

**MAPPING THE HISTORY OF THE INDIAN RESPONSE TO
SHAKESPEARE: CHANGING PERSPECTIVES****PRASUN BANERJEE**

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare and his plays have always found a tremendous response in India since the time the Bard was first introduced in India way back in the 18th century. But the nature of this response has never been a monolithic one having witnessed paradigmatic shifts of perspectives, hiding under it the complex transformation and evolution of Indian values. This paper seeks to map these changing perspectives of the Indian response to Shakespeare starting from the 18th century to the present with the prism of the colonial/postcolonial discourse to trace the transformation of Shakespeare from being the most prominent and potent cultural icon of the West towards being a subject of popular culture in the Indian context.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Indian Response, Colonial, Postcolonial, Cultural Icon, Popular Culture

Standing at a time which is exactly four century ahead since the Bard had last breathed in this mortal world, it feels almost wondrous to know how prophetic and authentic Ben Jonson has been in his observations on the genius of his rival-cum-friend, Shakespeare, that ‘he was not of an age, but for all time’. Jonson, who was otherwise very critical of Shakespeare for his ‘small Latine, and lesse Greeke’, made this observation rather casually (as per William Drummond’s records) upon the death of Shakespeare. But this has been rather spot on as Shakespeare has not only proved to be the most discussed writer in the world, but his dramas have moved beyond times and cultures, having found admirers in all ages and expression across all cultures through translations, adaptations, appropriations and largely by inspiring innumerable texts of all kinds. Modern theorists and commentators attribute this less to the universal and timeless appeal of the Bard as the notions of timelessness and universality of a literary text in terms of its quality has rather been redundant at present, and more to fact that Shakespeare’s plays have touched upon such issues and aspects of a human lives and emotions that have a sort of archetypal significance that can be given vent to in any language and in any culture with just ‘a local habitation and a name’. And that is perhaps why Shakespeare has been so well accepted and absorbed across all time zones and cultures with each having their own perspectives to go with their adaptations and appropriations of the Plays, which have sometimes gone beyond the source texts themselves to generate new indigenous texts. In this paper, I would like to trace the history of one of such interactions:

the acceptance and absorption of Shakespeare and his plays in the Indian context, with a view to mapping the changing perspectives of the Indian response to Shakespeare starting from the 18th century to the present.

The presence of Shakespeare in India is probably older and more intense and complex than in any other country outside the West. This is chiefly because of, as Professor Sukanta Chaudhuri observes in his seminal essay, *Shakespeare in India* (2006), ‘India’s long colonial history and the presence of largely receptive elements in the mother culture.’ In fact the inclusiveness and flexibility of our culture is such that Shakespeare can be adapted and appropriated into the local cultures of almost every state and community, which in turn can be ‘reshaped and inseminated by Shakespearean influence’ (Chaudhuri, 2006). And till the 21st century, Shakespeare has been adapted, assimilated, absorbed and appropriated in almost every Indian languages and culture, but the process has far from being a monolithic or unidirectional one hiding under it the complex transformation and evolution of Indian values. In the same essay quoted above, Professor Chaudhuri identifies two chief ways that the Indian response to Shakespeare have found expression: through translations, following ‘literary, largely Sanskritic norms of form and diction’ and through ‘a racy stage version with sensational touches, colloquialisms and popular songs.’ (Chaudhuri, 2006) But the writer of this essay wants to add one more variant to it: the cinematic form which has become at recent times probably the most prominent medium of the very powerful Indian popular culture industry, unlike the theatrical form which has been reduced to a chiefly urban, if not an elitist audience. And, this shift of Shakespeare in the Indian cultural context from being the most prominent and potent cultural icon of the West to being a subject of popular culture has been paradigmatic, and can be traced with the prism of the colonial/postcolonial discourse.

The earliest of Shakespeare performances in India by English troupes dates back to 1770 in Mumbai (the then Bombay). The earliest recorded performance to have happened in Kolkata (Calcutta), the then Capital and cultural hub of India is that of *Othello* at the Calcutta Theatre during the Christmas season of 1780. Over the next eight years, the same venue saw *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III* and *Henry IV*. Performances continued till the mid-19th century, chiefly at the Chowringhee and Sans Souci Theatres. The English troupes which later were replaced by the touring companies (such as the Lewis Theatre Company in the 1870s and Maurice E. Bandmann's Company in the 1880s) in the heydays of the British raj, started making regular theatrical performances before select Indian audiences, chiefly comprising the elite educated urban section of the society. The enactments of the scenes and the performances of the actors under these productions, as it can be deciphered from some the rare stills and descriptions found of those performances, were more in line with the Western theatre craft and traditions. These performances were not really meant to introduce Shakespeare as a literary genius who could be appreciated chiefly from the aesthetic point of view by a community which has a great literary and cultural heritage of their own. Shakespeare was rather packaged and presented as a Western cultural icon whose works demonstrated the core values of Western tradition to do away with the cultural rustiness of the rather flashy Indians whose literature, as Macaulay has so summarily concluded in his *Minute* (1835), has never gone beyond erotica and exotica. Shakespeare, thus, became one of the glossiest superior Western products to be sold to the Indians by the



British traders with nefarious imperialistic designs, as if, being weighed down under their ‘white men’s burden’ to ‘wean’ the ‘ignorant’ Indians of their ‘horrid ways’ (Conrad, 2002). And these performances came to be a part of their ‘civilizing mission’ which became the euphemism for the colonial project of imperialism and domination (Singh, 1996).

From the early and mid 19th century onwards, Shakespeare with his dramatic *oeuvre* entered into the academic domain in India with the newly established Hindu College in Bengal (established 20th January, 1817) first introducing Shakespeare as a part of a regular curriculum of study in the 1820s. This time witnessed the arrival of so called Indian or Bengal Renaissance which is often touted by the colonialist historiographer and social commentators to be a West-inspired socio-cultural phenomenon having almost the magnitude of a tsunami which has sort of washed away the cultural backwardness of the ‘inferior’ Indian and ushered in the era of modernity. Now the Indians, as if, can stand vis-à-vis with the world stage by dint of the new-found light and reconstruct their cultures and ways of the world. With the cultural superiority and domination of the West had been established among at least a sizeable section of the intelligentsia (like the young Bengals), Shakespeare became a subject of more rigorous academic and pedagogical discussion in the premises of the Hindu College, and later in the Presidency College which got separated from the Hindu College in 1855. Though some excellent, truly-enlightened Indian and European teachers like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, David Lester Richardson took to Shakespeare teaching and inspired occasional short performances of the Bards’ plays by their pupils, their teaching was more in synchronization with the Western aesthetics and European methods as the curriculum was indoctrinated and designed as per Macaulayesque visions imprinted in the Minute (1835). In this context, one can quote Lord Macaulay’s letter to David Richardson to find how he approved their method of teaching Shakespeare:

‘I may forget everything about India, but your reading of Shakespeare, never (Sen, 1966)’.

Under their teaching, Shakespeare was still seen as awe-inspiring Western icon, which could be held in reverence, but could not yet be challenged, improved upon or appropriated into the native culture.

But the individual genius and great tradition of inspired Shakespeare teaching set up by teachers like Derozio, Richardson, C.H.Tawney, which was later augmented and sustained with genius teachers like H.M.Percival, Manmohan Ghosh and Prafullachandra Ghosh at Presidency College in particular and Calcutta (now Kolkata) in general, created a generation of confident Shakespeare-educated pupils who could not only discuss the Bard in academic circle, but had had the confidence to adapt the Bard’s works for the popular Indian stage which was ever growing at that time as a medium under the patronage of some 19th century Indian elites like Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. One of earlier instances of such Indian appropriation was, as cited by Professor Chaudhuri, Baishnab Charan Addy’s enactment of the character of Othello at the Sans Souci Theatre, Kolkata in 1848. The performance of this Indian actor received both appreciative and hostile treatments from the English press, and is viewed in the then Bengal as a cultural triumph of the colonized Bengalis (Chaudhuri, 2006). Similar performances include that of Derozio and his pupils, famous as the ‘young Bengal’, at Dhurumtollah Academy, St Xavier’s College, Kolkata. Most of these performances by the



Indian students were short excerpts only; but entire plays were gradually taken up. Besides Bengal, traditions of Shakespeare performances were set up in other states as well, such as St. Stephen College, Delhi where the Shakespeare society was established in 1924 and in M.S. University, Vadodara (Baroda). The popular renderings of the Shakespearean plays by the Parsi theatre companies were also popular. It was here at this juncture perhaps the Indian perspective for Shakespeare took a deviation as the growing sense of patriotism and increased awareness of the ‘Indianness’ make the Indian makers challenge the Western codes for Shakespeare appreciation, and develop their own vernacular model of reproducing Shakespeare for the Indian audience. It will not be irrelevant to note here that chiefly for this reason Girish Chandra Ghosh’s beautiful poetical rendering of *Macbeth* was rejected by the contemporary audience in 1893, whereas Nagendra Nath Chaudhuri’s adaptation of *Hamlet* in *Hariraj*, though much inferior, was well received in 1997. The latter catered more to the popular demands of the Indian stage, whereas Ghosh’s version remained closer to the source text.

Thus, the propensity of seeing Shakespeare out of the colonial context, and being appropriated into the Indian context, grew gradually with the colonial domination of British imperialistic regime on the wane. What followed are innumerable free Indian adaptations and translations of Shakespeare’s plays. The Indian National Library in Kolkata counted that till 1964 the total number of Indian adaptations and translations of Shakespeare is 670, among which 128 is in Bengali, 97 in Marathi followed by 83 in Tamil, 70 in Hindi, 66 in Kannada and 62 in Telegu (Chaudhuri, 2006). These transpositions which contain both creative and critical Indian assessment of Shakespeare, ranging from Nagendra Nath Chaudhuri’s *Hariraj* (1897) to greatly popular Bollywood rom-coms like Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014), use the tools of adaptation and appropriation to counter the colonial construction of Shakespeare and to cater to the demands of the popular culture industry. And to do that they often, rather deliberately, become free Indianized adaptations, often transforming the plot and adding new wealth of rhetoric, song and melodrama. The public would have seen such plays as outcrops of the general run of poetic melodrama and tragic-heroic numbers. The Shakespearean roots of the formula itself might have been appreciated only by a few.

The Indian response to Shakespeare, again, receives a paradigm shift during and just after the Indian Independence in 1947. When the ever growing consciousness of the notions of nationhood and patriotic sentiments got tempered down after the independence of India, a sudden decline can be noticed in the urge to reproduce the Shakespearean texts either on the stage or in print. It was not certainly because of a sense of anti-colonial hostility that could be directed at the iconic English dramatist as Shakespeare was still discussed in chosen academic and theatre circles. It was probably because newer models in terms of new dramatists like Ibsen, Strindberg, Shaw, Brecht, were available to the Indian makers, and they also may have felt exhausted with stereotypical Romantic renderings of the Bard. This sentiment can be traced in B.V. Warekar, the Marathi dramatist’s reaction to Shakespeare: ‘He is not good for our modern Marathi theatre. Our modern age demands realism and Shakespeare cannot give us a realistic theatre. He retards it (Chaudhuri, 2006)’.



In spite of Warekar's straight rejection of the relevance of Shakespeare in post-Independent Marathi theatre, it is Maharashtra that produced the greater number of Shakespearean adaptations in comparison to other states, especially Bengal where Shakespeare adaptations underwent a draught phase until the emergence of the Marxist dramatist-cum-actor Utpal Dutt. Notable Marathi adaptations of these period are V.V. Shirwadkar's adaptations of *Macbeth* (as *Rajmukut*, 'The Royal Crown', 1954, featuring the celebrated Nanasaheb Phatak and Durga Khote) and *Othello* (1960), Nana Joag's 3-act *Hamlet* (1957), Vinda Karandikar's *King Lear* (1974), Vijay Kenkre's *Dream* (1991, controversially incorporating 14 Marathi poems). In Bengal, Shakespeare performances were restricted to schools and Colleges, and to the performances by amateur groups and touring companies. This sudden decline is due to the inability to find appropriate contexts into which Shakespearean dramas could be placed, and also because of the emergence of other popular entertainment medium like the Cinema. Shakespeare productions in Bengal received a new lease of life in the hands of Utpal Dutt who first took Shakespeare out of the elite Kolkata circles into the countryside and the performances popular by bringing in entertainment quotients from *Jatra*, the very popular form of Bengali folk-theatre, such as dramatic and bold rendition of the dialogues, energetic movements of the limbs and the high dramatic energy. Dutt rightly understood the futility of performing only before an elitist audience and also got fed up by the political turbulence at the then Calcutta, formed the Little Theatre Group which started performing first at the outskirts of Kolkata and then at remote countryside. He used the emotional turmoil, the dramatic tension inherent in the Shakespearean dramas to attract the village audience, however, never allowing the dramas to lose the connection with the context. Some of his stellar works are *Macbeth* (1954, performed at least 100 times in Bengal villages as well as Kolkata), *The Merchant of Venice* (1955), *Julius Caesar* (1957), *Othello* (1958), *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* (both 1964). Yet the play Dutt declared himself to prefer above all, was *Timon*, of which, in despite of his own views, he offered a surprising Christian interpretation in his book on Shakespeare. Shashi Kapoor did the same in Maharashtra but in much smaller scale. However, the most notable contribution in Shakespeare production post-Independence, has been single adventures, indicating gradual lack of interest among groups and audience to reproduce Shakespeare. One can note in this context Ebrahim Alkazi's Hindi *King Lear* (1964) and an Urdu *Othello* (1969) which he produced for Delhi's National School of Drama, or Arjun Rana's attempt of reproducing Shakespeare through 'kathakali', a popular dance form of South India in 2001. Thus, attempts of redefining and renegotiating Shakespearean themes and performances as per the Indian context and assimilating him in the Indian culture have been going on to absorb the Bard into the mainstream of the Indian life, and the tag of 'Englishness' has long been removed from the Shakespearean texts which has found a permanent place in our habits and colloquialism.

However, despite the fact that Shakespeare has now a local habitation and a name, his appeal was chiefly cerebral, and therefore restricted to only a select audience even in India until Shakespeare found an entry into the Indian film industry through adaptation of his tales for a commercial movie. The Indian film industry popularly called the Bollywood in the Indian media and abroad, has become synonymous with Indian popular culture. Over the years, it has come to shape the mass consciousness of the country, and tends to follow the tenets and



prerequisites of the ‘culture industry.’ Bollywood has found in the Shakespearean tales of envy and murder, violence and drama, mistaken identities, warring relatives, song and dance an echo of its own image, and, therefore, ideal of adaptation. Earlier film productions also drew materials from Shakespeare but either in small scales in the form of inspirations or without acknowledging the contribution of the Bard. But some recent Bollywood adaptations of Shakespeare, such as Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool*(2001), *Omkaara*(2014) and *Haider*(2014), or Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s *Ramleela*, not only draw heavily from the texts but mentions the Bard on the credit roll making him their unique selling point. These films use the Shakespearean themes by appropriating them in Indian context without sacrificing the basic contours of typical Bollywood romcom, thus doing what Utpal Dutt did to the drama form. Bhardwaj’s *Maqbool* places the archetypal tale of ambition and betrayal of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in the context of Mumbai underworld creating similar sinister atmospheric and emotional effects like the plays. With the help of a tale that has purely Western contours attached to it, Bhardwaj brilliantly presents a very wholesome glimpse of the Muslim India, with its specific rituals and culture. The witches of *Macbeth* took the shape of two corrupt police officers, Pandit and Purohit, who goes on doing the same with *Maqbool*’s life what the witches do with *Macbeth*. Lady *Macbeth* is Nimmi here. She is not the wife of *Macbeth* but the young mistress of Abbaji, the Duncan of the film and the love interest of *Maqbool* giving him another strong motif to kill Abbaji to win her love. Thus, with new motives being brought in and subtle nuances added, the tale of *Macbeth* gets comfortably fit into its Indian robe, creating a master narrative with intertextual echoes. Never in the film-making process, Bhardwaj seems bent under the weight of Shakespeare; rather makes the Bard look Indian and contemporary. In his other films *Omkaara*(2004) and *Haider*(2014), too, Bhardwaj beautifully absorbs Shakespeare in the Indian context, but the results are not as masterful as that of the first.

What these film adaptations have finally vindicated the point that the Shakespeare can be disassociated from the highly prejudicial colonial design and from the identity of an iconic figure of the colonial England, and still be made relevant in any cultural context. His plays have a life beyond the Western cultural discourse and can survive ages, and have a mythos or essence that form the basis of every reconstruction of them. People may reject the ‘high culture’ discourse that has attached to it or the essentialist English spirit that may have governed and propelled the plays, but the Bard can be made relevant and decipherable to any section of the society if the maker has the requisite skills and sincerity. The Indians may have rejected and outgrown the British regime but they have made Shakespeare their own, much in the line of the German’s *unser Shakespeare*: ‘our Shakespeare.’

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