

## SHAKESPEARANA – THE SHAKESPEARE

### GHARANA (TRADITION):

#### **The Influence of the Bard on the Indian Stage and Screen with Special Reference to *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello***

The Bard of Avon who wrote of kings, queens and nobility and who wrote for the entertainment of the contemporary royal echelon, in reality hailed from a humble background. He married a lady who was eight years older, and whose early profession, as speculated by various biographers, could have been that of a poacher, a stable-keeper at a London theatre or a local school master.

Being a plebeian he was familiar with the joys and woes of the common man but his mastery lies in the treatment of the royal characters and the palette of emotions betrayed by these majestic individuals. His familiarity with the royal mannerism helped him become a bridge between the higher strata of the society with all refined traits and the people living in the lanes and by-lanes of the upcoming towns and cities representing the harsh realities of human existence.

Thus, Shakespeare helps readers of all different kinds (persona) and categories (background) to understand the other kinds and categories that they have not encountered directly; and this stands out as one of the major reasons behind his growing popularity<sup>1</sup>. Another important reason for his being the most popular dramatist is his immaculate art of characterization. He has been a master in portraying characters from all walks of life, and very often, portrays characters who are larger-than-life itself.

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1 PABITRA SARKAR, «Jatra: The Popular Traditional Theatre of Bengal» . *Journal of South Asian Literature* 10, No. 2/4, Theatre in India (Winter, Spring, Summer 1975): 87-107.

As far as India is concerned, the impact of Shakespeare's theatre began and developed primarily in those cities or settlements, which were founded by the English merchants and the British rulers or where their commercial, industrial or administrative centres were located. That is the reason why this theatre got so much more patronage and encouragement in new cities like Calcutta, Bombay and to some extent in Madras, than in other regions. As a result, its achievements, whatever they are, have different levels in different languages and regions of the country.

In Bengali and Marathi, it became most active, prosperous and popular from the beginning and in its subsequent development. In Bengali, the rise and almost the entire expansion of the theatre was confined to Calcutta, which was the first main centre of the East India Company and later the capital of the British rulers.

For the Bengalis, their main traditional theatre the *Jatra* might have appeared crude and backward, since no tradition of Sanskrit theatre was extant, they were naturally attracted and overwhelmed by the novelty, power and effectiveness of Western drama and theatre<sup>2</sup>. The charm of this new theatre created a huge audience in the middle-class, educated sections of Calcutta (in fact, the entire Bengal) to the extent that a craze for theatre became a distinctive characteristic of an educated Bengali. The noted dramatists such as Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Deenbandhu Mitra, Girish Chandra Ghosh, D.L. Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, Manmath Ray, Sachin Sengupta and many others wrote hundreds of plays for this new stage, after the models of Shakespeare, Moliere, Ibsen, Bernard Shaw and others<sup>3</sup>.

The master dramatist has passed on more than only his works. He has been a constant source of inspiration for several generations of playwrights, directors (dramatists), actors, poets, script-writers, film-makers, etc. He has been a fountain of ideas for people associated with the theatre and film industry, and he continues to enjoy the undisputed status of being the most popular to date. His plays continue to be adapted by other popular directors and film makers across the globe. His plays provide the

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- 2 SARKAR, «Jatra: The Popular Traditional Theatre of Bengal» . *Journal of South Asian Literature* 10, No. 2/4, Theatre in India (Winter, Spring, Summer 1975): 87-107.
  - 3 CHATTERJEE SUDIPTO, «The Nation Staged: Nationalist Discourse in Late 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali Theatre» *Modern Indian Theatre*, Nandi Bhatia (ed.) (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009): 97-131.

best ingredients for a mainstream film in any language that could belong to any other culture, ethnic backdrop, time-space paradigms, relationships, and so on. His works, undoubtedly, have a universal appeal in their ability to transcend the confines of the written word with characters belonging to a different era and a different culture.

There have been multiple attempts, some successful and some not that successful, of re-presenting Shakespeare and the point of discussion cum debate is whether such transpositions are deemed fit to be termed an 'adaptation', a 'trans-creation', a 'translation', an 'interpretation', a 'contemporisation', or an 'appropriation'; but whatever, it is called, it has been successful in creating a '*gharana*' (tradition) that bespeaks a master's omnipresence. Shakespeare has been carried across languages and cultures in such a way that his motifs have become universal — they no longer belong to the West in the present context<sup>4</sup>.

A number of Shakespeare's plays were remoulded into Indian socio-political situations and were performed regularly for the Indian masses with great success. Some of the most popular localised versions are: *Durlabh Bandhu* (1880, The Merchant of Venice), *Bazm-e-Fani* (1890, Romeo and Juliet), *Meetha Zahar* (1895, Cymbeline), *Murad-e-shoke* (1895, The Winter's Tale), *Khoon-e-Nayak* (1898, Hamlet), *Shahid-e-Wafa* (1898, Othello), *Dil Farosh* (1900, The Merchant of Venice), *Haar Jeet* (1902, King Lear), *Bhool Bhulaiya* (1905, Twelfth Night), *Kali Nagin* (1906, Antony and Cleopatra), *Gorakh Dhandha* (1912, The Comedy of Errors), *Manmohan ka Jaal* (1915, Much Ado About Nothing), *Jungle mein Mangal* (1914, The Tempest), and *Bagula Bhagat* (1923, Measure for Measure). Dr Harivansh Rai Bachchan (1907-2003), a noted Indian poet, has adapted a few of the Shakespeare's plays in free verse. His adaptations of Macbeth (1957), Othello (1959), Hamlet (1969), and King Lear (1972) shed new lights on Shakespeare's interpretation and are considered invaluable treasures of Indian literature<sup>5</sup>.

Margaret Jane Kidnie in her seminal work, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* (2009), contends that, «Cultural, geographical or ideological differences between work and adaptation are rooted in a perceived temporal gap between work and adaptation enabled by an idea of

4 SANDERS, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006): 03-13.

5 ROUT SATYABRATA, «Indianizing Shakespeare: Adaptations and Performances», accessed June 5, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/29053101/Indianizing\\_Shakespeare\\_Adaptations\\_and\\_Performances](https://www.academia.edu/29053101/Indianizing_Shakespeare_Adaptations_and_Performances).



the work not as process, but as something readily identifiable instead as an *object*» (68-69). This makes it clear that certain differences are unavoidable and that adaptations do lead to certain problems. For example, when a text is adapted for a film, it is trimmed to counter the issue of time and space.

This shortening may lead to a quality compromise<sup>6</sup>. The author's genuine intention is overlooked in such a collaborative venture of moviemaking, and often the participation of the viewer is strictly limited, contrary to the process of reading where a reader has the liberty to participate in shaping the meaning of the text. But still, in spite of a few grey shades, Shakespeare continues to be the most followed dramatist on the Indian Stage and Screen.

In order to depict the influence of Shakespeare on the regional playwrights, it wouldn't be out of place to quote Hurro Chunder Ghose, a student at the Hoogly College and the author of *Bhanumati Chittabilas* (1853):

Under the guidance of one such great Englishman who inspired many boys to crave for knowledge, I did start to translate Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* word by word, but soon realized that many ideas propounded in the play do not suit the sensibilities of our language. Then I followed the advice of this man who asked me to translate only the basic idea expounded in the English play to suit the understandings of my language. I found this convincing and accordingly I have composed the play *Bhanumati Chittabilas* in both prose and verse. Even if this not in exactitude to the Shakespearean play, I have tried to bring the essence of what the master playwright had tried to convey<sup>7</sup>.

Let us look at another translation from the pre-Rabindranath period. Another important translator of poetry and drama in this phase was Hemchandra Bandopadhyay. In his translation of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, he mentions:

This text is just a shadow of Shakespeare's «*Romeo Juliet*», it is not a translation. The nature of differences between the English and Bengali languages are so huge that on translating an English play into a Bengali play, all the essence of the original play gets lost. Due to differences in culture, nationality and religious practices any immediate translation

6 LINDA HUTCHEON, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London: Routledge, 2006).

7 HURRO CHUNDER GHOSE, «*Bhumika*» in *Bhanumati Chittabilas*, 1853.



of their text would make it difficult for us to see and hard to understand. Certain places from the original have been omitted or altered. Conversations between the men and women have been localized. Only the main characters have been kept as exactly as possible like that of the original. I have tried to adapt Shakespeare and his main hero-heroines and suit them in a localized fervour that can become most acceptable to the local readers<sup>8</sup>.

The 'localized fervour' that the Indian playwrights added to Shakespeare oozes out from the play *Durlabh Bandhu* (1880) which is an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Bharatendu Harishchandra (1850-1885), also known as the father of the modern Hindi Literature, was quite successful in maintaining the educational and cultural dignity of the Bard while directing *Durlabh Bandhu* giving it a meaningful interpretation and political value.

He tries to bring down the play into Indian situation by changing the name of the characters, places and actions without changing the plot. Creating a parallel to the conflict between the Christian and Jews in the original play, he placed it as the conflict between the Hindu and the Jain religions. The play turns to be political and becomes a metaphor of India's independence struggle against the British rule representing Shylock as a foreigner who wants to encroach the native land and grab the money by killing the innocent people through deceitful means. The adaptation also indicates how the knowledge of colonial models used as a tool to strike back the colonizers<sup>9</sup>.

Time has changed, and the most striking aspect of Shakespeare in India today is that it seems to have at last got over its colonial hangover. There have been a number of attempts to translate, trans-create, adapt, imitate, or re-present Shakespeare as an entity of the modern times, and that too, in a localized fervour<sup>10</sup>. One finds that Shakespeare has not only influenced Indian theatre, but also the Indian Cinema to a remarkable extent. One can easily trace Shakespearean echoes even in a number of

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8 KALISADHAN MUKHOPADHYAY, *Paschatya Kabitar Anubade Rabindranath*. Tuli-Kalam, Kolkata 1987: 23-24.

9 SATYABRATA ROUT «Indianizing Shakespeare: Adaptations and Performances», accessed June 5, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/29053101/Indianizing\\_Shakespeare\\_Adaptations\\_and\\_Performances](https://www.academia.edu/29053101/Indianizing_Shakespeare_Adaptations_and_Performances).

10 KATJA KREBS (ed.), *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film* Routledge New York 2014: iii-vi.

plots that are not a direct adaptation or imitation of his plays such as *Om Shanti Om* by Farah Khan (2007, *Hamlet*), *Ishaqzaade* by Habib Faisal (2012, *Romeo and Juliet*), and *Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-leela* by Sanjay Leela Bhansali (2013, *Romeo and Juliet*); whereas, there are a number of movies which claim to be direct adaptations, complete or a part, and representations such as *Savkari Pash* by Baburao Painter (1925, *The Merchant of Venice*), *Khoon ka Khoon* by Sohrab Modi (1935, *Hamlet*), *Zalim Saudagar* by J J Madam (1941, *The Merchant of Venice*), *Hamlet* by Kishore Sahu (1954, *Hamlet*), *Do Dooni Chaar* by Debu Sen (1968, *The Comedy of Errors*), *Angoor* by Gulzar (1982, *The Comedy of Errors*), *Maqbool* by Vishal Bhardwaj (2004, *Macbeth*), *Om-kara* by Vishal Bhardwaj (2006), *10ml Love* by Sharat Katariya (2012, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), *Haider* by Vishal Bhardwaj (2014, *Hamlet*), and a few others. One cannot miss the great influence of the Bard on the regional Cinema Industry, for example: *Saptapadi* by Ajoy Kar (1961, Bengali, *Othello*), *Bhranti Bilas* by Manu Sen (1963, Bengali, *The Comedy of Errors*), *Hrid Majharey* by Ranjan Ghosh (2014, Bengali, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*), *Arshinagar* by Aparna Sen (2015, Bengali, *Romeo and Juliet*), etc.

It is quite evident that Shakespeare's plays have been adapted for the screen since the early days of cinema and continue their vital presence in today's growing global cinematic market. One finds the Bard's strong presence in a number of films, despite their deviation from the text or radical transformation of character as well as situation. Some of the noted directors who trans-create Shakespeare's plays into cinematic spectacle significantly reshape the audience's understanding of characters or themes<sup>11</sup>.

Such representations demonstrate the changes in dominant attitude towards gender, race, class, and national identity over the past decades. Another noteworthy feature here is that the directors are well aware that to survive in the film industry, they have to profit, and therefore, they blend popular culture with Shakespearean ethos in their films. An important factor behind the popularity of such movies is the conjoining of two opposite poles together: on the one hand, the wish to return to the known pattern, while on the other to escape it by a new deviation. Thus,

11 SATYABRATA ROUT, «Indianizing Shakespeare: Adaptations and Performances», accessed June 5, 2019, [https://www.academia.edu/29053101/Indianizing\\_Shakespeare\\_Adaptations\\_and\\_Performances](https://www.academia.edu/29053101/Indianizing_Shakespeare_Adaptations_and_Performances).

one finds Shakespeare permeated in Indian society in two hierarchical strata - Shakespeare in the English language for the educated elite from the early nineteenth century because of obvious colonial reasons, and Shakespeare in popular culture that has been adapted and indigenised for mass culture. The second stratum exists in the form of translation or adaptations. Though often resisted and criticised it eventually encompasses a much wider circle<sup>12</sup>.

There has been adaptation, appropriation, representations, translations, and trans-creations – a variety of different experiments have occurred with almost all Shakespeare's plays; but, undoubtedly, *Othello* and *The Merchant of Venice*, are ranked high in the list. Although, Jayaraaj's *Kaliyattam* (1998), an appropriation of *Othello* in rural Kerala setting, could not make much impact; Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006) was successful in exploring universal human emotions. It narrates the tale of Om Kara or Omi Shukla (Ajay Devgan). Omi (the Othello figure) is a gifted chieftain who heads a gang of outlaws which includes the crafty Langda Tyagi (Saif Ali Khan/Iago figure) and the dynamic Kesu (Vivek Oberoi/Cassio) among his lieutenants. Billo (Bipasha Basu) a singer/dancer is Kesu's love interest and performs the rocking song and dance number.

The story takes interesting twists when Omi appoints Kesu not Tyagi as his chief lieutenant. Tyagi's pride is humiliated and engulfed in envy as he conspires a plot to falsely implicate Omi's beautiful, fair lover Dolly (Kareena Kapoor/Desdemona) in a love affair with Kesu. With the unwitting aid of Indu (Konkona Sen Sharma), Tyagi's wife, accompanied by the willing submission of Raju, a fellow grouch who is head-over-heels in love with Dolly, Tyagi's vicious plan materialises. Gradually the plot gives rise to a bloody tale of deceit, betrayal and murder. *Omkara* attempts to interpret Othello in its own cinematic language by using the potentials of the film / visual medium to its complete advantage. It is one of the most self-allusive films wherein Shakespeare's language is self-consciously recontextualised for present purposes. The film is designed to appeal to a variety of audiences, to a people for whom 'art' is boring, who are less 'academic' or 'educated,' i.e., a common audience.

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12 LIVIA SEGURADO NUNES, « Back to the roots: Shakespeare and Popular Culture in the 20th and 21st centuries». *Societe Francaise Shakespeare*, accessed June 6, 2019, <https://journals.openedition.org/shakespeare/1949>.



It would be very appropriate to mention here the Indian film *The Last Lear* (2007), which is surprisingly not an adaptation of any of the Bard's plays. It is a film by Rituparna Ghosh and depicts the influence of the Master Dramatist on Indian minds. It features a retired Shakespearean theatre actor Harish Mishra (Amitabh Bachchan) who is immensely passionate about Shakespeare. The film is a complex negotiation of the artifices of theatre and cinema.

Shakespeare has been performed and accepted extensively in multiple ways representing the multiple cultures of India. Starting from folkloric presentations to contemporary theatre and cinema, the Bard's plays have been adapted, transformed, altered, restructured, and successfully presented across India.

Postmodern cinematic appropriations of Shakespeare stand out as attempts to convey Shakespeare plays through the cultural space and social dynamic of contemporary times<sup>13</sup>. In the process, the socio-cultural setting is reconstructed and is so designed that some films neatly get blended to the popular cultural texture and turn out to be grippingly entertaining. The Shakespeare film canon has emerged as a progressive cultural force. Though adapted in several genres, it refuses to fall into any predictable generic pattern.

Thus, one notices Shakespeare to be as equally 'Indian' as any other Indian playwright, and his characters resemble the common people of India more than anyone else's depiction. The fact cannot be denied that plays written by Shakespeare are universal in appeal, and therefore, they easily cross borders and get dissolved into the cultures and literature of other nations.

His characters are the citizens of the universe, and they cannot be identified or limited to any particular place or location. One finds a Hamlet, a Macbeth, a Desdemona, an Othello, an Iago, a Shylock, a Rosalind, an Orlando, etc., everywhere. The Indian playwrights and cinema directors have explored this aspect of the Bard's genius to the best of their potentials in offer to the world some amazing and thrilling performances.

The translations, adaptations, trans-creations, and appropriations keep adding to the unfathomable reputation of the Bard. The long list of

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13 JYOTSNA SINGH, *Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial / Postcolonial India. Modern Indian Theatre*, Nandi Bhatia (ed.) Oxford University Press, New Delhi 2009, 77-96.

admirers of Shakespeare create a group of their own which may be adequately labelled the *gharana* of Shakespeare. It wouldn't be out of the place to mention here that cinema has made Shakespeare more popular than he ever was before. It is with the help of cinema that Shakespeare has the potential to reach each and every person, literate or illiterate, rich or poor, employed or unemployed, a school-goer or a professional across the globe. These adaptations and re-performances of the Bard add local colour to his personality, and make him a celebrated Indian Shakespeare.

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## Ամփոփում

ՇԷՅՔՍՓԻՐԱԿԱՆ  
ՇԷՅՔՍՓԻՐԵԱՆ ԿԱՐԱՆԱՆ (ԱՒԱՆԴՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ)

ԹԱՏԵՐԱԳԻՐԻ ԱԶԴԵՑՈՒԹԻՒՆԸ ՀՆԴԿԱՍՏԱՆԻ  
ԲԵՄԱԴՐՈՒԹԵԱՆ ՄԷՋ, ՄԱՍՆԱԽՈՐ ԱՆԴՐԱԴԱՐՁՈՎ  
ՎԵՆԵՏԻԿԻ ՎԱՃԱՌԱԿԱՆԸ ԵՒ ՕԹԵԼԼՈՅ  
ԹԱՏԵՐԱԽԱՂԵՐՈՒՆ

## ՄՐԱԲԱՆԻ ԲԱՍՈՒ

Շէյքսպիրի գրած է թագաւորներու, թագուհիներու եւ ազնուական-  
ներու մասին, բայց ծագումով համեստ ընտանիքէ էր:

Իբրեւ ռամիկ, ծանօթ էր պարզ մարդու երջանկութեան ու ցա-  
ւին, բայց իր վարպետութիւնը կը կայանար ազնուական տիպարներուն  
մշակման եւ այս վսեմ անհատները բնորոշող՝ բազմերանգ զգացումները  
դրսեւորելուն մէջ: Թագաւորական սովորութիւններուն իր ծանօթու-  
թիւնը օգնեց, որ կամուրջ մը ստեղծէր ընկերութեան վերին, նրբաճա-  
շակ խաւերուն եւ գիւղերու ու քաղաքներու աղքատ բնակիչներուն մի-  
ջեւ:

Այսպէս, Շէյքսպիրի շնորհիւ, ընթերցողները կրնան հասկնալ տար-  
բեր դասակարգի անհատներ, որոնց հետ անմիջական չիլում չեն ունե-  
ցած:

Հանճարեղ բեմադրիչը ներշնչման աղբիւր եղած է հնդկի թատե-  
րագիրներու, բեմադրիչներու, դերասաններու, բանաստեղծներու եւ ռե-  
ժիսորներու բազմաթիւ սերունդներու համար: Շատ փորձեր եղած են,  
մերթ յաջող, մերթ ոչ այնքան յաջող, Շէյքսպիրի գործերը ներկայաց-  
նելու տարբեր հարթակներու վրայ, ինչ որ ծագում տուաւ «կարանայի»  
մը (հնդկերէն՝ Հնդկաստանի արուեստագիտական ակադեմիան մէկ տե-  
սակը), որ վարպետ թատերագիրին ամէնուրեքութեան արտացոլումն է: