

Shakespeare In Bollywood

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Abstract

With The Comedy of Errors, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth, Othello and Hamlet all receiving screen makeovers, Shakespeare is arguably the most popular screenplay writer in Hindi cinema. However, Shakespeare has not directly contributed to Indian Cinema. The cinematizing of his plays in India has been an outstanding and ground-breaking venture. He has inspired several generations of filmmakers across the world with ideas through his plays which offer some of the best ingredients for a mainstream film in any language that could belong to any culture, ethnic backdrop, time-space paradigms, relationships and so on. His works have the universality to transcend the confines of the written word, albeit in an English that is no longer in vogue, with characters that belong to a different era and a different culture and backdrop altogether. The fact that William Shakespeare suddenly became a point of attraction to Indians is inaccurate. Shakespeare has remained omnipresent in literary scholarship for a very long time. Perhaps we are noticing the appeal now because of a flood of varied celluloid representations of Shakespeare's works by Indian filmmakers.

Keywords: Bollywood, adaptation, relation, Shakespeare, translation

Introduction

The works of William Shakespeare are more prevalent in the 21st century than ever before. Being a cultural author, Shakespeare is everywhere in our culture. His works dominate the curriculum in literature departments. His plays are regularly and widely produced. In India, the presence of Shakespeare is older and perhaps more complex than in any other country outside the West. The regional cultures of most of our states have proved to be ideal mediums, capable of absorbing Shakespeare well within their cultural realm and, in turn, being reformed and impregnated by Shakespearean influence. Indian engagement with Shakespeare is not just a part of history; it also involves questions relating to more prominent philosophic and political undercurrents. India assimilated him into life to make him an integral part of its cultural heritage.

The British left India in 1947; however, Shakespeare's influence is still considerable today. Although independence was achieved, Indians did not entirely reject the substantial literature that the British had brought into the subcontinent. Shakespeare's theatrical works were first used to entertain British colonisers and European traders. But now, they are part of

today's Indian education and continue to affect Indian arts and culture. Poonam Trivedi distinguishes various phases, each characterised by different approaches to the playwright: when his plays were incorporated into the civilising mission of the British Empire, Indians

seemed to be awed by them, thus making them probably “too respectfully;” in the late 19th and 20th centuries, instead, Parsi theatre productions tended to treat Shakespeare “in a cavalier fashion, mixing and mashing up his plays into hybrid and melodramatic versions,” so much so that their representations were a source of embarrassment for academics, who considered them “populist travesties.” This period was followed by three other moments: firstly, a phase of faithful translations and performances, secondly a phase of creative adaptations and assimilations into local theatrical forms, and ultimately the current moment of “irreverence,” in which theatre and film directors are feeling free to “play around” with Shakespearean works (Trivedi, 2016). Globalisation and the growing accessibility to the internet are possibly enhancing Indian youth’s confidence in the postcolonial, so that, among the various initiatives, an annual festival called “Hamara Shakespeare” (meaning “Our Shakespeare”) is held in Chennai and an annual short play competition is organised by the Shakespeare Society of India in Delhi. In August 2015, even the students of an Indian Engineering and Technological University organised an original “Great Indian Shakespeare Festival” in which, for instance, Julius Caesar was set in the corporate world and entailed the deposition of the title character as CEO (Trivedi, 2016).

In the Indian context, screen adaptations and unconventional stage productions testify to today’s different types of engagement with the playwright, who, “detached from the colonial baggage, [...] continues to speak in strange and wondrous forms to newer generations” (Trivedi, 2016). Especially in recent years, Shakespeare has thus been rewritten and reinvented in many ways and multiple media. Both outside Great Britain and India, he has been read, translated, and interpreted in both English-speaking and non-English-speaking countries. Scholarly debates have arisen over the playwright’s presence in almost every age and culture, leading some academics to link his works with a presumed universality, this being an idea already present in Ben Jonson’s famous assertion in the “Preface to the First Folio” (1623) that Shakespeare “was not for an age but for all time.” Despite recognising that Shakespearean plays have crossed the borders of both their cradle (Great Britain) and the theatre medium (“Such Tweet Sorrow”, for instance, is a unique Twitter adaptation of Romeo and Juliet “performed” by professional actors in five weeks in 2010), my paper departs from the use of the ambiguous and misleading concept of “universality” to embrace the idea of the adaptability and easy transculturation of the playwright’s theatrical works. Jeffrey R. Wilson summarises this stance on the page on the Harvard University website dedicated to his projects: Shakespeare is not universal, but Shakespeare is versatile. That is, Shakespeare is not good and proper for all people in all places at all times, but his drama does have a tendency, much more than other writers from his age or others, to speak to diverse cultures at different times.

Adhering to this view, my study also moves away from some other critics’ assumptions that the playwright is still studied and performed only as a consequence of colonialism, having merely served “as a powerful tool of empire, transported to foreign climes along with the doctrine of European cultural superiority” (O’Toole, 2012), to impart the “humanistic” ideals of British civilisation. By contrast, in the subcontinent, the playwright’s position has been two-fold, both colonial and postcolonial, both functional and cultural. Maurice Hindle, in his

introduction to *Studying Shakespeare on Film* (2007), highlights that Shakespeare “has [also] always had an audience,” whether small or large, elite or popular.

In the meantime, India has demonstrated to be no exception. The inception of Indian cinematic tradition dates back to the early 20th century, during the so-called “Indian Renaissance,” when Dadasaheb Phalke, the commonly-known “father of Indian cinema,” started his career. His *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), a commercially successful silent movie, is said to have marked the beginning of Indian cinema. At the time, Western culture had already been absorbed massively into the mainstream, so much so that even Shakespeare, despite having been used by colonisers to promote the English language and Western core values to the detriment of the endemic ones, was translated and adapted in various Indian languages. Although historical and mythological films or episodes, together with Hollywood action movies, were privileged throughout the 20th century, Indian cinema has engaged Shakespeare’s works, motifs, and main themes, since its foundation. Thus, being part and parcel of Indian culture, the playwright has inspired Indian cinema more or less consciously, in particular Bollywood. His plays have significantly impacted various screen genres, including silent films, theatrical cinematisation, and feature films.

Notwithstanding, it is after the advent of director Vishal Bhardwaj that the so-called “Bollywood Shakespeare” has become a severe field of study and academic research (Dionne and Kapadia, 22). In his Shakespearean trilogy, this contemporary filmmaker adapted three of Shakespeare’s most memorable tragedies, namely *Macbeth*, adapted by *Maqbool* (2003), and *Othello*, adapted by *Omkara* (2006). *Hamlet*, adapted as *Haider* (2014), intends to create original works that deal with the violence and vicissitudes of modern-day Indian society and politics.

Imagine a young man dressed in black and wearing a hat adorned with coloured feathers who descends the stairs of an ancient snow-covered temple as, in the background, a catchy melody starts to play. A spectator in the front row of a large audience begins to clap while about fifteen dancers in a kind grey uniform are moving to the rhythm of the music. Such a show lasts for more than six minutes and includes “live” music, dance steps, acting, and the use of tall puppets. The lead performer seems to look directly into the eyes of his audience, whose members are transported and emotionally engaged by the representation. Our hands and feet cannot stay still, and we are also tempted to sing: we feel captured inside the screen. “Screen” is the exact word to use in this context, as the show is one of the musical interludes in Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Haider* (2014), nothing less than a Hindi cinematic version of William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This performance, in particular, reproduces “The Mousetrap,” which is the famous play-within-the-play through which Claudius’s guilt in the murder of his brother is proven.

Bhardwaj adapted some Shakespearean female characters, making them active agents that often handle typically male weapons, thus challenging the traditional female roles of Mumbai’s mainstream cinema and Indian society in general. In *Maqbool*, Nimmi incites her lover to kill his “godfather” by using physical and verbal expedients that prove more effective than the man’s ambition. She is seductive and manipulative, to the point of aiming the gun at

Maqbool (also firing a shot) to force him to declare his love for her; she is determined and deceiving so that she risks her own life by asking her lover to choose whether he wants to kill her or the don.

In *Omkara*, Dolly is more fragile than her Shakespearean counterpart; however, she too is made to handle a seemingly heavy rifle and point it at her husband-to-be (even if playfully). Her Dionysian opposite is Billo, a “woman with agency,” a singing and dancing performer indifferent to social disapproval, who, during one of her dance spectacles, helps the gangsters entrap the man that has tried to murder the local politician they work for. Instead, the real hero (or better heroine) of the film is Indu, the self-sacrificing mother who kills her husband to preserve her son’s and family’s honour. Also, Billo and Indu are made to handle a weapon: in Billo’s case, during the show mentioned above, organised to capture a rival gangster, she dances provocatively with a gun in her hand; in Indu’s case, it is the blade she uses to hit and kill Langda. Most meaningfully, the weapon Indu is armed with is not a male one but a characteristically female tool associated with grain threshing and food preparation (Heidenberg, 98).

Finally, in *Haider*, the two notable female characters are Arshia and Ghazala. Arshia, definitely more resilient than Shakespeare’s Ophelia, is a resolute young journalist committed to justice and peace: once gone mad, she does not commit suicide by drowning but shoots a bullet in her head, presumably with her dead father’s gun, while she lies in bed and sings wrapped in the undone red scarf she previously knitted for him. Ghazala, by contrast, is another self-sacrificing mother that decides to blow herself up to both punish herself and put a definite end to the tragedy that has hit her family.

Another feature of Bhardwaj’s trilogy is the brutal violence they display. On certain occasions, violence seems gratuitous, and its presence on screen is undoubtedly more robust than it is usually on stage. *Maqbool*, for example, begins inside a van, where two police officers kill one of Mughal’s gangsters they have in custody. Likewise, in *Omkara*, gunfights are the order of the day, so much so that the title character does not hesitate to make his “best friend” Langda answer his question regarding Dolly’s infidelity by putting a gun into his mouth. Unnecessary violence permeates *Haider* as well. In this case, it is perpetrated by both police officers and the main characters.

Analysing Bhardwaj’s films against their socio-political and cultural backdrop, the paper tries to show how a postcolonial director uses Shakespeare’s tragedies “as a natural lens through which to view contemporary India” (Saltz, 2014). In effect, viewers are confronted with 20th and 21st-century India’s everyday reality while watching the three movies. In *Maqbool*, for instance, the main characters come from one of the exiled Muslim communities that constitute a minority in mainly Hindu Mumbai. This choice appears to be particularly meaningful in terms of religious orientation because the film was produced after both the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the USA and the religious riots of 2002 in Gujarat, which made Muslims’ popularity in Bollywood decline rapidly. In the same movie, the Bollywood industry itself is represented as being historically connected with the gangland, as Mumbai’s dons are

It is generally fascinated with its stars and celebrities and is involved in the money laundering and lucrative video piracy that tarnish the film business.

While working on my paper, I listened to some of the few interviews the filmmaker ever did to have a clearer idea of his standpoint on Shakespeare and how he appropriated the playwright's most famous tragedies. First, he changed the medium to convey them, from theatre to cinema. Still, he adapted Shakespearean plots rather than Shakespearean words: in this way, he tried to satisfy the taste of the average Indian moviegoer rather than that of Indian intellectuals. In this regard, Bhardwaj's trilogy can be used as the first means to introduce a writer or playwright to pupils. Some screen versions of Shakespeare's comedies and tragedies are already employed at high school and university levels to simplify the learning and comprehension of Shakespearean texts. Sometimes, however, students watch these films to become familiar with Shakespearean plots but do not read the original plays anymore. Since comedies and tragedies were produced to be staged (thus watched), not read, and being a student and teacher-to-be myself, I perfectly understand that pupils find it easier and also more comfortable to understand a theatrical work by seeing and listening to it rather than to read Shakespeare's 16th-century "obscure" language.

To conclude, Bhardwaj directed his trilogy by using Shakespeare as his "cowriter," appropriating the plots of his plays as Shakespeare did with his sources. The director thus created three original works in which the playwright is still recognisable but not felt as a burden on which to rely faithfully. Though initially thinking that his films, now also inserted in Indian university curricula, would not have to go beyond India, the director has recently declared his intention to film another trilogy based on Shakespeare's comedies. The filmmaker has already revealed that the first movie will be an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* and will be given the title of *Chaudhvin Ki Raat*. Like all his other films, it will be set in contemporary India since he wants to focus on today's politics, culture and music. Quoting the first line in the comedy, "If music is the food of love, play on" (*Twelfth Night*, 1.1.1), the director has unveiled that music will undoubtedly be present in the backdrop, also thanks to his renewed collaboration with the famous lyricist Gulzar Saab. What remains still undisclosed is the name of the actress that will interpret the twin's Viola and Sebastian.

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