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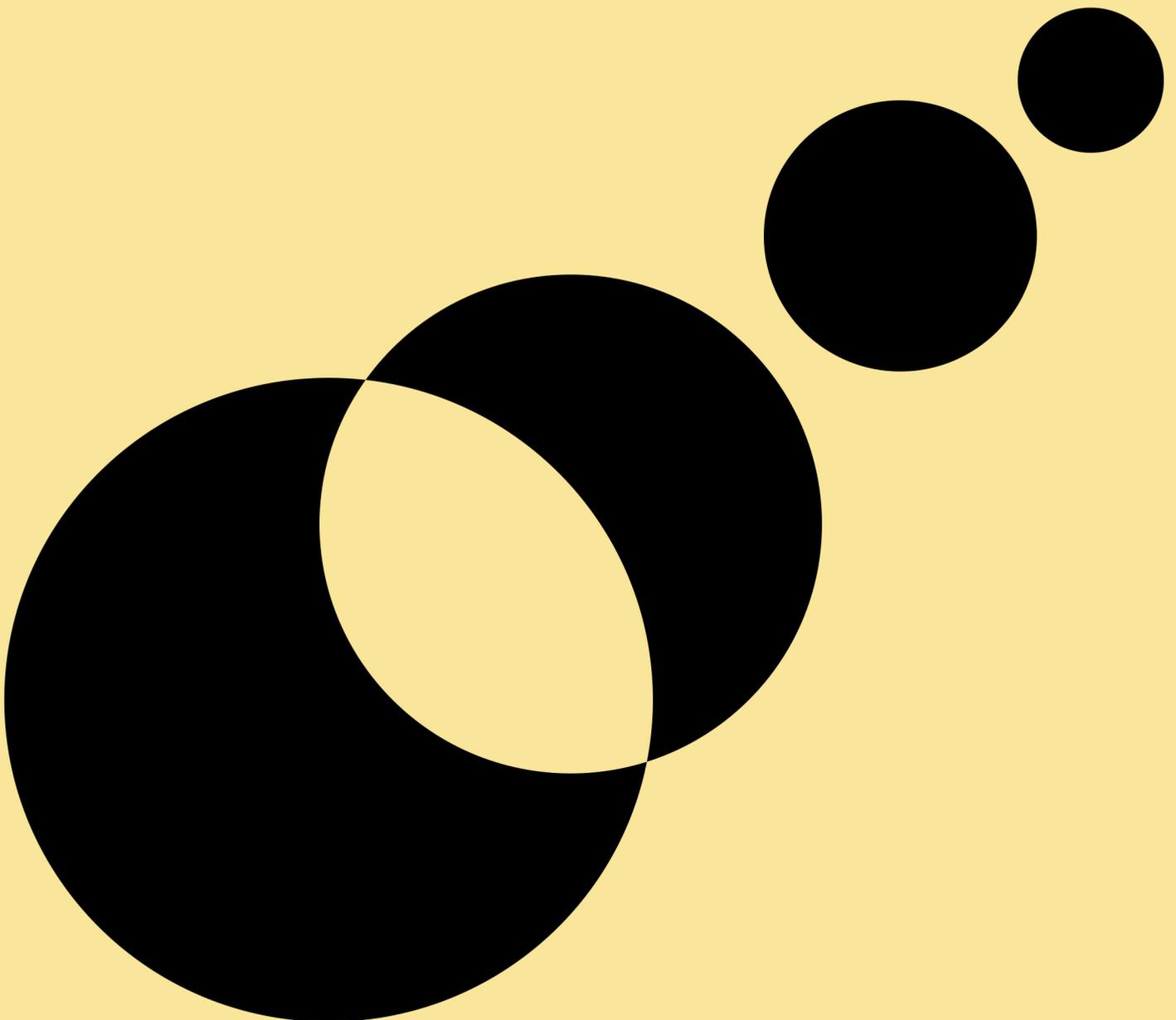
SOCIEDAD ESPAÑOLA
DE LITERATURA GENERAL
Y COMPARADA

Estudios de Literatura Comparada 2 (Vol. 1)

**TRANSCOMPARATISMO &
NARRATIVAS MÁS ALLÁ DE LA LITERATURA**

EDITORA GENERAL

Blanca Puchol Vázquez



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Who Defines Motherhood? A Study of Ibsen's Ghosts (1882) and Its Iranian Adaptation

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Resumen

El objetivo del presente estudio es examinar comparativamente las representaciones de la maternidad como rol de las mujeres en las adaptaciones literarias transculturales. El papel de las madres es un tema importante que tiene diferentes definiciones y manifestaciones en las sociedades y adaptaciones occidentales y orientales, ya que los discursos son capaces de redefinir esas conceptualizaciones. En este estudio, se analizan las representaciones de la maternidad en la obra noruega de Ibsen, *Ghosts* [Espectros] (1882), y en su adaptación cinematográfica iraní *Apparition* [Aparición] (2014), dirigida por Dariush Mehrjui como un estudio de caso para mostrar cómo las adaptaciones transculturales pueden contribuir a la reconstrucción de la definición y representación de los roles de la mujer. Por lo tanto, esta investigación comparará y contrastará analíticamente los aspectos sociales, culturales y religiosos de la maternidad en las dos obras, a la luz de *La teoría de la adaptación* (2013) de Linda Hutcheon, para mostrar cómo las adaptaciones, influenciadas por los discursos sociales, contribuyen a definir el significado del género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Adaptaciones transculturales, Maternidad, Ibsen, Cine iraní, Mujeres.

Abstract

In the present study, the aim is to examine comparatively the representations of motherhood as one of the roles of women in transcultural literary adaptations. The role of mothers is an important issue that has different definitions and manifestations in Western and Oriental societies and adaptations as discourses can define and represent those definitions. In this study, I find it crucial to examine the manifestations of motherhood in the Ibsen's Norwegian play, *Ghosts* (1882), and its Iranian film adaptation *Apparition* (2014) directed by Dariush Mehrjui as an example to show how transcultural adaptations can contribute to the reconstruction of the definition and representation of the roles of women. Thus, this research will analytically compare and contrast the social, cultural and religious aspects of motherhood in the light of Linda Hutcheon's *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013) to finally show how adaptations influenced by social discourses can define the meaning of gender.

KEY WORDS: Transcultural Adaptations, Motherhood, Ibsen, Iranian Cinema, Women.

Introduction

Linda Hutcheon informs us of the ubiquity of film adaptations in recent years. Defining them as an "extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art" (2013: 170), she uses Ellis's words to argue that the directors are more willing to adapt the "tried and tested" in order to avoid risks of failure and to be financially successful (2013: 5). In this way, by using the text from world bestselling books that have already gained success, the directors can make sure that a great group of audience will be attracted to watch their movies. Besides, by adapting great world literary masterpieces, directors can "pay homage" to prior works and "contest the aesthetic or political values of the adapted text" (2013: 20). Consequently, through

adaptations, a mutual relationship is created between the two texts (in this case literature and media) as a result of which not only the text helps the success of the movie, but the movie also contributes to the revitalization of the text and is capable of critically reexamining the potential values of the source text and to construct, re-construct, or de-construct them.

This, which is perhaps one of the main reasons for the popularity of adapted screenplays in Hollywood, is so important that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) has dedicated an award (Oscars) for the Best Adapted Screenplay since the 1920s. In an almost similar manner, in recent years, directors in the Iranian cinema have been more willing to adapt from the most famous works of world literature. To name a few, one can mention Asghar Farhadi's recent Oscar-winning movie *The Salesman* (2016) adapted from Arthur Miller's *Death of the Salesman*, Ali Mosaffa's *The Last Step* (2012) adapted from James Joyce's "The Dead", Bahram Tavakoli's *Here Without Me* (2011) adapted from Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Varuzh Karim-Masihi's *Tardid* (2009) adapted from *Hamlet*, and Dariush Mehrjui's *Sara* (1992) adapted from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. These are perhaps the best Iranian cinematic adaptations of world literature, first, because they have been among the best-selling movies in the history of Iranian cinema and, second, because as in the case of Farhadi's *The Salesman*, they have received international acclaim.

Bearing in mind the importance of literary adaptations, in this study, the aim is to launch a comparative outlook and investigate the representation of mothers as one of the roles of women in Henrik Ibsen's Norwegian play, *Ghosts* (1882), and its recent Iranian film adaptation *Apparition* (2014) directed by Dariush Mehrjui to see how adaptations can contribute to the reconstruction of the definition of motherhood as influenced by their social and cultural context. While many feminists have already discussed the bipolarity of sex and gender and defined gender as a social and cultural phenomenon¹, in this study we will examine the ways in which motherhood as one of the gender roles of women in the twentieth century can be redefined and represented through intercultural literary adaptations. The method of this study is descriptive-analytical using the visual and verbal signs of the two texts and in the framework of the ideas of Linda Hutcheon mainly when she discusses the key concepts of 'transcultural adaptations' and 'indigenization'.

1. *Ibsen on the Iranian Screen*

In the whole world Ibsen's reception is highly positive. His plays have been translated into Persian Language several times. Also, they are included in the syllabi of Iranian departments of literature and theater, and often many dramatizations of them appear on the scene. In addition, two of his well-known plays, namely *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1882), have been adapted for the cinema by Dariush Mehrjui who is one of the most popular film directors in Iran.

Mehrjui was born in 1939 in Tehran where he lived until he was twenty years old. Then he went to California to continue his education in cinema and philosophy. According to critics, he is a director famous for piercing realism and objective depiction of details in his cinematic works. As Holledge and Tompkins contend, Mehrjui has "played a major role in the development of the new Iranian cinema" as "his films have won critical acclaim both within Iran and internationally" (2000: 37. See also Dönmez-Colin 2006: 74-75). Akrami also considers him as "one of the most enduring artistic figures in the Iranian cultural scene today" (1999: 128). This is true because in the past years, most of his movies have gained

¹ Simone de Beauvoir is one of the most important representatives of this school whose famous *The Second Sex* (1956) clearly explains this distinction. According to de Beauvoir, sex, being the biological and natural aspect of every creature, is fixed, unchangeable and predetermined while gender is constructed by society and is flexible and dependent on the context (See de Beauvoir 1956: 273. Also see Butler 1986: 35). To know more about the other important feminists who have discussed this issue, see Stoller (1984), de Lauretis (1987), Sedgwick (1990), Millet (2000), Pilcher and Whelehan (2004), Tong (2009), Carter (2012), and Coole (2013).

national popularity among Iranian people, have been positively reviewed by critics and experts in literature, cinema and philosophy, were applauded by the Iranian government², and have received international awards.

As Akrami argues, Mehrjui is well acknowledged, “as the director most responsible for heralding a new wave of filmmaking in Iran, whose reverberations are still enriching the Iranian cinema after three decades” (1999: 128). After examining this director’s pre-revolutionary movies, Akrami suggests that his films are commonly concerned with “the plight of the dispossessed” according to which they focus on “the censorship codes” and “a cruel social system that offers nothing but injustice to its most deprived citizens” (1999: 130). However, Akrami also maintains that after the Islamic revolution in Iran Mehrjui seems to have lost interest in the cult: “This was a particularly curious change of direction on his part since the political climate had decidedly changed in favor of depicting the disadvantaged classes” (1999: 130)³. This is true because after the Islamic Revolution, Iran became a society in which the improvement of the life and condition of people from all classes was important for the achievement of the goals of the Revolution itself. This is naturally represented in the cinema that is governed by principles of the revolution. As a result, Mehrjui, being influenced by this system finds it crucial to delve into the life of the people who have previously been neglected.

Dönmez-Colin discusses Mehrjui as a director who “focused on women and their plight in an androcentric Muslim society in transition to modernity” (2006: 74). Moruzzi also mentions him as a director who “has made a whole series of films that focus on the dilemmas of women’s choices” (2001: 91). As a good example, one can mention *Sara* (1992) that concentrated on the dilemmas that a woman faces in a patriarchal society and the consequences of any choice⁴. This is significant because the film is concerned with an important social crisis after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, which is the question of the role of women. Accordingly, it can be suggested that as a social director, Mehrjui tries to depict the main concerns of the Iranian society while he also takes the important factors of the social context into consideration.

For Holledge and Tompkins, *Sara* is “one of four films with strong central female characters made by Mehrjui between 1992 and 1997” (2000: 37). As they further explain, “in his adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, time, place, and culture are all changed, and the artistic medium has moved from theatre to film, but overall the text is extremely faithful to the original, despite some significant deviations” from it (2000: 37). In the discourse of Hutcheon, this is an important issue because both fidelity and innovation are the important components of adaptation: “repetition without replication” as she uses the term (Hutcheon, 2013: 7). Fidelity reminds the audience of the influence of the source text while innovation creates a sort variety that attracts the contemporary audience with new tastes and needs.

Holledge also argues that working “through the framework of Islamic family law to create his adaptation” of Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (2011: 158) the Iranian director is successful mainly because as we know, Ibsen’s play is the product of the liberal European society dealing with Christian ideals while everything is different in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, his being able to produce a successful adaptation that has gained international applaud, based on a text that belongs to a foreign culture is a great achievement. Thus, we can claim that Mehrjui has on the one hand somehow appropriated Ibsen’s play so as to highlight his principal themes, while on the other hand, he has successfully attempted to meet the cultural demands of the Islamic Iranian society.

Jahid also reminds us that a reason for the popularity of *Sara* is that Mehrjui has selected an appropriate and interesting subject for it, a subject that “was more suitable for the

² As in the case of *The Cow* that was positively acknowledged by Imam Khomeini. See Jahid (2012: 43) and Dönmez-Colin (2006: 74).

³ To know more about Mehrjui’s cinema before and after the Islamic Revolution, see Mirbakhtyar (2006, 56).

⁴ Dönmez-Colin (2004: 122) explains this in detail.

atmosphere of the time, and could be realized within existing constraints” (2012: 153). In fact, he has tried to realistically represent the life of Iranians as it is (in Howellsian tradition)⁵ while at the same time he has delved into the consciousness of his characters and developed a sort of psychological realism about the ways Iranian characters have to interact with the social issues of the time. Accordingly, using the “tried and tested” material of *A Doll's House*, that also matched the concerns of the Iranian society, Mehrjui gains success in appropriating the Norwegian play into his movie *Sara* by realistically representing the life of Iranians as it is.

2. Apparition (2014), Mehrjui's Second Adaptation of Ibsen

Apparition (2014) is Mehrjui's second movie adaptation of a play by Ibsen called *Ghosts* (1882). Ibsen wrote it in 1881 and the play was premiered in the next year. Yet, no comparative research has yet focused on these two works, which is the main concern of the present study. *Apparition* recounts the story of Soleimani, a wild alcoholic Militant, who rapes his servant. Years later, Maziar, his son who has been forcefully sent abroad by his mother, comes back home. Now a professional artist, Maziar falls in love with Roza, a young servant, who is revealed to be the illegitimate daughter of the Militant himself, and is, therefore, Maziar's sister. However, it is coincidental that just at the time the two decide to marry the truth is revealed. Appreciating this, Roza desperately leaves the house. Maziar, who has for long been suffering from a disease, feels additionally sick and finally dies.

Although the plots of the two works share many similarities like the fact that both recount the story of a sick boy who is just back from abroad, or the fact that both die at the end and suffer a sort of determinism, Mehrjui has merged so much of his own cultural codes with those of the Norwegian play. In both the original play and its adapted movie the role and condition of the mother is especially significant; but this has been left untouched by the critics. Thus, this study finds it crucial to unravel the influence of cultural considerations on the representation of the mother as one of the gender roles of women in the twentieth century when Ibsen's play was written in the aforementioned play and its Iranian film adaptation.

To highlight the significance of this research as it concerns with the examination of the portrayal of mothers, it should be noted that in all cultures the mother is the central figure of the family. Defined as “an automatic set of feelings and behaviours that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby,” motherhood is “an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture” (Akujobi, 2011: 2). Accordingly, it is the rules, cultural customs, and expectations of a society about the roles and responsibilities of a mother that construct her identity. Thus, from one culture to another its representation can be different.

As Akujobi puts it, motherhood is “wrapped in many cultural and religious meanings – cultural as in what the society thinks a mother should be, that is, some elements associated with a mother, and religious in what the practiced faith of a particular society attaches to motherhood” (2011: 2). Thus, the concept of motherhood “assumes different [...] shapes depending on the society that is practicing it” and this different portrayal can represent itself in “literature and in other discourses” like media where it is “a recurrent theme across cultures” (2011: 2). Therefore, to study motherhood in various texts taking root from incongruous cultural, social, and political backgrounds is the meaning of the negotiation of different cultures and nations that are far from each other, while it is also the main objective of comparative literature.

This also testifies to Henry Remak's claim when he argues that comparative literature is no longer limited, rather it is

the study of literature beyond the confines of one particular country, and the study of the relationships between literature on the one hand, and other areas of knowledge and

⁵ To know about realism and its branches, see Pizer (1995).

belief, such as the arts. [...] It is the comparison of one literature with another or others, and the comparison of literature with other spheres of human expression. (qtd. In Ray, 2008: 27)

That is exactly what we are doing in this study, which is to examine comparatively literature and cinema that are distinct fields of study. Hutcheon also admits that adaptation studies are comparative studies because “When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works” (2013: 6). Thus, to study motherhood in two different cultures, languages, and mediums is what comparative literature yearns for.

3. *Adaptation as a Cultural Product*

In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Hutcheon argues that the act of adaptation consists of both creation and interpretation (2013: 18). It includes interpretation because one has to fully understand the primary text so as to adapt it and it includes creation because after interpreting the work, one has to reproduce it in a new medium and/or context. So when we call a text an interpretation, we are in fact focusing on the fact that the adapter should limit him/herself to the adapted work while creation means that the adapter can deviate from the text and create an independent product. Adaptations include both.

Thus, it is expected that the Iranian director should interpret all the cultural codes (words and signs) used in Ibsen's play and then translate them for the Iranian audience. As mentioned earlier, Hutcheon argues that “When we call a work an adaptation, we openly announce its overt relationship to another work or works” (2013: 6). This relationship can exist in theme, plot, style, context and any signs within the two works and it depends on the choice of the director, the context of the production and many other important factors like the influence of the politics or religion, etc.

In this way, considering the interrelationship between the source and target texts, adaptations are not perceived as solely autonomous objects; rather, they are perceived as “mosaics of citations” whether they are visible or not (2013: 21). This is how the Iranian literary audience who is familiar with Ibsen's *Ghosts* will watch Mehrjui's adaptation as a reproduction of the play, a “palimpsest” in Hutcheon's words, and not as an autonomous movie, remembering the interconnections of the former (Ibsen's) play and the voices of the latter (Mehrjui's) alterations.

Nonetheless, Hutcheon argues that adaptations are also “*original screenplay[s]*” ([emphasis in the original] 2013: 87), and the possible outcome of the (geographical, cultural, historical, etc.) conditions of their production. As a result, they can illuminate the “changes in politics” and are capable of revealing the “historical and political moments of their production” (Springer, 2013: 1). For instance, the Iranian audience who is quite naïve about Ibsen's *Ghosts*, can take real pleasure from Mehrjui's *Apparition* because the story, language, dressing codes, etc. are tangible for the Iranian people. As Julie Sanders contends,

On the surface, all screen versions of novels are transpositions in the sense that they take a text from one genre and deliver it to new audiences by means of the aesthetic conventions of an entirely different generic process (here novel into film). But many adaptations, of novels and other generic forms, contain further layers of transposition, relocating their source texts not just generically, but in cultural, geographical and temporal terms. [...] Genette would describe this as a ‘movement of proximation’ [...] and it is extremely common in screen adaptations of classic novels. (2006: 20)

Thus, while we consider adaptations as connectors that link two (or more) works together, we should also note that they, independent as they are, are born out of their unique cultural and temporal contexts.

That is how on the one hand they are the means by which “stories [can] travel to different cultures and different media” (Hutcheon, 2013: 31) in order to “fit new times and [...] places” (2013: 176) while on the other hand it is always the “context” that “conditions [the] meaning” of them (2013: 145). Therefore, when we examine the portrayal of the mother in Ibsen’s play and its Iranian movie adaptation, we mean not only the similarities and differences of the two works and the influence of the source play on its target movie, but we also consider Mehrjui’s adaptation as an original movie that is the product of the Iranian cultural, social and religious context.

4. *How Is Motherhood Defined in Ghosts?*

Helen Alving is the only mother-figure in Ibsen’s play. Helen is the wife of the deceased Mr. Alving and the mother of Oswald. In the play, we hear Ibsen’s characters exchanging about Regina’s mother as well. Yet we never see her on the scene. At the outset of the play, Mrs. Alving calls herself “a lucky woman,” for after two years she is now having her son back at home (Ibsen, 2000: 9). She repeatedly expresses her pleasure and happiness because of her son’s presence. Besides, by using a very kind language when she speaks about or with him, she shows her strong love and great care for him (2000: 35-37, for example). Yet her expression of love and care is not limited to the use of kind words, because she is always meticulous about his health, and often prevents him from excessive smoking and drinking (2000: 15 & 35).

As we read the dialogues between Helen and Mr. Manders, we come to understand about the misdeeds of Oswald’s father that have remained a secret for years. Helen confesses to her friend that for the protection of her son she has tried to play the role of a good mother by sending him away when he was very young in order to save his life and help him eliminate his childhood from bad memories about his father. Even now that Oswald is a young man, she pretends that his father was a man “full of fun” and that Oswald has “inherited the name of a man who undoubtedly was both energetic and worthy” (2000: 16 & 27), which is later revealed to be nothing more than a bunch of lies. She also playfully hopes that Oswald will be as energetic as his father was (2000: 16). As she concedes, she has lied to her son for years because she believed that it is the best way for him⁶. Hence, up to now we understand Helen as a caring and loving mum who tries her best to protect her son even by false pretention.

However, in later stages of the play we find her an open-minded mother who believes that a better training policy is if we provide our children with occasions to extend their social interactions before it is late for them. She says that going out into the world “is the best thing for an active boy, and especially for an only child. It’s a pity when they are kept at home with their parents and get spoiled” (2000: 16). Also, when Oswald acknowledges that he has had some extramarital relations, she “nods assent” (2000: 17), and later on she bravely expresses her ideas in this regard in front of Manders, the priest: “I say that Oswald was right in every single word he said” (2000: 18. See also 17-19). The priest, however, stands against her brave declarations and reminds her that she has “forsaken [...] [her] duty as a mother” (2000: 19), and that she has “been overmastered [in] all [...] [her] life by a disastrous spirit of willfulness” (2000: 20). The priest is radically against the liberal ideas of Helen and tries to question her role as both wife and mother:

All your impulses have led you towards what is undisciplined and lawless. You have never been willing to submit to any restraint. Anything in life that has seemed irksome to you, you have thrown aside recklessly and unscrupulously, as if it were a burden that you were free to rid yourself of if you would. It did not please you to be a wife any longer, and

⁶ This picture of Helen seems comparable to that of Nora in *A Doll’s House*, a wife and mother who thinks is doing her best to save her life and family through telling lies.

so you left your husband. Your duties as a mother were irksome to you, so you sent your child away among strangers. (2000: 20)

In a similar manner, S. H. Siddall argues that mothers in Ibsen's plays reject their traditional "role, either neglecting their children or, like Hedda, struggling in frightened anger against her pregnancy" (2008: 57).

Nonetheless, throughout Ibsen's play we are provided with the viewpoints of two groups of people: those of Manders as a priest and those of Helen and her son. Manders addresses Helen as "a guilty mother" (Ibsen, 2000: 20) whereas Helen believes that she has endured all her life problems with her husband only because of her son (2000: 22); that despite her son's long-term detachment from them, she has had a close relationship with him so he doesn't feel strange with them (2000: 20); and that only when she conceived the reality of her husband's rape of the maid she had to send her son away from home because she came to realize that "the child would be poisoned if he breathed the air of this polluted house" (2000: 22). These brave indications of Helen provide a picture of her as a strong and caring mother who surely protects her child against all possible dangers.

Even now that Oswald is at home, she tries to protect his feelings by preserving the truth about his father from him and restricting him from a share of his inheritance. She also tries to comfort him when he is desperate and devastated (see 2000: 36 & 49). Besides, though she is strictly against her son's drinking, when she finds him really frustrated, she allows him to drink and smoke in order to calm him down (2000: 38). Or, when she finds him in love with Regina, she even thinks about the possibility of their marriage although she knows that in Christian terms it is both impossible and illegal. So typically, she is a mother who can neglect her strongest predilections for the sake of her son's salvation.

Oswald too has a mutual respect for her mother. For example, he often talks to her in a kind and polite language (see 2000: 35 & 53), he does not refrain from admitting that she is his best friend in the world (2000: 40), and he always feels happy being with his mum: "it's so nice and cosy, mother dear. (Caresses her with one hand.) Think what it means to me--to have come home; to sit at my mother's own table, in my mother's own room, and to enjoy the charming meals she gives me" (2000: 35). However, it is natural that his being far away from home for a long time has created a distance between them. Accordingly, Oswald believes that his mother is "indifferent" towards his coming back home again and that she must have "been quite happy living without [...] [him] so far" which is admitted by Helen as well: "Yes, I have lived without you--that is true" (2000: 36).

5. *Helen's Reception in Iran*

Helen's introductory picture that shows her a thoroughly caring and protective mother is in line with the image of the typical mother in Persian literature and cinema. In his book *Iran* (2003), Kheirabadi describes motherhood in his country and argues that the mother in the Iranian culture

[...] is very much the moral gauge of the family. She is supposed to raise good children and instill good values in them. The prophet Muhammad said, 'Heaven is at the feet of mothers.' This saying and many similar proverbs and comments found in Iranian secular and religious literature have greatly elevated the status of mothers in Iranian society. Usually when a woman reaches the status of a mother she is much more respected by the others. (2003: 104)

In the same way, Ali Hatami's *Mother* (1991) and even a more recent series like Javad Afshari's *Kimia* (2015) show that the ideal Iranian mother is the one who sacrifices all her life

to support her children, who loves them so tenderly and thoroughly that even if she finds them in trouble she is very likely to get sick herself. Thus, when the Iranian reader faces Helen telling lies to her child for the sake of his life, she feels sympathetic with her and comes to appreciate her motherly conduct.

However, the image of the mother provided in the later stages of *Ghosts*, which shows her living happily without her child, goes counter to the picture of the ideal mother already presented in traditional literature and media of Iran. Here, one must note that the children in the western countries are sent away since young ages to live independently from their parents, and the distance between them and their parents seems to be a naturally accepted outcome of this process of detachment, while in Iran, children usually leave their parents to start their independent lives only after they have got married. This is why Hutcheon argues that in film adaptations “[t]he context of reception [...] is just as important as the context of creation” (2013: 149). She theorizes that

Contemporary events or dominant images condition our perception as well as interpretation, as they do those of the adapter. There is 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. 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)

Adrienne Rich also believes that “Every culture invents its special version of the mother-son relationship” (1995: 202). Correspondingly, the Iranian adaptor has to make some modifications in his work to make it appropriate to the conception of the Iranian audience who considers love and care the most important features of motherhood.

Notwithstanding, what surprises Iranian Ibsen’s readers is Oswald’s request of her mother to help him commit suicide. From the eye of the present readers it is even shocking not only for the Iranian audience with strict religious bias against suicide, but perhaps for the Norwegians as well. As we read in the play, Helen herself too is shocked by his request (2000: 56). So she professes a claim that she is the one “who gave you your life!” and that for a mother like her, who has given life to her child, it is impossible to contribute to his death (2000: 56). In the final scene, however, she challenges with the failure of all of her motherly ambitions, because she has to stand confronted by the scene of her son’s death. When she “jumps up despairingly, [and] beats her head with her hands” she starts screaming with shock and fear, and the scene is so unbearable to her (2000: 57). As the curtain falls down in the final Act, we see her “Paralyzed with fear,” and she cries and screams (2000: 57), which is expected by the Iranian readers.

6. *How Is Motherhood Defined in Mehrjui’s Adaptation?*

6.1. *Religious Codes*

From the perspective of her role in the family, the images of the mother provided in Ibsen’s play are closely comparable to those of the ideal mothers in Iran. So, one can assume that Mehrjui’s role as an adaptor is rather easy and simple. But before we pass a final judgement on this, we need to make a careful assessment of the subject. In Mehrjui’s adaptation, Sara and Taji play the roles of Mrs. Alving and Johanna in the Norwegian play. However, because of the cultural codes of the Iranian cinema that are based upon the Islamic premises, the director has to make some alterations so as to appropriate the cultural codes. Hutcheon’s argument provides a simple formula for this act of appropriation:

Adapting across cultures is not simply a matter of translating words. For audiences experiencing an adaptation in the showing or interacting modes of engagement, cultural

and social meaning has to be conveyed and adapted to a new environment through what Patrice Pavis calls the “language-body” [...] The intercultural, he says, is the “intergestural”: the visual is as important. (2013: 149)

According to this formula, “Fashions, not to mention value systems, are context-dependent” (2013: 142). As an example among many others, clothing is an important code that has to be adapted for the Iranian cinema as it is based on Islamic premises and seemingly addresses the greatest number of Muslims. Therefore, it is not for nothing that in Mehrjui’s adaptation all the characters come onto the scene with *hijab*. Although Sara lives a luxurious life with a drunkard man where there is no sign of belief in God or religion, the long and dark articles of clothing which she often has on herself, and which attract no attention at all, apparently signify her bleak and dark life, while in the Iranian contemporary society they stand for acceptable cultural codes and meanings (following principles of Islamic system). However, the fact that she leaves a part of her hair in no veil shows her liberal attitude rather than her strict religious stance.

The distance created in the adaptation between male and female characters is another important code in the Iranian media and culture, according to which men and women who do not have a close kinship⁷ should always wear a veil in the presence of one another. In the movie, this orthodoxy or code of conduct is carefully observed. For instance, when Sara finds Roza spending time with her son, she warns her to keep distance from him. Also, although Sara is not a religious figure, she is against the illegal marriage of Maziar and Roza, which is in contrast to Helen who thinks of submitting to the marriage between Oswald and Regina even though she is aware that this marriage is illegal in religious terms. Sara, the Iranian mother, even bids her son not to get too close to Roza because she finds it inappropriate.

In the same way, the Iranian director omits Oswald’s request from his mother to help him commit suicide because he is certain that it goes counter to the Islamic religious codes while it is far from being understandable for the Iranian mother. Hutcheon emphasizes the value of this issue: “[s]ometimes, [...] changes are made to avoid legal repercussions” (2013: 146). So the changes Mehrjui makes in the adaptation of his film are for the observation of the axioms of the sociology of Islam in the Iranian life. Now we can make a simple conclusion (however yet perhaps an early one): the job of the Iranian director in the appropriation of the picture of women that seem very close to the background of the target text is not as simple as it seems!

6.2. Social and Cultural Codes

Another fundamental issue for Hutcheon in the adaption of a literary work is that its (re) interpretation “can alter radically” mainly because “[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). Hence, the way Mehrjui has interpreted the codes of the Norwegian play differs from the way an American director or a director from any other background does so. As an example, Baggali and Khiabani remind us that the role of the mother in *Sara* is slightly different from that of Nora in *A Doll’s House*. As they concede, “Being a highly responsible and emotional wife and mother, at the end of the film Sara did not leave her daughter alone and decided to take her with herself in contrast to Nora’s decision for leaving her children with Torvald” (2015: 223-234) which is the result of the differences in the cultural background of the two works.

In the same way, we can argue that the past in *Ghosts* is what we conceive from the discussions of the characters while in its Iranian adaptation it is an important part of the story presented at the beginning of the movie which gives the audience a full picture of the characters and sometimes justifies their actions as well. *Apparition*, the Iranian movie, begins with the picture of the retired Militant Soleimani, a drunkard who comes home wholly insane because

⁷ Men and women who are so to speak not ‘Mahram’ to each other.

of drinking too much. He even beats both his wife and servant and abuses them verbally. However, these moments are lacking in the play and they justify the claims of Sara when she defends her decision to send her child away from home. This sounds as though the director tries to give a more innocent image of the mother to the Iranian audience, a mother who has suffered in a system of patriarchy and has resisted violence for saving her children.

Maziar should be the only redline for Sara, for she is so concerned about him that she stands against her husband's violence and threatens to kill him when he intends to hurt the child. As Hutcheon quotes from Stam, "Transcultural adaptations often mean changes in racial and gender politics" (2013: 147). Accordingly, she maintains that "Sometimes 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" (2013: 147). Therefore, although the equivalents of Sara-Militant Soleimani struggle scenes are absent from the play, through the supplication of such scenes the Iranian director attempts to rescue Sara's position as a mere submissive wife and emphasizes her role as a caring and supportive mother.



Picture 1: A scene from the film when Sara tries to protect her son against her drunk husband

Like the roles taken by Helen in the Norwegian play, Sara in the Iranian movie cares very much about her son. In the Norwegian play whenever the son is sad, his mother is there to comfort him. She talks to him in a tender and kind language, she appreciates his simple paintings, and if she finds him susceptible to injury, she asks the servant to take him away from the situation. These are all in line with the typical image of the mother that is often provided in the Iranian movies like *Mother* (1991), *A Mother's Love* (1998), *M for Mother* (2006) and *Here Without Me* (2011), while they are also in accordance with the mother image that Ibsen produces of Helen at the outset of his work.

Taji, the female servant and the mother of Roza, also makes the same picture. Despite her bold poverty because of which she needs the financial support of the Militant and his family, she rejects to abort her pregnancy and accepts to be homeless; she gives birth to her child and takes care of her. These scenes too which are lacking in the original play are among the modifications that Mehrjui has made to highlight the position of the mother.

When Sara's husband rapes the maid, it is both morally inappropriate and religiously sinful. So when the former finds out about the rape and sends her son to France, her reason is the same as the reason that is behind Helen's decision to send Oswald away from home. Sara does so for protecting her son's security against her husband's abuse and eliminating her son's bad memories from his father. However, the difference in this regard between the original play and its adaptation is that whereas the former shows Oswald as the physical victim of a sort of determinism that takes root in his father's misdeeds, the latter represents Maziar's psychological problems as the outcome both of the social environment and Sara's mistake in forcing him away when he is too young. He has endured loneliness since he was quite young (which is quite unusual in the Iranian family), and it has rendered him a sickly guy. Perhaps this is the reason behind his immediate love for Rosa⁸. Here Mehrjui merges the cultural codes of his society into the play and intensifies the consequences of the mother's decision while he highlights the importance of the family in Iran.



Picture 2: A scene from the film when Sara farewell little Maziar in the airport

This is also an attestation of Hutcheon's prospect to transcultural film adaptations when she argues that

When stories travel—as they do when they are adapted in this way across media, time, and place—they end up bringing together what Edward Said called different “processes of representation and institutionalization” [...] According to Said, 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 [...] Adaptations too constitute transformations of previous works in new contexts. (2013: 150)

⁸ In contrast to Oswald's sexual desire for Regina whom he finds caring and energetic which he was lacking in childhood

Therefore, Maziar gets sick because in the Iranian cultural ideology the mother is always expected to accompany her child in the fulfilment of her/his ambitions, and if the former avoids doing it, it is even likely that the latter is put into danger.

In the same way, adapting the story of Ibsen's play, the Iranian director decreases the volume of Oswald's sexual desire for Regina and also removes the direct representation of Soleimani's intercourse with his servant, because in an Islamic culture it is expected that a man's desire for a woman before and after marriage be more than sexual. Thus, Mehrjui tries to transform the ideologies of Ibsen's play for the substantiation of the premises of the target context, a process which Hutcheon calls "indigenization" (2013: 150).

Another significant difference is revealed in the farewell scene of Sara and Maziar. Sara sends her son to France because as his aunt lives there, she feels certain that somebody is there to take care of him. This is nonetheless not justified in the original play. Nonetheless, for the Iranian audience who take care of their children until their marriage (when they start their independent lives), a crucial question arises: Why shouldn't she accompany him in his voyage to France or even join him to live there? Later in the movie the question is answered by Dae Baba, a former lover of Sara, who is now her husband. Dae Baba reminds Sara of her selfishness in sending her son abroad at a very young age which he says she did not do out of love and care but out of escape from responsibility. Here Dae's claim is in sharp contrast to Sara's picture as a compassionate mother at the beginning of the movie, which is shocking for the Iranian audience who expect the mother figure to be as wise, compassionate, and selfless as the mothers already represented in the Iranian cinema⁹. Sara's approval of this picture by silence and laughter validates Dae's claims and questions her position. By this, Mehrjui tries to highlight the crucial role of the mother in her children's lives. Maziar suffers throughout the movie because of his mum's mistake, and he finally dies.

In Mehrjui's adaptation in particular, and in the Iranian culture in general, this mode of punishment is due for a woman who does not carefully take her motherly responsibilities. For instance, in Tavakoli's *Here without Me* (2011), Farideh's selfish decisions about her daughter lead to the latter's excessive depression. In *The Stranger* (2014) also he provides us with the portraits of the same selfish mothers whose rejection of their responsibility is the cause of their children's homelessness (See Nazemi et al, 2018: 562). In *Apparition* too the final scenes highlight the images of such Iranian irresponsible mothers. While Helen feels shocked and deeply depressed by her illness as Oswald explains it, the mother in the Iranian movie does not try to comfort her son and only considers him crazy and doesn't take his statements seriously. Notwithstanding, when Sara encounters Maziar's death she shows no reaction to it other than breaking into little tears and uttering a few words that slight the realism of the movie. This deviation from the portrayal of the idea of mother creates a significant metamorphosis in the ideology of Mehrjui's adaptation regarding the concept of motherhood. In this way, Mehrjui's adapted film is a record for the instruction of the Iranian society regarding the loving mother and her roles and responsibilities.

7. Conclusion: Who Defines Femininity?

The present paper has attempted comparatively to approach Ibsen's *Ghosts* and its Iranian movie adaptation *Apparition* directed by Dariush Mehrjui in Iran. After examining Mehrjui's achievements in the cinema of Iran, this study delves into the discussion of adaptations as cultural productions. Adaptations being produced in unique geographical, cultural, historical, social and political contexts, are nonetheless influenced by the context of their production. Taking into consideration the concept of motherhood that is a universal notion in different

⁹ For instance in Mehrjui's *Mum's Guest* which was produced in 2004 and *Gilaneh* which was directed by Rakhshan Banietemad in the same year

cultures and a characteristic of gender, it was argued that this concept is also socially and culturally constructed and represented. Thus, to answer the first question that we posed in this study, that is, 'who defines femininity?' in this research it was argued that movie adaptations as cultural and social productions are capable of re-defining and re-presenting definitions and manifestations of gender. This is how Mehrjui appropriated the concept of motherhood for the Iranian audience.

Examining the images of mothers in these works for the pattern of their behavior towards their children, this study argues that both mothers are so thoroughly about their safety that they keep their sons away from the poisonous atmosphere of their homes and even neglect their own dreams and beliefs to help them in the fulfilment of their ambitions. Although Mehrjui considerably sticks to the image provided by the Norwegian playwright, which is in line with the ideals already presented in the Iranian cinema and literature, he also goes beyond the frames of that image by giving Sara the characteristics of a mother whose selfishness leads to the death of her child. This is an excessive yet ironical address to the current conditions of motherhood in Iran where women prefer to work outside home and take less responsibility about their family and children. Taking use of this feature of the Iranian culture, the director may have intended to warn the society of the significant role of the mother in the fate of the children. Thus, he has used adaptation as a means to insert his cultural values to the adapted text. Mehrjui's mother figure in *Apparition* (2014) is both supportive and compassionate while she is also an embodiment of tender kindness. Nonetheless, dramatizing the outcomes of the selfish or impartial behavior of the mother figure toward her child should want to alert the Iranian social authorities about an impending problematic future.

The results of this study also suggest that adaptations as products of unique contexts can connect different cultures through representing similarities in universal concepts and appreciating differences. While Hutcheon admits that adaptation studies is comparative studies, in this study it was attempted to show the ways in which adaptations contribute to the main objectives of comparative literature by linking the products of two different countries that are culturally, geographically, religiously and socially different from each other. It is hoped that the results of this study will help the scholars who are interested in cross-cultural adaptations and their contributions to the representation of the gender roles of women.

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