Adaptation As An Afterlife Of A Text: With Reference To The Beggar’s Opera, The Threepenny Opera And Teen Paishacha Tamasha

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Abstract:

The present paper deals with the ‘afterlife’ of Gay’s The Beggar’s Opera (1728) in an adaptation by Brecht as The Threepenny Opera (1928) which was later adapted by a Marathi playwright P.L. Deshpande (Known as Pu La Deshpande) into Marathi as Teen Paishacha Tamasha (1978). Brecht adapted The Beggar’s Opera into German as Die Dreigroschenoper in 1928 and it was translated into English in the same year by Eric Bentley. For the discussion of the play the translation of Brecht’s play is used. The three plays were written in different ages, in different countries, in different languages, for different audiences and for different purposes. The adaptations are complete in themselves and do not need the original’s assistance to survive. These adaptations are successful because of the strong original plot but also because of the adapters’ skills, their ways of handling the original. Adaptation is, thus, a new literary work and can be studied independently.

Adaptation is certainly a ‘rebirth’ of the ‘original’ work but it is also a (new) ‘birth’ of a new literary work. Even Shakespeare based his plays on some other plays of his time or some other writings. His plays are compared to their originals but nobody calls them adaptations because of the skill in handling the known stories in different styles by the genius. Adaptation has a connotation of ‘theft’ or ‘not original’ work. Adaptations should be considered to be new and independent works of art. Perhaps there is a need to replace the word ‘adaptation’ for such writings because of its negative connotation.

Key Words: - adaptation, afterlife, rebirth, Teen Paishacha Tamasha, Pu La Deshpande, transcreation.

Introduction:

Walter Benjamin in his essay “The Task of the Translator” (1923) talks about the idea of ‘afterlife’ of texts. A text survives in due course of time because of the ‘translatability’ and ‘adaptability’ of the text in different languages and cultures. A text is ‘dead’ if it does not have a reader. This paper studies ‘afterlives’ of two plays which have stood the taste of time and which are adapted in two different languages and have given ‘birth’ to two new plays.

Adaptations are not new to any language or literature or culture. Writers get fascinated by the successful works in other languages and try to bring them into their own language for different reasons. The text appeals to the writer so strongly that s/he wants to bring it into his / her language and wants to share it with the people. Sometimes certain socio-political situation in a society demands adaptations of certain literary works or revival of certain works. For instance, during the Nazi Germany there was a revival of Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice (1596) which was used as propaganda against the Jews.

Adaptation is a ‘free translation’ (or transcreation) in which a writer borrows the skeletal structure from the ‘Parent’ writer and fills it up with his own skills. Thus, the new work remarkably differs from the original. Adaptation is a creative process in which the writer / adapter has to take into consideration the social milieu and the taste of his audience / receivers to win them over. Unless he relates the work to the present it does not have much value for the readers / audiences; it fails as a work of art. Thus, the adapted text is an ‘afterlife’ of the ‘original’ work.
The Beggar’s Opera was one of the most successful plays on stage in the 18th century because of the brilliant songs and dances in it. The success of the play was challenged only by Oliver Goldsmith’s She Stoops to Conquer (1773) in the century. By 1800 the play had 1081 performances. John Rich, the manager of the Theatre Royal and of the play made a profit of more than 4,000 pounds. Thus, the success of the drama caused the people to say that the play made “Rich gay, and Gay rich.” However, Gay’s play was almost forgotten in due course of time. In the 19th century the play was hardly staged. It came to the fore after two centuries when Brecht adapted it in 1928. Brecht borrowed the theme from Gay and transformed the play to serve his purpose that is, to satirize the bourgeoisie. The Threepenny Opera falls in the didactic phase in Brecht’s career and many glimpses of his idea of epic theatre can be seen in the play, although he had not developed fully his idea of epic theatre then. The immediate success of the ply on the stage also revived interest in The Beggar’s Opera among the audience. Thus, the adaptation made people recognize the original.

Influenced by The Threepenny Opera, Pu La Deshpande adapted it in Marathi as Teen Paishacha Tamasha in 1978. The adapted version in Marathi was hugely appreciated by the audience and the play became one of the hits in the 1980s. Thus, Brecht became popular and well known to Marathi audiences through Pu La Deshpande as Gay was to the 20th Century European audience through Brecht.

The present paper studies the two adaptations and compares the adapted versions to the original plays. Little attention has been paid so far to these adaptations. The critics of 18th drama analyze The Beggar’s Opera from the social and political points of view; they bring out the allusions in the play and primarily see it as a political satire. These critics pay little attention to its adaptation by Brecht. Similarly, the critics of Brecht are less inclined towards Gay’s play. They just mention the fact that Brecht based hi play on The Beggar’s Opera and refer to a few changes made in the play. Pu La’s transformed version of The Threepenny Opera in Marathi faces the same fate as that of Brecht’s play. Everybody mentions it or knows that it is based on some other play but nobody has tried to study the differences in the adaptations and relate them to the success of the plays.

The three plays have universal appeal since they justify that human beings are the same everywhere. The strong comic plot which Gay invents helps in arousing laughter. Gay’s play is remarkable because of his innovative content and techniques. Intermingling of songs and dancing in the play was an adventurous step taken by Gay towards introducing new techniques in drama in the 18th century. One can say that The Beggar’s Opera is a mixture of opera and drama. The ingenious songs have been making the play popular and they are appreciated till date. The success of Gay’s play made other writers of his age to include songs dances in their plays. The songs (Airs)and dances in the play made The Beggar’s Opera interesting. People at that time were bored listening to the weary tragedies and were no more interested in comedies either. Drama was declining inthe 18th century. A change in the content and techniques would catch their attention. For recreation they flocked to the operas or applauded vigorously the singers, instrumentalists, and dancers in the midst of regular performances in the theatre. From Restoration days, and even in Elizabethan times, dancing formed a popular part of dramatic performances. In the operatic form in drama, dancing and music reassigned important roles. The people wanted a change which they got in The Beggar’s Opera and therefore it was a huge success.

The adaptations, one can notice, differ remarkably from the original. They are complete in themselves and do not need the original’s assistance to survive. When Gay composed the ‘opera’ he had particular persons in mind to criticize and had other targets to attack. Undoubtedly his main aim was to demolish the reputation of the opera as a form which were becoming undeservingly popular. Gay satirizes the artificiality of the Opera and also mocks at the hypocrisy and pompousness of the upper classes who were fond of such operas and who would watch the monotonous ‘entertainment’
just to show off. Gay also exposes out defects of operas such as their ending, which is always happy. The operas blindly follow the conventions rather than the action.

The corrupt government, the prime minister and the king were the first targets of Gay’s satire. The 18th century audience understood the allusions in the play and followed the action. They got Gay’s point namely that low life is a mirror of high life. They knew which character represents which minister or gentry. Everybody knew that Walpole, the prime minister, was the main victim of Gay’s satire. They also appreciated the attack on the contemporary comedies and romances in the play. The ‘tragedy’ of the South Sea Bubble was fresh in the people’s minds but they were helpless. The attack on the government and its policies came in time through Gay’s play and got immediate response from the people. Thus, Gay’s play is mainly a social satire and is a product of the immediate social and political upheavals in England. But Gay was certainly not a Marxist like Brecht. He depicts the social problem but is not didactic about them nor does he provide any solution to them; he uses the whole situation just to arouse laughter.

Elisabeth Hauptmann, Brecht’s secretary had informed him about a current revival of Gay’s play in London. She had sent for a copy of the play and translated it for Brecht. Brecht, after reading the play, was fascinated and decided to write a modern version of the play. Brecht is certainly ‘preaching’ in his play, explicitly giving out his Marxist ideas. In The Threepenny Opera Brecht shows the consequences of capitalism by altering Peachum’s business from an informer to that of a trainer of beggars. Throughout the play Brecht focuses on the bourgeoisie who prosper under a capitalistic system by exploiting the workers and the poor. In the play Peachum exploits his ‘workers’; similarly, Macheath also earns money without doing much work. The success of The Threepenny Opera lies in the handling of the ‘know story’. Certainly, we do not see the fully developed epic theater in the play. Here Brecht is still experimenting with the techniques through which he could persuade the audience to ‘think’ rather than to ‘feel’ while watching the play. That is why he follows the ancient techniques like prologue, interludes etc. in his play. At certain points, his Marxist ideas clearly come to the fore as in ‘The First Threepenny Finale on the Uncertainty of Human Circumstances’ in Act I, scene iii. He explicitly conveys that since human beings live for such a short time, everybody should get enough in life and an earthly paradise is possible if human beings stop to be mean. He shows that the main exploiter of man in the world is man himself.

Brecht, like Gay, does not have particular persons in mind to satirize. His play does not depict the contemporary social and political situation in Germany. By setting the play in the distant past and in a distant country Brecht tries to detach the emotions / feelings of the audience. He feels that by doing so they can concentrate on the action and can critically analyze the events. So, we notice some traits of the ‘epic theatre’ in the play and Brecht modifies a few in his later plays. Brecht partly owes the success of the play to Kurt Weill who wrote brilliant music for the play. In The Threepenny Opera the women are far more intelligent than those in The Beggar’s Opera. Mrs.Peachum and Polly are cunning; not naive and foolish as they are in Gay’s play. Brecht does not mock at the operas like Gay. His main ‘enemy’ is the bourgeoisie and he tries his best to demolish their reputation. One should consider The Threepenny Opera as one of Brecht’s great plays but unfortunately it has not earned the reputation it deserved because people see it as an adaptation - a borrowed work. But it is certainly perfect in form and rich in content.

Only a few critics are sympathetic to the adaptations. Stephen McNeff in his essay on The Threepenny Opera in The Cambridge Companion to Brecht reveals some of the changes made by Brecht in hisadaptation. McNeff rightly opines that The Threepenny Opera goesbeyond the adaptation and comes out as a new work taking The Beggar’s Opera as its ‘model’ for it.

Pu La was a voracious reader of European literature and brought as many as seven European plays / novels into Marathi through translation or adaptation. In his adaptation he is primarily
concerned about Indianizing in the whole work. Had Pu La gone directly to Gay for the adaptation, certainly he would have written *Teen Paishacha Tamasha* differently. Then his play would not have been ‘twice removed’ from the original and perhaps then he would have paid more attention to songs and music. Though in his preface to the play he agrees with Brecht’s views of drama, he keeps himself away from ‘teaching’ in drama. *Teen Paishacha Tamasha* is basically an entertainment like *The Beggar’s Opera*.

Brecht’s and Gay’s satires are Juvenalian, denouncing severely the bourgeoisie and the upper class and the politicians respectively, whereas Pu La’s satire is Horatian, gentle, witty and projects the tolerant man of the world. Pu La more often has recourse to wry amusement than to indignation over the spectacle of human folly, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy. He uses a relaxed and informal language to evoke from readers a wry smile at human failings and absurdities, sometimes including the readers’/audiences. His aim seems to laugh people out of their vices and follies. Whereas Gay satirizes high and low societies in England at that time, and Brecht picks on the bourgeoisie, Pu La does not aim at a particular class of people (except in scene ix where mocks at the politicians and the cooperative societies). He does not have specific person(s) in mind to attack as Gay does. Pu La nowhere ridicules the form of ‘Tamasha’. Gay and Brecht actually use the operatic form in their plays but there is no ‘Tamasha’ in Pu La’s play. The play is not a Tamasha in the conventional sense; it does not have the features of a Tamasha in it. The success of *Teen Paishacha Tamasha* lies in handling and transforming a European play. Pu La’s skills provide a brilliant piece of entertainment to Indian audiences. The adaptations crossed the barriers of language and culture and could enable people to enjoy a play from a distant country and culture.

**Conclusion:**

All the three writers wrote their plays in disturbed political and social environments but their reactions to the contemporary politics are different. The adaptations are, thus, successful because of the writers’ skill and innovative techniques and they should be read and considered as independent works of arts. Gay’s play finds afterlife in the 20th Century in Germany and India but it has also given birth to two ‘new’ plays.

**Bibliography**

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