

## **Cinematizing Shakespeare: A Study of Shakespearean Presence in**

### **Indian Cinema**

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#### **Abstract**

The 'Glocal' cinematizing of the plays of William Shakespeare in India has been an outstanding and ground-breaking venture. The literary corpus of Shakespeare is galvanic, and an inexhaustible source of inspiration for countless people across the globe. When Shakespeare's writing is adapted on celluloid, it sets it ablaze, and transfers the audience to a cinematic utopia. Indian adaptation of both Shakespearean tragedy and comedy can be comprehended as an amalgamation of 'videsi' and 'desi', a synthesis of East and West, and an Oriental and Occidental cultural exchange. Shakespeare's 'androgynous' mind, the complexity of his narrative, music, story-telling, and aesthetic sensibility categorizes him as an ace literary craftsman.

Cinema in India is as important as a religious cult for the people. This research paper aims to explore the Indian theatrical phenomenon, laying emphasis on the Indian adaptation of Shakespeare's plays. The Glocal aspect that revolutionized Indian cinema, and indigenized the

plays of Shakespeare need to be studied optimistically. The evolution of modern Indian cinema is thus a non-corroding endeavor to translate the intellectual potential of Shakespearean drama for Indian audience, and to replenish the art of cinematography in India.

**Keywords: Glocalization (Glocal), Globalization, Adaptation, Appropriation, Palimpsest.**

### **Cinematizing Shakespeare: A Study of Shakespearean Presence in Indian Cinema**

The 'Glocal' cinematizing of the plays of William Shakespeare in India has been an outstanding and ground-breaking venture. The literary corpus of Shakespeare is galvanic, and an inexhaustible source of inspiration for countless people across the globe. When Shakespeare's writing is adapted on celluloid, it sets it ablaze, and transfers the audience to a cinematic utopia. Indian adaptation of both Shakespearean tragedy and comedy can be comprehended as an amalgamation of 'videsi' and 'desi', a synthesis of East and West, and an Oriental and Occidental cultural exchange. Shakespeare's 'androgynous' mind, the complexity of his narrative, music, story-telling, and aesthetic sensibility categorizes him as an ace literary craftsman.

The nexus between Indian cinema and European drama can be grasped by delving into the past of celluloid inauguration in India. The father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke, produced the first full-length motion picture titled, *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. This was a silent film in Marathi. However, the first Indian talking film was *Alam Ara* (1931) made by Ardeshir Irani. History of Indian cinema reveals that Parsi theatre was the locus of immense theatrical activity. Western stories were introduced in performance art for the purpose of fostering cultural harmony. Intellectual exchange of this sort made its way into the Indian ethos, and attracted a majority of Indian population. Talking specifically of Shakespeare's drama, it can be observed that his plays were introduced in India for the purpose of promoting English language in India. Thus, English evolved in India as a second language, a language that prospered in its Indianized version, and linked India to other countries of the world. At this point

I am reminded of Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture (1993) in which she said that, "We die. That may be the meaning of life. But we do language. That may be the measure of our lives" (n.pag.). Language plays an important role in cultivating our intellectual faculties, and in shaping our society. English language in India is an ever-rejuvenating phenomenon.

Shakespeare's oeuvre is now part of world literature because national literatures are now being rapidly replaced by World literature. In the contemporary scenario transmission of literature is a perpetual phenomenon. It is because of widespread globalization that literary production moves from local → regional → global = GLOCAL. The word 'Glocal' is derived from the portmanteau word 'glocalization'. This word is made up of two words, globalization and localization. The dictionary meaning of 'Glocal' is to, "think global, act local". This trend of 'Glocalization' focuses on the international standards on one hand, and the local requirements on the other. However, when we discuss globalization in the literary arena, we talk of Goethe who coined the term 'Weltliteratur'. His futuristic vision created the corpus of world literature to blur the geographical barriers between nations. David Damrosch asserts, regarding the impact of globalization on literature:

The ongoing acceleration of economic and cultural globalization has brought the scope of world literature to a new level today. In the older imperial networks, literature usually flowed outward from the metropolitan center to the colonial periphery ...but literature now circulates in multiple directions, and writers even in very small countries can aspire to reach a global readership. (106)

This makes it clear that global readership has enhanced the scope of reading and writing on a massive scale. The canon of world literature has opened new avenues for translation and cross-cultural studies.

Innumerable cinematic efforts are being made globally to cherish Shakespeare's writing. Captivating adaptations of literary classics and revolutionary celluloid advancements have altered the experience of watching movies. The visual senses are rapidly stimulated by perception of images on screen rather than through the conventional reading process. Thus, the scope of cinema, irrespective of geographical or cultural diversity has earned massive popularity,

and has also amalgamated with the social fabric. E. Ann Kaplan in her essay, “Fanon, trauma and cinema” affirms that:

...cinema functions like night dreams and daytime fantasies to permit regression to infantile stages inadequately worked through. It functioned as temporary wish-fulfillment the better to enable people to carry on their physically burdened lives .... Cinema could function like Freud’s mourning process— to accommodate people to loss of the object. (150)

Watching the plays of Shakespeare as movie adaptations is a visual treat that transports the audience to a cinematic utopia for a couple of hours.

In India, cinema is as important as a religious cult for the people. William Shakespeare’s plays have been adapted by Indian moviemakers on a grand scale. Namrata Joshi, a film critic, noted regarding Shakespeare that, “Shakespeare’s plays with their dramatic strength and superb portrayal of the universal truths of human nature, have always lent themselves well to adaptation to different times and places” (n.pag.). The indigenized version of Shakespeare’s drama in form of movie adaptations require thoughtful visualizations, and aesthetic sensibility because a slight deviation can lead to a giant theatrical blunder. However, Indian filmmakers garnish European drama with Indian aesthetic nuances so as to make it palatable for the Indian audience.

At this juncture the Indian adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays need to be discussed at length. In the early twentieth century Sohrab Modi enacted the role of *Hamlet* in his movie called, *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935). Naseem Bano played Ophelia, and Shamshad Bai played the role of Gertrude. The Indian adaptation was written by Mehdi Ahsan. In 1941, J. J. Madan followed Sohrab Modi and adapted *The Merchant of Venice* for his Hindi film titled, *Zalim Saudagar*. The Indian adaptation was written by Pandit Bhushan. Similarly in the latter half of the twentieth century the trend of adaptation flourished with the release of the film *Angoor* (1982), which was directed by Sampooran Singh Kalra (Gulzar). *Angoor* was a remake of *Bhrantibilas* (1963), a Bengali comedy film that was based on a Bengali play of the same name written by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar’s play was an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, *The Comedy of Errors*. A recent remake of *Angoor* directed by Sajid Khan is titled, *Hamshakals*. *Romeo and Juliet* was adapted of late by Sanjay Leela Bhansali as *Goliyon Ki*

*Rasleela Ramleela* (2013) in a Gujarati milieu. The Montague-Capulet family rivalry was reflected in the Rajadi-Sanera family conflict. Death of Ram (Romeo) and his beloved Leela (Juliet) finally ended the bloodshed between their families.

The art of cinematic adaptation in Indian cinema has been redefined by the Shakespearean trilogy of Vishal Bhardwaj. He won big accolades in filmmaking specifically for his Shakespearean trilogy that consisted of three movies, *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014). Bhardwaj does not indulge in rampant plagiarism, but on the contrary in many of his interviews he acknowledged his admiration of Shakespearean drama. The first movie of his trilogy called *Maqbool* was a genuine adaptation of *Macbeth*, and it is in this regard that film critic, Madhu Jain, observes that, “Shakespeare hasn’t got lost in translation here. *Macbeth*, a study in ambition and guilt, is perhaps one of the more accessible of the bards plays” (n.pag.).

In an interview with Roshmila Bhattacharya, Bhardwaj admitted that he adapted *Othello* for the second movie of his trilogy, *Omkara*, because of the ‘sexual conflict’ in the play. In a later interview Bhardwaj remarked that he adapted *Hamlet* as *Haider* to round off his trilogy because this play too had the element of ‘sexual conflict’ like the two earlier plays in his trio. *Haider* (2014) was written in collaboration with author, Basharat Peer. In a conversation with Deepanjana Pal, Basharat Peer discussed how the soliloquies of the play *Hamlet* were translated to Hindi, and how some celebrated lines had to be omitted because of the paucity of time. Regarding cinema Peer asserted that, “...what helps in cinema is that music and visuals do replace a lot of words” (n.pag.).

‘Adaptation’ and ‘Appropriation’ are two fundamental aspects of adapting texts for filmmaking. The Latin root of the word ‘adapt’ is ‘*adaptare*’ which means ‘to make fit’. Thus, the adaptation of Shakespeare’s plays makes his writing fit for contemporary cultural and political situation. These adaptations do not tamper with the original text, and try to maintain the essential mood of the written text. However, some changes are mandatory such as those of language translation, local setting, and certain other cinematic essentials. 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 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. 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. The author’s genuine intention is overlooked in such 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. ‘Generic hybridity’ or the ‘instability of genres’, is also an important aspect of adaptation process because the medium of communication is changed, and there is an interplay between the genres to enhance the cinematic charm. As defined by Julie Sanders, adaptation is a, “...transpositional practice, casting a specific genre into another generic mood, an act of re-vision in itself” (18).

Linda Hutcheon studies the process of adaptation in her book, *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). She suggests that adaptation can be studied from “three distinct but interrelated perspectives” (7). She remarks that adaptation can at first be studied as a, “formal entity or product”, secondly as a “process of creation”, and thirdly it can be studied as a “process of reception” (7-8). Hutcheon further observes that adaptation is “a form of intertextuality” (8). Gerard Genette in his celebrated work, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree* (1982), made a detailed study of the palimpsestuous nature of the text, which focused on the interaction between the texts. He appreciated this interaction, and encouraged intertextuality for promoting artistic expression. Thus, it may be concluded that an adaptation is, “a derivation that is not derivative— a work that is second without being secondary. It is its own palimpsestic thing” (Hutcheon 9).

Another very useful process in filmmaking is that of ‘Appropriation’. Julie Sanders, while delineating with the aspect of ‘appropriation’ suggests that, this process deals with the source-text by appropriating it into a different blend of cultures. She says that this transformation might involve generic instability and that, “the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signalled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. They may occur in a far less straightforward context than is evident in making a film version of a canonical play” (Sanders 26). Shakespeare believed in appropriation himself because he appropriated many folktales,

legends and myths in his plays. He was greatly inspired by writers like Ovid and Plutarch. It is because of appropriation that deliberate plagiarism in filmmaking can be curbed, and the authenticity of the adapted text can be retained.

In the words of T. S. Eliot, an illustrious literary figure of the 20th century, “No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists” (15). These lines echo the glocal significance of great minds of the past that have a non-diminishing identity. Their colossal contribution shaped the body of English language so as to create global readership, and encourage literary enthusiasm. The Glocal aspect that revolutionized Indian cinema, and indigenized the plays of Shakespeare need to be studied optimistically. The evolution of modern Indian cinema is thus a non-corroding endeavor to translate the intellectual potential of Shakespearean drama for Indian audience, and to study Shakespearean drama historiographically, which means navigating Shakespeare’s literary corpus both historically and graphically.



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