

Adapting Shakespeare in the Indian Context

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's plays have been adapted and translated ceaselessly through generations and in different regions of the world. His works transcend the limitations of space and time. Shakespeare's texts have been taught, staged, filmed and explored in every possible way. In this paper, I have focussed on the adaptation and acceptability of Shakespeare in the Indian context. As an effect of colonisation, Shakespeare was introduced in the academic sphere for the very first time as part of the curriculum in schools, colleges and universities in India. His plays and their adaptations subsequently made way to the Indian theatre and to the screen. The scope of this paper is to explore how Shakespeare's plays adapted in different Indian languages have resonated with the times. Shakespeare's plays have been staged and screened with unmatched uniqueness in varied art forms while holding on to the original storyline. But the question is - How far have these adaptations been successfully utilised in the Indian context? How much could the Indian audience accept and relate to these adaptations from Shakespeare?

Keywords: Shakespeare, plays, stage, screen, adaptation

Introduction

Shakespeare's plays have inspired generations of theatre and film makers with plots that could belong to any region, era, backdrop, and varied human relationships. They have transcended all boundaries. The universality of Shakespeare's characters and their situations make them worthy of adaptation.

From pages to stages and then to the screen, Shakespeare's influence both in pre- and post-independent India has been overwhelming. With the beginning of the colonial rule in India, and the new Education policy laid down by Lord Macaulay, Shakespeare was introduced in the academic sphere for the very first time to every Indian student and to the Indian intellectuals of the day. In the curriculum of various Boards of examinations and Universities, the inclusion of the important texts of Shakespeare became mandatory. Through

translations and classroom interpretations, Shakespeare began to be staged, at first in the amateur mode in colleges and universities and gradually made its way to the professional Indian theatre and subsequently to the screen. In the scholarly milieu of 19th-century Bengal, Richardson an eminent professor of English at Presidency College, Kolkata, taught students how to create an appreciation of Shakespearean plays, how best to learn and analyse each of them. His teachings gave the learners some lessons in acting. They learnt how to enact the Shakespearean plays and how to recite passages from the tragedies of Shakespeare. Every Indian language tried to absorb the very essence of Shakespeare's fascinating work and blended it with India's popular culture.

As early as 1932, Ranjee Shahani's documented reference 'Through Eastern Eyes', reinvents Shakespeare in the Indian context trying to bring out the differences in race, culture and ethnicity. Smarajit Dutta in the 1920s, brought out three volumes on Hamlet, Macbeth and Othello, each subtitled, An Oriental Study.

To quote Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin in Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation, (Palgrave MacMillan 2014), "Reproducing Shakespeare marks the turn in adaptation studies toward recontextualisation, reformatting, and media convergence. It builds on two decades of growing interest in the "afterlife" of Shakespeare, showcasing some of the best new work of this kind currently being produced."

Stage Adaptations

At the very beginning, Shakespeare's plays were staged in Kolkata but gradually his plays were performed in different regions of the country. Interestingly, each of these regions absorbed the very essence of Shakespeare's fascinating work and blended it to suit the Indian context. These plays gained immense popularity in playhouses, and subsequently on screens, because of their universal themes and appeals.

Adaptations in Bengali Theatre

In the 19th century, the plays of Shakespeare underwent several stages of modifications and translations for the purpose of theatre. The plays were remodelled to suit the Indian context, incorporating music and dance that resembled an opera or what was popularly known then as the 'geetinattiya'. Othello was performed at the "Calcutta Theatre" in the Christmas of 1780 in Bengal. Several other plays of Shakespeare such as "Hamlet", "The Merchant of Venice", "Romeo and Juliet", "Richard III", and "Henry IV" were performed in the course of the next eight years.

Shakespeare's The Comedy of Errors, got translated and staged in Bengali in 1873. This was followed by Cymbeline and Macbeth both were made ready for stage production the following year. Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of Bengali theatre, skilfully adapted and staged Macbeth on January 28, 1893. It was not only an accurate representation of Macbeth but also a perfect lyrical interpretation. A masterpiece of poetic translation, Girish Ghosh's Macbeth, according to some reviewers, flopped on stage as "it could not match the

brilliance of Shakespeare”. One after another the educated middle-class intelligentsia continued to present Shakespeare’s plays, “The Merchant of Venice” at the Governor’s residence in 1837, “Othello” at the “Oriental Academy” in 1853, and “Henry IV” in 1855. With the rising popularity of the Shakespearean stage shows, the plays were now transcribed and translated into various Indian languages by provincial writers.

In Kolkata, although the fad for staging Shakespeare’s plays considerably reduced by the 1920s to the ‘40s, it bounced back in the later part of the twentieth century under the powerful direction of Utpal Dutt, a renowned theatre personality, director and actor. Utpal Dutt was of the opinion that “the classics were not a prerogative of an élite”. He firmly believed that the plays of Shakespeare must be presented before a larger audience or they would at some point of time ‘cease to exist’. Dutt therefore brought in a new element to Shakespearean plays. He translated the plays of Shakespeare into Bengali with great adeptness he retained the names of the characters and their drapes. His plays were written in contemporary Bengali dialect. Utpal Dutt not only directed some of the classics of Shakespeare, he even played the protagonist in the plays, such as, Othello, Twelfth Night and Julius Caesar.

Adaptations in Marathi Theatre

The Marathi theatre had a similar story to tell. Shakespeare’s plays were becoming predominant on the Marathi stage. The Marathi play Natasamrat, by Shirwadkar was an adaptation of Shakespeare’s King Lear. Rajmukut, another play by Shirwadkar, was an Indianised merged version of Othello and Macbeth. Mention must be made of Parashuram Deshpande, another Marathi playwright who translated The Merchant of Venice. Habib Tanvir, the veteran theatre director, presented an Indian adaptation of A Midsummer Night’s Dream with Kaamdeo Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna. This was uniquely presented in Chhattisgarh’s Nacha theatre form.

For many years, the English theatre in Mumbai continued to offer a number of adaptations of Shakespearean plays. Those worth mentioning are Alyque Padamsee’s Hamlet (1964) and Othello (1990), Vikram Kapadia and Naseeruddin Shah’s Julius Caesar (1992), and several plays by the Phoenix Players led by Salim Ghouse and Anita Salim.

A Modern Day Stage production

Rajat Kapoor’s stage production of Hamlet the Clown Prince was out of the ordinary. It presented a surreal interpretation of Shakespeare’s Hamlet. In this out of the ordinary presentation of Hamlet the Clown Prince, a troupe of six clowns decide to perform the play ‘Hamlet’, in a unique manner. As the title suggests Rajat Kapoor’s play was a deviation from the standard adaptations of Shakespeare. Rajat Kapoor’s Nothing like Lear is an unconventional adaptation of William Shakespeare’s King Lear. It explores human nature in-depth and the character of Lear is fictional yet contemporary and relatable to the tragedy of Lear. The one-act play, where popular Indian actor Vinay Pathak played the protagonist,

made the audience laugh, cry, connect and contemplate all through. Unlike a dull monologue, the play had Vinay Pathak as an old clown, engaging with the audience to bring in some comic relief with hilarious one-liners and sarcastic dialogues on contemporary lifestyles, changing relationships and human nature. The dialogues were at times striking--justifying a Shakespearian adaptation of King Lear through various incidents in the life of an old depressed clown.

Shakespeare in Malayalam and Kannada theatre

The influence of Shakespeare has been quite impactful in the Malayalam and Kannada plays too. King Lear got successfully regionalised in the Malayalam production Katha Prasangam. K.N.Panikkar's Kodumkattu was an Indian adaptation of Shakespeare's The Tempest. A noted theatre personality B.V Karanth brought great innovation in his creation of Macbeth by including the traditional Yakshagana dance-drama form of Karnataka.

Shakespeare in Folk Theatres

Shakespeare's plays even touched the folk theatres of India. The manner in which Othello titled Rumelo was adapted and presented in the folk theatres of Uttarakhand appealed greatly to the masses. Ajeet Singh Palawat created magic with intrinsic Rajasthani art of Kathputli (string puppet theatre), and vibrant hues in his directorial Kasumol Sapno, that was a reshaping of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. The play unlike the original was not set in Athens but in Amorgarh, Rajasthan and it mirrored the colours and passion of the desert land. The woodland fairies, the duke and duchess were replaced by a fairy puppet king, a weaver, magic, jungle sprites and elves. Another veteran theatre director Ratan Thiyam adapted Macbeth strikingly for stage using Manipuri folk forms elevated with live music and extravagant set and lights.

As the reputed theatre director and NSD alumnus Rajendra Panchal puts it, "These theatre directors have been pioneers of creating Shakespeare's magic on stage using Indian folk forms. Their adaptations have been brilliant so much so that Shakespeare appears to have set his play plot in India. His writing style is unique and has written on diverse topics like tragedy, comedy, satire, and social dramas which are still relevant. Moreover, there's no other writer of his time who gave so much diversity and liberty in the text for adaptation."

Shakespeare Festival

Every year in Chennai, an Arts foundation holds an annual festival called 'Hamara (our) Shakespeare'. 'Scenes from Shakespeare', is another annual short play competition organised by the Shakespeare Society of India in Delhi, that is becoming increasingly popular. In the 'Great Indian Shakespeare Festival' organised by students of an Engineering and Technological University, Shakespeare's Julius Caesar was set and adapted in the boardrooms of the corporate world with Julius Caesar being removed from the office of the CEO but spared the knife.

Cinematic Adaptations

The cinematic representation of Shakespeare began with the Indian adaptation of Hamlet in *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935), written by Mehdi Ahsan and directed by Sohrab Modi, with Sohrab Modi as Hamlet, Naseem Bano cast as Ophelia, and Shamshad Bai playing Gertrude. In 1941, J. J. Madan presented his adapted Hindi film titled, *Zalim Saudagar* based on *The Merchant of Venice*. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ramleela* (2013) is an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* in a Gujarati milieu. The rivalry of the Montague-Capulet family is here represented in the conflict of the Rajadi-Sanera family.

Vishal Bharadwaj's trilogy of Shakespeare's adaptation of Hindi films, *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*, 2003), *Omkara* (*Othello*, 2006), and *Haider* (*Hamlet*, 2014) have adhered closely to the original texts in the backdrop of contemporary India. Bharadwaj's films set the current political scenarios in their narrative of Shakespeare: the gangs of Mumbai and rural North India with their own set of laws, and the unresolved question of Kashmir. *Haider* was set in the time frame of the turbulence of the 1990s, with Kashmir in the background. *Maqbool* set against the backdrop of the Mumbai underworld displays the complex interplay of human emotions in crisis. *Omkara* on the other hand takes us to the feudal heartlands of northern India with its class distinctions and social structure.

Conclusion

With globalisation and increasing internet accessibility, Shakespeare became orientalist and regionalised in India beyond language and cultural barriers, Shakespeare's works were set in contemporary Indian social and political contexts. This 'Indianness' of the characters and the events, the inter-play of human emotions and relationships, helped create a genre that was unique and exclusive to both stage and screen. The stage and movie adaptations of Shakespeare's plays reached out to a very large audience. The Bard's plays revered earlier in the academic world now appealed greatly to the masses, even to non-academic people. As the original plays mostly remained incomprehensible and unavailable to many, due to reasons such as the lack of background knowledge and interest, these stage and cinematic adaptations opened up new spaces, and made the plays popular to the masses. The late nineteenth, twentieth centuries have made use of Shakespeare in varied dramatic forms. With the modern retelling of his stories through cinematic adaptations, Shakespeare continues to enjoy universality, is relatable and widely accepted by the Indian audience, even in the twenty-first century. In countless stage and screen adaptations, in different forms of modern interpretation on stage, Shakespeare continues and will continue to entertain us.

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