

ADAPTATION IN *PONGAH SI PEMUNGUT HUTANG*

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ABSTRACT

Adaptation is defined, as an altered or amended version of a text, one adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source. This form of technique is common in theatre productions these days and adaptation had successfully transformed many texts into plays. Also, adaptation in theatre can offer new perspectives on some of the issues that never grow old across time. *Pongah si Pemungut Hutang* was first staged during the Terengganu Theatre Festival 2019 was an adapted version taken from the popular one act love/romantic comedy, *The Boor* written by Anton Chekov in 1888. Even though, it was more than 200 years old, Chekov's work has never been exhausted as perceived by many. The issue raised is still relevant in current situation, that is a husband passed away leaving a widow who had to bear the dead husband's debts. The plot twist was when the debt collector, had fallen in love with the widow. It is found that this new version of *The Boor*, had transformed the scene from the original texts as a means to suit the socio-cultural background of the audience. This paper traces the elements of adaptations in this modified version of romantic comedy. It is also intended to focus on the ways in which how adaptation is still relevant in highlighting the issues that are prevalent in current days.

Keywords: Adaptation; comedy; modification; socio cultural background; transformed,

ADAPTASI DALAM *PONGAH SI PEMUNGUT HUTANG*

ABSTRAK

Definisi adaptasi sesebuah karya adalah suatu perbuatan mengubah, memperbaiki sesuatu teks ke sebuah teks sastera dalam versi yang berlainan, mahu pun dari novel ke suatu teks yang lain untuk tujuan penyiaran, atau pementasan. Teknik ini bukanlah asing lagi terutamanya di dalam pembikinan teater dan pementasan. Ini kerana, teks berbentuk naratif begitu mudah disadurkan atau diadaptasi menjadi satu pementasan yang menarik. Teknik ini juga dapat memberi nafas baru dalam penelitian dan apresiasi seni dalam genre yang berlainan. *Pongah, Si Pemungut Hutang* ialah sebuah komedi yang telah dipentaskan di Festival Theatre Terengganu pada 2019. Karya ini merupakan sebuah teater yang diadaptasikan dari teater realisme Eropah terkenal, *The Boor*, oleh Anton Chekov. Walau karya Chekov telah berusia lebih 200 tahun, pengisian tema dan persoalan yang mendasari teater beliau masih lagi relevan. Isu hutang yang ditinggalkan kepada balu yang sedang bersedih menambah kemelut yang berakhir dengan, Pongah telah jatuh cinta secara tidak sengaja kepada balu itu, iaitu Nyonya Mansor yang menanggung hutang suaminya. Perubahan plot pada pengakhiran cerita ini telah memberikan elemen lucu dan menghiburkan kepada penonton. Sehubungan itu, usaha Grup Teater Asyik telah mengadaptasikan karya ini dengan mentransformasikan jalan cerita dengan pelbagai perubahan yang sesuai dengan keadaan semasa dan latar sosio budaya masyarakat tempatan

yang menontonnya. Makalah ini bertujuan mengkaji elemen adaptasi dalam karya yang telah dimodifisikan dalam bentuk yang mudah dan menghiburkan disamping mengetengahkan isu dan permasalahan yang masih lagi kerap terjadi hingga kini.

Kata Kunci: Adaptasi; komedi; modifikasi; sosio budaya; transformasi,

INTRODUCTION

Pongah, The Debt Collector is an adaptation from the original play, *The Boor*, written by the famous Russian author, Anton Chekov in 1888. The play reflects the essence of what is an adaptation play looks like typically with some transformations being made to suit the cultural backgrounds of its viewers in general. Whilst the issues of love, hatred and surmounted debts that had caused misery to many, this adapted play managed well to highlight the issues that are prevalent in current situations.

As mentioned by Edwards, “to adapt is to make it fit” (2007) which means, adaptation in literary perspective would be easily defined as an altered or amended version of a text that is being adapted for filming, broadcasting, or production on the stage from a novel or similar literary source. It has always been known for its best trait as a form to impart ideas or issues that are still relevant in any elements. This form of technique is found to be widely applied in many theatre productions simply for its flexibility and adaptability to present the reality of life in many ways.

The play began with two Clowns namely, Badut 1 and Badut 2, narrating the story of what happened in that big house, from its glorious days when the owner, Datuk Mansor Baginda, was still alive until his death, leaving a grieving widow, Nyonya Mansor behind. Everyone in the house was sad especially Nyonya Mansur who preferred to be alone in her own room and refused to accept any visitors. Then, one day, Nyonya Mansor was shocked to learn that his late husband had huge amount of debts, and the debt collector namely Tuan Borhan Arang Batu insisted that she paid all the late husband’s debts at once. The plot twist is when the debt collector himself, had fallen in love with the widow, and that has made all the difference in which the play becomes very entertaining to the audience.

The play was performed at the Festival Teater Terengganu in October 2019 (Terengganu Theatre Festival 2019). *Pongah the Debt Collector* was successfully performed entirely in Bahasa Melayu and the acceptance of the audience was exceptional. While the experimentation seemed to be interesting, somehow some theatre practitioners, who attended the show, had raised their concerns on whether the adapted version of *The Boor* which was rewritten and performed by Teater Asyik Group, was indeed valid and acceptable. They questioned about the script, which had undergone quite a major modification and made the new play to become distinctly different from the original. Therefore, there is a call for a serious analysis whether this adapted version fits with what had been claimed earlier by these local theatre practitioners. Hence, there is a call to delve deeper on the pertinent issue raised. It is aimed that, this paper traces the elements of adaptations in this modified version of romantic comedy, with the intends to focus on the ways in which how adaptation is still relevant in highlighting the issues that are still exist regardless of time and place.

METHODOLOGY

The two hundred years of time gap found in between the two texts, *The Boor* and *Pongah, the Debt Collector*, is indeed significant. This would imply that, when the original play has become a reputable classical play, the adaptation of the latter production has been perceived to be prudent and creative. Such process is indeed inevitable since the appreciation of current audience is seen as crucial. The present audience wants something that could be easily related to their day to day life or perhaps something fresh that could change their perceptions on some of the issues raised in the staged plays. It could also be mentioned here that, the adaptation is deemed important to indicate the issues that were being highlighted in the original text still occurred in this period. Hence, it is wise to focus on the adaptation approach that was applied in the *Pongah, the Debt Collector* to suggest that regardless the change of time and place in the setting of this new adapted play, the issues raised are still prevalent.

This paper will look at the ways in which how the play, *Pongah, the Debt Collector* was adapted from the original text, *The Boor*, by Anton Chekov. The elements of adaptations found evident in the new text will be studied to explicate further on the relevance of such process of adaptations had been made. Moreover, the paper will also look at the comparison in between these two different texts which depicted from one another but had brought many changes that are deemed important. The elements of adaptations represented had proven that old plays did go through moments of evolution and transformed into new plays that are far suitable to the current audiences and settings.

THE CONCEPT OF ADAPTATION

When a text is being adapted to fit, the next process would be is to modify or transform it to suit with the intended fittings. It was once mentioned by Leitch (2005) when he straightforwardly defined adaptation as signals of a relationship with an informing source from the original text (26). In this context, when a text is being made an adaptation, it has surely undergone a transformation process, in which would be defined as a slight change from the original form for the appropriateness of the new texts and contexts. Transformation is a consciously active process to make amendments from the original texts with an intention to ensure suitability for the viewers or readers to the new modified forms of texts (Saber, 2019). When an adaptation is deemed possible or indeed required at some extent, the next process would be to transform the original text. Here, a change would involve different texts to be presented differently. This happened simply because adaptation is a languid process that could make a genre being transformed to a different genre without any obstacle and indeed such process is valid and acceptable (Saber and Mas Rynna, 2017).

Hence, this effort to change and adapt have given a better appreciation for any of the texts: be it the older version or, and the amended ones. It can be mentioned here that a text cannot be adapted without being transformed, and this usually happens when readers' present times scenarios and their layers of social backgrounds had to be taken into serious considerations. Robert Giddings (1990) in his book, *Screening the Novel: The Theory and Practice of Literary Dramatization* (47-50) said that adaptation as a technique was not uncommon in the West. Hence, to his view, there are plenty of ways in which a text could be adapted. Mana Sikana (2014) had emphasized that when a text was deemed to be so significant, the creativity and the writer's thoughts should be extended into different mediums with an intention of getting more audience's appreciation. Therefore, such efforts should not limit the adaptation from occurring (150).

In discussing further, critics had agreed that, adaptations can also be in the form of translations. Linda Costanzo Cahir (2006: 14) had outlined her definition of what translation means in the context of the concept of adaptation,

To translate in contrast to adapt is to move a text from one language to another. It is a *process of language*, not a process of survival and generation. Through the process of translation, a fully new text- *a materially different entity*- is made, one that simultaneously has a strong relationship with its original source, and yet is fully independent from it.

It could be stated here that, a translation happens during the process of adaptation from a text to recreate another text through a different codes or language and symbols but not the context and ideas. Simply, a translated work contained similar context but is explained in detail in a different language. This would also support to what Leitch (2012) had said earlier that the adaptation works in the form of translation must have the textual and aesthetic integrity from both: the earlier and later texts that were involved (98). No new text is possible to be adapted without being transformed or translated from the original text and this was what Kristeva, who had categorized it as part of an intertextuality process. She described it as “existence of text in a text” or “dialogue in a text”. She emphasized on the relationships between the hypotext (the short story) and the hypertext (the novel) for the author to recreate a text of his/ her own. (Tuan Rusmawati and Mawar Safei, 2015). Thus, it can be postulated here, that there is no definite concept that restricts and constitutes adaptation as in its definition and application to many works at large. Therefore, adaptation is a concept that is fluid and easy to be applied which contained the best of both works in which one that was taken from as a source and the other as considered a renewed form of text from the old.

ADAPTATION IN MODERN MALAY THEATRE: BACKGROUND STUDY

Adaptation in Modern Malay theatre practice was not new. It could be traced back, from the earlier establishment of Malay theatre performance practise in Tanjung Malim Teachers’ Training College (Maktab Perguruan Tanjung Malim). It was mentioned that at this college, it had marked a unique tradition of staging dramas in the past. It could be said that many adaptations of western works were made possible and became popular here. The first few adapted Shakespearean plays were staged circa 1933-1936, and the plays were known as *Saudagar dari Venice* (The Merchant of Venice) *Ribut Laut* (Tempest) and Julius Ceaser. Another famous Shakespeare’s play, *Charles dan Mary Lamb* (Charles and Mary Lamb) was translated and adapted by Za’aba who happened to be one of the teaching staff at the said college back then. It was reported that the technique used to stage these plays were heavily influenced by the Shakespearean styles which did not have gone through much changes from the original plays.

Adaptation in Modern Malay theatre practice had flourished with many adapted plays being staged and such efforts continued. A well-known Malay playwright, Shahrom Husain, had written *Si Bongkok Tanjung Puteri* in 1961. The play was adapted from the famous Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* which was written in 1831. Shahrom changed the name of the place from the initial Notre Dame situated in France to a more locally known that was in Tanjung Puteri, Johor Bahru. The setting and plot were not changed much, only the characters and setting of the play were indeed locally infused to suit the audience’s typical socio-background.

Adaptation is also common in Malay plays that were taken from Malay historical figures from the past. *Tun Fatimah atau Rahsia Kejatuhan Melaka* (Tun Fatima or The Secret Downfall of Malacca), a novel by the famous Shaharom Husain was then adapted into a play. The play was staged in the hall situated at Bukit Zahrah English School, Johor Bahru in 1953.

The play was performed successfully, however, concerns were raised by the school administrations at national level. They critically mentioned that politics as a theme in the play was not appropriate to be staged for young audience (Lajoubert, 2010: 121). *Hikayat Hang Tuah* for example, was adapted several times in Modern Malay plays for its unique representation of a Malay warrior, and this could be seen in the play, *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan / The Death of A Warrior* by Usman Awang written and staged in 1961. *Tok Perak* was first staged in 1975, and it was indeed a grand play that gained many attentions ever since. The play was influenced by the story of a royal officer to the Sultan of Perak which was later adapted into and written by Syed Alwi. The play was performed in *Panggung Eksperimental* (Experimental Theatre) Universiti Malaya in 1975 and 1979.

Approaching the 1980s, theatres in Malaysia had reached a period of plateau. Not many plays were staged and one factor that could contribute to this scenario was, the local theatre industry in the 1980s was found to be lack of having good scripts to stage (Mana Sikana, 2014: 153). Not only that, it was the period of experimentations of texts, contexts and unique ideologies into the work of arts and theatre too. Therefore, having historical stories to be adapted into theatre was being a brilliant alternative. An important development that happened during this time was the idea to adapt Malay novels and transformed them into plays. In the late 1984, a play that was written by Anwar Ridhwan, *Hari-hari Terakhir Seorang Seniman* finally made into a successful production during the 4th Malay Language and Literature Congress in December of the same year. The adaptation continued to be experimented by other playwright, Hatta Azad Khan when he first staged the play *Mat Som*, which was taken from Lat's comic book in 1990.

It could be highlighted here that, adaptation is a not uncommon, and it is still being widely practiced by many theatre practitioners. The technique is simple, yet it allows other playwrights to be creative without restricting them to follow the original plays in detail. Adaptation is not mirroring the other text, but it opens the ways in which one needs to adapt and transform another texts to become distinctively unique in the class of their own.

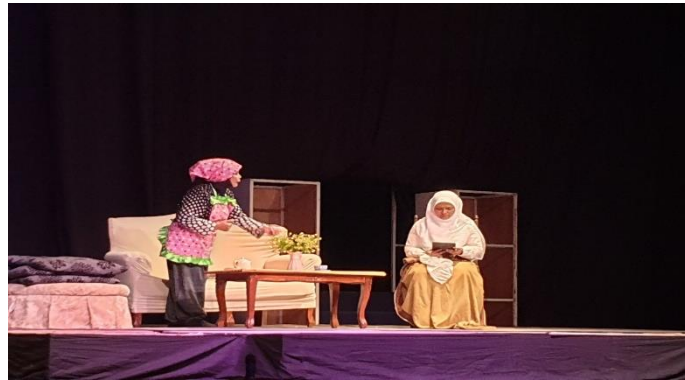
ADAPTATIONS IN *PONGAH SI PEMUNGUT HUTANG* FROM ANTON CHEKOV'S *THE BOOR*.

It is found that this new version of *The Boor* had appropriated some of the original texts as a means of cultural adaptations in its representations. These could be found evident in the play's setting that depicts the non- European setting unlike the original play, and the portrayal of two clowns with the purpose to tell the background details of the story had worked effectively. Not only that, the portrayal of the two lovers in the final scene, reflects the modifications that have been made from the original play. For the purpose of this analysis, text from the new reprinted text from *The Boor, 2002* will be applied accordingly to compare and contrast with the adapted play, *Pongah, the Debt Collector* written and performed in 2019.

THE SETTING OF THE PLAY

The setting of this new adapted version portrayed a mixture of different cultural settings such as the Arabia and Malay home settings. Perhaps this setting was chosen to indicate the elements of Islamic culture to suit the socio-cultural situations of the state of Terengganu, which was the place where the performance was performed. It is unlike in the classic text where Chekov presented the stage with a typical home setting found common in Russia. A widow lost her husband and was shocked to know the financial burden that she had to fulfil, thus, it was understandable that the living room of the house was presented to have less props, and the mood was set with a dim lighting to create a gloomy feeling effect. And by highlighting these

facts, the portrayal of a grieving widow fits in any settings regardless of time and place since this is the reality of the situations.



PICTURE 1.

The Living Room Setting Depicted the Typical Realistic pPlays in which Chekov was Famously Associated with.

In *The Boor*, Chekov portrayed a male house servant as Luka, to Mrs Popov the widow who is also the owner of the house. Unlike *Pongah*, *The Debt Collector*, the house servant is a lady, named Bibi Sarah and the widow's name is Nyonya Mansor. Such transformation had been made to ensure the elements of local colour not only in the setting of the main stage but also, the names of characters too are presented in this new adapted play.

THE CLOWNS BADUT 1 AND BADUT 2

In the original play, Chekov only placed Luka and Mrs Popov to describe what had happened to poor Mr. Popov before he died and how miserable their current conditions after Mr Popov left them with debts. This scene was taken in a living room setting and only these two characters were being portrayed. This can be seen in the original text,

LUKA:

It isn't right, ma'am. You're wearing yourself out! The maid and the cook have gone looking for berries; everything that breathes is enjoying life; even the cat knows how to be happy slips about the courtyard and catches birds, but you hide yourself here in the house as though you were in a cloister. Yes, by truly, by actual reckoning you haven't left this house for a whole year.

MRS. POPOV:

And I shall never leave it why should I? My life is over. He lies in his grave, and I have buried myself within these four walls. We are both dead.

LUKA:

There you are again! It's too awful to listen to, so it is! Nikolai Michailovitch is dead; it was the will of the Lord, and the Lord has given him eternal peace. You have grieved over it and that ought to be enough. Now, it's time to stop. One can't weep and wear mourning forever! My wife died a few years ago. I grieved for her. I wept a whole

month and then it was over. Must one be forever singing lamentations? That would be more than your husband was worth! [*He sighs.*] You have forgotten all your neighbours. You don't go out and you receive no one. We live you'll pardon me like the spiders, and the good light of day we never see. All the livery is eaten by mice as though there weren't any more nice people in the world! But the whole neighbourhood is full of gentlefolk.

(The Boor, 2002: 1).

Here, Luka was trying to advise his employer to stop lamenting over the past and ready to move forward with her life. There were many things that Mrs Popov needed to do as Mr Popov or Nikolai Michailovitch had passed away, all the affairs of the late husband needed to be managed and addressed accordingly.

However, in *Pongah the Debt Collector*, a change was made. Instead of having monotonous appearance of two characters mentioned earlier, Grup Teater Asyik had two clowns to narrate what had happened to Tuan Mansor and his family after he died. The appearance of these two comic relief characters were seen as a surprise; a twist made by this theatre group at the beginning of the play. The clowns, namely Badut 1 and Badut 2 were seen to not only function as a form of entertainment but also they told the background stories for the audience to truly comprehend the details of the plot. It could also be perceived that these clowns acted as a chorus to which it was able to bring an interesting element in the play. Even though this attempt was not being seen as smart by the critics, yet, undeniably, it was the fact that without having these clowning effects, the beginning of the play would be flat and draggy. An example of how these two clowns were talking about the debts and how the act of lending money to people and made them pay could be seen as scrupulously cruel,

BADUT II: Do You know?
BADUT I: What is it?
BADUT II: The way to make loans with the Jews?
BADUT I: Yes, I know exactly what you meant
BADUT II: What did you know?
BADUT I: It is worst than making loan with moneylenders
BADUT II: True!
BADUT I: What did you mean?
BADUT II: Do you know Shakespeare's plays?
BADUT I: Which one?
BADUT II: The Merchant of Venice?
BADUT I: It is about people who loaned money from a rich but evil Jew.
BADUT II: Exactly. Do you know that one who was unable to repay his debt; he has to repay them with his pound of flesh?
BADUT I: Inhumane! How cruel that the Jew was.

(Pongah, the Debt Collector, 2019: 7)

These two elements of adaptation and modification were found evident in this new adapted play as compared to the classic text. However, the Arabia- Malay living room setting and the existence of these two new characters did not interfere or disrupt the entire plot found in the original texts. The group had maintained the originality of the plot, with only some modifications were made to ensure the suitability of scripts whilst being creatively interesting at the same time.



PICTURE 2. Badut 1 and Badut 2 were Talking about the Death of Datuk Mansor.



PICTURE 3. Nyonya Mansor was Trying to Evade Herself from being followed by Borhan Arang Batu, who was about to Touch her Hand, soon.

The plot twist between these two main characters was indeed hilarious and interesting at the same time. This was the similar plot found in the original text, *The Boor*, when Chekov made the hate that these two had towards each other earlier on then turned it to love. As opposed to the original play, Smirnov grabbed Mrs Popov and gives her a long kiss at the end of the play, *Pongah the Debt Collector* was not. The adapted play however maintained a proper distance, that touching and kissing between these two lovers was deemed impossible. This can be seen in the final dialogue before the play ends,

Borhan Arang Batu:

I am angry with myself, for I had fallen in love like a young teenager. Fever that I am having because I have to beg and being down on my knee to crave for your love. Healthy that I should feel because I am in love with you (*while trying to touch and kiss Nyonya Mansor's hand*).

Nyonya Mansor:

Go! Go away. Don't you try to kiss or even touch my hands. I hate you!
(Pongah, the Debt Collector, 2019:29).

The dialogue above indicated that there was no romantic gestures such as kissing or even holding hands unlike the original play by Chekov. As compared to Chekov's play,

SMIRNOV: [*Approaching her.*] How angry I am with myself! Fall in love like a schoolboy, throw myself on my knees. I've got a chill! [*Strongly.*] I love you. This is fine all I needed was to fall in love. To-morrow I have to pay my interest, the hay harvest has begun, and then you appear! [He takes her in his arms] I can never forgive myself.
MRS. POPOV: Go away! Take your hands off me! I hate you .. you this is
[A long kiss. Enter LUKA with an axe, the gardener with a rake, the coachman with a pitchfork, and workmen with poles.]

(The Boor, 2002: 10)

These changes were perceived as necessary since the socio-cultural background of the actors and the audience were critically considered. Such amendments had been made to suit the locals and not to mention the judges who were at the hall watching and evaluating the plays for that theatre festival.

TRANSLATIONS IN THE TEXTS AND PERFORMING PLAY

It is found that *The Boor* was firstly written in 1888 in Russian. It was then widely translated into different languages, including in English language across the globe ever since its fame. One of the main concerns highlighted during the Terengganu Theatre Festival 2019 was that, *Pongah the Debt Collector* were written and performed in Bahasa Melayu, as opposed to its main reference, *The Boor* that was written and published in English, in which was then the text originally written in Russian. Such attempts to translate and adapt the play was indeed questionable since the critic raised that there would be something missing along the translation was being made.

In discussing earlier that many literary experts had agreed that, adaptations can be also in the form of translations. It could be stated here that, a translation happens during the process of adaptation from a text to recreate another text through a different language but not the context and ideas. This could mean that a translated work contained similar context but is explained in detail in a different language. Leitch (2012) mentioned that the adaptation works in the form of translation must insisted to have the textual and aesthetic integrity from both: the earlier and later texts that were involved (98). Therefore, there is no harm done by using the translated English version of *The Boor* in order to adapt *Pongah, the Debt Collector*. It was clear that, the gist of the plot remained the same, only changes were made such as settings and the usage of Bahasa Melayu became the main medium of the play. Apparently, such slight modifications did not make the new adapted play way different from the original play. However, it is undeniably, that translating texts into a different language, such thing as lost in translations do occur somehow. Hence, it could be said here that, in order for this to happen, writers need to be aware of the textual content and context applied discreetly.

CONCLUSION

Adaptation is indeed important in bringing the same issues from the past into the current situations. It functions to not only highlighting what is important in any of the texts; old and new, but it is a tool to renew the past performance with more interesting twist and catchy presentations to suit the present demands. *Pongah The Debt Collector* brought the old issue of loneliness and misery caused by death and debts to a setting that was not definite. This is a clever way to indicate that, the timeline is not important since the issues at hands still prevalent in today's world. It could be said that the attempts made by this theatre group though was not perfect, but it deserved to be praised indeed.

This study intends to highlight that, while adaptation is not uncommon, the practice should be well received in an objectively manner. Adaptation will change the ways one director sees one play from the other perspectives. A change is indeed needed as transformation was deemed important. With the advent of current mainstream, adaptation is perceived as wise and creative all at the same time. It gives the breadth of a fresh outlook of an old text to become new and well-read by many. Also, when the issues at hand are sensitive, or non suitable for the local crowds, experimenting with different techniques and in this context, adaptations can deal with these works discreetly without compromising the aesthetics and creativity the original source had (Mas Rynna, 2013).

Creativity in the arts industry should not be restrictive and dogmatic. Artistic experimentations should be appreciated and respected thus this effort would create a healthy discussions and appreciations on local arts/ theatre industry specifically. The adaptation made for this play was proven valid and the transformation of the old Chekov works into a Malaysian context was brilliant. When adaptations had been done and well practised in the local theatre industry years ago, theatre critics should not question why the efforts made by Grup Teater Asyik could not do the same.

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