

The Timeless Bard: Hamlet's Travel through Time and Space in Kurt Sutter's *Sons of Anarchy*

Meera Krishnadas*, Dr Sreenath Muraleedharan K**

* Research Scholar, Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

** Assistant Professor [Sr. Grade], Department of English and Languages, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Kochi Campus, India

Abstract- *Hamlet*, one of the most powerful tragedies of English literature is capable of seemingly endless retelling and adaptation by others. The Hamletian influence is seen in all walks of life from the Disney's *Lion King* to Bollywood's *Haider*. I intend to look closely at the *Sons of Anarchy*, the recent TV adaptation of *Hamlet* by Kurt Sutter and delineate how human relations and power hierarchy are all pervasive and effortlessly travel across ages. This quasi-Shakespearean adaptation, a modern day retelling of the tragedy while demarcating itself from the source material, does not easily reveal its roots but is still bound to it, emphasizing the Bard's timelessness. The setting of the show distances itself from the Elizabethan world and yet the parallels presented unravel one truth: All the world is still a stage for Shakespeare's timeless quill.

Index Terms- : Adaptation, Hamlet, Retelling, Space, Travel

I. INTRODUCTION

This "*These violent delights have violent ends*" (Shakespeare 9). The works of William Shakespeare have loomed large on all subsequent eras of popular culture. While the Bard of Avon was certainly an epochal cornerstone of English Renaissance Literature, his tales have transcended time, form and genre so much so that the above quotation has captured public imagination via a television show (HBO's *Westworld*) on futuristic Androids set in the American Wild West. It is this quality of timelessness and ubiquity that has seen

the shades of Shakespeare influencing works of art ranging from an ode to Malabar's folk past (Kaliyattam, based on *Othello*) to Kurosawa deconstructing Feudal Japan (*Throne of Blood*, based on *Macbeth*).

On surface level, *Sons of Anarchy* is merely a show on the travails and escapades of a group of violent bikers indulging in illegal gun trade, drugs and pornography. However, the moral wounds cut by the show on its viewers run deep and within them, one witnesses a tragic family tale of epic proportions punctuated by malicious decisions (albeit with the noblest of intentions) and a relentless, interminable pursuit of vengeance. Several of the show's episode titles are quotes from the play, including 'Burnt and Purged Away', 'To Be (Parts I and II)', 'To Thine Own Self' and 'What a Piece of Work is Man'. Suddenly, the ties of the tale to its Elizabethan past become clearer. Kurt Sutter, the creator and show runner of *Sons of Anarchy* says "I loosely based all my characters on ones from *Hamlet*. I winked at it with Gemma as Gertrude and Clay as Claudius. Opie was Horatio. And the ongoing question was: Would the prince find out? We take these sort of huge tragic turns at different points in the series that feel Shakespearean to me". (Damico and Quay. 13)

II. RESEARCH AND ELABORATIONS

The rather conspicuous lack of subtlety in recreating "Hamlet on Harleys" - as it is fondly referred to - both in plot elements as well as names (both of characters and episodes) points to a certain

belief on the creators' part that the story of Hamlet transcends time, and would feel as original now as ever. Right from the moment the protagonist, Jax Teller, wheels away on his motorcycle in the first frame of the show till the moment the ghost of his father, John Teller, leads him gently to his demise on another day in another motorcycle, *Sons of Anarchy* thoughtfully and unabashedly delivered a Post Modern, Californian tribute to the Prince of Denmark. This sense of purpose and self-awareness led to the show being the most watched original series on its parent network, FX thus serving as a timely reminder of yet another Shakespearean lesson borrowed from Hamlet - "*This above all: To thine own self, be true*".

Sutter and company created a series that not only warned about what happens when we deprive men of emotion and trust old white men in power, it housed characters whose pain transformed them from thinking, feeling people to ones who abandoned their humanity in order to survive. It also painted social villains and outlaws as regular people, who simply joined a club a few decades back so they could ride their bikes. (Donahue) This show humanizes the age old plot. We have seen adaptations of fairy tales with male centric narrative, feminist narrative etc. The reach of Hamlet which is among the most popular classics has facilitated this narrative. The modern social villains and outlaws are introduced into the Elizabethan theatre while the Elizabethan sensibility is introduced on the American Television.

Admittedly, Hamlet was not the sole major influence on *Sons of Anarchy*. Replete with Biblical references, right from the "John the Revelator" montage (alluding to John of Patmos, the author of the final book of the New Testament) to the Bruce Springsteen's "Adam raised a Cain", the show was equally fascinated with its Christian setting. Yet, the hand of Hamlet was visible even in the logo of SAMCRO (Sons of Anarchy Motorcycle Club, Redwood Original), with the visage of the Grim

Reaper bearing an uncanny resemblance to Yorick's Skull.

Remakes seek to mediate between the contradictory claims of being just like their originals only better in several ways. (Leitch. 45) *Sons of Anarchy* does not claim to be better but it sure maintains its identity. Only a careful follower of the show and of Shakespeare's works can recognize the connecting thread which is carefully camouflaged. The series finale emphasizes the Shakespearean influence on the narrative. (Damico and Quay. 13) The connection to the classic leads to the rigidity of the plot. While the creators could choose how Jax Teller should die, the fact that he should die in the end remains uncontested. Even though readaptations restrict the fluidity of the plot, the acceptance of the idea is not doubtful. These TV shows borrow heavily from literature with an intent to darken the already connected dots in the mind of the audiences.

Portrayal of men in 21st century television has also shifted, registering a complex tension between traditional and contemporary ideas on what it means to be a man. (Damico and Quay. 71) The show presents the protagonist giving his partner Tara respect and yet she is forced into the vortex of a male dominated society. The show opens with Tara being shown as an independent doctor but as it progresses her professional identity gets pushed back into the background and her identity evolves to that of Jax Teller's girlfriend and the mother of his kids. She does not fall prey to insanity like the Hamletian female protagonist Ophelia. Yet, she is in no position to take dominance of the story at any point. Even in cases where Tara tries to take matters into her own hands her fate is bound to the life and fate of the male protagonist. Her individual actions are crossed over by the larger male aura of Jax Teller.

Damico and Quay points out how the shows like *Sons of Anarchy*, *Dexter*, *House of Cards* and many

others mirror the pervasive presence of the 21st century antihero (71). Thus, the Elizabethan tragedy fits perfectly in the post modern Television screen. Jax Teller, like Hamlet is the crown prince of the biker empire. He heads a club that deals with guns and drugs- Jax Teller is no hero. He is everything a hero shouldn't be- flawed. The Elizabethan antiheroes of Shakespeare and Marlowe like Richard III, Iago, Hamlet or Faustus resurfaces with all their might in the 21st century Television as Frank Underwood, Dexter Morgan, or Jax Teller. They change the perception of the fairytale knight in shining armour and bring forth a Machiavellian anti hero.

Like the Elizabethan tragedies, Richard III among them that focus on an overreaching Machiavellian antihero, the gangster film is built on a structure of identification and alienation. (Loehlin. 74) Identification of the audience with the hero whose character is flawed can lead to a moral dilemma which is relieved through the alienation of the hero. This alienation and ultimate fall assuages the moral conscience of the viewer. In the show Jax Teller while dealing with the demons of his life goes down a path without any morals.

The movement between identification and alienation that he finds in Shakespeare's play and the classic gangster film is arguably present in the antihero series as well. (Vaage. 5) The easy transformation from the Shakespearean theatre to the gangster movies to the television reflects how human behavior has remained the same through the ages. Loehlin points out that the gangster underworld, with its violence, passion and feudal conflicts of loyalty has served several Shakespearean film adaptations. (75) While human behavior has remained the same, the sensibilities of the audience couldn't have been so different, for, the theme of the bard is still popular.

The show starts out and carefully eases into the Hamletian scroll. The pilot episode itself proves that the relations are different here. A simple Hamlet-Claudius rivalry is not what follows. The protagonist has an ex-wife Wendy who is hospitalized due to drug overdose. The modern day problems are these. Lifestyle itself hints that something is rotten in the State of California. The story at first has no resemblance to the Shakespearean plot but slowly the ghost of his father is revealed- here, the metaphorical ghost unlike the King's ghost in Hamlet. The appearance of the ghost of Hamlet's kingly father is replaced in the show by the discovery of John Teller's secret writings in the pilot, which sets Jax on the path of vengeance against his father's murderers. The situations leading up to John Teller's death is constantly put under doubt. This foreshadows that there are unburied skeletons in Clay's closet.

“In the early days of *Sons*, Jax was a ringer for Kurt Cobain, with his dirty-blond hair and sad blue eyes. He should be strumming a guitar instead of handling AK-47s. But now that he's taken over the club from Clay, he's had to get more ruthless, yet he's still nowhere near as much of a hardass as the old man, who schemes to reclaim his throne.” (Sheffield)

Clay, the modern day Claudius hoping to head the biker club is first introduced as a good step-father. The plot moves in a single direction- towards Shakespeare's timeless play. The relation between the protagonist and his mother Gemma, the name being similar to Gertrude, is important throughout. The most spectacularly violent moment on *Sons of Anarchy* all year has no bikes, no guns, not even blood – just a conversation between a boy and his mother. (Sheffield) Gemma is protective of Jax and loves Clay. This plotline is the first and the most striking plot similarity that is overtly visible between Hamlet and *Sons of Anarchy*. To be a

Shakespearean tragedy, the protagonist must die. He must die violently and it must be as a result of his own bad choices.

III. CONCLUSION

A work has to transform itself in order to transcend time and this reshaping brings the past into the present in clever disguises like the case of the Sons of Anarchy. A new appreciation of the horror and the gothic resonating the romantic ideal of the appreciation of intense emotions couples with the Shakespearean elements of male bonding and drama, thus compelling the show to be or not to be the product of a single age. The show with a complete shift in the intended medium of performance from stage to the TV makes us reimagine the aesthetics for appreciating the age old plot. The modern day biker series hinting that 'something is not right in the state of California' puts Shakespeare on the wheels and brings him into the postmodern era addressing the social evils of the age in the process.

Leitch, Thomas. "Twice-Told Tales: Disavowal and the Rhetoric of the Remake." *Dead Ringers The Remake in Theory and Practice* edited by Jennifer Forrest, Leonard R. Koos State University of New York Press, Albany, 2002

Loehlin, James N. in "'Top of the World, Ma": Richard III and Cinematic Convention', in Lynda E. Boose and Richard Burt, eds., London: Routledge, 1997

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Edited by William George Clark and William Aldis Wright, Cambridge, 1866.

Sheffield, Rob. '*Sons of Anarchy*' Is *Hamlet* in *Black Leather*. Nov 13, 2012.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/sons-of-anarchy-is-hamlet-in-black-leather-20121113>. Accessed 15 June 2016.

Vaage, Brunn Margrethe. *The Antihero in American Television*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

WORKS CITED

Barsuglia, Brian. *Sons of Anarchy — The Hamlet Conclusion*. 10 September 2014.

<http://influxmagazine.com/sons-of-anarchy-the-hamlet-conclusion/> Accessed 8 March 2017.

Demico, Amy M and Quay, Sarah E. "Stories and Audiences" *21st-Century TV Dramas: Exploring the New Golden Age*. Praeger, California 2016.

Donahue, Anne T. *Sons of Anarchy: Shakespeare on motorcycle wheels*. 11 December 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2014/dec/10/sons-of-anarchy-shakespeare-on-wheels>. Accessed 10 June 2017.