

## **Adding Nuances of Postcolonial Arguments to Shakespeare – A Study of Selected Novels under Hogarth *Shakespeare Series***

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**Abstract:** From plays to prose, to operas, to ballet, to movies, to video games, and to contemporary Manga series, William Shakespeare is probably the most adapted and adaptable of all the literary stalwarts. The seven titles published under the Hogarth Shakespeare series from 2015 to 2017 are rewriting, reimagining and reinterpreting of Shakespearean plays by celebrated contemporary writers. As Douglas Lanier points out this ambitious plan to commission prose retellings/ rewritings of Shakespearean drama was conceptualised on the conviction of the brand as “a home for new generation literary talent, an adventurous fiction imprint with an accent on the pleasures of storytelling and a broad awareness of the world.” However, this microgenre or the adaptation of plays into prose by these writers embeds more than just contemporizing Shakespeare and the pleasure of storytelling. The proposed paper aims at analysing these adaptations with reference to Hutcheon’s theory that views adaptation as a process and product and how these texts interweave the contemporary theories, specifically postcolonial discourses with a special focus on the issues of race, gender and agency as lived, contested and defined by contemporary thinkers and how by doing so these texts also follow and add to the existing theories on adaptation. The paper will also study the adaptations by women novelists, namely *Hag Seed* by Margaret Atwood, *The Gap of Time* by Jeanette Winterson, and *New Boy* by Tracy Chevalier as creative retellings, informed re interpretations, and celebration of universal elements and thereby adding modern nuances to the Bard’s plays.

**Keywords:** Adaptation; Postcolonialism; Adaptation as a praxis of postcolonial arguments; *New Boy*; *Hag Seed* and *Gap of Time*

He was a great recycler of stories, and there s no reason why his stories shouldn t be recycled.”

(Greenbalt, 242)

Shakespeare has been an inspiration to many a creative writer in every century that followed him. Interestingly, Shakespeare s works have been always experimented, innovated and reinterpreted from time to time. Earlier there was a prevalent hegemonic binary between the original work and the adapted work which has been deflated by the contemporary adaptation theorists like Linda Cahir, Thomas Leitch, Robert Stam and Linda Hutcheon. The broader definition of adaptation as given by Fischlin and Frontier is, “Adaptation includes almost any act of cultural works of the past and dovetails with general process of cultural recreation.” (qutd.from Hutcheon 22). However, adaptation is not just limited to medium it is also equally explored and celebrated in terms of adaptations of original work into other genres. Hutcheon defines adaptation as following:

An acknowledged transposition of recognised other work or works

A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation / salvaging

An extended intertextual engagement with adapted work. (Hutcheon 65)

Recent theories of adaptation have challenged and largely renounced the hierarchical distinction between the “original” text and its adaptation. As Linda Hutcheon argues, adaptations should be understood not as secondary or derivative works but as creative reinterpretations that generate new meanings within different cultural and historical contexts (*A Theory of Adaptation*). This shift in perspective has redeemed many appropriations and retellings of canonical literary works that were previously relegated to the lower rungs of creative practice. Such a reconceptualization has, in turn, legitimized experimental and innovative reimaginings of literary texts. The works of William Shakespeare, in particular, have long demonstrated a remarkable openness to adaptation across temporal, cultural, and generic boundaries.

One notable contemporary example is the Hogarth Shakespeare project initiated by Hogarth Press under Vintage to commemorate the quadricentennial of Shakespeare s death in 2016. As part

of this initiative, several contemporary novelists retold Shakespearean dramas in modern prose fiction. These include *The Gap of Time* (2015) by Jeanette Winterson, a rewriting of *The Winter's Tale*; *Hag-Seed* (2016) by Margaret Atwood, based on *The Tempest*; *New Boy* (2017) by Tracy Chevalier, a retelling of *Othello*; *Dunbar* (2017) by Edward St. Aubyn, inspired by *King Lear*; *Shylock Is My Name* (2016) by Howard Jacobson, a reinterpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*; *Vinegar Girl* (2016) by Anne Tyler, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*; and *Macbeth* (2018) by Jo Nesbø, a contemporary retelling of *Macbeth*. Together, these works exemplify the ongoing vitality and democratic adaptability of Shakespearean drama in contemporary literature.

Close readings of William Shakespeare from a postcolonial perspective have become as significant as the continued study of his dramatic works themselves. Shakespeare's plays occupy an important place in postcolonial studies because they were written at the dawn of European colonial expansion and reflect many of the cultural, historical, and ideological assumptions of supremacy that characterized the period. Critics have examined his works to reveal how characters such as Othello, Caliban, Cleopatra, Prospero, and the non-Christian Shylock are constructed through discourses of racial, religious, and cultural otherness (Loomba).

In *Postcolonial Othering in Three Plays by Shakespeare: Othello, Antony and Cleopatra, The Tempest* (2015), Cado reads these plays through the lens of stereotypes associated with the "Other," analyzing how speech, race, religion, and gender function within early modern structures of power. Similarly, scholars such as Singh and Shahani have explored the applicability of terms such as "early colonial" and "proto-colonial" to Shakespearean drama, interrogating their implications for contemporary critical practice.

Shakespeare has also elicited anticolonial literary responses from writers in formerly colonized societies. For instance, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *A Grain of Wheat* and Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Eloquent of the Scribes* engage, directly or indirectly, with colonial legacies shaped in part by

canonical European literature. Reflecting on such responses from the colonized world, Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin observe:

Intellectuals and artists from the colonized world responded to Shakespeare in a variety of ways: sometimes they mimicked their colonial masters and echoed their praise of Shakespeare; at other times they challenged the cultural authority of both Shakespeare and colonial regimes by turning to their own bards as sources of alternative wisdom and beauty. In yet other instances, they appropriated Shakespeare as their comrade in anti-colonial arms by offering new interpretations and adaptations of his works (Loomba and Orkin).

However, it is remarkable to also study the rewriting of Shakespeare's plays in the form of novel engaging with postcolonial perspective and reimagined, reinterpreted and representation of contemporary theories in praxis by Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson and Tracy Cevalier in their novels *Hag-Seed*, *Gap of Time* and *New Boy*. These novels are not simple adaptations in terms of form but also adds layers of contemporary thinking, writing and debates stemming from the postcolonial theories and concepts of identity, cultural hybridity, race and the otherness. The "writing back to empire" tradition included "mixed genres, unexpected combinations of tradition and novelty, political experiences based on communities of effort and interpretation" (Said 335)

Through the very title *Hag-Seed*, Atwood invokes the whole discourse on othering and enslavement of Caliban by Prospero in *The Tempest*. Through her intertextuality and parody within play technique she creates opportunities for debate, discussions and questioning of Prospero's colonisation of the island and enslavement of Caliban in the source text. The class discussion on *The Tempest* summarises the discussions both the colonial and postcolonial insights on the text over the time. The following comments by the class is used by Atwood to showcase these insights; "Plus he's a slave-driver" says Red Coyote (Atwood, 126). "Not just with Caliban. He's got his foot on Ariel too" says eight hands (Atwood, 126). Thus, Atwood shows the reception and analysis of Prospero in contemporary time through postcolonial lens wherein he is not a victimised hero and magician but a

slave driver, an encroacher turned into a coloniser and exploiter of the land that sheltered him. This also shows him as one of the White Male Coloniser who exploited everything and everyone available to him on the newly found land” and manipulating it for his personal growth that ultimately enriched the Commonwealth. Her rewriting of *The Tempest* also resonates with Franz Fanon’s argument in Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) which discussed racial discourses underlying benevolent civilising missions. Again, Atwood debunks the myth of the Whiteman’s Burden project so much propelled during the period of colonisation when all the White Men did was exploitation, appropriation and exhaustion of the human and natural resources of the colonies when she makes one character comment, “Plus he’s a land stealer” adds Red Coyote. Sucking old white guy. He should be called Prospero Corp. Next thing he’ll discover oil in it., develop it, machine-gun everyone to keep them off” (Atwood, 127).

This capitalist Western models of trade under the garb of upliftment and civilization of the colonies are now also being exposed by many contemporary writers like Amitav Ghosh who link the climate change with the colonial practices and exploitation through capitalism propelled by the Empire. Atwood shows how the colonial era have enriched the West and created empires of corporations that still dominate the erstwhile colonies while the colonies are left to the aftermath of climate change and environmental hazards. She also digs in at the blood-stained history of western industrialisation that prospered and thrived on oil excavation and history of colonisation.

Interestingly, Atwood while describing the postcolonial insights and interpretations of Shakespearean play, also brings out the fact that the play itself shows the flipside of the colonisation project. Through the interpretation of postcolonial inferences and nuances of various characters, Atwood also shows that the Bard has portrayed his characters and the theme in a way that is open to criticism for project colonisation. Thus, through her novel she not only recreates *The Tempest* in the Modern World but also reinterprets and reinstates the Bard against the storm of charges against him as being the key instrument of cultural appropriation during the project colonisation.

Postcolonial arguments of cultural hybridity, agency and otherness are quite present and played with by Jeanette Winterson in her adaptation of *Winter's Tale*. *Gap of Time* portrays a range of characters from England, France and US like the play by the Bard. The play had also shown three places and countries but Winterson sets these locales beyond Europe and Perdita is sent to New Bohemia where she is raised by Shep – a black man. Her biological mother is a French woman and her biological father is of British origin. The partners Holly, Polly and Molly of the band-*Seperationists* in which Perdita sings are Chinese triplets who were found in babyhatch of Guangzhou and adopted by English missionaries and their father was a minister of High Wycombe and had ended up in a Baptist church in New Bohemia via a mission to China.

The novel also uses food, music of various countries, artists, cars and the video game as part of her narrative that add to the aspect of the cultural hybridity of the contemporary world. The video game that is developed by Xeno transports the player into multiple cities of multiple nations; “Xeno dropped down a moving screen of cities, their icons recognisable at once- Big Ben, the Eiffel Tower, Brandenburg Gate, The Harbour Bridge, The Empire State...” (Winterson 37)

These locales of the game also speak for the spatial temporal hybridity induced by the virtual reality in our contemporary world again pitched in together due to the history of colonisation. Winterson sets these characters in contemporary time where capitalism, power struggle and sexuality dominate the choices and decisions of life. Leo owns a kingdom in terms of power and money through which he dictates the world around him. The novel encompasses the complexity and hybridity of these international-intercontinental relationship and situations with a continuous discussion on Leo's progress, fall and rising during and after the global crisis of 2008. Leo's position, power and engagement with profit-oriented market represent the Capitalism and its policies rooted in the history of colonisation that used business and capitalism as a tool to enlarge the Empire. This is well reflected in, “Leo hadn't invented capitalism-his job was to make money inside a system that was about making money” (Winterson 21).

In Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time*, Leo's obsessive desire for control recalls the historical logic of the white European patriarch who seeks dominion over both domestic and imperial spaces. Yet alongside this critique of masculine authority, the novel offers a compelling reconfiguration of female agency. Like her Shakespearean counterpart in *The Winter's Tale* by William Shakespeare, Pauline remains morally steadfast, confronting Leo's megalomania, suspicion, and the cruel abandonment of his child. However, Winterson's reinterpretation extends agency even further, particularly in her portrayal of Mimi (Hermione) and Perdita.

Mimi, devastated by the loss of her daughter and the death of her son, initially appears emotionally paralyzed. Unlike Hermione in Shakespeare's play, however, she does not remain a silent emblem of suffering. Instead, she chooses to walk away from Leo and rebuild her life in Paris, exercising deliberate autonomy. Although she relinquishes her musical career, she composes a song for Perdita during their separation—an act that signals enduring maternal connection despite patriarchal rupture (Winterson). Moreover, Winterson presents Mimi as a successful and financially independent artist who has earned more than Leo, thereby unsettling traditional gender hierarchies. Her vulnerability emerges most sharply when Leo accuses her of infidelity, revealing the entrenched double standards of patriarchy: Leo assumes entitlement to multiple affairs—with both men and women—yet suspects his wife merely for being intellectually and socially at ease with Xeno. His chauvinistic paranoia ultimately compels him to steal Perdita and orchestrate her removal, an act that devastates the family structure and underscores the destructive consequences of patriarchal possessiveness.

Perdita, too, is rendered with greater independence than her Shakespearean predecessor. In Shakespeare's play, Perdita largely appears as a young woman in love whose fate unfolds through the decisions of others. In *The Gap of Time*, by contrast, she insists on learning the truth about her origins, compelling Clo to reveal her history (Winterson). Rather than being passively taken abroad by her lover, she actively chooses to seek out her biological father, embarking on the journey with Zel as an

equal partner. Ultimately, she rejects Leo and chooses Shep, affirming her capacity for autonomous decision-making. Through this portrayal, Winterson situates Perdita within a contemporary, postcolonial framework in which female subjectivity is self-fashioned rather than inherited.

Shep's hesitation in returning the child and his reluctance to become a witness in Tony's murder case further gesture toward systemic racial anxieties. Xeno's suspicion of Shep reflects the persistence of cultural biases against Black men. While such undercurrents of racial otherness surface in Winterson's narrative, the theme of racism is more centrally and explicitly explored in Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy*, a retelling of *Othello* produced as part of the Hogarth Shakespeare series, where racial prejudice becomes the primary axis of conflict.

In Tracy Chevalier's *New Boy*, Osei—referred to as "O" by his classmates—is the only Black child in his middle school. Set in a 1970s American public school, the novel reimagines William Shakespeare's *Othello* within the microcosm of childhood social hierarchies. Dee is initially fascinated by Osei, drawn to the color of his skin as a marker of difference, while many other students and even teachers display varying degrees of discomfort, prejudice, or mild repulsion toward the eleven-year-old boy. Osei, however, is not unfamiliar with such reactions. Having previously encountered racial bias, he has learned to navigate white social norms through strategic self-containment and mimicry. As the narrator observes, "He had learned to make himself smaller, to wait and see how much of himself was acceptable" (Chevalier).

Like *Othello* in Shakespeare's play, Osei is persistently judged and defined by his skin color rather than his character. The hostility and resentment directed at him by Ian—Chevalier's counterpart to Iago—symbolize the lingering structures of racial prejudice and colonial ideology that frame Blackness as otherness. Osei's father, a diplomat whose profession necessitates frequent relocation, underscores the boy's outsider status; he is perpetually new, perpetually foreign. The ordeal of being the only Black student in a predominantly white school environment becomes a powerful lens through

which the novel exposes the everyday normalization of racial bias. Chevalier captures this omnipresent scrutiny succinctly; “He was used to the looks, the stares, the whispers” (Chevalier).

This exclusion becomes more excruciating when he becomes the target of suspicion from teachers and the subject of hatred from his peers. The teacher’s reaction when he sees Dee going with O and O touching her becomes furious, and he scolds O for touching her inappropriately. This reaction shows the deep-rooted bias against Black people, where they have been wrongly blamed for immorality and inappropriate cultural practices. This continuous surveillance, exclusion, and accusation make O reminded of his otherness, inferiority, and lack, which leads to mistrust, rashness, and ultimate psychological breakdown that results in the tragic end (Chevalier). This continuous scrutiny and suspicion due to the colour of the skin echo Frantz Fanon’s views on institutional racism. Ian’s manipulation of other students and the situation also echoes the manipulation and exploitation of the African subcontinent. While the novel shows cultural hybridity due to postcolonial existence, it also echoes the historical encounters and destruction of the cultures of colonies. It also represents how people like Mimi, Casper, Bianca, and Dee would have played an instrumental role in the tragedy of colonies in the past, when colonial discourse was propelled, furthered, and executed by White European men like Ian (Chevalier).

While O has to suffer due to his colour and identity, Ian also represents the identity crisis of the white man and the bias against coloured people deeply rooted in their collective unconscious. Chevalier captures this feeling of never being able to belong because of “an inferior identity.” “He was Ghanaian at home, American at school, and never enough of either” (Chevalier). Ian is jealous when O becomes popular and is not afraid of his bullying, but he becomes enraged when he sees Dee—a white girl—becoming close to a Ghanaian boy. This also highlights the evils of the modern world, where “Black Lives Matter” has had to become a revolution for the rights and dignity of Black people. The novel is set during the era of “Black is Beautiful,” and this is repeated by various characters in the novel (Chevalier). Moreover, the novel also shows some teachers correcting the

biases against O, but ultimately the racist, oppressive, and manipulative Ian, along with other teachers, makes O fall into the trap and commit the mistake, making him behave in the exact way the whites wanted him to, living up to the toxic image often associated with Black men. After acting in this aggressive and unthoughtful way, O is described as having realized how he has been a fool and a puppet to the manipulation of his white enemies, thus ruining his own dignity and image. Osei felt the heat rise in him, not from shame, but from knowing it was expected of him to lose control” (Chevalier).

Thus, to conclude, it is evident that all three novels by these contemporary women writers reimagine, reconstruct, and resituate Shakespearean dramas into our times. While doing so, they not only add to the original plays but also enhance their nuances and relevance. Engaging with the Bard’s works through a creative and critical employment of language, characters, settings, and plot, these novels not only retell but, in fact, transform the original texts with informed and conscious praxis of postcolonial debates and preoccupations. As Ania Loomba underscores, Shakespeare’s plays stand the test of time because they address issues that span human history. In the introduction to *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism*, Loomba argues that Shakespeare’s plays form a bridge between the past and us: even as we read in them stories of a bygone world, we also continually reinterpret these stories to make sense of our own worlds” (4–5).

Loomba and Martin Orkin view Shakespeare’s plays more as contested loci of cultural hybridity than as carriers of hegemony. Loomba and Orkin further elucidate that Shakespeare’s plays overlap with post-colonial concerns ... [and] provid[e] the language for expressing racial difference and human sameness as well as colonial hybridities” (10).

From plays to prose, to operas, to ballet, to movies, to video games, and to contemporary manga series, William Shakespeare is probably the most adapted and adaptable of all literary stalwarts. The seven titles published under the Hogarth Shakespeare series from 2015 to 2017 are rewritings, reimaginings, and reinterpretations of Shakespearean plays by celebrated contemporary

writers. As Douglas Lanier points out, this ambitious plan to commission prose retellings/rewritings of Shakespearean drama was conceptualised on the conviction of the brand as a home for new generation literary talent, an adventurous fiction imprint with an accent on the pleasures of storytelling and a broad awareness of the world” (Lanier). However, this microgenre, or the adaptation of plays into prose by these writers, embeds more than just contemporizing Shakespeare and the pleasure of storytelling. By including aspects and themes of postcolonial concerns and innovative engagement with this theory, these three women writers transform the original play into a product of our time.

These novels demonstrate an acknowledged transposition of a recognised other work of Shakespeare, provide a creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging of the original text, and also exemplify an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work. Thus, they level up to the three conditions mentioned by Linda Hutcheon in her adaptation theory. And therefore, as Hutcheon says, these retellings become both a process and a product while adapting Shakespeare (Hutcheon).

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