision to re-interpret a source text” (2006, p. 2). George Orwell's *1984* offers a critique of totalitarian regimes and the significance of individual freedoms through various film and theatre adaptations across different eras. The 2013 modern theatre adaptation by Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan revisits the novel's themes from a contemporary viewpoint. In her column in *The Guardian*, Kate Hennessy expresses surprise that *1984* reached number one on Amazon and questions why so many people are turning to such a bleak dystopian novel. She claims that “it's because after Trump's election the word ‘unprecedented’ was used a lot. Yet in 1984 there was a place where all this, and worse, had happened. Fictional, yes, but still a precedent, and a safe space to process the realities of a post-Trump world” (2017). Therefore, the novel has regained meaning in today's complex political and social climate.

The main argument of this study is that the narrative of the Samsa family reveals not only Gregor's transformation but also the alienation experienced in different ways by the other members of the family. This argument, as the basic guiding principle of the article, addresses the concept of alienation in a multi-dimensional framework. In this context, the study includes in its analysis the forms of alienation that Marx associated with the labor process, as well as gender-based alienation and the experience of the precariat emerging in today's capitalist societies. This observation aims to make visible not only Gregor's individual tragedy but also the broader structural and ideological framework affecting all members of the family.

Alienation and Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

1984 has been adapted to different genres of literature and visual arts in the light of historical and political contexts. Nonetheless, the core themes of the original text, the politics of fear and political oppression, remain constant. Similarly, although Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, first published in 1915, has undergone various adaptations, one of the novel's main themes, alienation, remains unchanged. *The Metamorphosis* deals with Gregor Samsa's physical transformation and the resulting deep alienation he

experiences. The universality and timelessness of Kafka's narrative is constantly emphasized by being reinterpreted in different branches of art.

Alienation has been a concept of discussion in philosophical and academic circles for decades. For example, "in theological discourse it referred to the distance between man and God; in social contract theories, to loss of the individual's original liberty; and in English political economy, to the transfer of property ownership" (Musto, 2021, p. 3). Karl Marx was the philosopher who placed the concept in an economic and political context by drawing from Hegel's works. As Sean Sayers (2011) states, Marx regarded labour as the fundamental and central activity in human life. While this perspective is implicit throughout his works, it is most thoroughly addressed in the 'estranged labour' concept in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1982). In Marxist terms, alienation's "origin and continuing basis in civilized society arises from the alienation of labor which characterizes all systems of private property from slavery to capitalism. Alienation expresses the fact that the creations of men's hands and minds turn against their creators and come to dominate their lives" (Mandel & Novack, 1973, p.7). This study adopts this definition of alienation as its framework, positing that the alienation experienced by the characters in the *Metamorphosis* adaptations, particularly Gregor Samsa, aligns with this conceptualization.

There have been several adaptations of *The Metamorphosis* for years. The 2012 film adaptation, directed by Chris Swanton, remains faithful to Kafka's work and details Gregor's psychological and physical transformation. In this film, Gregor's alienation is clearly seen in his relationships with his family and society. Brian Howard's 1983 opera adaptation "chillingly portrays the psychological disintegration and alienation of Gregor Samsa and the journey to callous disregard of his once-loving family" (2018). In a dance adaptation of Arthur Pita staged by the Royal Ballet in 2011, Gregor's transformation and alienation are explained through dance movements and body language. In Peter Kuper's graphic novel adaptation published in 2003, Gregor's transformation and alienation are emphasized with Kuper's characteristic visual style, and Gregor's physical change and his break with his environment are visualized. Saul Steinberg's 1969 illustration re-imagines Kafka's story in a single detailed drawing, while Gregor's transformation and alienation are expressed through the details and symbols in the drawing. These different artistic adaptations explore Gregor Samsa's theme of alienation in various formats and variations, revealing the universal and timeless nature of Kafka's work.

In David Farr and Gísli Örn Garðarsson's *Metamorphosis*, staged by Vesturport Theatre in 2006, Gregor's transformation and alienation are expressed through stage design and acrobatic movements. Additionally, "David Farr and Gisli Orn Gardarsson, as joint adaptor-directors, see it as domestic tragedy and political metaphor. Gregor becomes an image of marginalised people everywhere" (2006). Farr and Gardarsson transpose the theme of alienation in *Metamorphosis* to a political context, set against the backdrop of the lingering impact of the 9/11 attacks, the ongoing Iraq War, and the politically polarized world. Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* has inspired a wide range of artistic adaptations, each interpreting the work through distinct creative lenses. Across these interpretations, the characters, most notably Gregor Samsa, experience varying degrees of alienation from the self, their labour and the broader social environment.

Analysis of Alienation in Steven Berkoff's and Lemn Sissay's Adaptations

Steven Berkoff's *Metamorphosis* and Lemn Sissay's *Kafka's Metamorphosis* illustrate alienation in Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* on stage and serve as the primary focus of this study. In Steven Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*, the physical transformation and alienation of the protagonist, Gregor Samsa, are accentuated through expressive body language and facial expressions. Berkoff's distinctive physical theatre technique dramatically stages Gregor's estrangement from both society and his family.

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* begins with the following sentences: "As Gregor Samsa woke one morning from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed into some kind of monstrous vermin" (Kafka, 2009, p. 29). In Steven Berkoff's theatrical adaptation, Gregor's father, Mr. Samsa, appears in the first scene and speaks: "As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams..." (2017, p. 79). Afterwards, Gregor's mother, Mrs. Samsa continues the conversation: "He found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect..." (p. 79). "Kafka did not specify what kind of creature Gregor became" (Joyce, 2009, p. 10), but what is certain is that Gregor has distanced himself from being human. Despite the lack of a clear explanation by Kafka for Gregor's transformation into a gigantic insect, Gregor does not question his horrifying transformation or his new existence. Instead, his immediate concern about the complications that will arise if he cannot get out of bed and go to work serves as the first indication of Gregor's alienation. As Marx (1988) states, an alienated worker "does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind" (p. 73). When analysed from this perspective, both in the original text and in Berkoff's adaptation, Gregor has turned into a machine, even a quasi-human mechanism, which serves as a profound representation of alienation.

Unlike the original text and Berkoff's adaptation, Lemn Sissay's *Kafka's Metamorphosis* (2023) does not commence with Gregor's transformation. Furthermore, Sissay named the first act of the play "Pre-Metamorphosis" (2023, p. 3). Gregor's transformation is not depicted in the first scene of the play. Sissay opts to begin the play with her sister Grete's words instead of Gregor's. In the first scene, Grete moves through the room and "drapes herself in fabric and looks in the mirror" (Sissay, 2023, p. 3). Sissay gives the first signal from the very beginning of the play that he will create a character of Grete that is significantly different from the original text and Berkoff's adaptation. In the same scene, Grete says: "Hello, my, name, is, Grete Samsa... And I love life" (p.5). These dialogues are entirely absent from Kafka's original text. Berkoff's adaptation also largely omits details about Grete's inner psychological state or emotions. In Berkoff's *Metamorphosis*, during a scene in which Gregor articulates his exhaustion from hard work, Grete is depicted approvingly with the remark "he works so hard" (2017, p. 80) while she prepares milk, coffee, and breakfast for Gregor. Grete's existence in the play is designed to bolster and enhance Gregor's narrative.

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Grete is portrayed as a 17-year-old young girl who maintains amicable relations with her family and shares a particularly strong bond with her brother, Gregor. She is also characterized by her artistic development, notably as skilled violinist. Throughout Kafka's work, Grete also changes, but this transformation is mostly confined to her maturation from adolescence into "a handsome, fully figured girl" (2009, p. 74). Nina Pelikan Straus (1989) critically analyses the portrayal of Grete in Kafka's work in the context of gender studies and feminist criticism, contending that Grete is ensnared in a patriarchal cycle. According to her, Grete "whose mirror reflects women's present situation as we attempt to critique patriarchal dominance in order to create new lives that avoid the replication of invalidation" (p. 652). Conversely, the long monologues dedicated to Grete in Sissay's adaptation are particularly significant:

The problem I have (although I think more than I speak and I think it is not a problem, actually) is that I like to speak which makes me more boy than girl, boy girl. Grilboy. Groy. Dad wanted a boy. I am not supposed to know but I do. So I speak quietly giving an impression of one thing when I am actually quite another altogether. I am a girl and girls do things. I play violin. (Sissay, 2023, p. 14).

Grete's statements demonstrate a profound awareness of societal gender roles and the expectations imposed on women. While Grete states that she does not like to talk, she associates this situation with "male" characteristics and questions societal gender norms. Terms such as "Gril boy" and "Groy" express Grete's confusion regarding her gender identity and her fluidity between gender roles. These statements

illustrate how society tries to enforce specific stereotypes on women, leading to feelings of alienation when individuals fail to conform. The fact that her father wants a son intensifies the pressure and expectations placed upon Grete, diverting her from her authentic self. Grete's statements show that she is moving away from both her and her gender roles. Defining herself as "more boy than girl, boy girl" puts her at the intersection of gender identity and social expectations, and reveals that this situation alienates her from her true self. Her assertion "I'm a girl and girls do things" points out the alienation and internal conflict she feels as she tries to conform to gender roles. Doğan (2021) argues that such situations are effective in revealing the hierarchical and class dynamics and power relations surrounding the characters. Within this framework, the intertwined structure of Grete's identity and her state of alienation becomes visible.

Sissay's *Kafka's Metamorphosis* includes another detail about Grete that completely contradicts Kafka's original text. Grete declares: "I hate the scales. I hate the rosin. I hate the first position. I hate the third position. I hate these scales. The scales! I hate the violin. I hate the fidgety strings which harden my finger skin" (2023, p. 14). Grete's aversion to playing the violin demonstrates the immense strain and pressure she experiences in trying to conform to social expectations. The study of music, particularly violin playing, has often been associated with sophistication and elegance, qualities traditionally linked to feminine values. Grete's dissatisfaction with this issue and her hatred towards the violin, which she regards as an insect "sucking the blood from my (her) neck into its body" (Sissay, 2023, p. 15) everything related to it shows that she is stuck between her own identity and society's expectations and therefore feels alienated. Grete's hatred of the wires that harden the skin of her fingers is more than just a physical discomfort, it symbolizes her feeling that her personal freedom and life are being limited. For her, musical terms such as charts, rosin, positions and scales mean more than just a physical occupation, but a spiritual and emotional captivity. These elements symbolize the conflict between Grete's own wishes and personality and the imposed expectations, and the alienation created by this conflict.

Straus (1989) points out that "Traditionally, critics of 'The Metamorphosis' have underplayed the fact that the story is about not only Gregor's but also his family's and, especially, Grete's metamorphosis." (p. 652). This observation serves as the foundational premise for this article, which seeks to explore the broader implications of the narrative on the Samsa family. Besides Gregor and Grete, Mr. and Mrs. Samsa also experience alienation. The social conditions and political context that affect Grete and Gregor are equally applicable to them. As Marx and Engels (1988) declared in a capitalist society "the bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation" (p. 212). In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and adaptations by Berkoff and Sissay, the original novel and play adaptations are set within a political and economic framework that indicates a capitalist state structure. Mr. Samsa, while not afflicted with any significant health problems, is unable to work. Mrs. Samsa, who suffers from asthma, dedicates most of her time to chores without leaving home. Following his father's bankruptcy, Gregor has been working at the company he joined to pay off his family's debts for five years without even taking a sick leave. Consequently, the family is facing severe economic difficulties.

In Berkoff's adaptation, in scene two, the family comes together after Gregor turns into an insect. The family talks about the unemployment and cost of living they face following Gregor's transformation and his consequent loss of employment:

Mr. Samsa: It'll still be necessary to earn enough for our expenses

Mrs. Samsa: Of Course

Greta: Let me work! I'm longing to go out to work.

Mr. Samsa: Yes, you could always take washing as your mother did in the bad old days.

Mrs. Samsa: But it's only till Gregor gets better.

Mr. Samsa: We don't know that. (Berkoff, 2017, p. 103)

Gregor's transformation into an insect symbolizes not only a physical transformation but also a profound shift in the roles and relationships within the family. Although Mrs. Samsa still has hope, and the family members begin to worry about providing for themselves, as they consider him now economically useless. This indicates that Gregor is perceived not as part of the family, but merely as an economic resource. This indicates that Gregor is perceived not as a family member but as an economic resource, highlighting his alienation from the family's human values. The primary concern becomes economic difficulties and the need for employment, illustrating that the family's connections are defined by economic conditions. Grete's aspiration to find a job and Mr. Samsa's suggestion to take up laundry work, as his wife does during difficult times, exemplify how labour alienates family members. Viewing work as a burden and necessity suggests that individuals are distanced from their own identities and human values.

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Mr. Samsa's transformation follows a symbolic course. According to Harold Bloom (2007), Mr. Samsa was too exhausted to work at first and therefore lost his authority to Gregor. Mr. Samsa was "forced back to work by Gregor's inexplicable condition, Mr. Samsa becomes a bank messenger and is required to wear a uniform to work. After taking in some lodgers to help pay the bills, Mr. Samsa shows his renewed authority by kicking them out at the end" (p. 35). In Berkoff's adaptation, Mr. Samsa's character development follows a similar course to the original text. In the first family meeting after Gregor's metamorphosis, the family members talk:

Mr. Samsa: Gregor, yes, Gregor - although he worked hard, he never seemed to be a part of it - don't think he wanted to - stood outside it somehow - as if he was saying: "This is nothing to do with me" ... he didn't really like work, he downright his answered it.

Mrs. Samsa: How can you say that when he worked so hard?

Mr. Samsa: Oh, I know he worked hard - but did he ever see his face sometimes after he had come home it was hard with resentment - saying it is for you I'm doing this. (Berkoff, 2017, p. 104)

Mr. Samsa's alienation can be critically analysed through Gregor's transformation and his remarks about work in the dialogue. Mr. Samsa asserts that despite Gregor's diligent efforts, he is unwilling to integrate himself into the business, instead positioning himself as detached from his job. This detachment mirrors Mr. Samsa's sense of alienation from his family and society. Gregor's dissatisfaction with his professional life and his underlying resentment of working solely for his family echo Mr. Samsa's disappointment and alienation. When Mr. Samsa observes his son's expressions of dissatisfaction upon returning home, and he perceives that the job holds no intrinsic value for Gregor. This realization reflects Mr. Samsa's sense of purposelessness and profound estrangement from social roles. Mr. Samsa's alienation can also be easily observed in Sissay's play *Kafka's Metamorphosis*:

There'll be no begging. No bone woman stories anymore. No luxury of stories! The dinner parties preceded the boy and were in a time before dear Grete was born. Gregor has enjoyed the fruits of my labor and needs to share. And as long as he is under my roof he will do as I say. All of you will. This is the rule of this house. I hate the story of the beggar. I was forced to tell it. The boss who would only visit on payday because that's when our cupboards were full. The interest on the debt! 'Tell the story of the beggarwoman, Mr. Samsa - beggars can't be choosers, Mr. Samsa.' So they got what they were given. I told it so many times I believed it myself (2023, p. 38)

Mr. Samsa reflects his deep disconnection from his family and his own humanity and his disillusionment rooted in the restless pressures of a capitalist society. His disdain for 'the luxury of the stories' and his rejection of empathetic narratives highlight a shift towards utilitarian values where personal history and emotional connections are subjugated to economic survival and authoritative control. His enforced storytelling, driven by debt and economic dependency, symbolizes the erosion of individual autonomy and identity under the weight of financial obligations. The repeated telling of the beggar's story until it becomes a belief truth illustrates the internalization of alienation, where one's sense of self is moulded and diminished by the external social economic forces. This dynamic is reflective of broader social alienation, where human relationships and personal dignity are often compromised by the imperatives of economic survival and social hierarchy.

These words uttered by Mr. Samsa in the play poignantly illustrate the concept of alienation within the context of contemporary historical social and economic realities. Sissay's adaptation is situated in the contemporary context, reflecting the pervasive influence of the global neoliberal economic order. Berkoff's and Kafka's Mr. Samsa characters are also accustomed to living in capitalist societies, yet Sissay's Mr. Samsa lives in the core of neoliberalism, whose "operation of capitalism is not confined within any national borders but across the globe" (Wong, 2022, p. 97). Thus, it becomes evident that The Samsa Family, as reinterpreted by Sissay, exists within a more acute and detrimental phase of capitalist exploitation. The most distinctive example of this situation is seen in Gregor's business trips. In the original text and Berkoff's adaptation, Gregor's travels are limited to domestic train journeys. However, in Sissay's version, he travels to Istanbul, which he calls "a magnificent Trading city" (2023, p. 10), China and other European cities. This shift signifies that the company Gregor works for operations as a contemporary trans-national corporation. Unlike the historical and economic contexts of both Kafka's original text, written in 1915, and Berkoff's adaptation, first staged in 1969, the neoliberal era is characterized by a propensity to induce a more profound alienation among employees.

According to David Harvey (2014), alienation "refers to how affections, loyalties and trust can be alienated (transferred, stolen away) from one person, institution or political cause to another" (p. 267). Harvey argues that the concept of alienation has historically evolved to the detriment of workers with the development of capitalism. In the contemporary period, which he describes as the endpoint of capitalism, he characterizes alienation as a broader social relationship and states that all social relations are encompassed within the mechanism of alienation. According to Harvey (2014), This mechanism "can be exceedingly damaging to the social fabric" (p. 267). This is exactly what happens to the whole family in Sissay's *Kafka's Metamorphosis*. The transformation experienced by the family reflects a neoliberal mechanism of alienation that permeates its social and economic relations in their entirety.

In Sissay's work, Chief Clerk arrives at Gregor's door and calls out to him:

Right, I see that, rather than it be between you and I. Man to man. Maybe your parents need to hear the truth... What is that noise?! I was going to tell you in private but you do not even open the door. Not even to your own family. Your position in this company is *not* secure, Gregor. Maybe it's good for your parents to hear it. Your work has been below par.

Mrs. Samsa *gasps*.

You are not reaching the targets.

A gasp this time from Mr. Samsa (2023, p. 25)

Chief Clerk shows up at Gregor's door, threatening him with job loss due to his failure to meet sales targets. These threats highlight the insecurity of Gregor's position, a scenario not depicted in the two adaptations of *The Metamorphosis* included in this study, nor in the original text. This precarious working condition is entirely consistent with the neoliberal economic system, which is mostly governed by transnational corporations. In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor, "the boss's creature" (2009, p. 31) is portrayed as a proletariat who is closely subservient to his employer. However, in Sissay's adaptation, Gregor is depicted as an insecure member of the precariat, so entangled in the corporate bureaucracy that he is barely unaware of who his employer is. Giving background information about contemporary capitalism, Guy Standing (2018) defines the precariat as a new emerging class:

Since 1980, the global economy has undergone a dramatic transformation, with the globalization of the labor force, the rise of automation, and—above all—the growth of Big Finance, Big Pharma, and Big Tech. The social democratic consensus of the immediate postwar years has given way to a new phase of capitalism that is leaving workers further behind and reshaping the class structure. The precariat, a mass class defined by unstable labor arrangements, lack of identity, and erosion of rights, is emerging as today's "dangerous class." (p. 1).

The precariat is a socio-political class consisting of economically disadvantaged individuals with diverse identities in terms of gender, nationality, sect, race, and lack of social security. Standing (2011) traces the historical process of precariat formation to neoliberalization, which emerged in the 1970s and soon affected the entire camp of capitalist states. To Standing, "neo-liberal model was that growth and development depended on market competitiveness; everything should be done to maximise competition and competitiveness, and to allow market principles to permeate all aspects of life" (p. 1). In this context, neoliberalism introduces labour market flexibility to enhance the competitive potential of employees, which inherently leads to precarity. Considering this context, Sissay's Gregor is undoubtedly a member of the precariat.

In Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor is described as a traveling salesman, yet in Sissay's adaptation, he is referred to as a "commercial trader" (p. 27). At the same time, this may initially appear to be a simple update to his job description in response to changing conditions. However, it is a strategic class tactic that the employer implements against the employee. As Standing (2011) asserts, "someone in a static, going-nowhere job is given a high-sounding epithet to conceal precariat tendencies. People are made into 'chief' or 'executive' or 'officer' without having an army to lead or a team to forge" (p. 17). For example, employees are given prestigious-sounding job titles such as 'recycling officer' instead of bin emptier, 'cleaning consultant' instead of cleaner, or 'media distribution officer' instead of paper boy, yet these fancy titles cannot hide the fact that they actually have to work for very low wages. In this context, the fact that Gregor moves from the position of traveling salesman to the title of 'commercial trader' in Sissay's adaptation, coupled with his deteriorating economic compared to the original text, clearly exemplifies his inclination to be a member of precariat.

It is very likely that precarization will lead to alienation in every aspect. Standing argues that “The precariat experiences the four A’s – anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation” (2011, p. 19). To Standing, alienation stems from realizing that one’s work serves others’ purposes rather than one’s own, a defining trait of the proletariat. However, “those in the precariat experience several special injections, including a feeling of being fooled—told they should be grateful and ‘happy’ that they are in jobs and should be ‘positive.’” They are told to be happy and cannot see why” (p. 21). Gregor is deeply unhappy and unable to understand the source of his discontent:

Why don’t I sleep a little more and forget all this? I work day in, day out. It is harder work than the work they do at head office. I have to deal with travel, train connections, bad cafe food, temporary and constantly changing Human relationships, I am met by everyone. I am remembered by no one. I’m done with it all. (Sissay, 2023, pp. 20-21)

Gregor’s monologue occurs after his transformation. These words make it clear that he is experiencing deep alienation. His desire to forget all this by sleeping reflects his dissatisfaction with his job and life. Having to deal with constant travel, train connections, bad cafeteria food, and temporary, ever-changing human relationships puts a huge strain on him. Although he is known by everyone, the fact that he is not remembered by anyone indicates a deep lack of identity and belonging. Furthermore, he is regarded as an “asset” (Sissay, 2023, p. 23) by his company, not a human being. This situation is the most obvious example of Gregor’s alienation as a precariat.

Conclusion

Metamorphosis, written by Steven Berkoff in 1969, focuses on Gregor’s alienation as its theme. However, the depiction of Gregor’s alienation in this work differs from Kafka’s original narrative. In Berkoff’s adaptation, Gregor experiences his transformation from the very beginning in this play, yet this time Gregor’s transformation is experienced from the outset, similar to the original text, yet his emotional state is primarily conveyed through his family’s dialogues. In contrast, Lemn Sissay’s 2023 play *Kafka’s Metamorphosis* distinguishes itself by depicting Gregor’s transformation in the middle of the play. This conscious choice of Sissay brings Gregor’s sister, Grete, to the forefront from the beginning, deviating from the original text. Sissay’s adaptation further explores the alienation of Gregor’s family, particularly focusing on Grete.

In Sissay’s adaptation, Gregor lives in a post-neoliberal era where capitalism is structured by multinational corporations worldwide. Reflecting the demands of this period, Gregor’s work has also transformed. His travels, which contributed to his identity crisis, are now international and more harrowing. Furthermore, sales targets are prominently highlighted throughout the play, placing Gregor in a relentless continual improvement process. In Sissay’s work, Gregor makes it clear that his travels and incessant sales targets significantly contribute to his own alienation. Additionally, the sales targets are indicative of Gregor’s job security, trying his performance to his sense of stability. From this perspective, Gregor can be seen as member of precariat, emerging from the relationship between precarious working conditions and insecurity. Gregor’s alienation, depicted in all three works, is the result of different phases of capitalism. With the historical evolution of capitalism, the manifestation of alienation in the play has also evolved.

Sissay’s Gregor exists within an ecosystem of alienation that extends beyond his inner world to encompass his environment, family and society. In Kafka’s original text, Grete is portrayed as a young, beautiful and artistically talented woman overshadowed by her brother and father, shaped by conservative values. In Berkoff’s adaptation, Grete’s voice is more pronounced; however, Sissay’s adaptation elevates Grete to a level where she could be considered the protagonist of the play. Grete’s relationship with her violin and in Sissay’s work is highly symbolic. In the original text, Grete loves playing the violin and bases her

future plans on this instrument. In Sissay's adaptation, however, she openly expresses hatred for the violin and everything it represents. This shift in Grete's attitude signifies the profound crisis of alienation she experiences.

This study has comparatively examined two different adaptations of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* to reveal how the concept of alienation has evolved. As a result of the analyses, it has been observed that Gregor is not the only character who is subjected to alienation; on the contrary, this situation affects all the family members in different ways. In Sissay's adaptation in particular, Grete's transformation reveals that alienation is not only an individual experience but also takes shape in terms of social roles and identities. The findings reveal that while the theme of alienation is preserved in both adaptations, this theme is reconstructed according to the structural realities of different capitalist periods. Whereas Gregor's transformation in Berkoff's adaptation is marked primarily by its individual and emotional aspects, Sissay's version foregrounds the character's entrapment within neoliberal pressures. Gregor's constant travels, performance targets, and anxieties regarding job security serve as clear indicators of his situation. In this context, Sissay's Gregor can be considered a representative of the precariat positioned within the precarious and fragile work conditions of contemporary capitalism.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details

Hakan Gültekin

¹ Artvin Çoruh University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of Western Languages and Literatures, Artvin, Türkiye

 0000-0001-7802-7009  hagultekin@artvin.edu.tr

References

- Berkoff, S. (1995). *Meditations on Metamorphosis*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Berkoff, S. (2017). *The trial; Metamorphosis; In the penal colony: three theatre adaptations from Franz Kafka*. London: Amber Lane Press, 2004.
- Bloom, H. (2007). *Bloom's guides: The Metamorphosis*. New York: Infobase publishing.
- Doğan, P. (2021). İrkçilik ve cinsiyetçilik kesişiminde ucubeleşen göçmen kadın. In *Edebiyatın ucubeleri* (pp. 143–174). Phoenix Publishing.
- Elliott, K. (2010). Adaptation as compendium: Tim Burton's Alice in Wonderland. *Adaptation*, 3(2), 193–201.
- Farr, D., Kafka, F., & Örn Gardarsson, G. (2006). *Metamorphosis*. London: Oberon Books.
- Harvey, D. (2014). *Seventeen contradictions and the end of capitalism*. Oxford University Press.
- Hennessy, K. (2017, May 18). 1984 review – stage adaptation confuses Orwell's classic. *The Guardian*. Retrieved (21.06.2024) from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/may/19/1984-review-stage-adaptation-confuses-orwells-classic>
- Hutcheon, L. (2006). *A theory of adaptation*. London: Routledge.
- Kafka, F. (2009). *The Metamorphosis and other stories*. Oxford University Press.
- Leitch, T. (2012). Adaptation and intertextuality, or, what isn't an adaptation, and what does it matter? *A companion to literature, film, and adaptation*, 85–104.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F. (1988). *Economic and philosophic manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Mandel, E., & Novack, G. E. (1973). *The Marxist theory of alienation: three essays*. Pathfinder Press.
- Musto, M. (2021). *Karl Marx's writings on alienation*. London and Berlin: Springer Nature.
- Rees, C. (2017). *Adaptation and nation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sanders, J. (2015). *Adaptation and appropriation*. London: Routledge.



Sayers, S. (2011). *Marx and alienation: Essays on Hegelian themes*. Springer.

Sissay, L (2023). *Kafka's Metamorphosis*. London: NHB Books.

Standing, G. (2018). The precariat: Today's transformative class? *Development*, 61, 115-121.

Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The new dangerous class*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Straus, N. P. (1989). Transforming Franz Kafka's "Metamorphosis". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 14(3), 651-667.

Wong, Y. (2022). Student alienation in higher education under neoliberalism and global capitalism: A case of community college students' instrumentalism in Hong Kong. *Community College Review*, 50(1), 96-116.



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi
Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

Appropriation of Churchill's *Owners* and *Top Girls* against Capitalism in Lucy Kirkwood's *Tinderbox* and *NSFW*



Elvan Karaman Mez¹  

¹ İstanbul Topkapı University, English Language and Literature, İstanbul, Türkiye

Abstract

Caryl Churchill is a distinguished playwright of the twentieth and twenty-first-century English theatre, and with her *oeuvre*, it is very difficult to describe her with the words she deserves since her contribution by means of the critiques in her plays is of immeasurable importance. One of her junior contemporaries, Lucy Kirkwood, has a similar understanding and practice to Churchill in her works. Both playwrights have an apparent reaction against the capitalist economic system, the patriarchal system and their harmful oppression of people. Churchill has always been an anti-capitalist throughout her career, as it is in *Owners*, a play written in the early years of her career as a professional playwright, and she emphasizes the significance of socialism for feminism as it is in *Top Girls*, a milestone for English drama. In her plays *Tinderbox* and *NSFW*, which stands for *Not Safe for Work*, Kirkwood employs appropriation as a technique that leads the audience and readers to make a connection with Churchill's critical attitude towards capitalism in *Owners* and *Top Girls*. She stresses that the same problems emerging from the capitalist system have been continuing for more than fifty years. This study aims to analyze Kirkwood's *Tinderbox* and *NSFW* in terms of her appropriation from Churchill's aforementioned plays with an analysis of the impacts of capitalism on people in the twenty-first century owing to the increasing effect of the system, which has gained power since the 1970s.

Keywords

Appropriation • capitalist system • consumerism • Caryl Churchill • Lucy Kirkwood



Citation: Karaman Mez, E. (2025). Appropriation of Churchill's *Owners* and *Top Girls* against Capitalism in Lucy Kirkwood's *Tinderbox* and *NSFW*. *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*–*Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 63–74. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1484548>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Karaman Mez, E.

 Corresponding author: Elvan Karaman Mez elvankaraman@topkapi.edu.tr



Introduction

Culture is one of the most significant components of life, and it cannot be ruled out by the influence of the economic system and the superstructure working for the base (Marx, 1904, p. 11). Particularly, after the Second World War, the socio-political influences of capitalism along with its climbing economic dominance become stronger. In the late twentieth century, globalization and mass production bring about mass consumption, all of which have resulted in a ripple effect on the vicious cycle of producing and consuming more around the world. In Baudrillard's words, "All societies have always wasted, squandered, expended and consumed beyond what is strictly necessary for the simple reason that it is in the consumption of a surplus, of a superfluity that the individual - and society - feel not merely that they exist, but that they are alive" (1998, p. 43). Capitalist culture, making people accustomed to purchasing whatever they wish on the condition that they have enough money, has transformed human beings and their characteristics. Although each person needs to be accepted as unique and valuable as an individual, the capitalist culture has modified this criterion. People are evaluated according to their outfits, the amount of money and property they possess or the district where they live these days. This changing standpoint is an outcome of the capitalist system, the exchange value of which is capital. As Baudrillard points out, "As a process of signification and communication, based on a code into which consumption practices fit and from which they derive their meaning. Consumption here is a system of exchange, and the equivalent of a language" (1998, p. 60). Likewise, the mentality and characteristics of ordinary people have deteriorated. Capital and profit have been the focus of life for a long time, which makes people greedier and self-centered in their lives and relationships. There is also cruelty against animals and nature in the present because of capitalist culture centering on self and gain, making everyone antagonists against each other and every creature we share this world with. What is more, consumerism has emerged from the capitalist culture, transforming everybody into greedy purchasers all around the world. Consumerism causes the urge to buy and consume limitlessly without any evaluation of need or cost of the earth. This culture has also caused perfectionism, especially for women, resulting in them applying new kinds of cosmetic products and wearing an increasing variety of garments and shoes. Nevertheless, the drive to look perfect is not satisfied by them and cosmetic surgery is also involved and has become popular these days. Consequently, capitalist and consumerist culture has caused severe erosion in the mentality and characteristics of human beings since the post-war period, and its severity has gradually increased in the twenty-first century.

One of the outstanding contemporary playwrights of English drama, Churchill's success and the fame of her *oeuvre* surpass the borders of England. When her first professional work, *Owners*, is analyzed, the clues of her career as a playwright who meticulously observes the world, detects its problems, and criticises them in her plays, demonstrate themselves. In this work, written in 1972, she critiques the capitalist culture of her period, dominated by Keynesian economic policies, and the devastating effects on human beings, especially with the characters Clegg and Marion, the greedy couple of the play. Likewise, in *Top Girls*, one of the landmarks of feminist drama, she criticises late-stage capitalism again ten years later. This time she reveals with the protagonist Marlene, who both ignores and sacrifices her female body and her motherhood as well as her daughter and family members for success in her career, how capitalism leaks into the brains of human beings and changes their attitudes in their lives.

More than four decades have passed since these plays were created and the problems emerging from the capitalist system, transforming into neoliberalism led primarily by globalization and financialization, and capitalist culture, have been continuing, not to mention the deterioration in the characteristics of human beings. Kirkwood, one of the young and brilliant playwrights of English drama, has a similar attitude to Churchill in her career and proves that she is also concerned with the socio-economic and socio-political

troubles of people in her society. In her dystopic play *Tinderbox*, she critiques the impacts of capitalist culture on people by her characters Saul and his wife Vanessa. Particularly, with Saul's greed and extreme brutality, Kirkwood demonstrates how much a human being becomes inhumane against not only his wife but also other people around him. In *NSFW*, which stands for *Not Safe for Work*, she criticises another aspect of the capitalist system, consumerism and its negative impacts on people. Miranda, the manager of a women's magazine, *Electra*, is a symbol of perfectionism and consumerism in today's world. In that sense, this study aims to explore Kirkwood's plays *Tinderbox* and *NSFW* as an appropriation of Churchill's plays *Owners* and *Top Girls*, regarding the difference in historical and socio-economic conditions between the 1970s and the 2000s and later examine the effects of capitalism and consumerism on people in the twenty-first century as a consequence of the evolving impacts of the capitalist system from the 1970s to the new millennium.

Capitalism and Consumerism as a Catalyst for the Deterioration of People's Characteristics

With regard to the period when Churchill's plays *Owners* and *Top Girls* were written, it is significant to remember the socio-economic conditions of the 1970s and 1980s, along with the 2000s, when Kirkwood created *Tinderbox* and *NSFW*. A long-term economic crisis dominates the 1970s, during which stagflation, including "a skyrocketing inflation and unemployment," is accompanied by a variety of strikes, power cuts and emergency states (Porion, 2016, p. 302). A series of troubles such as the oil crisis in 1973 and the danger of bankruptcy in 1976 oblige the English government to borrow a loan from the IMF (Porion, 2016, p. 302). Despite the reforms of the Labor government, including several progressive measures dominated by Keynesian economic policies in the late 1960s, the British people cannot be saved from suffering throughout the 1970s (Porion, 2016, pp. 303–304). Whereas British politicians utilize and practice Keynesian policies, supporting "government intervention through public policies that aim to achieve full employment and price stability" after the Second World War, the stagflation in the 1970s cannot be solved by its policies and 'monetarism' starts to dominate the economy, followed by late-stage capitalism in the 1980s (Jahan et. al, 2014, p. 5).

British people experiencing the deep recession of the 1970s, "the period of high declinism, [... the] combination of high inflation, high unemployment and comparatively low growth," elect and start the long period of Margaret Thatcher, with the promise of 'reversing decline' in 1979 (English & Kenny, 2000, pp. 294–295). Through the shift to monetarism, the Conservative government does not aim to keep employment and prices stable by means of "demand management and incomes policy" but rather focuses on the control of inflation (Pemberton, 2005, p. 184). Another shift during the 11-year-long governance of Thatcher occurs radically from public ownership to 'privatization', the range of which becomes wider (Pemberton, 2005, p. 185). In parallel with privatization, in Collette and Laybourne's sentences, "The political consensus that once existed around the maintenance of the welfare state has gone; political attitudes within the Conservative and Labour parties have changed fundamentally; socialist and Marxist parties have collapsed or gone into decline; trade unions have diminished in power and influence" (2003, p. 1). The consequences of her politics are not only limited to the economic field, such as the dramatic fall in the manufacturing capacities of national factories, but "state funding for the arts" and any kind of cultural activities are also cut severely, whereas they have been accepted as the main contribution to "the national morale and self-consciousness" before (Davies, 2000, p. 141). Another outcome of Thatcherism impacting socio-economic life is the rising unemployment during her long-standing governance. The number of unemployed people jumps over three million people until 1983 and continues at this high point in the following three years, whereas it is over two million by the year 1980s (Morgan, 2000, p. 80). These high unemployment rates unsurprisingly bring about strikes, demonstrations and riots in a variety of cities during the 1980s (Morgan, 2000, p. 83).

Lucy Kirkwood writes her plays in the twenty-first century, the socio-economic dynamics of which are different from the 1970s and 1980s. Neo-liberalism dominates this new millennium with its focus on “economic liberalisation, political liberalisation, privatisation, the restructuring of Capitalist industry and Capitalist society, free markets, and the rapid expansion of Capitalism itself” (Morgan, 2000, p. 76). It dates to the end of the Cold War, and it is accepted as a means of supporting capitalism against the economic crisis in the 1970s. Along with neo-liberalism, industrial capitalism also dominates most capitalist countries of the world for a long period of time (Morgan, 2000, p. 80). Capitalist culture emerging from industrial capitalism has been dominant since the 1950s, particularly by means of “mass production, mass consumerism, mass consumption”, which also directly influences socio-cultural dynamics and art now (Morgan, 2000, p. 80). Therefore, it can be concluded that contemporary culture is under the impact of industrial capitalism and neo-liberalism, the dynamics of which are intertwined and with a cycle of “industrial production and industrial consumption of culture” in our contemporary world (Morgan, 2000, p. 80).

The capitalist economic system controls not only the economic sphere but also the socio-cultural structure in most countries of the world. Thus, capitalist culture monopolizes the social life of millions of people in a variety of societies. Inhumanity, one of the main features of capitalist culture, which evolves with the capitalist economic system, has been a serious problem for human beings. Consumerism both emerges from the capitalist culture and increases its negative impacts on people, so it is one of the components of capitalism, on which the system depends now. The industrial capitalist system, having been established on production and consumption in factories centuries ago, has been experiencing mass production and mass consumption for a long time after numerous technological improvements. Whereas people were rapacious to gain more money and save more property in the previous decades, that ambition has turned into the main target for some, which means inhumane greed, for which these people can do anything. In Schutz's words,

The material affluence brought about by the ever-progressive technological development of the advanced market societies has led to a nearly universal consumerism, a quasi-addiction of the individual to the continual purchase of an ever-expanding stream of personal commodities as a way of self-fulfillment and of the construction of self-identity. (2011, p. 133)

Under the impacts of satisfying themselves by producing goods, motivating them to work and earn more, people have forgotten about the main features of humanity such as caring about others and having humane relationships with people, like friendship and kinship. As Adiseshiah and Lepage suggest, “[Our] neoliberal ... condition [is] unacceptable and dehumanizing” (2016, p. 4). Hence, capitalism and consumerism make people become alienated from society and transform into self-centered beings, who are only interested in themselves and their profits. This mentality also commodifies everything and everyone as much as possible. People even accept human beings as objects to be bought or sold in many areas, which proves the inhumanity this culture generates for people.

Consumerism, dominated by mass production and mass consumption, compels people to buy and consume more while mass production pushes the limits of nature and causes fatal problems, like global warming, the outcomes of which are experienced by means of extreme weather conditions, drought and famine. As Boström and Klintman argue, “Mass consumption is apparently not an ahistorical concept. To the contrary, mass consumption is apt for describing the extensive and often globalized circulation of goods and services in late modern times, which causes both welfare and socioecological destruction” (2019, p. 855). It results from the evolution in culture and the mindset of human beings, particularly directed by consumerism. According to Boström and Klintman, “By using the term ‘mass consumption,’ the discussion here refers to the comprehensive cultural norm of consumption, consumers, consumption practices, outlets, advertisements, branding, shopping, fashion, and spending in contemporary societies” (2019, p.

856). Especially after some developments around the world, namely “globalisation, individualisation, and modernisation,” mass consumption has spread to most countries of the world dominated by the neoliberal system (2019, p. 855). The lives of people are, thus, surrounded by the agents of consumption, such as advertisements, fashion, and promotions of various products. As Bauman argues, “To increase their capacity for consumption, consumers must never be given rest. They need to be constantly exposed to new temptations in order to be kept in a state of constantly seething, never wilting excitation and, indeed, in a state of suspicion and disaffection” (2005, p. 26). In that regard, they have to be conscious of the system that tries to involve them in the craziness of mass consumption, particularly in this globalized and extremely individualized world.

In this capitalist and consumerist world, dominated by the neoliberal economy, the concept of the body has also undergone a transformation, and it has turned into “a symbol of value and identity which is largely performed and developed via the purchase of products” (Phipps, 2014, p. 9). People assume that they need to purchase a variety of products so as to ‘add value’ to themselves, which is one of the main features of consumerism in the present. Additionally, an obsession with the perfect body has been created and stimulated by this system by means of the concept of the elevated and prestigious body (2014, p. 9). Obsession and dissatisfaction with the body, including body weight and shape, starts at a very early age in childhood now (Urla and Swedlund, 2000, p. 397). Thus, mostly women are targeted by consumerism and its agents to have them feel ashamed by their bodies and they are promoted to buy new clothes, shoes, cosmetic products and even undergo cosmetic surgeries to compensate for their “spoiled identity” (Dolezal, 2015, pp. 131–132). As Urla and Swedlund point out, “Fueled by the hugely profitable cosmetic, weight-loss, and fashion industries, the beauty myth’s glamorized notions of the ideal body reverberate back upon women as ‘a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control’” (2000, p. 397). In consequence, to look perfect has become one of the necessities of most women’s lives in the consumerist world of the twenty-first century, and they are always promoted to look and feel as ideal women in the most beautiful outfits, shoes and make-up along with periodical cosmetic surgeries, aiming to create a perfect body.

Appropriation

Umberto Eco states in his world-wide-known novel, *The Name of the Rose*, that “I discovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told” (qtd. in Hutcheon, 1988, p. 128). In *The Poetics of Postmodernism*, on intertextuality, Hutcheon emphasizes the network between literary works created previously and points out that “the intertextual echoing simultaneously works to affirm—textually and hermeneutically—the connection with the past” (1988, p. 125). Thus, literary works become bridges between the past and present, between different time periods and socio-cultural circumstances. As Leitch puts it, “Intertextuality posits both an uncentered historical enclosure and an abysmal decentered foundation for language and textuality; in so doing, it exposes all contextualizations as limited and limiting, arbitrary and confining, self-serving and authoritarian, theological and political” (qtd. in Hutcheon, 1988, p. 127). In the appropriation of a work, there is also an intertextual relationship, although it is not as explicit as it is in the adaptation (Sanders, 2006, p. 2). One of the most significant aspects of appropriation is the writer’s “political or ethical commitment [that] shapes a writer’s, director’s, or performer’s decision to re-interpret a source text” (Sanders, 2006, p. 2). In particular, along with its miscellaneous adaptations, transforming his famous plays into exhilarating movies and pieces of musical or opera, Shakespeare’s plays have been appropriated by a number of playwrights. It is also known that appropriating the works of particularly Latin and Roman writers and poets is “a celebrated form of artistic creation” not only at grammar schools in the Elizabethan period but also before that time (Loftis, 2013, p. xv). One of the most successful appropriations of Shakespeare’s plays is *Dunsinane* by David

Greig, who defines his work as a sequel to *Macbeth*. The reason behind his appropriation is historicopolitical since Greig has some historical points to correct and some contemporary political issues, which disturb him severely, to bring forward. As Julie Sanders also stresses in her well-known work *Adaptation and Appropriation*, “[A]ppropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations” (Sanders, 2006, p. 26). Kirkwood also has socio-economic concerns, emerging from the capitalist economic system, and appropriation is utilized as a technique in her plays *Tinderbox* and *NSFW* in order to unveil the negative outcomes of capitalist culture. It may be difficult to recognize the appropriation of *Owners* and *Top Girls* by Churchill in *Tinderbox* and *NSFW* by Kirkwood, but what is obvious in her plays is that this technique supports her criticism of the neoliberal system and boosts the influence of the plays on readers and viewers.

Appropriation of *Owners* in *Tinderbox* against Capitalist Culture

Caryl Churchill observes the world regarding socio-economic problems and burdens on people, mainly emerging from the capitalist economic system and the patriarchal order, so in her plays, she invites viewers and readers to “see the damaging effects of a contemporary world disfigured by capitalism” (Aston, 2014, p. 202). In *Owners*, she criticises the devastating impacts of capitalist culture on people in the 1970s by means of her couple Marion and Clegg, who breathe with a strong capitalist urge in their private and professional lives and who commodify not only objects but also human beings around them with this urge. Churchill, who “condemns the capitalist principle of private ownership” in this play, implies that their capitalist drives are closely connected with the aforementioned features of the 1970s, such as the end of nationalization in terms of Keynesian policies and the start of a new era focusing on private property (Gobert, 2014, p. 44). Clegg earns his life as a butcher by slaughtering animals and transforming them into commercial “saleable objects” (p. 49). Moreover, his expectation of having a son is another capitalist element since he wants to have an heir for his butcher: “Clegg and Son. Pork butcher. Clegg and Son. Family butcher” (Churchill, 1986, p. 11). Meanwhile, this desire commodifies his future son, and he even announces that he does not need to have a son anymore once he loses his business. What is worse, he believes that his wife Marion belongs to him, and he intends to punish her violently on the condition that she betrays him: “If I thought for a moment she had dishonoured me, then without hesitation or a thought of the police – [He plunges knife into meat.] And also into the heart of the thief. ... She is legally mine. And one day she will die knowing it” (Churchill, 1986, pp. 10-11). Clegg imagines murdering his wife and tells these sentences in rage and with the desire for revenge, intertwined with his capitalist urge of ownership of his wife.

Full of capitalist drives, like her husband, Marion works as a zealous estate agent. She has a very assertive personality and is obsessed with the desire to own more money and property. In Botham's words, “Like Marlene [in *Top Girls*], who abandons her daughter to pursue a career in London, Marion doesn't recognise a biological maternal instinct” (p. 107). Thus, she only focuses on her job and possessions with her vigor and determination for success: “There's no limit. It's finding where to start. Before I started on property I just had no idea of myself. You don't know what you're capable of till you suddenly find yourself doing it” (Churchill, 1986, p. 45). It is obvious that her existence depends on her belongings, and she desires to gain more as a significant feature of capitalist culture. As Adiseshiah argues, “Ultimately, however – and tragically for the Left – it is a story of how traditional forms of resistance and opposition have been defeated by an aggressive neoliberalism, which bankrupts human cultures and economies through the processes of globalisation, consumerism, and marketisation” (p. 214). In that regard, Churchill gives an impressive representation of the erosion in the morality of people owing to the multifaceted ascendancy of capitalism

over society. Deprived of any value, Marion pushes the limits of owning more and buys the flat where her ex-lover lives with his family to seduce and own Alec back. In this sense, she starts to reduce a human being to a commodity and states, "If you love someone you want to keep them. I want to" (Churchill, 1986, p. 28). In her dialogue with him, her capitalist mentality is underlined once more: "You were mine then and you always will be" (Churchill, 1986, p. 31). Additionally, she commodifies Alec and his wife Lisa's baby by adopting it by force and not giving it back. She assumes that the baby is one of her belongings and never gives them to anyone else. Marion highlights that "I will keep what's mine. The more you want it the more it's worth keeping" (Churchill, 1986, p. 63). Her mercilessness here easily turns into cruelty with her order for her assistant Worsely to set fire to Alec's house to kill them when she understands that she is not going to keep either Alec or the baby. As Gobert puts it, "The play ... reveals the inescapability of property's logic – its subordination of human interests to acquisitive values – buoyed as it is by Britain's political and judicial systems" (2014, p. 47). Churchill, thus, severely criticises the "whole idea of Western individualism, and capitalism, and progress" in this play since she is conscious of the influences of this aggressive economic system and its culture on human beings, who are degenerated step by step (Gobert, 2014, p. 47).

Lucy Kirkwood, who also observes her society and is aware of the serious problems that capitalist culture causes, criticises neoliberalism in the twenty-first century as the main reason for this order. As Wallace observes, "Kirkwood is recognisably an engaged playwright seeking theatrical modes of reflecting on the struggles and antagonisms of the present" (2022, p. 25). In *Tinderbox*, the focus of her appropriation of Churchill's play, *Owners*, remains on the neoliberal system, which has become vulgar and has made people more individualist, self-centered, and cruel. As Sanders remarks, "Appropriation then, as with adaptation, shades in important ways into the discursive domains of other disciplines, in particular here the legal discourse surrounding the controversial areas of land and property rights" (2006, p. 30). A dystopic play, *Tinderbox*, the setting of which is Bradford in an undefined future, also has a couple, Saul and Vanessa. Saul is a butcher, like Clegg in *Owners*, and his wife Vanessa is generally meek, unlike Marion in *Owners*, although she is Saul's accomplice in a number of crimes he has committed. Kirkwood criticises the vulgar capitalist system with this couple and their ruthless and cold-blooded crimes, committed together. The negative effects of the economic system permeate the whole society in most countries of the world in the new millennium, especially by means of globalism and the extreme individualism which always stimulate people to be more self-centered and remorseless each passing year. As Huang and Rivlin emphasize, "Precisely because appropriation carries strong overtones of agency, potentially for the appropriated as well as for the appropriator, it can convey political, cultural, and in our contention, ethical advocacy" (2014, p. 2). Thus, Kirkwood appropriates *Owners* as a piece of her criticism regarding the capitalist system and its crushing influences with its transforming socio-economic aspects from the 1970s to the 2000s. Both *Owners* and *Tinderbox* start with their focus on the butchers of the plays, Clegg and Saul. Like Clegg, Saul's butcher's shop is a crucial part of his life, and he even defines it as his empire: "An Englishman's home is his castle, but an Englishman's shop is his Empire" (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 11). Additionally, he accuses his wife Vanessa of not giving him an heir to bequeath his butcher's shop, like Clegg again, since their children were killed during the attacks on Stratford in 2012. In this sense, the capitalist economic system depends upon a male-centered socio-economic structure despite the differences between the two periods. While Clegg becomes more ruthless through the end of the play and even rapes Alec's wife Lisa, Saul is also a very cruel character whose wife escapes from him in the first scene of the play so as not to be beaten or killed. He also announces that everybody has to obey his rules in his empire, including his wife and his workers or any intruders (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 18). Vanessa, thus, does not seem gratified to be his wife and has to bear his insulting language and behavior towards her. As Vanessa was an actress in second-rate pornographic movies in the past, Saul insults her in front of Perchik, a stranger in the beginning: "Never kiss a bought woman.

All your food will start tasting like pennies" (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 19). He even tortures her physically and psychologically in various ways and compels her to cry helplessly. This aspect of Saul again reminds us how Clegg desires and plans to murder his wife. Throughout the play, the butcher's shop is like a tinderbox, which can set fire at any time, Saul is the person who holds the matches. Consequently, Saul is the threat risk in the play, like Marion in *Owners*, who never cares about anyone except for herself. Nevertheless, Saul does not content himself with threatening people around him, but he murders them brutally as a butcher.

Throughout the play, it is inferred that Saul has murdered several young men before Perchik, the runaway Scottish boy desperately needing a shelter, arrives. Frankie, a young boy working for him, is the one who is first mentioned to fall into the cement mixer by accident, but later deduced to be pushed by Saul, the coldblooded murderer, deliberately:

VANESSA. But – you said that it was an accident. You said he *fell*.

SAUL. He did fall.

VANESSA. But ... you pushed him.

SAUL. I ... manipulated his centre of gravity, yes. Accidentally. (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 30)

However, Saul's violence is not restricted to murdering Frankie. While they are talking about Frankie's murder, he suddenly attacks Perchik by stabbing a fork into his leg. This is an act of intimidation for both Perchik and Vanessa to keep their silence about Frankie. Menace always exists in the play, but Saul is the main person who sheds blood ruthlessly and Perchik also seems to be under threat at any time. What is more, Saul does not have a limit to attack people when he feels under threat. To illustrate, he kills Detective Prawn, who searches his butcher's shop for a dangerous painter, with a cricket bat. His techniques to kill people callously show the extent of his brutality in the meantime. Shortly after he murders the detective, he intends to murder Perchik, most probably so as to efface the evidence of his last murder. However, Saul is not the only person who does not care about anyone. All the main characters continue talking about ordinary topics after the detective's murder as though nothing had happened a few minutes ago. Kirkwood elaborates on the value of human beings for the three characters in the twenty-first century, which also reminds us of Marion's remorseless order for the murder of Alec. In the Second Act, readers learn that Saul has killed seven or eight young men in total before the detective and their murder is generally because of their seducing Vanessa:

VANESSA. How many has it been now? Is it seven? Or eight?

SAUL. You just can't get the staff.

VANESSA. You have such bad luck, don't we, Saul? Either they have to leave. Like Perchik. Or Stavros. Or they have an accident. Like Frankie. Or Klaus. (Kirkwood, 2016, pp. 67-68)

In this play, people are just consumed by Saul one by one like a product. They are usually welcomed to Saul's butcher's shop to stay or work there for some time. However, they cannot get out of it as Saul just butchers them, like the animals he slaughters and sells. As Coveney observes, "Kirkwood's play is like a madcap mixture of Joe Orton's high-spirited blasphemy, Ben Jonson's triangular power play in *The Alchemist*, Martin McDonagh's thud and blunder ..., and the poisoned lyricism of Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. There are gunshots, foul language, smacked bottoms, bloody limbs and sardonic bursts" (2008). Vanessa transforms into an accomplice from a victim wife. Even after Perchik, the searched dangerous painter, murders Saul and starts to manage his shop, she does not yield to him. Although it is not clear, in the end, she most probably kills him and starts a new life by the sea, which she always misses. In consequence, Vanessa is very similar to Marion in *Owners*, in which "the corrupting power of ownership - of

human beings as well as of property - is a persistent concern" (Keyssar, 1985, p. 79). Kirkwood's appropriation of these two characters increases the impact of her critique of neoliberal culture, which poisons human beings and deteriorates their characteristics. People just lose their values of humanity due to the self-centeredness and ruthlessness of capitalist culture, the severity of which climbs year by year. Accordingly, this culture makes people lose their moral values and get deprived of humanity itself, the outcome of which is becoming people, like Saul and Vanessa in *Tinderbox*, much more remorseless than Clegg and Marion in *Owners*. Kirkwood increases the influence of her play on viewers and readers through her appropriation, which provides "enhanced self-awareness and richness of discursive understanding that [is provoked] in the perceiver" (Huang and Rivlin, 2014, p. 9).

Appropriation against Consumerism in *Top Girls* and *NSFW*

The other play in which Lucy Kirkwood utilizes appropriation is *NSFW*, where the character Miranda reminds the audience of the successful businesswoman Marlene, the protagonist of *Top Girls* by Churchill. In *NSFW*, Kirkwood has political motives and critiques not only the media and its abusive order but also consumerism in the last act, which will be analyzed in this study. By appropriating *Top Girls*, Kirkwood boosts the influence of her criticism. Marlene is a "Thatcher-like character," who has just focused on her career and manages her own employment agency (Reinelt, 2000, p. 180). In the second half of the play, it is underlined that the capitalist system compels women to make a choice between their career and private life. So as to be successful in work life, it is imposed that women have to concentrate on merely their jobs and careers and ignore their private life, which means themselves indeed. As the capitalist system always prioritizes men rather than women and protects their rights in the economic sphere, women are just subordinated and advised not to marry if they want to work. It is also clear in the dialogue between Marlene, "who has recently displaced a man to take her place at the top of the capitalist ladder as director of a prominent employment agency," and Jeanine, searching for a job, in Act II (Godiwala, 2003, p. 9):

JEANINE. I am saving to get married.

MARLENE. Does that mean you don't want a long-term job, Jeanine?

JEANINE. I might do. ...

MARLENE. So you won't tell them you're getting married?

JEANINE. Had I better not?

MARLENE. It would probably help. (Churchill, 2013, pp. 172-173)

Even in the 1980s, gender discrimination in the economic life was still a big problem for women, although they struggled a lot to improve their conditions since World War II. They had to hide the truth about getting or being married from their employers to be accepted or to continue working since it means having a child in the near future and having to leave their work to look after their babies. As Marlene is aware of these difficulties and is an ambitious woman who desires to have a status and a good career in business, she just ignores them and leaves her daughter and family members behind. As Aston points out, "The difficulty of combining work and family life is posed as an unresolved problem in *Top Girls*, while the dangers of espousing Marlene's masculinist, capitalist values, oppressive to other women (and men), are signalled in the final line of the play, delivered by Angie: 'Frightening'" (2003, p. 22). She explains the reasons: "I know a managing director who's got two children, she breast feeds in the board room, she pays a hundred pounds a week on domestic help alone and she can afford that because she's extremely high-powered lady earning a great deal of money" (Churchill, 2013, p. 222). As she is conscious of the difficulties of a woman who is married with a child, she has left her daughter to her sister Joyce in order to continue her career. However,

to play the game according to the rules of this system serves capitalism again and it creates a vicious cycle, in which women are either excluded or obliged to suppress their womanhood and private life, like Marlene. Thus, Marlene is a woman who also serves the capitalist system and capitalist culture, shaping people and encouraging them to be self-centered without any values.

Kirkwood emphasizes in *NSFW* that capitalist culture has become stronger and more dominant on people, through particularly consumerism in twenty-first century Britain. By her appropriation of *Top Girls*, she first reminds the audience that “the criteria for top women achievers in the patriarchal system of 1980s” have not improved (Godiwala, 2003, p. 12). The editor of *Electra*, a weekly women’s magazine, Miranda is a businesswoman like Marlene. She is also self-centered and suppresses her womanhood and female body, so she is lonely in her private life and unhappy inside. In that regard, women still have to sacrifice happiness in their personal life to have a brilliant career in their work life. This capitalist and male-centered system still forces women to make a choice between their life and career. As Brown puts it, “It is not the individuals, but the system itself that is being indicted” (qtd. in Godiwala, 2003, p. 15). Likewise, Miranda never cares about other people’s feelings or lives, but she only focuses on her job, career, and the profits of the magazine she manages. What is more, she represents the consumerist and perfectionist culture of the capitalist system in this play, becoming more vulgar with each passing year. The walls of *Electra* are covered with the pictures of ‘healthy-looking’ women in beautiful clothes and shoes along with heavy makeup. All the women in these pictures look perfect as they have been photoshopped. As Taylor and Saarinen argue, “desire [of consumption] does not desire satisfaction. To the contrary, desire desires desire” (qtd. in Bauman, 2005, p. 25). In this sense, women buying this magazine are stimulated to look more beautiful and purchase more cosmetic products, trendy clothes and shoes. Miranda also seems very trendy in her black dress, and describes the group of women she belongs to: “We’re confident, modern, media-literate women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five who earn upwards of twenty thousand pounds a year, aren’t we? ... We’re leaders, thinkers, dreamers, shoppers, upscale ABC1 women with upscale ABC1 purchasing habits” (Kirkwood, 2016, p. 229). This group of women is the consumer group of society, and not only cosmetic products but also cosmetic surgery are a significant part of their lives to be able to look perfect although their bodies are not perfect, and aging is one of the realities of human beings. As Bauman points out, “in a society of consumers, ... life-projects are built around consumer choice rather than work, professional skills or jobs” (2005, p. 1). Kirkwood stresses that there is now an obsession with consumption for millions of people living in neoliberal societies. Furthermore, Miranda is extremely self-centred and is ready to abuse anyone for the sake of the magazine. For instance, she not only compels Sam to find a fault in his ex-girlfriend’s body to employ him but also abuses Rupert, another journalist, like a guinea pig, by forcing him to apply cosmetic products and undergo cosmetic surgery, like Botox. He is also obliged to walk on Oxford Street in a mini dress for the magazine not to be fired. In Bauman’s words, “Nothing truly lasting could be reasonably hoped to be erected on this kind of shifting sand. Purely and simply, the prospect of constructing a lifelong identity on the foundation of work is, for the great majority of people (except, for the time being at least, the practitioners of a few highly skilled and highly privileged professions), dead and buried” (2005, p. 28). In that regard, the neoliberal system and consumerism transform people into greedy consumers of products, but they are also consumed ruthlessly by this system as its representations are apparent in the play. Accordingly, by her appropriation and the character Miranda, Kirkwood emphasizes the vulgarity of consumerism, which not only encourages people to consume more unnecessarily but also transforms them into consumption products.

Conclusion

The capitalist economic system monopolizes most countries of the world by means of capitalist and consumerist cultures. Human beings are the main target of this system, with the contribution of the superstructure and institutions of each country serving the base, the economic system. It is hard to escape from the impacts of the economic system and the culture it has created, affecting them unconsciously most of the time. In the twenty-first century, the devastating effects of capitalism and consumerism on people are so harsh that they have become as vulgar as the system itself owing to the loss of their values and humanity. Churchill and Kirkwood observe the world around them and criticize this system that oppresses people with not only harsh living conditions but also the psychological battle people have to undergo in this culture. In *Owners* and *Top Girls*, Churchill's critiques of the capitalist system and culture in the 1970s and 1980s, surrounding people at each moment of their lives, are still very meaningful and in effect. Thus, Kirkwood appropriates Churchill's two plays to criticize the disastrous impacts of neoliberalism along with consumerism upon people in the twenty-first century. Using appropriation in her plays *Tinderbox* and *NSFW* makes Kirkwood's critiques more impressive for both spectators and readers. She emphasizes that the capitalist economic system, transforming over time, has been continuing to expand its power and dominion over people, and human beings have lost their values, resulting in the loss of dignity and humanity itself in their extremely self-centered, isolated, and corrupted worlds on the edge of chaos and catastrophe. Accordingly, people must create an alternative system to be able to revolutionize their despondent and inhumane lives.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details	Elvan Karaman Mez (Assistant Professor)
	¹ İstanbul Topkapı University, English Language and Literature, İstanbul, Türkiye
	 0000-0002-4581-6623  elvankaraman@topkapi.edu.tr

References

- Adiseshiah, S. & L. LePage (2016). Introduction: What Happens Now. In S. Adiseshiah & L. LePage (Eds.), *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now?* (p. 1-13). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aston, E. (2003). *Feminist Views on the English Stage: Women Playwrights, 1990-2000*. Cambridge UP.
- Aston, E. (2014). The 'Picasso' of Modern British Playwrights. In R. D. Gobert (ed.), *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (pp. 201-213). London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Baudrillard, J. (1998). *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Sage Publications.
- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Work, Consumerism and the New Poor*. 2nd ed. Open University Press.
- Boström, M., & M. Klintman. (2019). Mass Consumption and Political Consumerism. In M. Boström, M. Micheletti and P. Oosterveer (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Consumerism* (pp. 855-875). Oxford UP.
- Botham, P. (2012). Playwrights and Plays: Caryl Churchill. In C. Megson (Ed.), *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s – Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (pp. 99-122). Methuen Drama.
- Churchill, C. (1986). *Plays One: Owners, Traps, Vinegar Tom, Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, Cloud Nine*. Methuen.
- Churchill, C. (2013). *Top Girls*. (B. Naismith & N. Worrall, Eds.). Bloomsbury Methuen Drama.
- Collette, C. F. and K. Laybourn. (Eds.). (2003). *Modern Britain since 1979: A Reader*. I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd.
- Coveney, M. (2008, April 29). *Tinderbox*. *WhatsOnStage*. https://www.whatsonstage.com/news/tinderbox_19603/



- Davies, A. (2000). Class, Consumption and Cultural Institutions. In A. Davies & A. Sinfield (Eds.), *British Culture of the Post-war – An Introduction to Literature and Society 1945-1999*. (pp. 139–45). Routledge.
- Dolezal, L. (2015). *The Body and Shame Phenomenology, Feminism, and the Socially Shaped Body*. Lexington Books.
- English, R. & Michael K. (2000). *Rethinking British Decline*. Basingstoke: Macmillan Press.
- Huang, A. & Rivlin E. (2014). Introduction. In A. Huang & E. Rivlin (Eds.), *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (pp. 1–20). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hutcheon, L. (1988). *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. Routledge.
- Godiwala, D. (2003). *Breaking the Bounds: British Feminist Dramatists Writing in the Mainstream since c. 1980*. American University Studies. XXVI, Theatre Arts; Vol. 31. Peter Lang Publishing.
- Jahan, S. et. al. (2014, September). What Is Keynesian Economics? *Finance and Development*, 51(3), 4–5.
- Keyssar, H. (1985). *Modern Dramatists: Feminist Theatre: An Introduction to Plays of Contemporary British and American Women*. Macmillan Education.
- Kirkwood, L. (2016). *Plays: One*. Nick Hern Books.
- Loftis, S. F. (2013). *Shakespeare's Surrogates: Rewriting Renaissance Drama*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Marx, K. (1904). *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Trans. N. I. Stone. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company.
- Morgan, K. O. (2000). *Twentieth-Century Britain: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford UP.
- Pemberton, H. (2005). The Transformation of the Economy. In P. Addison and H. Jones (Eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain: 1939-2000*. (pp. 180–202). Blackwell Publishing.
- Phipps, A. (2014). *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age*. Polity Press.
- Porion, S. (2016). Reassessing a Turbulent Decade: The Historiography of 1970s Britain in Crisis. *ÉA*, 69(3), 301–320.
- Reinelt, Janelle. (2000). Caryl Churchill and the Politics of Style. In E. Aston and J. Reinelt (Eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern British Women Playwrights* (pp. 174–193). Cambridge UP.
- Sanders, J. (2006). *Adaptation and Appropriations*. Routledge.
- Schutz, E. A. (2011). *Inequality and Power: The Economics of Class*. Routledge.
- Urla, J. and Swedlund, A. J. (2000). The Anthropometry of Barbie: Unsettling Ideals of the Feminine Body in Popular Culture. In L. Schiebinger (Ed.), *Oxford Readings in Feminism: Feminism and the Body* (pp. 397–428). Oxford UP.
- Wallace, C. (2022). Embodying Agonism in Lucy Kirkwood's *Mosquitoes* and *The Welkin*. *Litteraria Pragensia*, 32(63), 24–40. <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2022.63.3>

Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

Resisting Translation and Tomson Highway's Rez Cycle Plays: Building Community Through Cree Language in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*



Raphaela Pavlakos¹  

¹ McMaster University, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Hamilton, Canada

Abstract

Inclusion of non-colonial language in theatre spaces is just one of the tools Indigenous playwrights can wield as a tool to make space for the inclusion of Indigenous voices. The Cree playwright Tomson Highway also uses this technique to build resistance. Highway, whose first language was Cree, includes his traditional language throughout his Rez Cycle plays, *The Rez Sisters* (1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989), as a form of resistance against the colonial erasure of traditional Indigenous languages. Reading these plays can be a jarring experience for non-Indigenous readers, as Highway refuses to include in-text translations for his Cree dialogue, much like how the performance would be experienced for a non-Indigenous audience. While Highway includes translations in footnotes or post-text appendices, this highlights the important questions of audience, inclusivity, and translation. This article uses a methodological lens I have developed called Critical Dispositioning, which is specifically designed to facilitate ethical engagement with Indigenous texts by settler-scholars. This article will explore Highway's selective use of translation in his published plays (and rejection of it on stage) as a way of building community and highlight the ways in which Indigenous Theatre functions as a space of Indigenous resistance.

Keywords

Indigenous drama • Translation • Cree • Tomson Highway • Critical Dispositioning

Author Note

An earlier iteration of this paper was originally presented for the Theatre and Drama Network's Online Conference, "Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation," in December 2023, under the same title. It has since been further developed and expanded on into an article, and in part, uses a methodological framework that is being developed as part of my dissertation project.



Citation: Pavlakos, R. (2025). Resisting translation and Tomson Highway's Rez Cycle plays: Building community through Cree language in *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta*. *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi–Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 75–87. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2024-1586309>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Pavlakos, R.

 Corresponding author: Raphaela Pavlakos pavlakor@mcmaster.ca



Introduction

My introduction to Indigenous Theatre was through Tomson Highway's work. Highway, an influential Cree playwright, writer, and musician, has helped create an Indigenous Theatre scene in Toronto, Ontario, but his work has also seen reverberations across Canada and North America. As a settler-scholar, my first opportunity to read Indigenous work came during my undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto. Despite my Canadian public-school education, I never had the opportunity to read the work of Indigenous authors, and any actual education on Indigenous cultural studies was sparse. The fact that my first encounter with Indigenous Literature was in university is somewhat problematic; what is even more problematic is that most Indigenous courses (including the one I took) were taught by other settler-scholars rather than Indigenous scholars. The first Indigenous play I encountered was Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, which changed the way I read and thought about drama and the possibilities of what can be enacted on stage. As a settler-scholar continuing this work, ethical engagement with Indigenous literature is necessarily foregrounded in my research praxis.

Tomson Highway was born in 1951 in Brochet, Manitoba. When he was six years old, he attended the Guy Hill Indian Residential School in Sturgeon Landing, Saskatchewan (Boyd, 2008). His first language, Cree, has been essential in his creative process. Highway's inclusion of the traditional Cree in his work is both influential and ground-breaking, as he deals with the "problem" of translation by refusing it. In his plays, we get immersed into moments of Cree language; translations are offered in removed ways for readers of the works but get entirely rejected for an audience watching these plays be performed. I will also be unpacking what I am calling "chaos moments" that appear at the climax of action in two of Tomson Highway's plays, *The Rez Sisters* (first produced in 1986) and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (from 1989). These plays were both published by Fifth House, an Indigenous publisher based out of Saskatchewan, in 1988 and 1989, respectively.

As a settler-scholar, it is important that I state my positionality and foreground my commitment to ethical engagement with Indigenous texts. While I am currently living and learning in Toronto, Ontario, which is the traditional land of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples, I would also like to acknowledge the land rights of all Indigenous peoples in what is colonially called Canada. It is important to foreground this acknowledgement in this work, despite Highway being from a different province, because his work is largely based on and grounded in Toronto's landscape. As I work through these two plays, some questions I am considering as I do this work are as follows: Why might Tomson Highway insist on refusing to translate Indigenous languages in his work for a settler audience? Why might he also choose to include translations in footnotes or appendices in the print versions of the same plays? And lastly, what is at stake or gained through Highway's insertions of Indigenous language?

Critical Dispositioning is a methodological lens I am developing that allows settlers to ethically engage with Indigenous texts by creating space for community-specific readings of texts, so as to not pull texts out of their Indigenous contexts and apply Western generic frameworks to them. This also rejects the idea of settler-scholars entering into an Indigenous analytical space that has the potential for dangerous slippage into appropriative reading practices (should settler-scholars do work from an Indigenous framework they are not a part of). Here, Critical Dispositioning is used to read both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* in a way that maintains a critical distance between myself, the settler-reader, and Highway's Indigenous perspective, both in the fictional Wasaychigan Reserve where the plays are set, and the Cree epistemological framework Highway writes from.

Highway was influential in the development of an Indigenous Theatre scene based in Toronto, Ontario, which led to the creation of space for Indigenous voices and creative production within a more mainstream

theatre community. Highway acted as the Artistic Director of Native Earth Performing Arts, or NEPA, one of the first Indigenous-led theatre companies in North America, which is also based in Toronto. NEPA, founded in 1982, has been at the centre of many influential playwrights and productions in the Indigenous Theatre scene, not just in Toronto, but across North America. In 1986, NEPA shifted from project-based productions and began “full-time operation with Artistic Director Tomson Highway” (“About us,” n.d.). The first production of Highway’s play, *The Rez Sisters*, was staged that same year, which later “went on to become the first North American, Indigenous written and performed production at the Edinburgh International Theatre Festival in 1989” (“About us,” n.d.). NEPA has helped carve out space within mainstream, hegemonic theatre communities for Indigenous voices and actors, to allow them to tell their own community-specific stories in their own authentic voices and languages. It continues today to be Canada’s oldest professional Indigenous theatre company.

Highway was influential in cracking open hegemonic theatre spaces and inserting Indigenous bodies, stories and voices in spaces they had never appeared before. His play, *Dry Lips*, was the first Indigenous play to be staged at Toronto’s prestigious Royal Alexandra Theatre in 1991 (Nothof, 2019). Highway’s work is still important and relevant today, nearly forty years after his first play was produced. He is still an active member of the Indigenous literary writing scene and continues to emphasise showcasing and including the Cree language in his work.

Three years after the *Rez Sisters*’ debut at the Royal Alexandra Theatre, in 1994 Highway became the first Indigenous writer to be inducted into the Order of Canada (Charlebois & Nothof, 2021). Since then, he has received a number of prestigious awards for his literary achievement and contribution to the contemporary ‘canon’ of Indigenous writing in Canada. Highway, since his induction, has been awarded six honorary doctorates, and has been writer-in-residence at the Universities of Toronto, Concordia, British Columbia, and Simon Fraser University (Kamloops Campus) (Charlebois & Nothof, 2021). In addition, his contributions to Canada’s theatre scene were honoured in 2015 when Highway was “awarded the Canadian Theatre Critics Association’s biennial Herbert Whittaker-CTCA Award for his long-term contributions to Canadian theatre and his influence on and inspiration for First Nations theatre artists” (Charlebois & Nothof, 2021).

In 2022, Highway received “the Governor General’s Performing Arts Award for Lifetime Artistic Achievement” (Ng, 2022), the same year that he traveled across Canada to “deliver his CBC Massey Lectures” (Ng, 2022), which is a great honour and prestigious literary achievement in Canada only awarded to the most distinguished and influential Canadians. He is still actively publishing although he is putting more emphasis on Cree-language and children’s books. He said in a press release for his children’s book, *Grand Chief Salamoo Cook is Coming to Town* (2023), that Cree is “the first language [he] spoke when [he] came into this earth, so [he] feel[s] it’s [his] responsibility to do whatever [he] can to help preserve it” (“Tomson Highway releasing,” 2023). Finding ways to celebrate, elevate, and inject Cree language into contemporary spaces has always been a tenet of Highway’s work, one that he has stayed true to over the decades of his writing career. Finding these intersections of contemporary creative production and traditional Cree language makes Highway’s work relevant to both the Cree (and larger Indigenous) community and helps future generations of Indigenous writers and creatives see themselves and their stories in these spaces.

This article traces the power of language in highway’s code-switching between English and Cree in his dramatic work, as well as the effect of this refusal of translation for an in-person audience (while making exceptions for a textual audience). In the first section, “Highway, NEPA, and Creating an Indigenous Theatre Scene in Toronto,” I set up the context of this chapter by tracing the origins of Indigenous Theatre in Canada to a particular geographical location, Canada’s largest city, Toronto. From here, I move on to Highway’s use of language and resistance against translation in the second section, “Inclusion of Cree Language and

Highway's Resistance Against Translation." In the final section, "Taking a Closer Look: Unpacking Examples from *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*," I use pivotal scenes in both of Highway's texts, which I call "chaos moments" as parallel scenes that affect the overall reading of the plays.

Highway, NEPA, and Creating an Indigenous Theatre Scene in Toronto

Native Earth Performing Arts is Canada's "oldest professional Indigenous performing arts company" ("About us," n. d.). It was first founded in 1982 in Toronto, Ontario, by Denis Lacroix (Plains Cree) and Bunny Sicard (Nothof, 2022). Four years after its founding, NEPA was able to secure government funding, which "provided a degree of stability, and allowed for the programming of a season" (Nothof, 2022). This additional funding allowed NEPA to expand, relocating to a new office space, hiring of "its first full-time staff, including Tomson Highway as Artistic Director" (Nothof, 2022). The key tenets of NEPA from its inception include goals to "provide a base for professional Native performers, writers, technicians, and other artists," as well as "encourage the use of theatre as a form of communication within the Native community, including the use of Native language" (Nothof, 2022). These are values that are still being held as NEPA continues to grow and create space for Indigenous voices in theatre through their Aki Studio Theatre and their annual "Weesageechak Begins to Dance" festival for Indigenous drama.

Highway's involvement in NEPA was central to inserting Indigenous voices and presence into the mainstream Canadian Theatre scene through his role as the artistic director, and with the way he has been able to showcase authentic Indigenous depictions in contemporary life. Before Highway, NEPA was reliant solely on crowdsourcing funds and donations from community members to fund productions. Their staff was entirely volunteer-based, and they relied on support from other Indigenous arts organizations in Toronto, like the Association for Native Development in the Performing Arts (ANDPVA). Highway was the first paid employee of NEPA, coming on as the Artistic Director when NEPA had secured government funding through the Ontario Arts Council¹.

Highway's *Rez Sisters* was first produced in 1986 simultaneously by the "De-Ba-Jeh-Mu-Jig Theatre Company on Manitoulin Island, on the reserve of Wikwemikong" and by NEPA at "the Native Canadian Centre in Toronto" (Fouache, 2015, p. 258). The same year, it won the "prestigious Dora Mavor Moore Award for Best New Play and was published by Fifth House" in 1988 (p. 259). Three years later, *Dry Lips* "premiered at Theatre Passe Muraille in Toronto" in 1989, which later "won the Ontario Art Council's Chalmers Award and was short-listed for the Governor General's Award" (Diel, 2014, p. 16). In 2010, Highway published Cree-language versions of *Rez Sisters*, called *Iskooniguni Iskweewuk* (Highway, 2010a), and *Dry Lips*, called *Paasteewitoon Kaapooskaysing*, which he calls the original version of the play (Highway, 2010b). Both texts were published by the Fifth House, the play's original publisher.

Ojibwe/Swampy Cree artist and writer, Lisa C. Ravensbergen, sees how Indigenous bodies have typically been depicted in Canada's national narrative in the context of trauma. Ravensbergen posits that the "accepted national narrative seems to believe that [Indigenous] collective trauma is the only thing . . . Indigenous peoples and artists . . . think or care about. This perpetuates the larger myth that [their] worth lies only in the story that includes settlers" (Robinson, 2016, p. 182). Highway, through his efforts to Indigenize theatre, tries to circumvent these traumatic narratives, showing an Indigenous audience an authentic depiction of themselves, while also destabilizing the settler expectation of Indigeneity as a tragic thing for a general Canadian audience. Operating in the vein of what writer and literary critic, Gerald Vizenor (White Earth

¹At this time, Indigenous Theatre was seen as a fringe group of the larger mainstream theatre scene in Canada. Because of this, it received little attention or support from mainstream networks and relied on collaborations with other theatres and Indigenous groups in Toronto for support, both financially and for the use of larger theatre spaces. NEPA, despite being a government funded company since the early 1980s, did not secure its own permanent theatre space until 2012 when they opened the Aki Studio Theatre in Toronto.



Minnesota Chippewa), calls *survivance* (Vizenor, 2008), Highway shows the real, ugly, honest and joyful side of Indigenous life, but does not succumb to or slip into these tragic narratives without laughter. *Survivance* is central to Highway's work as it is a necessary tool to provide an authentic representation of Indigenous life, characters, and experience in a contemporary space in what is colonially called Canada. Highway does not shy away from the struggles that Indigenous communities face in the wake of settler colonialism, like the aftermath of the Indian Residential School system (IRS)², the loss of traditional language, cultural, and spiritual knowledge, systemic addiction issues, and sexual violence (often towards female characters).

For Highway to show an authentic depiction, he includes both these very beautiful and very ugly truths. One way that he does this is by adopting an observational stance, where unsettling is key. This unsettling space is often occupied by settlers, whose discomfort can act as a productive entrance into complex conversations around settler colonialism. Generative unsettling can allow for what are otherwise familiar academic terms to be redefined, or perhaps more clearly defined, in order to address, and in Highway's case, to intentionally avoid "the increasing co-optation of discourses of reconciliation by a hegemonic network of institutions and agents" (Wakeham, 2007, p. 11, as cited in McCall, 2013, p. 57).

Through the unpacking of NEPA's history and tracing the entrance into the theatre of NEPA's first Artistic Director, we can see the work Highway did to get NEPA on the map, not just in the defining of Indigenous Theatre as a genre, but also in shifting his work from this previously considered fringe group, as Indigenous Theatre was considered at the time, into hegemonic Canadian Theatre discourse. Highway's *Rez Sisters* was, for the first time, an Indigenous play that was being produced at prestigious, longstanding theatres and taken up in conversation by mainstream Canadian Theatre networks. This marked a huge shift for Highway's career, NEPA's future funding and reception, and a pivotal moment for Indigenous Theatre as a genre.

Inclusion of Cree Language and Highway's Resistance Against Translation

Highway's inclusion of Cree in both plays is done in interesting ways, particularly signaled by his refusal to translate the Cree moments in the text for a live audience. Interestingly, in the print versions of Highway's Rez Cycle plays, translations for the Cree moments are given but not readily accessible. *Rez Sisters*, the first play in the cycle, includes translations for the Cree moments in footnotes further down on the page—a more immediate translation for non-Indigenous readers of the play, but still with a level of removal from the text. In *Dry Lips*, Highway takes this a step further, offering entire scenes in Cree which are translated in full, but the translations are included as a post-script appendix of the text.

This interesting use of Cree language and refusal of translation for live audiences raises questions of inclusivity, audience, and the potential for discomfort in Highway's work. Cree is central to Highway's writing process and the construction of his plays. He clarifies that "[he is] actually using English filtered through the mind, the tongue, and the body of a person who is speaking in Cree" (Highway, 2008, p. 33, as cited in Somacarrera, 2014, p. 43). According to Métis scholar, Warren Cariou, Highway described the publishing process of his Rez Cycle plays as "a kind of linguistic homecoming, insisting that [both] *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* had originally been composed in Cree and only translated into English" (Cariou, 2014, p. 581).

Thinking about the politics of translation, we can turn to the thoughts of literary theorist Gayatri Spivak. When considering creative expression in the literary arts, Spivak sees language as "one of the many elements that allow us to make sense of things, of ourselves" and in this capacity, "making sense of ourselves is what produces identity" (Spivak, 2009, p. 200). If language functions as a tool for identity-building, it inherently

²The Indian Residential School system, or IRS, was a system of government-funded and organized schools for Indigenous peoples with a focus on assimilation towards 'Canadian' values and a stripping of Indigenous language, culture and spirituality.



carries the baggage of identity politics within it. When we consider translation, the bridging of a text or an idea across disparate epistemological frameworks, Spivak sees the translator as being at the mercy of the text itself, having to “surrender to the text” (p. 205). The translator “must solicit the text to show the limits of its language, because that rhetorical aspect will point at the silence of the absolute fraying of language that the text wards off, in its special manner” (p. 205). Translation becomes a kind of intimate knowledge of a text, which can exist in both ideological spheres. As Spivak notes, “unless the translator has earned the right to become the intimate reader, [they] cannot surrender to the text, cannot respond to the special call of the text” (p. 205).

Postcolonial translation (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999; Niranjana, 1992) calls for a necessary contextualization of the work in translation in relation to the hegemonic system it is being translated into. Bassnett and Trivedi (1999) remind us of the political nature of translation, where the systems from which translations emerge get inscribed into the work itself, recalling how “translations are always embedded in cultural and political systems” (p. 6). Translations are not just an “aesthetic act” but a weaving together of systemic values, which rarely, as Bassnett and Trivedi point out, “involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors, or systems” (p. 2). Niranjana (1992) goes even further when considering the politics of postcolonial translation, suggesting that “translation both shapes and takes shape ‘within the asymmetrical relations of power that operate under colonialism’” (Niranjana, 1992, p. 2, as cited in Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999, p. 4). Turning this towards Highway’s work, we can read Highway’s refusal to translate for a live audience as a reaction of the audience’s entry into the intimacies of the play. Both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips* grapple with the struggles faced within Indigenous communities in Canada in the aftermath of the Residential School system. Both these plays were staged in Toronto for predominantly white, settler audiences. In this refusal to let the audience members fully enter into the world that Highway has built, perhaps there is a layer of protection for these stories, reserving them for the Indigenous audience members who can appreciate and articulate the experiences being staged. For Highway, the refusal of translation is a rejection of Euro-Western literary control over his Indigenous stories and his voice as an Indigenous person. It is a rejection of colonial dominance, just as surely as it is an act of resistance and a demand for visibility in a society set on eliding voices like his.

One of Highway’s greatest skills is the way he is able to “successfully feature[s] some of the issues currently afflicting [Indigenous] peoples’ lives in Canada for the benefit of white audiences” in his work, according to Cécile Fouache (Fouache, 2015, p. 259). Highway’s work is so unique and important to study because of what Fouache calls the “renewed interest in the everyday life of reserve [Indigenous peoples] in Canada” (p. 267). Highway was able to do this by “show[ing] the existence and richness of his people and to give them back a pride in themselves by combing Western and [Indigenous] dramatic forms of expression” (p. 268). Highway’s work is important to Indigenous audiences because of the authenticity in his representation of Indigenous life in mainstream theatre spaces. Here, we see that Fouache thinks that this is specifically for the “benefit of white audiences.” While the question of Highway’s audience is an important one, Highway’s staging of his plays with Indigenous cast members in mainstream theatre spaces may attract a larger settler audience due to venue location; however, he still keeps some of his Indigenous content as “insider” information for Indigenous audiences through the inclusion of Cree language and spiritual elements, like the presence of Nanabush, the Cree trickster figure, as a character in both plays.

Building on Western dramatic forms and conventions, Highway is able to manipulate generic conventions to work for his storylines. Fouache notes that Highway also “inserts [these forms] into a Cree outlook in terms of language, culture, spirituality, and contemporary social issues to achieve a balance between the two poles” of identity (pp. 266–267). The question of audience is an important one to consider when looking at Highway’s work—on one hand, Highway is telling Indigenous stories, using Indigenous language and

mythology, as well as Indigenous actors to stage these narratives—his work is very much *for* an Indigenous community, not necessarily one that is Cree, like himself, but one that has experienced and understands the struggle of what it means to be Indigenous in Canada. On the other hand, Highway is staging these works at predominant theatres in Toronto, theatres that are very much a part of the hegemonic, mainstream Canadian Theatre scene that are frequented by predominantly settler audiences. I think Highway's intended audience is *both* communities—he includes elements in his plays that build community for Indigenous audience members, like his use of Cree language, but is also aware of the many settler audience members and builds in aspects of the play to purposefully unsettle and create discomfort in the audience, like his refusal to translate the Indigenous languages present in his work.

Lindsay Diel thinks that *Dry Lips* especially has “predominantly been appraised from within a Western framework” (Diel, 2014, p. 17), but this does not mean that it was not written with the intention to transcend the bounds of mainstream theatre, that it was not meant to straddle the line between Western and Indigenous epistemological spheres. This simultaneous work in both Indigenous and Western spheres is one “translation” gap within Highway's work; Highway is unable to “translate” all of these experiences and significances that would make sense for a Cree, or even an Indigenous, audience, but would be lost on a Western audience—the elements are there if you have the framework to “read” them, but this does create a gap between a settler audience and the narrative they are seeing staged. In this way, there are two levels of translation at work in the play: the literal translation (or refusal) of the Cree language and the social or ideological translation of the community-specific details and knowledge present in the play.

Considering translation as a concept, we can turn to Simona Bertacco's thoughts, when she reminds us that “making another language palpable to your listeners or your readers, playing or struggling with the ambiguity that the space between languages allows are all very common experience to ‘foreigners’ of any time and place and qualify the interlanguage that they speak, marked as it is by the process of translation” (Bertacco, 2016, p. 178). If we follow Bertacco's thoughts here, we can see that the translation gap exists not only between language and worldview but is also intentionally used by Highway to alienate or ‘Other’ a predominately settler audience.

Considering Highway's work in relation to Bertacco's thoughts, we can see how Diel calls on Nadia Ferrara's thoughts on Cree ‘ways of knowing,’ to make this assessment, recalling the different way dreams are viewed in Cree culture versus Western culture. The flattening or Westernizing of cultural elements in Highway's work actually serves to eliminate their cultural and community-specific importance. Bertacco counts three instances of this code-switching within *The Rez Sisters* (p. 188), which she considers to function “as markers of dramatic moments and as chorus” (p. 188). NunatuKavut scholar, Kristina Fagan Bidwell, reads this a bit differently, considering the “code-switching, jumping back and forth between various languages and styles, [Indigenous writers] challenge the dominance of any one language. By keeping the reader ‘off balance,’ the writers bring their language choices to the reader's conscious attention, refuting the transparency of language and reminding us of the powers of language: to disrupt, confuse, exclude as well as to include, inform, and amuse” (Fagan, 2010, p. 26, as cited in Leconte, 2018, p. 18).

Bertacco tells us that “as readers, we often encounter textualities that resist a monolingual reading by putting us to the test in terms of linguistic, literary, and cultural competence. It may very well happen that we miss a pun or a cultural allusion because we don't know all the languages or the rhetorical protocols the text is using” (Bertacco, 2016, p. 182). This is an important tool that Highway makes use of in his work, keeping cultural or community knowledge coded for Indigenous audience members. This helps build community within and surrounding his work for Indigenous audience members to connect with the actors, storytelling, and cultural details. This simultaneously serves to keep settler audience members separate from these

stories through cultural distance. Not all knowledge is for every audience, and Highway enacts a secondary refusal of translation in his rejection to translate community details or Cree storytelling elements to let settler audiences 'in' on the action of the plays.

Highway uses "transculturation" as a "tool of survival for minority language culture," according to Bertacco (p. 187), but also considers the way that the inclusion of a non-colonial language, whether it is translated or not for an audience, can leave behind the residue of the history and significance of colonial encounters, in a productive way. Bertacco also tells us that "if translation is a bearing across of meaning . . . translation affect[s]—and functions as—their poetics and leaves a palpable trace of the passage from one language to another" (p. 183). In Highway's work, there is a level of translation happening between the Indigenous community elements that has to happen in order for them to be re-produced on stage. It is the level of contextualization and unpacking for a settler audience that is rejected in many instances.

Pilar Somacarrera, the translator for the Spanish-language version of *The Rez Sisters*, tells us that "many critics . . . have noted that the process of translation exerts violence against the other" referring to critics like Lawrence Venuti, Jacques Derrida, and Carol Maier (Pascual, 2013, p. 56, as cited in Somacarrera, 2014, pp. 42–43). Highway, in his rejection of the on-stage translation of the Cree language, avoids the potential danger of misinterpreting or misrepresenting the Cree conversations and idioms taking place in English for a live audience. The translations provided for the print version create a different layer of meaning and interpretation for the reader to digest as they work through the play. The potential for violence here is diminished, however, since Highway himself is translating these into English. Somacarrera, in their awareness of this potential for violence in their role as the translator of Highway's works, is essential in keeping their work and process ethical. I appreciate how they flag this, especially in that they are translating to Spanish, another colonial language, even if it is not directly related to the colonization of the land and area that Highway is from or writing about. Somacarrera's awareness of the overt implications of this translation means that they will be more thoughtful in potentially reproducing colonial violence in this text. This reflective act is an example of critical disposition at work. Here, Somacarrera is modeling the self-reflexive 'dis-positioning' work, analyzing their positionality and biases that they may carry into their analysis or impose on the text through their translation. Since translation, as an act, requires the translator to filter the text through their personal lens, their way of seeing the world, Critical Dispositioning makes one more aware of the ways in which their bias is influencing the text. In these moments, one could follow Somacarrera's model of translation, where they found a way to translate the spirit of the text, though it differs from 'textbook' translation in the shift from "sisters" to "comadres".

By looking at the different ways in which translation is tackled for in-person versus textual audiences of Highway's work, we can see that translation was not provided for productions of either of Highway's plays but was included in the print versions of *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*. Despite being provided, the translations were not readily-accessible, still removed by a layer of formatting in both versions, highlighting Highway's refusal to translate Cree words and scenes. In Highway's work, the refusal of translation is an act of resistance, an intentional rhetorical move on Highway's part, telling his stories in his primary language (Cree) and reclaiming space for his culture within a system that has sought to erase both his language and his presence. This resistance against translation is also a way to build community, allowing Cree audience members to enter into a protected space within the production while simultaneously excluding non-Cree or non-Indigenous audience members. This discomfort from being 'Othered' has the potential to be a space for generative and productive understanding of the systemic colonial displacement of Indigenous peoples in Canada, even on a small scale, just for the space of the play.

Taking a Closer Look: Unpacking Examples from *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*

Taking a closer look at two moments in Highway's work, we can unpack what I am calling "chaos moments" found in two of Highway's plays, *The Rez Sisters* (1986), and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* (1989). These "chaos moments" are moments of climax in the play, where movement, sound, and layers of time converge to create a 'soundscape' of music, language, and action.

As I read these two plays, I will be using Critical Positioning to guide my thinking. What I mean by this is that I flag moments in the text where community-building works are used, works that signal a collective Indigenous audience (like "us," "we," or "our") and call myself back, reminding myself that I am not the intended audience of these works, strengthening the critical distance between myself and the plays. In doing so, I am also making space for community-specific readings of these texts. In both *Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips*, Highway rejects the on-stage translation of the Cree language used. Highway is creating this gap, and in a sense, enacting a kind of Critical Positioning between the predominantly settler audience and the Indigenous worldview being portrayed on stage.

"Chaos moments" are sites of rupture where the critical distance seems to collapse for both settler and Indigenous viewers. In *The Rez Sisters*, right after the climax of the action in the text, the "chaos moment" occurs where the women from the Wasaychigan Reserve attend the BIGGEST BINGO IN THE WORLD, which is held in Toronto. The Bingo Master, another guise of Nanabush, the Cree trickster figure, comes to take the sick and dying Marie-Adele to the Spirit World, signaling her death. In this 'denouement' of action, Marie-Adele does not go gently with Nanabush. Instead, she begins yelling at him in Cree. He takes on the guise of a Nightbird, ready to take her soul to rest. Marie-Adele says to Nanabush in Cree: "U-ni-nuk ma-a oo-ma kee-tha? Ka. Kee-tha i-chi-goo-ma, so that's who you are," which means "Then who are you really? Oh. It's you, so that's who you are" (Highway, 1986, p. 104). In this moment, she recognizes Nanabush. She sees beyond his guises as the Cree trickster who has come for her.

This scene's Cree translation is provided for the reader in a footnote further down on the page. The footnote reads "Who are you? Who are you? Eugene? Nee. Then who are you really? Oh. It's you, so that's who you are...at the rest on the rock...the master of the game...the game...it's me....me...come" (p. 104). For a live audience, however, there would be no such translation offered, keeping this pivotal moment of a woman confronted with her own death as a private experience for her and her community members, rejecting translation as a refusal of the commodification of Indigenous suffering and tragedy by a settler audience. This moment is one of recognition, where Marie-Adele recognizes Nanabush for who he is. She also hints that she saw through his earlier iteration as the Bingo Master and knew that was not *only* who he was. She is confused at first, mistaking him for her husband Eugene, but when she fully recognizes him as Nanabush, she is ready for him to take her spirit away from the land of the living. The scene culminates with all the women gathering around Marie-Adele and singing to her an Ojibwe funeral song. They chant "Wa-kwing, wa-wking, nin wi-i-ja," which the footnote tells us means, "heaven, heaven, I'm going there" (p. 105). Marie-Adele is finally at peace. This song is not provided for a reader of the play, but an audience would get to experience it. In refusing to include this in the published version, I cannot help but think that Highway is also resisting the commodification of such a sacred song.

The "chaos moment" in *Dry Lips* comes at a similar place in the play's plot. In *Dry Lips*, the Wasaychigan women have created their own Indigenous women's hockey league that catches on until it becomes the "Aboriginal Women's World Hockey League." At this moment, we see Big Joey, who is an announcer for the WASY Reserve radio channel, commentating on the game (Highway, 1989, pp. 124-126). As the action continues and gets more chaotic, Big Joey slips into Cree, giving a play-by-play on the women's hockey game without translating every word—some words are 'untranslatable,' like the name of the team, the Wasy

Wailerettes, and hockey terms, like “right winger” and the “particular puck” that previously found its way inside the jersey of Gazelle Nataways (double-cast as Nanabush) from the earlier hockey scene, stopping the game (p. 75). In the last hockey scene, the chaos of action ruptures as Big Joey Cree play-by-play continues. Big Joey announces, “Hey, soggi pagichee-ipinew ‘particular puck’ referee Pierre St. Pierre . . . igwa seemak wathay g’waskootoo like a heard of wild turtles” (pp. 124–125). The translation of these lines, “Hey, and referee Pierre St. Pierre drops the ‘particular puck’... and takes off like a heard of wild turtles,” is provided in the post-text appendix (p. 133). The chaotic action and frantic commentary is broken up by “Bits and pieces of Nanabush/Gazelle Nataways’ ‘strip music’ and Kitty Wells’ ‘It Wasn’t God Who Made Honky Tonk Angels,’” which we get in a stage note, reminding the audience and the actors of Nanabush’s earlier arrivals in the play, and that Nanabush is still present, in this moment, but also in the space of the theatre through the return of Cree language for this scene. Translation for this whole scene, including the code-switching between Cree and English, is not provided on the page, but rather included as an appendix in the back of the book (pp. 133–134). Again, this is a layer of meaning that a reader of the play would get, if they look for it, but a live audience member would be excluded from.

It is interesting that Highway uses such a similar construction for each play’s plot structure, putting these pivotal moments in similar spots, but also choosing to have these moments of rupture and inclusion of traditional Indigenous languages when Indigenous women have placed themselves in the context of a global event, getting worldwide attention. Whether it be from the Biggest Bingo in the World or a the Aboriginal Women’s World Hockey League, Highway is choosing to have the world watch (both within the play, but also through the audience) as Indigenous issues and language are foregrounded.

In both of Highway’s plays, traditional Indigenous languages are used at a time of intense action to rupture the scene, to confuse and create discomfort for settler audiences, but also create community for Indigenous audience members. From my settler perspective, the way Highway strategically translates and refuses translation works to unsettle Western positionalities. The effect is to keep me, as a settler, un-settled and to make me an outsider to the play’s action. Simultaneously, these same aspects invite Indigenous audience members into the action. Bertacco considers these rupture moments of Cree language as a way of “establish[ing] in a permanent way the speech of a community that is likely doomed to disappear . . . mostly written in English and often performed only in English, but the trace of Cree and [Anishinaabemowin] as the languages spoken on the reservation, as well as the pervasive use of community’s ‘village English’” (Bertacco, 2016, p. 187).

Many characters in Highway’s plays (including Highway himself) are survivors of the Residential School system that was active in Canada from the early 18th century up until 1996. This system attempted to systematically erase the Indigenous culture and language and assimilate the Indigenous peoples into the colonial society. The fact that Highway retains his first language, Cree, and that he is making an effort to preserve and transmit it through his work is an act of resistance against a system that tried to destroy his ancestral language and culture. The fact that Highway has his characters speak Indigenous languages in mainstream Canadian Theatre spaces is an act of resistance. These moments are a rupture in the fabric of the Canadian colonial project, which is still ongoing today.

It is important to consider the resistance and implications of using traditional Indigenous languages within a dramatic Western setting after such thorough and pervasive efforts to erase it. Ravensbergen said that when she was younger, she “was told the fact that [she] exist[s] is a political act. [She’s] come to understand that it’s a political act to be *seen*” (Robinson, 2016, p. 190). I would like to extend this further by considering Highway’s use of language and translation in his work as resistance. I think that Highway would argue here that it is also a political act to be *heard*, and to be heard authentically in traditional Indigenous

voices and languages. Because these texts were, according to Highway, originally conceived of in Cree and translated into English in order to be performed and read by a wide, Western audience, there is a particular kind of gap that is created between the intended meaning and what gets performed. The closest we get to the 'original' intention of the play is the rupture moments where Cree is inserted into the play.

Bertacco reminds us of the cultural significance of the trickster figure in Highway's plays, Nanabush, who goes by other names and takes other forms for different Indigenous groups. At the beginning of each Rez Cycle play, Highway provides a "Note on Nanabush," where context is provided for a non-Indigenous audience that Nanabush is a shifting entity, taking many names and guises (Highway, 1986, p. xiii). Bertacco frames this in the context of language and translation, reading Nanabush as "the perfect embodiment of translation: neither animal nor human, neither God nor man, the Trickster or Great Translator, puts with its own presence the issue of untranslatability at the very centre of this story" (Bertacco, 2016, p. 191).

"Chaos moments" in both *The Rez Sisters* and *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing* can be read as parallel scenes, shaping the way we interpret their respective texts through the use of Indigenous language and refusal of translation, but also in the way dramatic conventions are broken for an audience. These scenes can also be read in a way that puts them in conversation with one another—two "chaos moments" from the same place but at different times and for different audiences, reading the actors on stage as one embedded audience, and the actual audience in the theatre as another. Critical Dispositioning is an essential reading practice for settlers engaging in Indigenous work as non-Indigenous readers. By flagging community-building words and sitting with the discomfort of being excluded from action through Highway's refusal for translation, creates a space of discomfort where understanding and healing can occur.

Discussion and Conclusion

Through Highway's revolutionary dramatic work, for the first time, Indigenous Theatre was brought out of the fringes and was set centre-stage in the larger Canadian Theatre scene. Highway's work with his Rez Cycle plays ruptured the bounds of theatre, breaking conventions just as easily as character's broke the 'fourth wall' in the *Rez Sisters*' interactive mid-play bingo game. Indigenous stories were finally being told by Indigenous storytellers and actors and were being taken up as part of the larger Canadian Theatre scene as a fully developed genre, rather than an indie sub-category of fringe theatre. Toronto, as a metropolitan nexus, served as the perfect backdrop to gather urban Indigenous theatre artists and writers to do this work, especially with the ongoing development of NEPA at the time.

More recently, Highway is continuing his project of transmitting Cree language to the next generation, like with his children's book he published in 2022. In an interview with Tobin Ng for Broadview, Highway was asked: "what can be done to preserve Indigenous languages?" (Ng, 2022). He replied simply, "Writing them" (Ng, 2022). Highway is both a writer and a musician, so writing books and music in Cree is essential in his project to transmit the language, preserve it, and even get people who do not speak Cree to "start singing in the language" because his work is so catchy (Ng, 2022). Overall, Highway's inclusion of Cree and strategic translation and refusal to translate makes for a compelling story, one that has the power to create discomfort and community in both Indigenous and settler audiences.

NEPA also continues to carry forward the work that Highway started as its first Artistic Director. Now entering into its 42nd season, NEPA continues to support emerging Indigenous playwrights by providing hands-on practical skills for Indigenous theatre artists. With the establishment of their permanent theatre space in 2012, the Aki Studio Theatre, they also continue to stage Indigenous plays, share Indigenous stories and promote Indigenous voices and languages—where translation into colonial languages is always optional.





Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details

Raphaela Pavlakos

¹ McMaster University, Department of English and Cultural Studies, Hamilton, Canada

0000-0001-7036-3980

✉ pavlakor@mcmaster.ca

References

- About us. (n.d.) Native Earth Performing Arts Inc. <https://www.nativeearth.ca/about/>
- Bassnett, S., & Trivedi, H. (1999). *Post-colonial translation: Theory and practice*. Routledge.
- Bertacco, S. (2016). On translation: Between Postcolonialism and the Global Humanities. *The New Centennial Review*, 16(1), pp. 177–194. <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.16.1.0177>
- Boyd, C. (2008). Tomson Highway. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/highway-tomson>
- Cariou, W. (2014). Indigenous Literature and other Verbal Arts, Canada (1960–2012). In J. H. Cox & D. H. Justice (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of Indigenous American literature* (pp. 577–588). Oxford University Press.
- Charlebois, G. & Nothof, A. (2021). Tomson Highway. *Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia*. <https://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Highway%2C%20Tomson>
- Diel, L. (2014). 'And what are you dreaming about?': An analysis of Tomson Highway's *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. *Rupkatha Journal: On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*. 6(2), pp. 15–22.
- Fagan, K. (2010). Code-switching humour in Aboriginal Literature. In E. LaRocque & P. DePasquale (Eds.), *Across Cultures/Across Borders* (pp. 25–41). Broadview Press.
- Fouache, C. (2015). Staging the Indian Reserve: Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*. In G. N. Devy, G. V. Davis, & K. K. Chakravarty (Eds.), *Performing identities* (pp. 258–269). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315089942-16>.
- Highway, T. (1989). *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (2010a). *Iskooniguni Iskweewuk (The Rez Sisters - Cree)*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (2010b). *Paasteewitooon Kaapooskaysing (Dry Lips - Cree)*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (1986). *The Rez Sisters*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (2008). "Why Cree is the Sexiest of All Languages." In D. H. Taylor (Ed.), *Me Sexy: An exploration of Native sex and sexuality* (pp. 33–40). Douglas & McIntyre.
- Highway, T. (1986). *The Rez Sisters*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (1989). *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (2008). Why Cree is the sexiest of all languages. In D. H. Taylor (Ed.), *Me Sexy: An exploration of Native sex and sexuality* (pp. 33–40). Douglas & McIntyre.
- Highway, T. (2010a). *Iskooniguni Iskweewuk (The Rez Sisters - Cree)*. Fifth House.
- Highway, T. (2010b). *Paasteewitooon Kaapooskaysing (Dry Lips - Cree)*. Fifth House.
- Leconte, M. (2018). (Non)Translation as resistance in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen*. *Transcultural*, 10(1), pp. 11–28. <https://doi.org/10.21992/tc29381>
- McCall, S. (2013). Intimate Enemies: Weetigo, Weesageechak, and the Politics of Reconciliation in Tomson Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* and Joseph Boyden's *Three Day Road*. *Studies in American Indian Literatures*, 25(3), 57–85. <https://doi.org/10.5250/studamerindilite.25.3.0057>
- Ng, T. (2022, Sept. 6). *Tomson Highway on the magic of Cree and the power of myths*. Broadview. <https://broadview.org/tomson-highway-interview/>
- Niranjana, T. (1992). *Siting translation: History, post-structuralism, and the colonial context*. University of California Press.



- Nothof, A. (2019). *Dry Lips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*. Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia. <https://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Dry%20Lips%20Oughta%20Move%20to%20Kapuskasing>
- Nothof, A. (2022). *Native Earth Performing Arts*. Canadian Theatre Encyclopedia. <https://www.canadiantheatre.com/dict.pl?term=Native%20Earth%20Performing%20Arts>
- Pascual, N. (2013). Cosmopolitans at home: The Spanishness of Canadian women writers. In P. Somacarrera (Ed.), *Made in Canada, Read in Spain: Essays on the translation and circulation of English Canadian literature* (pp. 54–74). Versita.
- Robinson, D. (2016). Acts of defiance in Indigenous Theatre: A conversation with Lisa Ravensbergen. In D. Robinson & K. Martin (Eds.), *Arts of engagement: Taking aesthetic action in and beyond the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (pp. 181–192). Wilfred Laurier University Press.
- Simon, S. (2011). Hybridity and translation. *Handbook of Translation Studies* (Y. Gambier & L. van Doorslaer, Eds.) John Benjamins Publishing, pp. 49–53.
- Somacarrera, P. (2014). From 'sisters to comadres': Translating and transculturating Tomson Highway's *The Rez Sisters*. *Canada and Beyond*, 4(1/2), pp. 41–64. <https://doi.org/10.33776/candb.v4i1.3014>
- Spivak, G. C. (2009). The Politics of Translation. *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (1st ed, Spivak, G. C., Ed) Routledge, pp. 200–225. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203440872-9>
- Tomson Highway releasing a musical picture book for kids in Cree and English. (2023, April 6). *The Canadian Press*. Retrieved from <https://www.ctvnews.ca/entertainment/tomson-highway-releasing-a-musical-picture-book-for-kids-in-cree-and-english-1.6345780>
- Vizenor, G. (2008). *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence*. University of Nebraska Press.
- Wakeham, P. (2007). Discourses of reconciliation, Aboriginal-State relations, and the production of postcolonial closure. *Abstract for TransCanada II: Literature, Institutions, Citizenship*, University of Guelph, pp. 11–14.



Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies

Research Article

 Open Access

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in Nineteenth-Century Istanbul: Appropriation and Performance as Trauma Narrative/Cure in Çağan Irmak's *Creature* (2023)



Özlem Karadağ¹  

¹ Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Türkiye

Abstract

Çağan Irmak's 2023 Netflix series *Yaratılan* (*Creature*) is an adaptation inspired by Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*. Çağan Irmak reappropriates the novel into the nineteenth-century Ottoman context. The series presumably has the cholera outbreak (1840s or 1890s) as the triggering point of one of the main characters', Ziya's (Dr Frankenstein's equivalent), search for immortality, and falls in line with the questions raised by the novel, as well as the traumatic history of not only the nineteenth century dynamics but also the human helplessness in the face of pandemics/epidemics, including COVID-19. İhsan (the creature) as an unusual doctor, who quite extraordinarily becomes the "monster" of this adaptation, helps raise questions concerning (bio-)ethics as well as trauma and recovery. He is re-educated and regains his memory through his encounter with a theatre troupe and heals through his interactions with others who are social outcasts like him. Thus, performance (acting and narrating) functions as a way of facing and dealing with traumatic memories. In the context of cultural adaptation and appropriation of a classical novel, this paper aims to discuss how the act of adaptation itself and the choice of theatrical rehearsal, performance, and storytelling serve as a LaCapraesque acting out and working through to help deal with fictional and non-fictional traumas.

Keywords

Çağan Irmak's *Creature* • Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* • cultural appropriation • transcultural adaptation • trauma narratives

Author Note

The Editor was not involved in the evaluation, peer-review, or decision-making processes of the article. These processes were conducted by the Guest Editor and the co-editor and editorial board members.



Citation: Karadağ, Ö. (2025). Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in Nineteenth-Century Istanbul: appropriation and performance as trauma narrative/cure in Çağan Irmak's *Creature* (2023). *Litera: Dil, Edebiyat ve Kültür Araştırmaları Dergisi*–*Litera: Journal of Language, Literature and Culture Studies*, 35(Suppl. 1), 88–104. <https://doi.org/10.26650/LITERA2025-1613742>

 This work is licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.  

 2025. Karadağ, Ö.

 Corresponding author: Özlem Karadağ okaradag@istanbul.edu.tr



Introduction

Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein* has been the subject and object of numerous film and theatre adaptations across various cultural backgrounds. The most recent Turkish adaptation and cultural appropriation of the novel to the screen is a Netflix series called *Yaratılan (Creature)* written and directed by Çağan Irmak (2023). Although the storyline loosely follows the original, as the running titles also suggest, the series is not loyally adapted from but inspired by Shelley's novel. The need for cultural (re)appropriation and the critical choices and changes made by the director/screenwriter mark the series as a text that opens itself to new theoretical discussions rather than the technical details of adapting the page to the screen. The series, which has the cholera outbreak (presumably the 1847 or 1893 outbreak) as the triggering point of Ziya's (Frankenstein's equivalent) search for immortality, not only falls in line with the questions raised by the novel, but also with the traumatic history of human helplessness in the face of pandemics/epidemics, old and new, including COVID-19, and the limits of humanity. Ihsan (Frankenstein's creature) as an unusual doctor, who quite extraordinarily becomes the "monster" of this adaptation, raises questions concerning (bio-)ethics as well as trauma and recovery. Contrary to the original creature who was depicted as a tabula rasa and as a noble savage that is educated through eavesdropping on the works such as Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Ihsan, whose name is phonetically and symbolically very similar to "insan" (human) and literally means "gift," is re-educated and regains his memory through his encounter with a theatre troupe. Thus, performance, on all levels, functions as a way of facing and dealing with traumatic memories. This paper focuses on *Creature (Yaratılan)* as a "palimpsestuous" (Hutcheon, 2006/2013) new text that is created through a process of cultural adaptation and appropriation of *Frankenstein*, specifically focusing on the creature of this adaptation, and how the act of adaptation itself as well as the choice of retelling/narrating, theatrical rehearsal, and performance in the heart of the series serve as a LaCapraesque acting out and working through to help deal with fictional and non-fictional traumas.

Trauma Theory and LaCapraesque "Acting Out & Working Through"

Trauma, the ancient Greek word for wound that is used for bodily injury, has been recognised as a theory, dominantly as a literary one, in the 1980s, with a return to Holocaust narratives. Yet, it was first defined as a wound of the mind, as early (or late) as the late 19th – early 20th century, by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he coins the term as "traumatic neuroses" (1940/2003, p. 50). Traumas are not limited to personal experiences; they are more of a personal or group response to both personal and/or collective traumas, which can be caused by any form of physical, verbal, or psychological violence. Freud describes it as a belated response to traumatic experiences that revisits the victim in the form of hallucinations, nightmares, and repetitive actions as the deeply buried traumatic memory struggles to come to the surface.¹ In her *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth discusses that "the wound of the mind," as Freud argues in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is "a breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world" and is not "like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event." Caruth states that it is "experienced too soon, too

¹Freud also sees a close relationship between the existence of a physical wound and the delay in the acknowledgement of trauma (-tic neurosis) as well as the impossibility of acknowledging it in the moment of experiencing a traumatising event: "In the case of ordinary traumatic neurosis, two features stand out very clearly, and have proved a useful starting point for further thought: first, the fact that the key causative element appeared to lie in the surprise factor, the fright experienced by the victim; and second, the fact that if any physical wound or injury was suffered at the same time, this generally inhibited the development of the neurosis" (1940/2003a, p. 50). He also underlines how the "patient" is haunted by the traumatic experience that is unclaimed without being conscious of it: "Now it is a distinctive feature of the dreamlife of patients with traumatic neurosis that it repeatedly takes them back to the situation of their original misadventure, from which they awake with a renewed sense of fright. People have shown far too little surprise at this phenomenon. The fact that the traumatic experience repeatedly forces itself on the patient even during sleep is assumed to be proof indeed of just how deep an impression it made. The patient is assumed to be, so to speak, psychically fixated on the trauma." (1940/2003, p. 51).



unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (1996, pp. 3-4).

A victim or survivor of a traumatic event does not actually realise being wounded in the mind, which remains hidden and therefore open and unhealed. However, through an encounter of the same kind that would remind the victim or make the victim realise the original traumatising experience, the wound of the mind is triggered and wants to be claimed and acknowledged by coming to the surface. Thus, the suppressed memory/experience begins to show or remind itself through and in repetitive yet uncommunicable ways to speak out and be healed. These repetitive acts might also include repetitive behaviours that somewhat takes the victim back to the traumatic event/past. In Freud's terms, these are a part of repetition compulsion: “the patient does not remember ... what he has forgotten and repressed but rather acts it out. He produces it not as a memory, but as an action; he repeats it” (1940/2003b, p. 36). Thus, through repeating and re-acting, the victim actually, unconsciously, first resists remembering but eventually tries to face and deal with the traumatising experience. In *Soundings in Critical Theory*, Dominick LaCapra argues that

For Freud a traumatic influx of excitation-an overwhelming rupture that the subject cannot effectively bind-is brought about not through an original event in isolation but through repetition: an event becomes traumatic retrospectively when it is recalled by a later event. In the trauma one thus has a conjunction of repetition and change. (LaCapra, 1989, 34-35)

Moving from Freud's repetition compulsion, in *Writing History Writing Trauma*, LaCapra proposes acting out and working through as two essential parts of overcoming/healing traumas. In his own words,

In acting out, tenses implode, and it is as if one were back there in the past reliving the traumatic scene. Any duality (or double inscription) of time (past and present or future) is experientially collapsed or productive only of aporias and double binds. In this sense, the aporia and the double bind might be seen as marking a trauma that has not been worked through. Working through is an articulatory practice: to the extent one works through trauma (...), one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recall in memory that something happened to one (or one's people) back then while realizing that one is living here and now with openings to the future. (Dominick LaCapra, 2001, pp. 21-22)

According to LaCapra's interpretation and use of these two concepts, acting out is a process seen as the victim looking at the experience as an insider and from a subjective stance. Thus, it is also a process during which the traumatic experience is revisited through re-acting, yet it is not claimed. However, acting out is the first and crucial part of the process, yet it is possible to claim the traumatic experience only when it is followed by “working through”. Since working through is a process during which the victim is able to look at the experience from an objective stance and as an outsider, which enables stepping out of a repetitive cycle. In the context of this article, not only this adaptation's monster but also the very act and need of going back to old texts and adapting them are studied under the light of trauma theory as the act of adapting is interpreted as repeating and reacting to remember and work through traumatic experiences, including historical ones.

Adaptation & Appropriation

Then, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by adaptation and appropriation in the context of this study. Adaptation studies, although a well-known and often studied or employed theoretical approach, is a field that had dominantly revolved around fidelity criticism (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 6) and adaptation from page to screen, classical novels to films to be specific. However, a more contemporary outlook in adaptation

studies finds this approach as a very limited one that, on the one hand valorises and centralises the original/ source text and disregards the new/end product, on the other hand, disregards a more complex process of an intermedia rewriting, reusing, adapting, and appropriating, which finally emerges as an independent text with its own agenda.

As Hutcheon discusses in *A Theory of Adaptation*, to talk about the process of or the end product as “adaptation” means that “we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works” (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 6). However, it is more of a concern to see how adaptation is no longer considered a copy (of a copy) that lacks originality, although it has close ties with one or several other texts. Hutcheon continues by defining her idea of adaptation as “repetition without replication” (2006/2013, p. 7), it is “a derivation that is not derivative—a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (2006/2013, p. 9). Therefore, this act may or should include a process of transferring and transforming (well-known) (non-) fictional stories through a new or different perspective, a dialogue between the source text and other texts.

It can be argued that, while Julie Sanders tackles adaptation and appropriation in their respective chapters in her seminal work *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006/2016), for Hutcheon, cultural appropriation is not seen as a concept separate from adaptation; shifts in time and place, specifically attempts at transferring and transforming from one culture to another, are discussed under adaptation as “transcultural adaptation” (2006/2013, p. 145) which includes a form of translation, also changes in time and setting, but most importantly introduces cultural changes that embody the specific positioning of history, politics, and other concerns of the target culture. The end product of this process of adaptation is a “transculturated” (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 145) text that comes with its own set of meanings that are created through the use of a mixture of stories, signs, and symbols from the source text and the target culture, thus “context conditions meaning” (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 145). As a part of this process, “something new and hybrid results” (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 150), and Hutcheon reuses Susan Stanford Friedman’s (2004) “anthropologic term ‘indigenization’ to refer to this kind of intercultural encounter and accommodation” (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 150). In the field of literary adaptations, film adaptations, and rewritings, this encounter results in not only recognisable connections with the source but also the adapter’s claiming the material as their own or their culture through deconstructing and reconstructing the source text (sometimes in a new medium) in a new context and possibly from a critical stance.

Although the definitions or the meanings loaded to the concept are similar, Julie Sanders technically defines adaptation as “a highly specific process involving the transition from one genre to another” (2006/2016, p. 24), it “most often signals a relationship with an informing source text either through its title or through more embedded references” (2016, p. 36). However, according to Sanders’ definition,

appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain, often through the actions of interpolation and critique as much as through the movement from one genre to others. (...) appropriations tend to have a more complicated, intricate and sometimes embedded relationship to their intertexts than a straightforward film version of a canonical or well-known text would suggest. (2006/2016, pp. 35-36)

Thus, adaptation is viewed mostly as an act that includes a “generic shift” (Sanders, 2016, p. 35), the transference from one genre or medium to another as a result of which the adapted text continues its ties with the source text in different ways. The main transformation is about the change in genre or medium, yet close and obvious ties to the source are at the forefront of the new text whereas appropriation does not necessarily require a generic shift but has a more complex relationship with the source text. Yet, Deborah

Cartmell, who is also referred to in Sanders' work, sees adaptation as having limitless possibilities that surpass any attempt at defining it in a very specific and clear-cut way. Referring to Wagner's and Andrew's categorizations², she further investigates the topic as follows:

But these categories restrict the field of 'adaptation' where the figure of the author (...) is prominent in the film's publicity and reception. We often lose sight of the fact that other films ... are also adaptations, and that there are adaptations which cannot be categorized in the ways that Wagner and Andrew suggest. In fact the more we study adaptations, the more it becomes apparent that the categories are limitless. (Cartmell, 1999, p. 24)

As Cartmell argues, these categorizations can be further multiplied, yet they also limit the definition of adaptation in the context of film adaptations to being an inferior or loosely related copy that receives acclamation or attention through their connection to the source text and its author. Although these categorizations do not diminish the creative and/or critical agenda of the adaptations, seeing adaptation as a process and an end product that may include or employ one or many different tactics that are categorised here in its aim to create a new whole can be a more inclusive and objective way of looking at adaptations.

Another important point in adaptation studies, apart from the impact of the source text and the aims of the adapter, is the audience response, as the audience, a "knowing audience" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 120) that knows the work is an adaptation from another recognised work or an "unknowing one" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 120) who does not recognise the source text and derives their own meanings and connections between the source text and many other possible references to other texts and the film. Imelda Whelehan also highlights this idea as follows:

Clearly the adapter 'poaches' from the original in most crucial ways, but perhaps the seasoned consumer of adaptations begins to find the process itself equally participatory, welcoming the opportunity to recapture the experience of a first encounter with the original text in a different formulation. (Whelehan, 1999, p. 16)

Hence, it would be more correct to say that adaptation comes as an umbrella term and acts of adapting and appropriating can be considered as acts of gathering, salvaging, replicating, and rewriting. It is not limited to copying and loyally recreating the source, keeping its time, place, and contexts intact. Furthermore, the meaning-making process is an open-ended or never-ending process that includes not only the source text, adapter and the adapter's position and the end product but also the audience. Therefore, it arises as a "writerly text," as coined by Roland Barthes in *S/Z* (1970/1974, p. 5).

Rewriting *Frankenstein* & Rewriting History

Çağan Irmak's *Yaratılan* (*Creature*) is an appropriation, a transcultural adaptation that adapts Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* through indigenisation, resulting in the reproduction of a new set of meanings in a new context. Irmak's series, with each episode, reminds the viewer that what they see is inspired by³ Shelley's novel. Irmak's adaptation keeps "knowing audiences" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 120) guessing while it

²Wagner (1975: 222–6) has suggested three categories of adaptations: 'transposition', in which the literary text is transferred as accurately as possible to film (...); 'commentary', in which the original is altered (...), and 'analogy', in which the original text is used as a point of departure (...). Dudley Andrew (1984) suggests adaptations be classified as 'borrowing', 'intersecting' and 'transforming': 'borrowing' makes no claims to fidelity (...), 'intersection' attempts to recreate the distinctness of the original text (...) and 'transformation' reproduces the 'essential' text (...)" (Whelehan, 1999, p. 16).

³Although in Turkish it says "Mary Shelley'nin *Frankenstein* romanından esinlenilmiştir" (Inspired by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*), yet the English translation says "based on the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley." The original and translation are actually two different processes of adapting from a text.

also emerges as a new text through cultural appropriation, although the similarities between the plots, characters, setting, and the concerns at heart are more than an inspiration.⁴ The concepts of inspiration, rewriting, adapting, and appropriating are not limited to Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Irmak (re-)tackles and, in a sense, "indigenizes" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 28) the *Frankenstein* story to deal with not only universal human dreams, anxieties, and limits discussed by Shelley in her novel but also with local history and traumas of the past, particularly Ottoman history, which also come as a desire to, perhaps, remind and deal with layers of past and present traumatic experiences. Thus, the act of indigenisation and cultural appropriation comes loaded with its own intertexts and meanings, while it also carries, transfers, and recreates the "palimpsestuous" structure of the source text (Hutcheon, 2006/2013, p. 6).⁵

It is possible to say that the adapter's task, or any author's or artist's task, is a Frankensteinian effort, similar to Shelley's *Frankenstein*, who gathers bits and pieces of body parts from graveyards to create a new being and stitches the pieces together and in a sense releases his creation to the greater world, Irmak, in our context, and Shelley herself, had woven their texts as a work of "intertextuality" (Kristeva, 2024, p. 37). Shelley is very much affected by her own reading history while creating her story and makes many allusions to other literary works that preceded her period (Hindle, 2013, pp. xxxii-xxxv). Starting from the subtitle of her novel "the Modern Prometheus" and with allusions to Milton or Rousseau, she not only makes references to her sources of inspiration but also recreates a new text by piecing together bits and pieces from other texts. Dennis R. Cutchins and Dennis Perry, in *Adapting Frankenstein* (2018), also list many sources that affected Shelley's writing as follows:

Shelley herself, in fact, began this dialogic process by incorporating into her novel Giovanni Aldini's radical experiments in galvanism, the Prometheus myth, Rousseauian philosophy, *Paradise Lost* (1667), the Faust legend, *Caleb Williams* (1794), and arguably François-Félix Nogaret's *Le Miroir des événements actuels, ou La Belle au plus offrant* (1790) and Senjūshō's 'Making a Humanoid at Mt Kōya' (ca. 13th century), among others. (Cutchins & Perry, 2018, p. 13)

They also argue that "Literary texts like Shelley's *Frankenstein* ... retain a plenitude of both intentional and unintentional meanings ... Adaptations may or may not adopt these meanings, but the very act of adaptation inevitably creates even more meanings, more possible paths ..." (Cutchins & Perry, 2018, p. 5). In his own right, Çağan Irmak not only delves into this palimpsestuous text but also loads it with other references, such as cultural and historical texts and visual and audial texts, as the new medium requires and enables him. This inevitably leads to the birth of new meanings pursued by the director or derived by the audience. Thus, the series also emerges as a new being, a creation that is pieced together, "a tissue, a woven fabric"⁶

⁴Both the novel and the adaptation/appropriation will dominantly be referred to as a text rather than a work, as used and defined by Roland Barthes in his "From Work to Text" in *Music, Text, Image* (1977). Barthes argues that "The Text can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign. The work closes on a signified. ... The Text, on the contrary, practises the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier and the signifier must not be conceived of as 'the first stage of meaning', its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its deferred action" (1977, p. 158). Therefore, a text is not only not closed in terms of its relations with other texts but also not closed in terms of meaning production as it is not fixed on a signifier.

⁵Palimpsestuous is a word derived from the word palimpsest, which was originally used by those who studied ancient manuscripts and parchments. Gérard Genette first used it in *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, where he indicated that it is "an adjective ... coined by Philippe Lejeune" (1982/1997, p. 399). As discussed by Sarah Dillon in her *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007), palimpsests "embody and provoke interdisciplinary encounter, both literally ... and figuratively" (p. 2) and palimpsestuous is, as she refers back to and quotes from Genette's reading of Proust, "a palimpsest in which several figures and several meanings are merged and entangled together, all present together at all times, and which can only be deciphered together, in their inextricable totality" (1982b, p. 226)" (p. 5). In our context, Shelley's and therefore Irmak's texts are seen as palimpsestuous texts that are "merged and entangled together" not only with each other but also with many other texts of their respective periods and/or concerns.

⁶Barthes refers to the etymological meaning of the word text when he says it is "a tissue, a fabric" and discusses that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (1977, p. 146) and draws attention to the palimpsestuous and intertextual existence of (any) text. However, I also like to add to this etymological meaning of the word tissue, its connotations that are closely related to the ideas discussed here, 1) paper, (and in the biological meaning of tissue as) 2) a collection of cells, all of which resonate not only with the idea of

(Barthes, 1977, p. 159); then, it is possible to argue that every work is a rewrite, an intertext, an appropriation that comes loaded with a new set of meanings.

However, the very conscious act of rewriting and adapting a text, especially going back to specific texts of the past and adapting and readapting them, comes with its own agenda. In a shallow manner, it might be for consumer culture and commercial purposes, yet in the last decades, it is more dominantly a postmodern desire to give voice to race, class, and gender issues. Encompassing the latter as well, I tend to see revisiting and rewriting or adapting old stories and histories, especially classical and controversial works such as Shelley's *Frankenstein*, in which human ambitions and anxieties are shaped into monsters (creature and/or Frankenstein) both as a need that emerges from humanity's unchanging yet ever-growing concerns and as an act of digging graves (in a Frankensteinian manner again), searching darkness and seeking pieces to create a meaningful whole that arises from the need to face and deal with the repressed traumas. Thus, rewriting, adapting, and appropriating all these acts, both for the writer, adapter, and the viewer, become either an act of acting out, seeking comfort in the known territory of literature and arts and/or a way of working through by resurrecting the (un)dead, unburying the deeply buried and unacknowledged traumas, and in our case, in a serial form that coincides with or follows a very recent global trauma, COVID-19, as well as the ever-growing concerns about the limits of science and technology in the hands of human beings.

While the main plot, the driving force for the protagonist(s) in both works, the search for prolonged life or immortality, and the discussions that arise from the similar teachings/restrictions of an Abrahamic religion in the field of science and medicine, questions concerning ethics and responsibility help the viewer link the adaptation with the original text, the intermedial approach, the changes necessitated by the cultural appropriation and the specific choices (intrusions, inclusions) introduced by the screenwriter/director make *Creature* a work of intertextuality and a rewriting. Thus, Irmak's work is in line with the processes of adaptation offered by Hutcheon, who argues that,

(It is) An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works

A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging

An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work. (2006, pp. 7-8)

Moving from Hutcheon's definition, it is clear to see that *Creature*, as an adaptation that alters the source work to adjust and appropriate it, is composed of these three processes. The process of recreation and/or rewriting in *Creature* is both a process of adaptation and appropriation.

The novel which was first published in three volumes, and in epistolary form in which the monster's, Dr Frankenstein's, and Captain Walton's stories/narrations are "intertextured," Shelley's *Frankenstein*, as mentioned above, was first published in 1818 in three volumes and republished in 1823 in two volumes, bearing Shelley's name as the author. The third edition, published in 1831, was a single-volume edition that included Shelley's corrections and additions (Hindle, 2013). The novel in its original form (1818) begins with Captain Walton's letters to his sister and gradually begins to encompass Frankenstein's recounting of the events of his past, starting with Volume I Chapter I, and at the core of the novel and Volume II, we are given the story of Frankenstein's Creature, which is then followed by Frankenstein and completed with Walton's letters. Thus, the novel presents the reader with an epistolary form that is structured in a narrative-within-a-narrative form. Although we hear Walton's voice in a limited way, the whole text actually belongs to him as he listens to these layers of stories and retells them in his letters, though (at least seemingly) in the form of a transcriptionist. As Peter Brooks argues,

smaller units, elements, quotations, references coming together and building a whole, a new text, but also with the dream of creating a living/organic being thorough the use of a variety of materials or techniques.



We might approach the network of issues dramatized in the novel first through Victor Frankenstein's crucial interview with his monstrous creation, the interview which leads to the Monster's telling his tale to Frankenstein, the story-within-a story (itself a story-within-a-story-within-a-story, when we consider the role of Robert Walton as initial and ultimate narrator). (1979, p. 205)

Therefore, the dominant voice, based on the number of chapters given to him, belongs to Frankenstein, yet at the core of the story we have the monster/creature's narration, which comes as a part of Frankenstein's story, yet clearly recounted as a moment that comes after the Monster's pleading to be heard by his creator "Listen to my tale ... Listen to me, Frankenstein... listen to me ... Hear my tale" (Shelley, 1818/2013, pp. 103-104). Reminding the reader of Hamlet's father's ghost who begs to be remembered, the Monster insists on telling his story, thus asking for the acknowledgement of his traumatic experiences. Brook states that "Frankenstein is touched by the Monster's eloquence" (1979, p. 207); hence, according to him,

In the narrative situation of the Monster facing and speaking to his creator, we have an instance of what we might call, in the terms of Jacques Lacan, the imaginary versus the symbolic order. ... In any specular relationship the Monster will always be the "filthy mass;" only in the symbolic order may he realize his desire for recognition. The Monster hence produces a tale, based, like any tale, on the "narrative contract" between narrator and narratee. (1979, pp. 207-208)

Thus, the Monster and his story are acknowledged only when they are conveyed through the symbolic patriarchal order, but not until he is recognised as a meropic and eloquent being. However, although his story is at the core of the novel, it is still encompassed, imprisoned in Frankenstein's narrative voice, and his creator and others see him as an abject (Kristeva, 1980/1982, p. 5) being.

The narrative form of the novel itself underlines the idea of remembering, rewriting, and intertextuality as the stories of three different characters are entangled. While the novel comes in volumes that include three layers of narrative voices, actually embraced in one authoritative voice of Captain Walton, Irmak's cultural adaptation comes as a Netflix series with eight 40-minute-episodes and disrupts the epistolary structure while keeping the "intertextured" story-telling pattern intact. The episodic form can be said to recreate the volumes and chapters of the novel in a new way. The names of the episodes also tell a story and, in a sense, summarise the main plot: "Heal Him," "Voices in my Head," "Blood Shall Flow Warm," "A Soul will rise from the Dead," "Resurrection," "Who Am I," "My Name was İhsan," and "I'm Done with Man(kind)" (Irmak, 2023). Although we see each character's story through their own experiences, the feeling that their narrative voices are intertwined and encompassed in each other is given through the fact that Ziya (Frankenstein's equivalent) narrates the whole story (which includes İhsan's [the monster's equivalent] story as he heard it from him) to Captain Ömer (Captain Walton's equivalent), who later writes it down by enclosing all these stories inside his narrative voice, including moral messages on science and technology. Due to the different medium in which the novel is recreated, the audience becomes a voyeur and a visual witness of the characters' traumatic experiences.

Places, names, and other cultural references are localised in the series due to the intercultural approach. Other major changes are made in *Creature* that underline the work's status as a rewriting and an appropriation that keeps its ties with the original but also begins its existence as a "new cultural product" with its own cultural codes. Linda Hutcheon argues that

the ways of engaging with stories do not, of course, ever take place in a vacuum. We engage in time and space, within particular society and a general culture. The contexts of creation and reception are material, public, and economic as much as they are cultural, personal, and aesthetic. This explains why, even in today's globalized world, major shifts in a story's context – that is, for example, in a national setting or time period – can change radically how the transposed story is interpreted, ideologically and literally. (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 28)

The appropriation of *Frankenstein* into a 19th-century Ottoman background in 2023 leads to “major shifts” (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 28) that open the new text to diverse interpretations. The first major change is seen in the title of the work. Instead of naming the series after the original and the protagonist, Irmak chooses to name it *Yaratılan* which is translated into English as creature rather than its literal meaning creation. Thus, Irmak shifts its focus from the creator Ziya to the creature İhsan. In the original language, the new name also points out a shift in the narrative perspective as well as the change that will be seen in the monster's identity. Changing the name from *Frankenstein* to *Yaratılan* (*Creature*) is not only a choice made to shift the focus from the original and foreign text but also an attempt at underlining the fact that it is a new text, not just a copy. However, it also puts the monster, the creature of the story, under the spotlight by removing Frankenstein from his titular position and naming the series as *Yaratılan*. While the English translation of the series, *Creature*, is still replicating the way other characters refer to Frankenstein's monster in the original, the nameless creature, the Turkish name, *Yaratılan*, does not actually come with connotations such as “monster” but literally means a being that/what is created. While the negative connotations are erased, “yaratılan,” as a word that means “what is created,” inevitably underlines a passive form of existence that requires a creator, possibly drawing attention to the second coming of İhsan as a resurrected being that needs care and guidance.

The adaptation presumably chooses the 1847 or 1893 cholera outbreak⁷ in the Ottoman Empire as its setting and references to leprosy and plague. Özgür Yılmaz contends that,

The Ottoman territories suffered greatly from plague outbreaks, which emerged in the Far East and journeyed to the west from there. Fortunately, in the Ottoman Empire, the plague lost its former power in the first period of the 19th century because of the quarantine system, which was implemented in the 1830s. However, eventually a more dangerous epidemic disease, cholera, became a global threat in this period. (2017, p. 24)

Thus, although cholera is not the only disease mentioned in the series, it is more dangerous and more significant than the other diseases, considering its impact in the 19th century Ottoman history. Yaron Ayalon, in *Natural Disasters in the Ottoman Empire: Plague, Famine, and Other Misfortunes*, argues that “the empire's refusal to embrace new methods of disaster prevention and control that had once proven effective in Europe, and the belated adoption of bacteriology and modern ideas of city planning” during “the 1890s cholera epidemic in Istanbul and its environs ... largely contributed to the collapse of the empire” (2015, p. 20). Thus, the reference to the epidemic and other diseases recalls the traumatic process and outcomes of both the epidemic and the way the government reacts to and is affected by it. In the backdrop of these diseases, we

⁷The series does not specify the date, and the aim here is not to locate the series in a specific year, yet the setting of the series and the diseases mentioned point to the late nineteenth century, as cholera was a recurrent epidemic that was threatening the Empire, whereas the reference to the stray dogs being exiled to an island (Sivriada/Hayırsızada) points to either 1839 or 1910. The aim of talking about the possible dates is to contextualise the collective traumas of the nation revisited in the series through adaptation and appropriation. However, these traumatic events from different decades seem to overlap in this fictional rewriting of history.



are presented with not one but two medical doctors⁸ with similar passionate obsessions and unorthodox ideas who suffer from God Complex. As if to echo the novel's title "Modern Prometheus," Ziya and İhsan are both motivated by the same dream of deciphering the Book of Resurrection. However, one main trait separates the characters in their ambitions. Ziya acts out of traumatic anger and hubris in his desire to defeat mortality, while İhsan acts more as a passionate yet responsible doctor who acts for the sake of finding a cure to diseases and not the secret of immortality.

Ziya, whose name means light⁹, is a medical student who is inspired by and rebels against the teachings of his father, who is also a doctor in this adaptation. He is recently traumatised by the loss of his mother, who died of cholera, and the helplessness of science and human beings in the face of these kinds of diseases. Due to his passionate behaviour and reactions, he is severely criticised by his conservative professor and expelled from the school. On the other hand, İhsan, whose name means perfection or excellence and is nearly homophonic with *insan* (Turkish for human), is a doctor educated in Europe and is depicted as a mad scientist who is already seen as a misfit and banished from the medical school due to his eccentric character and radical ideas. While Ziya is mostly driven by his anger and mourning, İhsan is driven by his hunger for knowledge and passion for science, and they turn into Faustian characters experimenting with death and the dead to discover the secret of resurrection as a cure for illnesses and mortality in general.

One of the most important shifts or changes made in the adaptation is the result of this experiment. The adaptation's monster, the creature, becomes İhsan, rather than body parts gathered together. While experimenting on a dead body snatched from the graveyard, a Muslim Pauper's Cemetery, (instead of a boar as İhsan used to do) on the machine invented by İhsan which is designed to achieve the process of resurrection, İhsan gets struck by lightning, which also causes a fire and kills him instantly. When Ziya returns with bottles of transfused blood they were planning to use in their experiment, and sees İhsan's dead body, out of denial, sorrow and also his ambition, he decides to continue the experiment aiming to resurrect İhsan. Ziya recites the lines from the Book of Resurrection: "A light from the sky will hit the machine and a soul will rise from the that... A soul stronger than ever ... A light that barred the way of the others that would follow it" (İrmak, 2023, Episode 3). Ziya, as his name means light and as he also remembers the way his grandmother talks about the story of his birth: "He tore his mother apart when he came out... That's why poor Gülfem couldn't have any more children ..." (İrmak, 2023, Episode 3). He misinterprets the lines from the Book of Resurrection and thinks that he is the one who finds the cure to mortality:

I tore my mother's uterus.

I barred the way of the

Ones who would follow me.

I'm the one and only!

The light is me! It's me! (İrmak, 2023, Episode 3)

This experiment, which ends "successfully," creates the monster of this *Frankenstein* adaptation. İhsan is similar to the original creature with his frightening, "scarred" appearance and baby-like innocence. This appropriation also creates a unique version of the monster/creature who can be seen as a victim of trauma with physical and mental wounds and repressed memories.

⁸Actually, İhsan is an unorthodox doctor who is rejected, while Ziya is a passionate medical student who is expelled from school for his unorthodox ideas.

⁹The meaning of Ziya's name, light, definitely is a reference to knowledge, a dominant connotation of light, and in this context, the connection to (life-giving or destructive) electrical power (lightning) should also be considered, while İhsan as a word means "gift" and someone gifted who acts perfectly, consciously, and responsibly.



Ziya, who becomes and fails as a father figure and a procreator for the creature, is also an involuntary witness to a horrific event and a perpetrator. He leaves the creature as he is unable to carry the burden of his own actions. İhsan, on the other hand, as the creature, turns into a *tabula rasa* when he is resurrected and is not aware of his traumatic neurosis, as he does not remember anything. As a trauma victim, he physically and mentally bears his scars and suffers from complete memory loss or unconsciously suppresses the traumatic memory: "As Caruth's influential book's title also suggests, the traumatic experience is an unclaimed one due to its imperceptible and obscure nature ... the traumatic event is not acknowledged properly and as a result of the mind's self-preservation, knowing the traumatic event and the proper reaction to it are suspended by the victim/witness" (Karadağ, 2022, pp. 21-22). Thus, İhsan is not yet able to realise the traumatic experience as he needs to reintegrate into life and society to experience flashbacks through his encounters with others that help him remember bits and pieces about his identity, which inevitably are also triggering effects that (re-)traumatizes him. Due to his appearance, the people of the city are afraid of him and out of fear, especially the fear of being contaminated, they beat him and call him names such as "leper," "undead," and "demon" (İrmak, 2023, Episode 4). The fear of contamination or calling him "undead" are related to the epidemic diseases of the period on which the series chooses to focus. Yet, it also represents the fear of the other, who does not look, or act in ways that are conceivable by the "normal," "ordinary" men. İhsan's marginalisation as a man who has Herculean power yet a scary and scary appearance, and the fear of contamination in other people also underline how trauma victims feel alone and feared by the others due to the threat of contamination through listening/witnessing the traumatic memory.

The first being that does not refrain from connecting with İhsan is his dog, Darwin. As Argos is the only one to recognise Odysseus in disguise (Homer, 2008, p. 209), Darwin recognises İhsan and does not judge his human companion based on his external appearance or is not afraid to be a part of İhsan's post-traumatic state. This encounter with Darwin is also the first moment in İhsan's resurrected life that he has a flashback that helps him remember an instance from his past life where he remembers his home and being with Darwin. However, İrmak touches upon yet another historical trauma of the period by drawing attention to the unconditional love between Darwin and İhsan. In Episode 5, Darwin runs towards a group of officials who seemingly feed stray dogs only to be able to catch them. One of them is heard saying "the French want them sent to the island ... who are you to question the state?" (İrmak, 2023). This reference to Istanbul's strays, who are still seen as a disturbance for civilised city life, has its own layers of traumatic history, beginning in the 17th century.

The strays of Istanbul were seen as a threat to public health or a more modern and civilised city life in different periods. While the first attempts at exiling or massacring dogs date back to the 17th century, we see that the 19th century, most probably due to the Westernisation and modernisation process of the Empire, and specifically the capital city, witnesses many different plans to "cleanse" the city off of its dogs. The series, with its reference to the French who wanted them sent to the island, goes back to the early 20th century, 1910 to be exact, and talks about the Hayırsızada incident. As Cihangir Gündoğdu describes,

In the summer of 1910, upon orders of the municipality, those celebrated members of Istanbul's urban landscape, its stray dogs, were pursued and hunted down with iron claws, put into cages, and embarked on a boat destined for Oxia (Sivriada, which is also known as Hayırsızada (Wicked Island)), a small, barren island off the shore near Istanbul. (2018, p. 1)

Gündoğdu also refers to the incident as a "tragic scene, which cost the lives of thousands of Istanbul's stray dogs," indicating that it "was the product of a long series of reforms in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire that were intended to revitalize the authority of the center" (2018, p. 1). Thus, it supports the idea that the plans to get rid of the strays of Istanbul resurfaced multiple times following the 17th century. However,

the acts of capturing and exiling or killing dogs have always been traumatic for the people of the city. Even Edmondo De Amicis, in his 1877 travelogue *Constantinople*, refers to the dog population of the city:

And by then no doubt one of the city's most engaging peculiarities will also have disappeared: its dogs... Everyone knows how much the Turks love them and protect them. ... when Sultan Abdülmecit had them all removed to an island in the Sea of Marmara, the people became restive, and when they were brought back, there was a great celebration. In order to avoid provoking such discontent again, the government has left them in peace ever since. (2005, pp. 80-81)

Though Amicis and other historical sources draw attention to the public love for the strays and their reaction to the governmental decisions to exile or massacre them, these sources also underline the fact that the insistent attempts at disposing of the dogs turned into a traumatising process as people tended to see earthquakes, fires, and defeats in war as a consequence of the deportation or killing of the dogs. Irmak, while touching on universal traumas such as illness and death, also tackles local traumas of the target culture by creating a side story in which İhsan finds solace and pieces of his identity through his relationship with Darwin. Thus, seeing him being captured, exiled, and left to his doom not only serves as a moment to make the audience face this traumatic history and realise that nonhuman animals, specifically the ones that one cannot benefit from, are always treated as marginalised others, but also the scene serves as another traumatising experience for our main character.

İhsan, eventually turns into an outcast, left alone, rejected by the majority of people, and is only accepted by a theatre troupe called Vasili's Company, which consists of other social outcasts, misfits of society due to their disabilities, physical appearances, professions, or national backgrounds. Vasili's company or his family is a travelling troupe that literally exists in the margins of the city, building their tents on the outskirts of the cities they visit, living under the colourful roof of their tent. They are nomadic subjects who cannot or are not allowed to take root in one place, as each member and the whole group are marginalised not only because of their physical appearance or bodily defects but also because of their Greek origins, Muslim origins or gender, and also their professions as performance artists. When Vasili sees İhsan for the first time and realises that he has no chance to survive in an "ordinary" society, he takes İhsan under his protection and acts as a father figure for him, Vasili's wife refers to İhsan as "He's familia" (Irmak, 2023) when Vasili introduces him to the company. The creature's experience with the members of the theatre troupe who accept him as a member of their family, regardless of his appearance, turns into a transformative and therapeutic experience for him.

Çağan Irmak replaces blind De Lacey's conversations, his music, Felix's education of Safie, passages read from the Bible, *Paradise Lost*, *Sorrows of Werther*, *Ruins of Empires*, *Plutarch's Lives*, all of which serve as the education of the monster, with the theatre troupe. Although cultural appropriation requires a change, choosing the performing arts to replace the teachings of these texts does function on two levels. First, witnessing rehearsals and performances of the troupe that carry specifically chosen references to other literary and artistic works, such as *Hamlet* and *Othello*, or allusions to mythology, re-educate İhsan through the use of theatre, one of the oldest educative arts. Second, storytelling, listening to stories and the trauma narratives of others and repeating/rehearsing the lines help deal with traumas as the experience of witnessing as a spectator and performing¹⁰ function as a form of acting out and working through. Dominick LaCapra refers to acting out as being "caught up in the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes-scenes in which the past returns and the future is blocked" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 21), which will be followed by working-through, hence, hearing and seeing the other members act, sing, and recite stories on stage functions as

¹⁰They make İhsan a mask that he can wear on stage while performing, which is similar to the one the audience recognises from *the Phantom of the Opera*. It can be argued that Irmak's added allusions and references to other texts are loaded with physically and mentally wounded, traumatised characters.

a form of acting out for İhsan. While watching them act, İhsan returns to the moment of his traumatic experience, and remembers the past. After a night at the theatre he wakes up from a nightmare and is able to speak again, with his first words being “I – wake up” (Irmak, 2023, Episode 5). İhsan’s acting out, going back to the scenes from his past, is followed by working through as he regains his speech thus (re)enters the realm of “articulatory practice” (LaCapra, 2001, p. 21). His first words also come as a conscious act, aiming to underline that he reclaims his identity and is awakened to his traumatised state. It is important to remember that “the uncommunicable trauma seeks its own voice to speak out, thus, as Caruth also suggests, it revisits or haunts the survivor in the forms of ‘repetitive actions,’ ‘nightmares,’ ‘hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’” (Karadağ, 2022, p. 22). Thus, as İhsan watches the performances of the other members, this witnessing triggers his traumatic memories. Slowly remembering his past, he starts having nightmares. Later, through rehearsing and performing on stage, he repetitively remembers and repeats his traumatic past. He struggles to work through his trauma to escape this loop, which requires the trauma victim to look at the experience from a more objective stance. It can also be claimed that İhsan, in his attempt to regain his memory, is in search of his identity. This can be read as his desire to find and learn the truth of his state, which can only be achieved through revisiting or being revisited by the cause of the wound, the root of his trauma. In her chapter “Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching,” Shoshana Felman in *Testimony* suggests that

To seek reality is both to set out to explore the injury inflicted by it—to turn back on, and try to penetrate, the state of being *stricken*, wounded by reality ... and to attempt, at the same time, to reemerge from the paralysis of this state, to engage reality ... as a vital, critical necessity of *moving on*. (1992, p. 28)¹¹

Similarly, İhsan’s silence, his inability to speak caused by being struck by lightning, resurrected with the use of an electric discharge, parallels the idea of being paralysed by the event. Thus, to claim his identity and to heal, he has to search and face his past, and he has to be able to articulate his story.

The possibility of working through trauma appears twice in the series, first when İhsan is accompanied by other outcasts in the theatre troupe who have their own traumatic pasts, and second when he meets another traumatised character Esma, after he is forced to leave the company. In both of these instances, İhsan is able to form a bond with fellow sufferers and feels a sense of belonging, yet, due to other people’s intervention and violence the possibility of healing and belonging. İhsan is in the position of a listener during the first stage of his recovery when he is with the company. Thus, he seeks his own story through hearing the stories of others. Marika, who is depicted as a woman who became addicted to the drugs she used to numb her pain, shares her story with İhsan. She tells him how she was forced into prostitution at the age of 12 and escaped at 16 years of age. Although caused by drug withdrawal, the tremor she regularly suffers from, is a strong sign of her traumatised mind and body. She finds solace in the company and performing and singing, which can be seen as alternative forms of trauma narrative, her way of acting out and working through her traumatic memories. She also shares with İhsan how she sees the company as a refuge and talks about the healing effect of theatre and singing: “Theater, songs, cantos, and melodies saved my life” (Irmak, 2023, Episode 6). Similarly, Fadime, also known as Princess Fadime, suffers from dwarfism, which makes her an outcast. However, she also takes refuge in Vasili’s Company and finds alternative ways of fitting in as a theatrical performance gives her the chance to be any character she likes. Significantly, she chooses to act like Ophelia by gathering flowers and reciting lines such as “forget me nots.” In her case, her being a Muslim woman is another problem that Irmak uses to refer to a cultural and historical trauma. Performing and

¹¹ Italics in the original.

singing on stage were forbidden for Muslim women, and any woman or company who refused to obey the law were to be imprisoned and/or pay fines. As Nalan Turna argues, “entrepreneurs in the entertainment sector mainly were Ottoman and foreign males in the ‘long nineteenth century,’ female entrepreneurs seemed to be non-Muslim Ottomans and foreigners” (2022, p. 204) however when it comes to working in entertainment business or specifically in theatres “cultural/religious reasons prevented Muslim women from working in the sector for a long time” (2022, p. 208). Thus, Fadime’s doubly marginalised state, and the necessity of hiding her in boxes when officers blame the company for employing a Muslim woman further delve into a history of discrimination that functions on and marginalises women in different ways. While Marika is seen by men as a woman of easy virtue because of her singing, Fadime has to hide as she does not have the freedom to sing or perform. İhsan, the eccentric doctor who turned into a marginalised outcast, in his new life/story, experiences life from an alternative position, seeing it through the eyes and stories of outcasts who are traumatised and pushed to the margins. While İhsan finds solace and seeks refuge in the by bonding with these people, he also gradually sees “the hatred humans feel towards the outcasts that are not one of them” (İrmak, 2023, Episode 8). The officers who come for an unfair retribution cause a series of unfortunate events which forces İhsan to leave the company, losing the chance of achieving healing.

After leaving the company that helped him “be human again” (İrmak, 2023, Episode 8), İhsan finds himself in a bucolic setting. He starts living in the coal cellar of an old woman and her granddaughter and starts eavesdropping on their conversations through a hole in the wall. Esma and her grandmother, Seher, are the reimagined versions of Safie and blind De Lacey. Seher and Esma trust İhsan and accept him as he is; they do not judge İhsan by his appearance. Esma, traumatised as an incestuous rape victim, is forced to hide in her grandmother’s house as the public opinion sides not with the victimized women but with the perpetrator. She is another character who turns into an outcast and outsider due to her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. She is also introduced as a significant character that represents a gendered cultural trauma. Esma not only shares her own traumatic past with İhsan but also becomes an empathic listener for him. When they converse, they ask each other the same question, “Who are you hiding from?” and give the same answer, “From all of them/ Everyone” (İrmak, 2023, Episode 7). While their stories are different, they find a common ground in being traumatised, victimised, marginalised others, and they form a strong and romantic bond based on mutual understanding. Yet, this blissful opportunity for working through and healing for both characters is again destroyed by the village’s people who are prejudiced against Esma, resulting in her death. Thus, for İhsan, each relationship that carries the potential of bonding and healing through empathy and acknowledgement, ends with being traumatised over again. As Dori Laub suggests, trauma victims, witnesses to trauma, want to tell their story and need an emphatic listener. In the case of İhsan he serves as an emphatic listener to his emphatic listeners, which gives him a “feeling of belonging to a ‘secret order’” (Laub, 1992b, p. 82), both of which he loses due to other traumatic experiences. The killing of an officer forces him to leave the troupe, while the death of Esma pushes him to search for Ziya to force him into resurrecting Esma, to no avail.

When he finds Ziya and forces him to go on a journey, they walk through a snowy mountain to reach Esma’s body, where Ziya is supposed to rebuild the machine to resurrect her. İhsan says, “It’s not about revenge for me ... you will finish what you started” (İrmak, 2023, Episode 8). In the novel, the creature wants a companion, and Frankenstein refrains from realising this request, fearing the possibility of them reproducing. However, İhsan does not want a bride, he wants Ziya to resurrect his emphatic listener, someone who loved him. Contrary to the novel’s Frankenstein or most of the other adaptations that reimagine him, Ziya understands this need only after retelling the story of İhsan to the Captain. Like the Creature of the novel, İhsan first forces Ziya to listen to his story, which in a sense is a visual and audial appropriation of how the novel gives us a story-within-a-story structure. Furthermore, this process of narrating and transmitting his story puts Ziya, who in a sense is the perpetrator, into the position of an involuntary witness. Ziya insists on

not hearing him but İhsan makes him listen to his own narrative of trauma, after which he falls ill and is left to the care of Captain Ömer and his crew. It can be argued that bearing witness through listening to a trauma narrative, one that is heavy and includes the listener as a perpetrator, is a burden for Ziya and makes him fall severely ill. However, as he slowly gains consciousness and heals, he also starts telling his and İhsan's stories. Retelling the trauma narrative can be seen as healing as he not only finds emphatic listeners in the captain and his crew who believe his story but also, in a sense, acts out and revisits the traumatic experiences (of losing his mother, losing İhsan, resurrecting İhsan) over again, which helps him face and claim his belated trauma as well as İhsan's. Ziya recovers and looks healthier, and he says, "I woke up only to find myself telling you the truth. I didn't understand when living it, but only as I told about it, you see, I healed myself with my own story" (Irmak, 2023, Episode 8). Thus, a connection is drawn between the belated response to trauma and claiming and healing trauma through revisiting the experience/story. Although he heals by telling the story and maybe realises the necessity of emphatic listening, which makes him heartily accept helping İhsan, he is accidentally shot and killed by one of the crew. So, İhsan loses not only the creator of his second self but also an old companion who shared his traumatic past and the person who eventually acknowledged his story.

When İhsan loses his empathic listeners and his fellow sufferers who belong to this "secret order," he loses his chance to experience or complete working through his trauma. LaCapra argues that "working-through itself should be understood as an open, self-questioning process that never attains closure and counteracts acting-out (or the repetition compulsion) without entirely transcending it, especially with respect to trauma and its aftermath" (LaCapra, 2001, p. xxiii). He also draws attention to the necessity of empathic relation and in İhsan's case, leaving the company, witnessing the deaths of Esma and (even) Ziya make it impossible for him to continue. As Laub suggests "[t]he absence of an empathic listener, or more radically, the absence of an addressable other, an other who can hear the anguish of one's memories and thus affirm and recognise their realness, annihilates the story" (1992a, p. 68). Thus, İhsan's story, the creature's story in this rewriting, is also annihilated without the possibility of healing his wounds as he rejects working-through when he loses his empathic listeners.

Conclusion

In terms of the act of rewriting itself, adaptations and appropriations are all acts of returning to an old source material, a well-known fictional text, and in this context an attempt at resurrecting/recreating a text that deals with mortality, science, and "bio"ethics. Appropriation, in this sense, serves as a form of "acting out" and "working through." Considering the traumatic cultural and historical references woven into the series, the new adaptation not only falls in line with the novel's questions but also with the traumatic history of human helplessness in the face of history, pandemics/epidemics, including COVID-19.

Thus, this repetitive revisiting of or returns to *Frankenstein* in different mediums and periods, and in our example, in a bingeable or effortlessly consumable form, acts as trauma re-enactment, going back to the traumatic event and repeating it which is a form of "acting out and working through" through an intermedial and intercultural rewriting of *Frankenstein* Çağan Irmak is also taking a cognitive approach, as discussed by Pascal Nicklas and Oliver Lindner in their Introduction to *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*:

The revision of myth in each age and its function in explaining the world or in being the reservoir of unresolved puzzles (Lévi-Strauss) show the basic anthropological set-up and the desire for recurring adaptations which keep appropriating the myth over and over again. (...) Cognitive poetics have to look at the connection of the pleasure principle with forms of repetition and the return of the repressed in the domain of psychological aesthetics. (2012, p. 3)

Consequently, as a new form of adaptation and cultural appropriation, the series can be seen as a revision and repetition of the repressed traumas that recur in real life and fiction, such as illness, death, and loss, so it is an alternative way for the director and the audience to face and deal with these traumatic experiences as well as carrying the potential of triggering past traumas. *Creature*, a text of transcultural adaptation and cultural appropriation that emerges as a new cultural product by revisiting the repetitive traumatic/traumatising narrative patterns that include illness, death, and other traumas, turns the audience into involuntary witnesses as well. Patrick Duggan and Mick Wallis argue that “witnessing in the context of performance is typically second-order: we bear witness to on-stage witnessing” (2011, p. 7). It can be argued that “this second-order witnessing to trauma functions on many different levels, first of all, witnessing trauma narratives/performances prepares the audience for similar catastrophic experiences” (Karadağ, 2022, p. 23). Most importantly, it can help the audience act out and work through collective traumas through the opportunity of reliving and repeating traumatic events as outsiders and witnesses. Thus, adaptations and appropriations deal with and may target and function as a way for facing, understanding, and healing collective (historical) traumas.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support	The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

Author Details

Özlem Karadağ (Associate Professor)

¹ Department of English Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters, Istanbul University, Istanbul, Türkiye

 0000-0002-6670-6060  okaradag@istanbul.edu.tr

References

- Amicis, E. D. (2005). *Constantinople* (S. Parkin, Trans.). Hesperus Press Limited. (Original work published 1877)
- Ayalon, Y. (2015). *Natural disasters in the Ottoman empire: Plague, famine, and other misfortunes*. Cambridge University Press.
- Barthes, R. (1974). *S/Z* (Richard Miller, Trans.). Hill and Wang. (Original work published 1970)
- Barthes, R. (1977). From work to text. In *Music, image, text* (Stephen Heath, Trans.) (pp. 155-169). Fontana Press. (Original work published 1977)
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University.
- Cartmell, D. (1999) Introduction. In D. Cartmell & I. Wheelan (Eds.), *Adaptations: From text to screen, screen to text* (pp. 23-28). Routledge.
- Cutchins, D. R. & Perry, D. R. (2018). Introduction. In Cutchins, D. R. & Perry, D. R. (Eds.), *Adapting Frankenstein: The monster's eternal lives in popular culture* (pp. 1-19). Manchester University Press.
- Dillon, S. (2007). *The palimpsest: Literature, criticism, theory*. Continuum.
- Felman, S. (1992). Education and crisis, or the vicissitudes of teaching. In S. Felman & D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history* (pp. 1-56). Routledge.
- Freud, F. (2003). Beyond the pleasure principle. In S. Freud, *Beyond the pleasure principle and other writings* (J. Reddick, Trans.) (pp. 43-102). Penguin Books Ltd. (Original work published 1940)
- Freud, F. (2003). Remembering, repeating, and working through. In S. Freud, *Beyond the pleasure principle and other writings* (J. Reddick, Trans.) (pp. 31-42). Penguin Books Ltd. (Original work published 1940)
- Genette, G. (1997). *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (C. Newman & C. Doubinsky, Trans.). the University of Nebraska Press. (Original work published in 1982)
- Gündoğdu, C. (2018). The state and the stray dogs in late Ottoman Istanbul: from unruly subjects to servile friends. *Middle Eastern Studies* (pp. 1-20). <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2018.1432482>
- Hindle, M. (2013). Introduction. In Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein or, the modern Prometheus* (pp.xi-l). Penguin Classics.
- Homer. (2008). *The Odyssey* (W. Shewring, Trans.). Oxford University Press.



- Hutcheon, L. (2013). *A theory of adaptation*. Routledge.
- Irmak, Ç. (2023). *Yaratılan* [TV Series]. Netflix. <https://www.netflix.com/tr/title/81504235>
- Karadağ, Ö. (2022). Rewriting women and trauma: Zinnie Harris's *This restless house*. *Tiyatro Eleştirmenliği ve Dramaturji Bölümü Dergisi*(34), 19-37. <https://doi.org/10.26650/jtcd.2022.1097604>
- Kristeva, J. (1982). *Powers of horror: An essay on abjection* (L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published in 1980)
- Kristeva, J. (2024). Bounded text. In J. Kristeva (L. S. Roudiez, Ed.), *Desire in language: A semiotic approach to literature and art* (pp. 37-61) (T. Gora, A. Jardine & L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press. (Original work published 1969).
- LaCapra, D. (1989). *Sounds in critical theory*. Cornell University Press.
- LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing history, writing trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Laub, D. (1992a). Bearing witness or the vicissitudes of listening. In S. Felman & D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history* (pp. 57-74). Routledge.
- Laub, D. (1992b). Bearing witness or the vicissitudes of listening. In S. Felman & D. Laub, *Testimony: Crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis and history* (pp. 75-92). Routledge.
- Nicklas, P. & Lindler, O. (2012). *Adaptation and Cultural Appropriation*. De Gruyter.
- Sanders, J. (2016). *Adaptation and appropriation*. Routledge.
- Shelley, M. (1818, 2013). *Frankenstein or, the modern Prometheus*. Penguin Classics.
- Turna, N. (2022). Limits and opportunities: Women and their experiences in the entertainment sector during the late Ottoman era. *Osmanlı araştırmaları/The journal of Ottoman studies*, LIX (2022), 195-223. [10.18589/oa.1145928](https://doi.org/10.18589/oa.1145928)
- Yılmaz, Ö. (2017). The cholera epidemic of 1847-1848 and its effects on the Ottoman empire. *Journal of Eurasian Inquiries*, 6(1), 23-55. <https://doi.org/10.26650/jes371499>
- Whelehan, I. (1999) Introduction. In D. Cartmell & I. Wheelan (Eds.), *Adaptations: From text to screen, screen to text* (pp. 3-19). Routledge.



Epilogue:

“From My Clay To Mould Me”: Romantic and Regency Literature in Pastiche

Aleks Sierz¹ 

¹ (PhD) FRSA, Boston University Study Abroad, London, England

As the online conference, *Adaptation, Appropriation, Translation* made clear, this is a subject that provokes lively and stimulating debate. It can also act as an inspiration for individual creativity. In my case, the conference stimulated me to look again at some British theatre adaptations of the works of the Romantics and Regency writers of English literature. In the spirit of both adaptation and appropriation, I have rewritten some classic passages from the novels and poems of the early 19th century to reflect an engagement with their more recent theatrical manifestations. Here are the results:

Two theatre-goers discuss a handful of Jane Austen adaptations

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any good theatre must be in want of a Jane Austen adaptation, especially if it is neo-romantic. However little known the feelings of the novels' fans may be about such ventures, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the theatre-going public, that the adaptation is considered the rightful property of anyone who has an opinion on the original novel.

“My dear Mr Fan,” said Dr Academic to him one day, “have you heard that *Pride and Prejudice* is on the stage at last?”

Mr Fan replied that he had not. “But it is,” returned the good doctor, “for Mr Lukis has just been here, and he told me all about it.”

Mr Fan made no answer.

“Do you not want to know about it?” cried their companion, impatiently.

“You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it.”

This was invitation enough.

“Why, you must know, Mr Lukis says his play is a one-man show about Mr Wickham, who is now ready to set the record straight. So he has let us see *Pride and Prejudice*'s most roguish gentleman, George Wickham, on the eve of his sixtieth birthday, lifting the sheets on what exactly happened thirty years before. And allows us to discover his own version of some very famous literary events. What really happened with Darcy? What did he feel about Lizzie?”

“What kind of adaptation?”

“A very free-form kind.”



“How so? How can it be just a one-man show and do justice to its source? Surely the romance will be unrecognizable.”

“My dear Mr Fan,” replied his companion, “how can you be so tiresome? You must know that I love those adaptations that are not literal re-tellings. The best *Emma* one is Amy Heckerling’s *Clueless*, which is not even set Regency England.”

“Is that being faithful to the original?”

“Faithful? Nonsense, how can you talk so! The whole point is to re-imagine the book in a different medium.”

“I see no occasion for that.”

“But why? You are over-scrupulous, surely. Consider this. Don’t you remember when we saw *Northanger Abbey* by Zoe Cooper? It had actors offer explanations of the plot direct to the audience, comment on how their own re-enactment of the story is progressing, and switch between dialogue and narrative, between sincere naturalism and physical theatre – and between showing and telling. It was full of adventure and joy.”

“In such cases, yes, I suppose it is so.”

“And I dare say there are other adaptations, such as Laura Wade’s *The Watsons* and Isobel McArthur’s *Pride and Prejudice (sort of)*, which likewise exalt in theatricality and the imagination.”¹

The playwright unhappily finishes their final draft of a Mary Shelley adaptation

It was on a dreary night of November that I beheld the accomplishment of my toils. With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony, I collected the drafts of my drama around me, that I might infuse a spark of being into the lifeless pages that lay on my desk. It was already one in the morning; the rain pattered dismally against the panes, and my mouse was nearly out of charge, when, by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow manuscript of my creature before me; I breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated my limbs.

How can I describe my emotions at this wonder, or how delineate the play’s monster whom with such infinite pains and care I had endeavoured to form? His character was coherent. His actions were in proportion, and I had selected his dialogues as beautiful. Beautiful!— Great God! On re-reading, his shrivelled utterances and clumsy exchanges filled me with dread. Indeed, he was a perfect replica of the horrid original.

The different accidents of life are not so changeable as the feelings of human nature. I had worked hard for nearly two years, for the sole purpose of infusing drama into an inanimate book. For this I had deprived myself of rest and health. I had desired it with an ardour that far exceeded moderation; but now that I had finished, the beauty of the dream vanished, and breathless horror and disgust filled my heart. Unable to endure the aspect of the play I had created, I rushed out of the room, and continued a long time traversing my bedchamber, unable to compose my mind to sleep. At length lassitude succeeded to the tumult I had before endured; and I threw myself on

¹Zoe Cooper, *Northanger Abbey* (2024), Adrian Lukis, *Being Mr Wickham* (2024), Laura Wade, *The Watsons* (2018) and Isobel McArthur, *Pride and Prejudice* (*sort of)* (2018). Source: Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813).

the bed in my clothes, endeavouring to seek a few moments of forgetfulness. But it was in vain: I slept, indeed, but I was disturbed by the wildest dreams.

I thought I saw Mary Shelley, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Bath. Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror; a cold dew covered my forehead, my teeth chattered, and every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon, as it forced its way through the window shutters, I beheld the text – the story I had turned into a play. The words on my screen seemed to me black insects, if insects they may be called, and were in constant motion. I escaped and rushed downstairs. I took refuge in the courtyard belonging to the house which I inhabited; where I remained during the rest of the night, walking up and down in the greatest agitation.

Morning, dismal and wet, at length dawned, and discovered to my sleepless and aching eyes an email from the theatre, which indicated an expect of delivery of my script. I issued again into the streets, pacing them with quick steps, as if I sought to avoid the director whom I feared every turning of the street would present to my view. I did not dare return to the apartment which I inhabited, but felt impelled to hurry on, although drenched by the rain which poured from a black and comfortless sky. I fled from my own creation.²

A 22nd-century tourist contemplates a statue of Sir Tom Stoppard in the West End

I met an android from an antique land,
Who said: “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the West End... Near them, on the Strand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that wrote them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
‘My name is Stoppardius, Writer of Writers;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level streets stretch far away.”³

²Nick Dear, *Frankenstein* (2011), Carl Miller, *Frankenstein* (2019) and Rona Munro, *Frankenstein* (2019). Source: Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (1818).

³Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993). Source: Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘Ozymandias’ (1818).



A political playwright considers retirement

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-pilèd books, in my neat study,
Hold like rich garners the full ripened grain;
When I behold, upon the theatre programme's face,
Huge shiny previews of a historical romance,
And think that I may never live to trace
Bloody Poetry's sequel with the hand of chance;
And when I feel, fair subject of an hour,
That I shall never write about thee more,
Never have relish in the fiery power
Of joyful creation — then on the shore
Of the wide world I stand alone, and think
Till love and fame to nothingness do sink.⁴

A critic reviews Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*

Arcadia is a specimen of the purely romantic drama, in which the interest is not historical, or dependent upon fidelity of portraiture, or the natural connection of events, — but is a birth of the imagination and union of the elements granted to, or assumed by, the playwright. It is a species of drama which owes no allegiance to time or space, and in which, therefore, errors of chronology and geography — no mortal sins in any species — are venial faults, and count for nothing. It addresses itself entirely to the imaginative faculty; and although the illusion may be assisted by the effect on the senses of the complicated scenery and decorations of modern times, yet this sort of assistance is dangerous. For the principal, and only genuine excitement ought to come from within, — from the moved and sympathetic imagination; whereas, where so much is addressed to the mere external senses of seeing and hearing, the spiritual vision is apt to languish, and the attraction from without will withdraw the mind from the proper and only legitimate interest which is intended to spring from within.

The story opens with a witty scene about Septimus the tutor and Thomasina his pupil, and is admirably appropriate to the kind of drama, giving, as it were, the keynote to the whole harmony. It prepares and initiates the excitement required for the entire piece, and yet does not demand anything from the spectators, which their previous habits had not fitted them to understand. It is purposely restrained from centering the interest on inessentials, but used as an induction or tuning for what is to follow. In the second scene, the entrance of Bernard and his meeting with

⁴Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (1984). Source: John Keats, 'When I Have Fears That I May Cease To Be' (1818).

Hannah puts the audience in possession of all the information necessary for the understanding of the plot. Observe, too, the perfect introduction of material about matters poetical, landscape sculpting, and scientific meditations.

The appearance and characters of the dramatical entertainment are finely contrasted. Bernard embodies the romantic temper, being stylishly flamboyant, energetic passionate and intuitive, yet his “gut instinct” about Byron’s duel proves to be an error. Contrast this with Hannah’s instinct that the hermit of Sidley Park is Septimus, which shows a rare equipoise of the faculties, in all their distinctive energies of faith, patience, constancy, fortitude, as opposed to masculine illusion. In the counterpoint 1809 scenes, Septimus, once Byron’s university friend — and himself Byronic in his keen mind and sharp wit — has his own romantic bearing, whereas Thomasina is the pupil whose genius (like Byron’s daughter Ada) intuits the second law of thermodynamics, a palpable improbability hazarded by a great genius of playwriting. Finally, the contemporary Coverly family are exemplars of distinctness and subordination, being instances of scientific thinking (Valentine), young innocence (Chloë) and metaphysical speculation (Gus). All contribute to a comedy of ideas, set between past and present, art and science, romance and reason, all means towards accomplishing the chief end, that of producing and supporting this willing illusion, serving to increase the inward excitement, wit and sensibility of the whole.⁵

A philosopher-novelist recalls plays about Percy, George, Mary and Claire

Their lives have for several years been a theatre of calamity. They have been a mark for the vigilance of tyranny, and they could not escape. Their fairest prospects have been blasted. Their enemies have shown themselves inaccessible to entreaties, and untired in persecution. Their fame, as well as their happiness, has become their victim. Every one, as far as their story has been known, has refused to assist them in their distress, and has execrated their names: Percy Bysshe Shelley and George Byron, Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont. They have not deserved this treatment. Many playwrights have been incited to the penning of these dramas only by a faint idea that posterity may by their means be induced to render them a justice which their contemporaries refuse. Their story will, at least, appear to have that consistency which is seldom attendant but upon truth.

The spring of action which, perhaps more than any other, characterised these dramatical works, was poetry. It was this that gave them an artistic turn. In fine, these plays produced in me an invincible attachment to ideas of narrative and romance. I panted for the unravelling of an adventure with an anxiety, perhaps almost equal to that of the man whose future happiness or misery depended on its issue. I watched, I devoured dramas of this sort. They took possession of my soul; and the effects they produced were frequently discernible in my external appearance and my health. My curiosity, however, was not entirely ignoble: my imagination must be excited; and when that was not done, my curiosity was dormant.⁶

⁵Tom Stoppard, *Arcadia* (1993). Source: Samuel Taylor Coleridge, ‘Notes on *The Tempest*’ (1836).

⁶Howard Brenton, *Bloody Poetry* (1984), Liz Lochhead, *Blood and Ice* (1982) and Helen Edmundson, *Mary Shelley* (2012). Source: William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (1794).

A romantic poet praises actor Mrs Siddons

She talks in beauty, like the light
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes;
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every curly tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express,
How sure, how dear their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in make-up spent,
A mind that thrills the crowd below,
A heart whose spell is divinely lent.⁷

Another poet travels to see a show at the Theatre by the Lake

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er rails and smoke,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
An audience of theatre folk;
Beside the lake, just past the trees,
Queuing and chatting in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the milky way,

⁷April de Angelis, *The Divine Mrs S* (2024). Source: Lord Byron, 'She Walks in Beauty' (1815).

They stretched in an expectant line
Next to the theatre of the day:
Some hundreds saw I at a glance,
Holding their heads in demure stance.

The waters beside them danced; but they
Out-did the sparkling sheen in glee:
A playwright could not but be gay,
In such a jocund company:
I gazed — and gazed — and surely thought
What wealth the play to me had brought.⁸

⁸Nicholas Pierpan, *William Wordsworth* (2017). Source: William Wordsworth, 'I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud' (1807).

