

# Shakespeare Meets the Screen: The Digital Reimagination of *Romeo and Juliet*

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## Abstract

The study analyses William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and its contemporary digital revision *Go Away Romeo* (a webtoon) with the theories of digital and transmedia storytelling along with the concept of participatory culture. The tragic love story of *Romeo and Juliet* stands as a canonical myth of Western literature and still popular for its themes and archetypes. The story has been adapted into numerous forms of media like movies, short films, television series, comics, fan fictions and so on. The paper makes use of the critical frameworks of Northrop Frye, Carl Jung, Henry Jenkins and Janet Murray to highlight the revised archetypes such as the star-crossed lovers, patriarchal authority and damsel in distress. It aims to study how digital mediums provide chance to the readers to engage and reinterpret the meaning of the story. This paper also explores how classical literature evolves and gets reshaped by technological, cultural and ideological change.

**Keywords:** Transmedia, Participatory culture, *Romeo and Juliet*, Revision, Archetypes, Webtoon.

## Introduction:

*Romeo and Juliet*, a play written by Shakespeare is set during the renaissance of Italy. The work talks about the group rivalry and class disparity of the time displayed by the two prominent noble houses and the unforgettable love story of Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet. This is described in the prologue of the play as: "A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life; Whose misadventure piteous overthrow, Doth with their death bury their parents' strife" (Shakespeare<sup>72</sup>). Shakespeare has drawn inspiration from his contemporary works to frame this play which led to a number of adaptations and recreations for decades. In the beginning, the story is reproduced in the form of prose to better understand the Elizabethan language. Later,

the play is adapted into short videos, short films, drama series and movies in various languages. Each form promoted Shakespeare's version by altering it according to the digital and ideological transformation of the readers/users.

Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is set in the Italian city of Verona where two noble families of Montague and Capulet are in constant war with one another for generations which gradually affects the general public. Thus, the prince warns the families to cease violence for the good of the people. Romeo, of the Montague house is the male protagonist of the play. He is introduced as a lovesick young man whose advances are rejected by the young Capulet lady, Rosaline. He tries to give up on his love by attending a masquerade arranged by the Capulet family and falls in love with Juliet, the female protagonist who is the sole daughter of the Capulet head. The youngsters fall in love in first sight and marry in secret in spite of all the alarming violence surrounded in their family. Problem brews when Juliet's parents arrange her marriage with Paris and when Romeo kills Juliet's cousin Tybalt in a duel. He is exiled from the city as a punishment and Juliet is left helpless until she is helped by friar Laurence who married her to Romeo. The plan which the friar devised to unite the two young couple took a miserable turn with the deaths of both. It is one of the tragical play where the two families vow to stop the feud for the better future of the younger generation. It ends with the line, "For never was a story of more woe Than this of Juliet and her Romeo" (Shakespeare 203).

Webtoon's *Go Away Romeo*, is a retelling and a completely different plot which moves with Rosaline Capulet in the centre. This is a satire and the story talks about how Romeo uses Rosaline and Juliet to gain power to take down the Capulet family and becomes the king of Verona. This webtoon shows the characters of Count Paris, Tybalt and Prince Escalus in a positive light. It antagonises Romeo and Friar Lawrence, who helps him usurp the throne of Verona. The authors of this work also create new characters like the matriarch of the Capulets, Luciana (Rosaline's grandmother) and Mino (Rosaline's son with Romeo). The Webtoon talks about the difficulties of a single mother in nobility and their societal standing. It also mocks nobility for their vanity. It also studies how children are affected because of it, and how class distinction is depicted and also how these themes are relevant to the contemporary period. Rosaline undergoes numerous trials and tribulations to establish her position in the society. This is depicted in the image below:



Fig. 1. Rosaline's suffering, Paintword, *Go Away Romeo*, 2023-2025.

She saves her romantic interest, Paris and the city of Verona from the hands of Romeo with her cunning and clever plans. Rosaline also exposes the corruption of the church and its involvement in burglary and kidnapping of children.

*Go Away Romeo* makes use of transmedia storytelling to reach the contemporary audience. It is not a mere adaptation but a retelling using digital media. Rosaline, a minor character of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* did not appear in any scenes in the original story. She appeared as a subject of Romeo's affections and the object of Mercutio's sexual jokes. Rosaline (of webtoon) who is used by Romeo gets up for herself and her son to gain power instead of being oppressed by the society. She proves her intelligence throughout the story with the help of her close friends. She also helps Juliet realise she is manipulated by Romeo in the name of love. Juliet parts from Romeo with the words:



Fig. 2. Juliet's parting words to Romeo, Paintword, *Go Away Romeo*, 2023-2025.

Paris who appears as one of the antagonists in the original story subverts from a mere suitor and has a character for himself. Paris in the webtoon is a highly respected noble and a renowned painter in Verona who is also a close associate of prince Escalus. He helps Rosaline without any social prejudice for her single mother status and supports her to establish herself as the next head of the Capulet family. Tybalt, who is a troublesome character in the play, is a shrewd and cunning double agent in the webtoon. He stays close to Romeo Montague in order to obtain his secret plans and helps his cousin Rosaline to capture Romeo and his supporters. Shakespeare's women characters in the play were rather innocent and dependant while the Webtoon version changed this notion by recreating the damsel in distress into a capable powerful matriarch. The webtoon gives voice to often villainised and misunderstood characters.

Carl Jung, Northrop Frye and Joseph Campbell have elaborated on the concept of archetypes associated with mythologies and rituals. Jung, in his work *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* (1959), introduces the Great Mother archetype where he describes how a great mother can be both nurturing and destroying at the same time. He also discusses about several other archetypes like the Anima/Animus, Trickster, Wise Old Man, etc. In the webtoon, Rosaline stands as the great mother who protects both her son and Verona by destroying the villainous Romeo. Rosaline's grandmother and Count Paris are the wise old man archetypes who guide the heroine during her quest of identity. Tybalt, a tricky character acts as the trickster archetype who imparts important lessons to Rosaline through indirect questions. Northrop Frye has introduced character archetypes in *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957), which includes scapegoat (*pharmakos*), *alazon* or the antagonist and *eiron* who helps the hero. In the original play, Romeo and Juliet are the scapegoats. This Frye quotes as: "We may call this typical victim the *pharmakos* or scapegoat. We meet a *pharmakos* figure in Hawthorne's Hester Prynne..." (41). The family members act as *alazon*. The nurse of Juliet and friar Laurence serve as *eiron* archetypes. But in the webtoon version, both Rosaline and Juliet are the scapegoats who are punished and ostracized. But Rosaline rises back on her feet and breaks the helpless victim role pushed upon her. Later in the story, Juliet declares that she will now live for herself and declares that her growth can only come with independence and change. Joseph Campbell in his work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) gives the universal plot structure of the hero's adventure as "separation - initiation - return" (30). This plot structure is followed in the webtoon but not in the play. Rosaline is removed from the society, then she goes on a quest to establish her identity

and finally returns back to high society by becoming the matriarch of the Capulet family and the chief advisor of the prince.

Linda Hutcheon, in her *The Theory of Adaptation* (2006) discusses how adaptations are not just imitations of the original source but a creative remodelling of the story catering to the culture, ideology and medium that satisfies the present-day consumers. She puts it as: “Neither the product nor the process of adaptation exists in a vacuum:

they all have a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture” (Hutcheon and O’Flynnxvi). She doesn’t consider adapted versions of the stories inferior or secondary but considers them as individual works. Through her theoretical lens, *Go Away Romeo* cannot be viewed as a derivative text. It is an interpretive text which is crafted carefully to express the cultural rearticulation or shift. The selected webtoon uses the transmedia medium for this purpose. Shakespeare’s play is meant for performance and it used Elizabethan verse and ideology of the time. Juliet is merely a teenager of thirteen when her marriage is discussed and she marries another teenager. This patriarchal idea is quoted in the play as, “Younger than you Here in Verona, ladies of esteem, Are made already mothers” (Shakespeare 85). The character symbolises the social practices of nobles and the powerless position of women. Meanwhile, the webtoon adaptation though set during the Shakespearean times, talks about single motherhood, female family heads and also women characters are much older than the original play. That is how adaptations enforce the expectations of contemporary readers.

Janet H. Murray is known for digital storytelling and her narrative theories. She theorizes the concepts of ‘multimodality’ where many factors like visual images, sound, sequencing of illustrations and colour palettes converge; ‘interactivity’ where users or readers engage in feedback to the story’s episodes; and ‘immersion’ where users are captivated by cliffhangers for the next episode and art style which makes them scroll the screen for hours. The play is merely a stage script which isn’t captivating unless it is performed. But the webtoon picturises the tale by showcasing the emotions of the character, the beauty of the settings, minute details like period costumes and accessories. In her work, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1997), she explains what digital mediums does to promote digital narratives:

Not only is the computer the most capacious medium ever invented, but it also allows us to move around the narrative world, shifting from one perspective to another at our own initiative. Perhaps this ability to shift

perspectives will lead to the technical innovation that will rival the Shakespearean soliloquy (Murray 283).

This gives the readers a pleasant experience to scroll through the screen and to view the author's portrait of the Shakespearean characters and Verona. It allows the readers to access the future contents with prior payments too, by gaining a revenue for the authors and the digital platform. Murray's concepts about digital storytelling reveal how webtoon's multimodal approach reaches so many readers in global level.

Henry Jenkins is a professor well known for his concepts of transmedia storytelling and participatory culture. He studies about how stories are adapted into various digital mediums which eventually gives birth to a cinematic universe of a particular work. He defines:

Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story (Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101 — Pop Junctions").

This paper interprets how Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* has made use of the transmedia platforms to stand the test of time. The story of Romeo and Juliet has taken various shapes from the time of its production. It has movies that are almost the replica or new imagination of the original plot. For example, the movie *Rosaline* (2022) is an adaptation that differs much from the original plot line. The anime industry of Japan has painted different universes using the original play. For example, the anime named *Romeo × Juliet* (2007-2009) is a dystopian fantasy version where Juliet is the protagonist. The gaming industry be it board games or digital games have adopted the Shakespearean characters into solving a mystery or puzzle or Romeo character finding the missing Juliet as in a classic Mario game. For example, PC game *Romeo: Wherefore Art Thou?* is a transmedia adaptation. *Go Away Romeo* is also one such transmedia adaptation which can be accessed in the form of webcomic with the help of a mobile app. This is how transmedia helps in producing "contemporary cultural products" (Jin 2086).

Jenkins also elaborates on the concept of participatory culture where vivid readers and fans actively participate with the text and the author through digital platforms like Naver Webtoon, Crunchyroll, etc. He quotes: "Participatory culture shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement" (Jenkins, "Critical Information Studies for a Participatory Culture (Part One) — Pop Junctions"). Readers or users get a chance to question the author's choice of plot, critique the elements, provide suggestions for improvement and even report

sensitive content to the publisher. Murray also describes this as: “Contemporary stories, in high and low culture, keep reminding us of the storyteller and inviting us to second-guess the choices he or she has made. This can be unsettling to the reader, but it can also be experienced as an invitation to join in the creative process” (38). Thus, making the reader into a minor creator.

In conclusion, the paper shows that the play, *Romeo and Juliet* has survived through centuries with the help of the adaptations that are both digital and non-digital. These mediums of transmedia has performed a predominant role in reshaping the story. The paper also shows how *Go Away Romeo* breaks the archetypes of star-crossed lovers, patriarchal authority and damsel in distress by evolving it to healthy relationship, gender equality and female agency. Through the theories of Hutcheon, Murray and Jenkins, the paper proves that digital storytelling helps for a far reach with the aspects of multimodality, transmedia and participatory culture. Thus, *Go Away Romeo* serves as an example of how classical literature evolves and gets reshaped by technological, cultural and ideological change.

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