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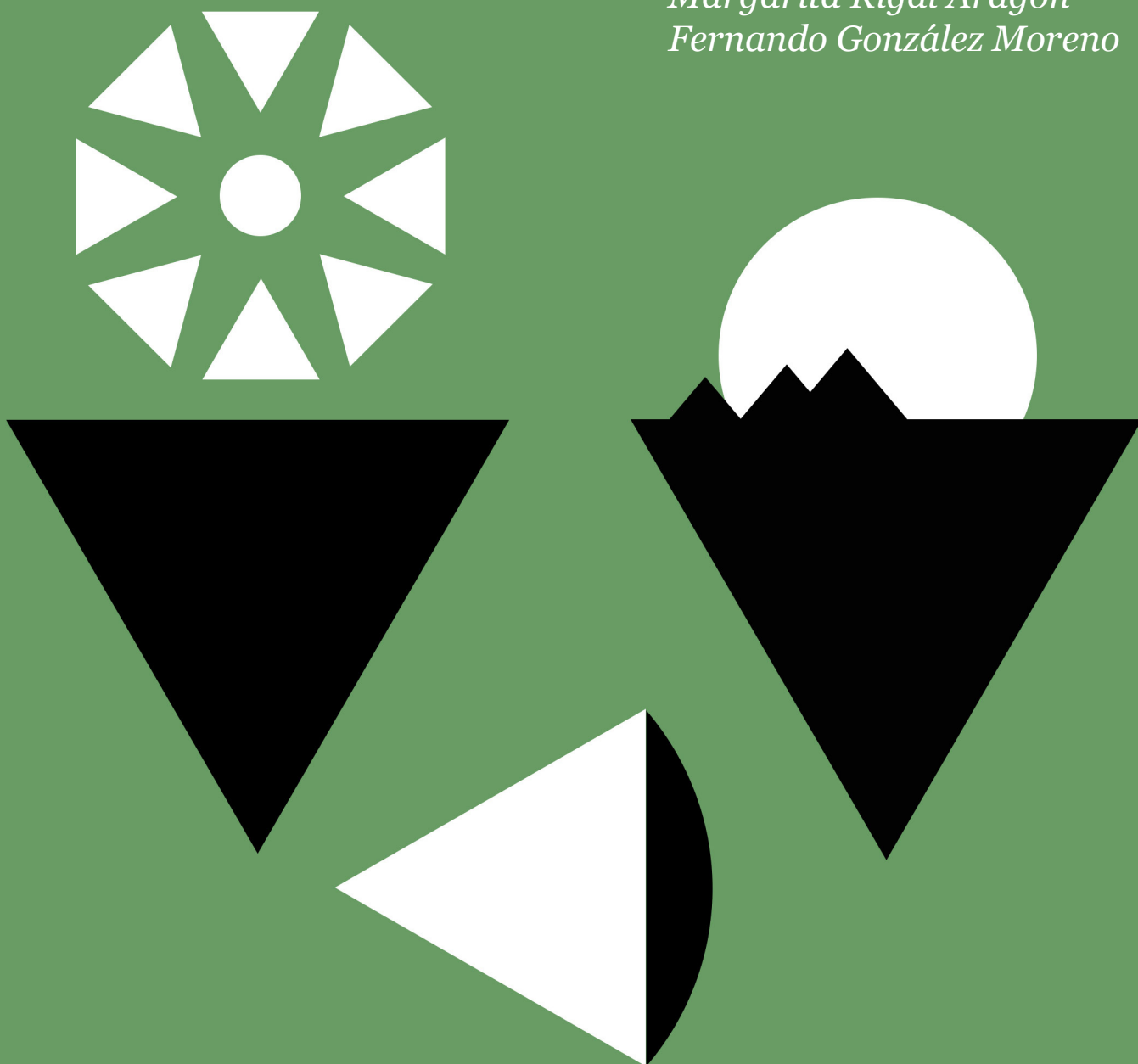
*Estudios de Literatura Comparada 3*

LITERATURA Y ECOLOGÍA,  
LITERATURA Y VISUALIDAD,  
VOCES DE ÁFRICA

**EDITORES GENERALES**

*Margarita Rigal Aragón*

*Fernando González Moreno*



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## Índice

MARGARITA RIGAL ARAGÓN Y FERNANDO GONZÁLEZ MORENO

*Introducción General*

### **1: Literatura y Ecología** 9

JOSÉ MANUEL CORREOSO RODENAS, coordinador

*Introducción a la sección 1* 11

PILAR ANDRADE

*Trasvases y particularidades de la ecocrítica de ámbito francófono* 13

FATEMEH HOSSEINGHOLI NOORI

*La dialéctica del amor y la revelación del secreto tesoro del espíritu en La Celestina y La leyenda de Cosroes y Šīrīn* 25

ISABEL GONZÁLEZ GIL

*Poesía y naturaleza: una lectura ecocrítica de la obra de Aníbal Núñez* 45

PAULA GRANDA MENÉNDEZ

*Racismo medioambiental en Quedan los huesos de Jesmyn Ward: lo «humano» y lo «natural» en el huracán Katrina* 59

RUT FARTOS BALLESTEROS

*Claves ecologistas en la saga Crepúsculo* 67

### **2. Literatura y visualidad** 77

ALEJANDRO JAQUERO ESPARCIA, coordinador

*Introducción a la sección 2* 79

DAVID TARANCO

*Écfrasis y alteridad: la mujer japonesa bajo la mirada de Blasco Ibáñez* 81

ANA BELÉN DOMÉNECH GARCÍA

*Un paseo por la Barcelona de Barrantes o la adaptación de los espacios literarios en «The Murders in the Rue Morgue»* 89

GEMA MARTÍNEZ RUIZ

*«El corazón delator» a través de sus ilustraciones: representación del cuento en las ediciones españolas* 97

JESÚS BARTOLOMÉ

*La transformación de la écfrasis del escudo de Eneas (Eneida VIII 636-731) en Lavinia, de Ursula Le Guin* 109

GUILLERMO AGUIRRE MARTÍNEZ

*Narración gráfica como escenario prototípico del proyecto arquitectónico* 125

FRANCISCO JAVIER SÁNCHEZ-VERDEJO PÉREZ <i>Dialogue between Literature and Early Silent Cinema: An Approach to J. S. Dawley's Frankenstein</i>	133
SHIANG TIAN <i>The Remains of the Day-Novels into Films</i>	147
JOSÉ MANUEL CORREOSO RODENAS <i>La producción de Michael Nicoll Yahgulanaas: el 'haida manga' como conversación entre texto imagen</i>	155
CARMEN GARCÍA BLANCO <i>El lenguaje narrativo visual en los libros de artista de Warja Lavater: hacia una poética de la abstracción</i>	167
CRISTINA FERNÁNDEZ LACUEVA <i>El desafío a la hegemonía de la visualidad en Catedral de Raymond Carver</i>	177
MÓNICA SÁNCHEZ TIERRASECA <i>El personaje entre la ficción y la acritud de su realidad en la adaptación cinematográfica de «Espuelas» por Tod Browning</i>	187
ZAHRA NAZEMI <i>Shahrazad: From Classical Literature to Iranian Television</i>	201
<b>3. Voces de África</b>	211
AURELIO VARGAS DÍAZ-TOLEDO, coordinador <i>Introducción a la sección 3</i>	213
LEONOR MERINO <i>En el escalofrío de la Luna, Resiliencia: Maïssa Bey</i>	215
RAFAEL FERNANDO BERMÚDEZ LLANOS <i>En esta casa todas las paredes tienen mi boca: teoría general do Esquecimento de J. E. Agualusa</i>	231
MARÍA ÁLVAREZ DE LA CRUZ <i>Yo, el otro yo y los demás otros. El «viaje» de un inmigrante congoleño a París en Tais-toi et meurs de Alain Mabanckou</i>	243

# *Shahrazad: de Shakespeare a la sociedad iraní*

## *Shahrazad: from Shakespeare to the Iranian Society*

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### *Resumen*

Este capítulo tiene como objetivo ofrecer una nueva visión sobre la relación entre la literatura y los medios de comunicación, examinando cómo la asimilación por parte de Hassan Fathi de elementos de la literatura occidental, específicamente del *Otelo* de Shakespeare, influye en la producción y recepción de la serie romántica e histórica iraní *Shahrazad* (2015). Después de utilizar *La teoría de la adaptación* (2013) de Linda Hutcheon e investigar la influencia de los temas de Shakespeare en la producción de una historia oriental, se sugiere que el resultado final es un producto simultáneo de ambos contextos, con una narrativa proveniente de la época de Shakespeare y revitalizada en la sociedad iraní moderna, con sus preocupaciones culturales y religiosas. Esto atestigua la permanencia de los temas de Shakespeare y su mutabilidad para todos los tiempos y lugares.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Otelo*, *Shahrazad*, Televisión Iraní, Adaptación y Apropiación, Shakespeare

### *Abstract*

This paper aims to offer a new insight about the relationship between literature and media by examining the ways in which Hassan Fathi's assimilation of elements of western literature, specifically that of Shakespeare's *Othello*, influences the production and reception of the Iranian romantic and historical series, *Shahrazad* (2015). After using Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) and investigating the influence of Shakespeare's themes on the production of an Eastern story, it is suggested that the final result is an offspring of both contexts, with a narrative stemming from Shakespeare's times and revitalized in modern Iranian society with its cultural and religious concerns. This testifies to the impermanence of Shakespeare's themes and their mutability for all times and places.

KEYWORDS: *Othello*, *Shahrazad*, Iranian Television, Adaptation and Appropriation, Shakespeare

### *Introduction*

During the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the evolution of the American school of Comparative Literature as led by Henry Remark, many scholars were encouraged to study the relationship between literature and «other areas of knowledge and belief» (Remak 1961, 3) such as visual arts<sup>1</sup>. *Shahrazad* (first broadcasted on October 12, 2015) directed by Hassan Fathi in Tehran (Iran) is one good example that testifies the strong interrelationship between literature and media. It begins with the 1953 Iranian coup d'état and continues with a romantic story happening afterwards in a historical and political context. The series recount the story of a medical

1 Robert Stam's *A Companion to Literature and Film* (2008), Deborah Cartmell's *A Companion to Literature, Film, and Adaptation* (2012), Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), and Julie Sanders's *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2015) are examples of the great importance of the field of adaptation studies in recent years.

student named Shahrzad whose father works for Bozorg Agha, the wealthy and powerful head of a group of mafia. As the first season of the series begins, Shahrzad is about to marry Farhad, a literature student and the son of Bozorg Agha's another henchman, but in the turmoil of the coup he is arrested and is sentenced to death. With the help of Bozorg Agha, he is saved only on the condition that Shahrzad marries the nephew of Bozorg Agha, Ghobad, who is already married to Shirin, the only daughter of Bozorg Agha who is sterile. The story then continues with the conflicts caused by this marriage and the social and political turmoil resulted from the coup.

Many factors lead to the popularity of the series among which we can mention the inclusion of a love story that is a common and favorable theme among the people, the choice of famous actors and actresses such as Shahab Hosseini, Taraneh Alidousti and Mostafa Zamani who have previously played successful roles in the Iranian cinema; strong publicity on the social networks about the series; the inclusion of important historical and political events like the 1953 Iranian coup d'état and the imprisonment of Mohammad Mosaddegh; the use of literary images and stories like those from *One Thousand and One Nights*, the plays by Shakespeare, poetry of Nima Yooshij, as well as famous movies such as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *Casablanca* (1942); along with the powerful music of the series song by Mohsen Chavoshi that adds to the nuances of melancholy, love and separation.

In this chapter, we investigate a subplot of the series that is the story of Maryam and Babak, the friends of Shahrzad and Farhad who act in the theatre and play *Othello* every night. Babak and Maryam are university students of literature in Tehran where they meet and decide to marry. Babak plays in the theatre and encourages Maryam to play as well. They start performing *Hamlet*, but after a few nights, due to the codes of censorship and for the fear of political implications in the play, the government decides to ban the show because they think it encourages doubt and suspicion among people towards Shah and its supporters. The group then decides to play *Othello*.

Babak plays the role of Othello and Maryam becomes Desdemona. After a few nights of practice, they start performing it in the theatre for all the people. Babak notices that an officer who has a high rank in the police attends the performance every night and sends flowers to Maryam. He becomes suspicious of a relationship between them. At first, it is proved that Maryam is not involved in this relationship. However, after some time, the more Babak becomes suspicious, the more the two are distanced and the more the officer tries to get close to Maryam by pretending to save her from the pressure made by government towards her role in the theatre, by sending her flowers and by offering her a well-paid job.

Finally, Babak decides to hold a wedding party and marry his love, but Maryam rejects because she is busy with her new job as the main actress for an important movie while at the same time, she thinks that Babak is a very jealous and suspicious person and will restrict her activities. They separate after a meeting. Babak follows Maryam secretly when she goes to work and sees the officer accompanying her in the street. Burst into anger and jealousy, he threatens to kill the officer with a gun. The officer, however, begins the duel immediately and shoots Babak. To protect him, Maryam moves forward and is killed. Surprised by the scene, Babak shoots the officer and when he finds his love dead, he kills himself too.



Picture 1. The moment when Babak encounters his love and the officer in the street. ) Source: <https://www.themoviedb.org/tv/65679/season/1/episode/26>



The presence of *Othello* in the series plays an important role mainly because the life and the relationship of the two actors, Babak and Maryam, is influenced by the events of this play in a «meta-theatrical» way (see Yazdanjoo, Asadi Amjad and Shahpoori Arani 2018, 9). Besides, very similar to the story of *Othello*, the themes of love, suspicion and jealousy are emphasized in *Shahzad's* plot.

### *Shakespeare and Cinema*

We must note that Shakespeare's *Othello* has been adapted many times in different historical and cultural contexts. Burt and Boose discuss the two ways by which Shakespeare's fame has been «expanded by digitalization and globalization, the first being film's circulation and alteration in other media and the other being a shift from national to transnational cinemas» (Burt and Boose 2003, 2). Accordingly, although we may suppose that by using the «tried and tested»<sup>2</sup> material of Shakespeare's famous plays, the movies have gained success and popularity, we should also admit that these movies have helped the popularization of Shakespeare's plays well. In his great companion, Jackson also tries to show that «Shakespeare's unique status – both as a complex of poetic and theatrical materials and a cultural icon – has been married to the equally complex phenomenon of the cinema» (Jackson 2000, 1). As he explains,

In the first century of moving pictures, Shakespeare's plays played an honourable but hardly dominant role in the development of the medium. Some forty sound films have been made of Shakespearean plays to date, but it has been estimated that during the 'silent' era – before synchronised dialogue complicated the business of adapting poetic drama for the screen – there were more than 400 films on Shakespearean subjects. These took their place in an international market unrestricted by considerations of language and (consequently) untroubled by the relatively archaic dialogue of the originals. Like the films of other 'classics', they conferred respectability on their makers and distributors, while providing an easily transportable rival to the pictorial, melodramatic mode of popular theatre (2000, 2).

These statements testify to the popularity of Shakespeare in the history of world cinema and suggest that Shakespeare's fame is closely connected with cinema.

Despite the fact that many critics have examined the interrelationships between Shakespeare's classical plays and cinema<sup>3</sup>, the revitalization of *Othello* in the Iranian drama series is novel and no critic has yet touched upon this subject. This will make our attempt more significant. Using the ideas of Linda Hutcheon in her famous book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), regarding the concepts and definitions of «transcultural adaptation» and «indigenization», we aim to study the two works and examine the ways in which the director's appropriation of *Othello* has contributed to the reception of the Iranian *Shahzad* series.

### *Shahzad's Utilization of Othello*

In her *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013), Hutcheon dedicates a separate chapter to the question of the place and time of the production and reception of adaptations. She starts her argument by saying that «[a]n adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum» (2013, 142).

<sup>2</sup> This expression is originally used by Linda Hutcheon. See (Hutcheon 2013, 5).

<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of studies have examined the interrelationship between Shakespeare's plays and cinema. See for example, Collick (1989), Davies and Wells (1994), Holderness (2002), Anderegg (2004), Keller and Stratyner (2004), Rothwell (2004), Boose and Burt (2005), Buchanan (2005), Jackson (2007), Thornton Burnett (2013), Ferguson (2016), Hindle (2019), and White (2020) among others.

This means that while we always consider *Othello* the product of the Elizabethan society and study its events, its codes, and its language as shaped by this context, we should also bear in mind that its adaptations produced in any temporal and national setting, will inevitably be influenced by the context of production and are therefore, «context-dependent» (2013, 142).

Knowing the importance of context, many adapters take into consideration the «reality of reception by updating the time of the story in an attempt to find contemporary resonance for their audiences» (2013, 142). That is why in recent adaptations of the plays of Shakespeare, usually the characters, the style they follow, and the way they talk and behave belongs to the present time. This happens because the director wants it to connect to the audience who watch the product. If, for example, in adapting Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in the Iranian movie *Tardid* (2009), the director had not updated the time and place of the play into the contemporary society of Iran, the film would attract the intellectual audience who could understand the layers of meaning in Shakespeare's play, but the common audience would fail to do so. Thus, the film, being broadcast in the cinema of Iran that belongs to all the people from all the classes of society, would fail its popularity<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, as Hutcheon states, «Time ... can change the context» (2013, 144).

Hutcheon believes the changes happening in the process of adapting a literary work result from a variety of factors such as «the demands of form, the individual adapter, the particular audience, and ... the contexts of reception and creation» (2013, 142). Therefore, when Fathi decides to adapt the play, he has to consider the fact that this story will be included as a subplot to the main romantic story of *Shahzad* so it must be appropriated within that framework and it must suit the purpose of *Shahzad* as a drama series. Also, he has to consider his own objectives for adapting this play and the Iranian audience's expectations who no longer deal with the question of race as did the 16<sup>th</sup> century English readers. Finally, he is expected to try to keep the main messages in Shakespeare's play and consider its language, themes and different layers of meaning.

Besides, what Hutcheon calls context «also includes elements of presentation and reception, such as the amount and kind of 'hype' an adaptation gets: its advertising, press coverage, and reviews. The celebrity status of the director or stars is also an important element of its reception context» (2013, 143). Considering *Shahzad* Series, as I have discussed earlier, these factors play an important role in its reception. For instance, long before the beginning of the series, very well qualified trailers accompanying the powerful music of Mohsen Chavoshi, the famous Iranian musician and singer, were distributed portraying a love story that would attract different groups of the society. Many of the important newspapers and magazines announced its rehearsal and after the distribution of the first parts, many magazines, cinema websites and individual pages on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter dedicated their notes to the acknowledgment of the series. The brand of the name of the director who is very famous in the cinema and television of Iran having produced many good films such as *Zamaneh* (2012), *Zero Degree Turn* (2007), *Shab-e Dahom* (2001), and *Pahlevanan Nemimirand* (1996), to name a few, also influences the positive reception of the series. In addition, Ali Nasirian, Shahab Hosseini, Taraneh Alidousti and Mostafa Zamani are key actors and actresses of the series who are already very popular among the Iranians. All these contribute to the reception of *Shahzad*. We may argue that in neither of these etiquettes the name of *Othello* as revitalized in the series is mentioned and it is only a subplot to the main love story. To answer this, I must admit that the popularity of the whole series influences inevitably the reception of this adaptation as well because the story of Babak and Maryam plays a key role in the development of the plot in the first season of *Shahzad*. Besides, in the series the characters directly admit that they are performing Shakespeare's play in the cinema so the audience know that what they are watching is an adaptation of a literary work. Therefore, the popularity of the whole series means the popularity of a revitalization of a literary work that is being shown in the series.

4 For a study of the Iranian adaptation *Hamlet*, see Ghandeharion (2017).

Later, Hutcheon proposes the concept of ‘Transcultural Adaptation’ (2013, 145). As she begins, «[a]dapting from one culture to another is nothing new: the Romans adapted Greek theater, after all. But what has been called ‘cultural globalization’ ... has increased the attention paid to such transfers in recent years. Often, a change of language is involved; almost always, there is a change of place or time period» (2013, 145). Accordingly, transcultural adaptations do not simply mean translating from one culture into another. While time and place play the key roles in this transformation, there are also more complicated terms such as language that should be highlighted. As we see, the actors who play the roles of Othello and Desdemona in *Shahrzad*, speak modern literary Persian language. The modern Persian language as used and understood by Iranians today, plays the role of a connector that links the two cultures that are alien.

Moreover, within this process, «Almost always, there is an accompanying shift in the political valence from the adapted text to the «transculturated adaptation» (2013, 145). To explain this, we have to take a short glance on the historical setting of the two works. *Othello* was first performed in 1604 during the reign of James I and it is written against the wars between Turkey and Venice that happened in the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What catches the attention of every reader when reading the title of the play is its emphasis on the main character being Moorish. As Vaughan writes,

With the exploration and exploitation of Africa begun by the Portuguese in the fifteenth century, race became a global concept, though not as rigid as it was to become in the nineteenth century ... Race also effects the microcosm in *Othello*, for the marriage of a black man and a white woman is the emotional core of Shakespeare’s play. And as recent commentators have shown, race was (and is) integrally tied to concepts of gender and sexuality (Vaughan 1994, 5).

We could also refer to one of the sources of Shakespeare’s play that is an Italian prose tale by Giovanni Battista Giraldi Cinzio written in 1565 in which there is emphasis on the general being a moor. However, we might wonder that in rewriting the prose tale, Shakespeare could change this aspect of the main character while he doesn’t. This might result from the fact that the Moors during the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage were never valued. Acknowledging a Moor general and giving him a high position could be a way for Shakespeare to deconstruct the power struggles and criticize the society.

Accordingly, we can admit that race is the main historical concern of Shakespeare when writing *Othello* while in *Shahrzad*, the story is different and its main concern is the question of class. Othello in this Iranian series has a darker face, with Arab beards and rings in his ears that implicate his being a moor, but his blackness has not been emphasized. The emphasis, instead, is on power and financial stability. Maryam, the actress who plays the role of Desdemona and is Babak’s fiancé, prefers the request of the wealthy officer mainly because he is from a high class of society and has enough money, whereas Babak is a simple university student and possesses no social classes. We could also refer to the historical events of the setting of the series that syndicates the 1953 Iranian coup d’état and the influence of mafia heads and groups on the important decisions made in politics only by using their power that comes from wealth. Accordingly, the concern of Shakespeare in emphasizing the question of race is shifted towards the question of class in order to fit the demands of the time. This testifies to what Hutcheon had suggested, that «Context conditions meaning» (2013, 145) and it can «modify» it (2013, 147).

Hutcheon also believes that «Sometimes, ... changes are made to avoid legal repercussions» (2013, 146). For instance, on the one hand, Babak and Maryam as actors of Othello and Desdemona should wear according to the rules of the Iranian cinema, the beauty of Desdemona should not be highlighted as much as it is in the play, and men and women characters should never touch mainly because the Iranian media is governed by the principles of

Islamic thought while for Shakespeare's time, these have not been the concern. On the other hand, we should argue that while in the time of Shakespeare, women could not play as actors in the theatre and men, wearing masques, played the role of women, in the present time, this rule has been diminished even in Islamic cultures. Accordingly, Maryam, a young pretty lady, can play the role of Desdemona without any limitations and she can have a voice in the society. This also testifies to Hutcheon's statement that «[t]ranscultural adaptations often mean changes in racial and gender politics» (2013, 147) according to which «[s]ometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial; at other times, the adaptation 'de-represses' an earlier adapted text's politics» (147). In adapting *Othello*, Fathi successfully reconsiders the two questions of race and gender.

Later in the same chapter, Hutcheon discusses the concept of Indigenization (2013, 148). To explain it in the framework of our study, it means what adapters usually do in recent years: they read a literary work, try to understand it fully, and transform it in a way that matches the audience's background better. To explain this, Hutcheon even mentions Shakespeare's *Othello*:

The context of reception ... is just as important as the context of creation when it comes to adapting. Imagine an audience watching any of the new adaptations of *Othello* during the O.J. Simpson trial: the fall of a hero, the theme of spousal abuse, and the issue of racial difference would inevitably take on a different inflection and even force than Shakespeare could ever have imagined (2013, 149).

This is one of the reasons why the Iranian director, portraying a historical time when slavery has been abolished in Iran (Afary 2003, 51-55), does not need to focus on the race of *Othello* because it will not be tangible for the audience. It is, instead, the «[c]ontemporary events or dominant images» that «condition our perception as well as interpretation, as they do those of the adapter» (Hutcheon 2013, 149). The Iranian audience, watching the series at the time when economic problems abound in the country, can sympathize with the concerns of the Iranian *Othello* because he is one of them, one who comes from the middle class and suffers the same financial problems and class distinction. They find him a hero, like Shakespeare's hero, not because of his rank and nobility, but because of his honesty and faith in love. Accordingly, adaptations create «a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves» (2013, 149).

As we have discussed earlier, «Economic and legal considerations play a part in these contexts, as do evolving technologies, as we have seen. So too do things like religion» (2013, 149). The question of religion is important mainly because *Othello* is produced in a Christian society while *Shahzad* is the product of Islamic society of Iran. As West writes, «Shakespeare wrote for a Christian audience, was himself Christian by rearing, and gave his play a Christian setting» (West 1964, 333). There are many biblical allusions in the play that make it Christian. For instance, *Othello* says he will kill Desdemona only after he has prayed: «I would not kill thy unprepared spirit» and together they pray for mercy of Desdemona (Shakespeare 2005, 160). Iran, however, is a Muslim country and that is why no emphasis on the Christianity of *Othello* is mentioned in its Iranian adaptation.

Besides, although *Shahzad* series portrays a time when Reza Shah Pahlavi issued a decree banning veils for women, its reception is at the contemporary Iranian society -after the Islamic Revolution of Iran when hijab is compulsory and over 80% of the population of Iran are Muslims. Accordingly, the actors working on the Christian play, appropriate Shakespeare's play according to the codes of Islam. To explain this better, we could refer specifically to the story of Maryam and Babak. In the play, Desdemona is the legal wife of *Othello* and has no right to reject him or to be unfaithful to him. However, in the series, Maryam has no legal



obligations towards Babak because they are not married, but she is punished for being ambitious and unfaithful in the relationship. In this way, the series intensify the code of fidelity in the Islamic Iranian culture by saying that even if the two were not married, the woman had no right to have an extra relationship with any other man than the one she was engaged with. This proves Hutcheon's statement when she says «[a]daptating across cultures is not simply a matter of translating words» (2013, 149).

We must also consider Hutcheon's principle that in adaptations «cultural and social meaning has to be conveyed and adapted to a new environment through what Patrice Pavis calls the 'language-body'» (2013, 149). When we study *Othello*, the story of the handkerchief as told by Iago is what makes the audience and Othello himself suspicious about the betrayal of Desdemona (Shakespeare 2005, 99). It is only through words that realities are constructed (Robinson 2011, 63). When it comes to the visual mode of representing the play, it becomes different. In *Shahzad*, the audience follow all the details about the life of Desdemona and Maryam. They see the handkerchief on the stage falling from Desdemona's hands and they see the flowers Maryam receives from the officer while also that she reminds the officer of the fact that they are not married and he should not treat her in an unreasonable manner (e.g. to get close to her or to touch her). Therefore, the gestures and moves make the audience more involved with the reality of the story.

In the showing mode, everything becomes important: «[f]acial expressions, dress, and gestures take their place along with architecture and sets to convey cultural information that is both verisimilar and an 'index of the ideologies, values, and conventions by which we order experience and predicate activity'» (Hutcheon 2013, 150). Accordingly, in *Shahzad*, while the red flowers on the scene connote the love between Othello and Desdemona, when it comes to killing her, the flowers are absent and the scene becomes empty. Maryam, being a second Desdemona in the series, tries to treat the officer with polite gestures at the beginning of the story, not gazing at him, while at the end, her constant gazes at him implicate a relationship for the audience. These indicate the very influential role of all the details in the visual mode.

Hutcheon believes that «[w]hen stories travel—as they do when they are adapted ... across media, time, and place—they end up bringing together what Edward Said called different 'processes of representation and institutionalization'» (2013, 150) according to which, «ideas or theories that travel involve four elements: a set of initial circumstances, a distance traversed, a set of conditions of acceptance (or resistance), and a transformation of the idea in its new time and place» (2013, 150) which is what happens in the Iranian appropriation of *Othello* as well. The director sets similarities in plot to highlight the work being the influence of the famous play and little by little, he tries to focus on each idea represented in the play, accepts or resists them (like the question of race and gender) and transforms the whole idea in a way that fits the Iranian stage.

Therefore, «[a]daptations ... constitute transformations of previous works in new contexts» (2013, 150). To this end, «Local particularities [have to] become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results» (2013, 150). The adaptation that Hassan Fathi has produced out of *Othello*, is neither pure Iranian nor pure Shakespearean. Rather, it is a hybrid entity that has been under the influence of both the play and its new context. Consequently, «Indigenizing can lead to strangely hybrid works» (2013, 151).

Finally, Hutcheon reviews the term 'indigenization' as used by Susan Stanford to refer to a «kind of intercultural encounter and accommodation» (2013, 150). As she explains, «the advantage of the more general anthropological usage in thinking about adaptation is that it implies agency: people pick and choose what they want to transplant to their own soil. Adapters of traveling stories exert power over what they adapt» (2013, 150). In a similar vein, Fathi exerts the power of Islamic Iranian culture into the material produced by Shakespeare and appropriates it for his own culture.

## Conclusions

After studying Linda Hutcheon's question of context side by side with Hassan Fathi's revitalization of *Othello*, we came to the conclusion that the final result of this revitalization is neither the pure product of Shakespeare's Elizabethan tragedy nor it is the pure creation of Iranian culture. Adaptations, being hybrid in nature, receive influences both from the context of reception and production and these influences represent themselves in many different ways, including but not limited to the question of power, language, gender, race, identity and even very minute details such as dress, gestures and looks. The Iranian *Shahzad* portraying a history before the Islamic Revolution and being received after the Revolution, not only has to stick to the codes written by Shakespeare, but also has to satisfy the demands of the audience who expect to see history in a modern adaptation. We must admit that *Othello's* adaptation in *Shahzad* has been successful in keeping its hybridity and the director has carefully taken into consideration all the important forces influencing the production and reception of the adaptation. Furthermore, while influencing the positive popularity of *Shahzad* among the literary audience, *Othello's* reception is influenced by being a subplot of this successful drama series as well. Accordingly, it is concluded that the director has successfully represented the interconnectedness between the reception of literature and cinema.

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