The Life and Afterlife: Adaptation of Shakespeare in Bollywood Films

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Abstract
The present article will analyse the Bollywood adaptation of some Shakespeare plays, showing how Shakespeare has been ‘glocalized’ to suit the contemporary audience. This will help to situate the Bard in a dialogic relationship within the Indian context where he was once used as the torch-bearer to spread ‘Englishness’. The article will begin by exploring issues like Shakespeare’s afterlife, colonization, and reverse-colonization which must be kept in mind when studying Shakespeare from a Postcolonial perspective. Finally, it will show how this text-context mediation has engendered so many different Shakespeares, hindering any attempt to contain him.

The fourth Death Centenary Celebrations of William Shakespeare across the globe invariably pointed to the sway he has on the public imagination, especially in the academics and cultural arena. There will be a plethora of answers if anyone poses the question “Why study Shakespeare?” with twin emphasis on why study Shakespeare? (that is, Shakespeare rather than any other topic) or why study Shakespeare, (the necessity to study a writer who wrote to give pleasure, any more than we must ‘study’ current films or music in order to enjoy them), as Stanley Wells has deliberated in his essay bearing the same name. The most common answer to the question is Shakespeare’s treatment of essential truths about the meaning and significance of life and his universal nature which transcends time and place. The fallacy of this view has been cogently forwarded by philosophers, historians, anthropologists, and others from the middle of the nineteenth century. Works of Freud, Lacan, Foucault, Heidegger, Derrida etc. have raised serious questions about the existence of a ‘given’, innate and unchanging ‘human nature’ and have argued that human behavior is subjected to several factors like local pressures, involving economics, climate, historical inheritance, the complex accumulation of beliefs, habits, mode of perception etc. Seen against this backdrop, Shakespeare’s ‘universal’ qualities appear highly untenable. In addition to this, we cannot be oblivious of the colonial era, where English culture had a formidable dominance over most parts of the world to project and propagate ‘universal Shakespeare’ through different subterfuges.

Keeping this brief introduction as the point of initiation, the present article will analyse the Bollywood adaptations of some of Shakespeare’s plays, showing how Shakespeare has been ‘glocalized’ to suit the contemporary audience. This will help to

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situate the Bard in a dialogic relationship within the Indian context where he was once used as the torch-bearer to spread ‘Englishness’. Furthermore, at the beginning, the article will explore issues like Shakespeare’s afterlife, colonization, and reverse-colonization which must be kept in mind when studying Shakespeare from a Postcolonial world.

The root of Shakespeare’s Englishness lies deep in the English language, and his rise to global fame is engineered by its expansion as a vehicle of British power and influence in the world. During the initial stage of British colonial project the empire tried to impose its presuppositions and world view on native language and culture by force, utilizing the bullet, bayonet and the gallows. But changes were gradually surfacing, which could perceive the precariousness of such overt subjugation fostering the programme of co-option which would lend stability to the empire, when the minds of the natives will be colonized. Lord Macaulay’s speech in the House of Commons in 1833, where he comments on “how rapidly the public mind of India is advancing, how much attention is already paid by the higher classes of natives to those intellectual pursuits on the cultivation of which the superiority of the European race principally depends” becomes important in this regard. If, as he later put it, “To trade with civilized men is infinitely more profitable than to govern savages”, then the obvious stratagem must be to propagate “that literature before the light of which impious and cruel superstitions are fast taking flight on the banks of the Ganges…” (Baldick, 1983 70-71). In 1855, the Civil Service of the East India Company outlined plans under the provisions of government’s India Act of 1853 to open its prestigious administrative posts to competitive examinations. The committee of the examination while listing appropriate subjects for the purpose proposed that “Foremost among [them] ...we place our own language and literature”. Shakespeare’s works remained the thrust area for the syllabus planners and from the middle of the nineteenth century his works were seamlessly blended into the intellectual fabric of the schools and universities of the colonized world (Baldick, 1983 70). As Gauri Viswanathan notes, “English literature appeared as a subject in the colonies long before it was institutionalized in the home country”. Viswanathan is drawing attention, not to an unheeded irony, but to one of the carefully laid stratagems of a policy of political self-interest (1990 49). Nonetheless, to present the teaching of Shakespeare solely as a part of sinister linguistic and cultural cleansing would be a misrepresentation, but one cannot equally ignore the stronghold of Englishness and the academic subject called ‘English’, which holds pride of place in the curriculum in most of the Postcolonial nations.

This brings me to the next issue ‘Shakespeare’s afterlife’, which begs serious scrutiny. Terence Hawkes raises a pertinent question in this regard – “Does any body of work genuinely possess a ‘life’ of its own, extending beyond the author’s death?” In one sense the answer should be a stark no, as no work can exist independently without recipients which is context bound – shaping it and in turn being shaped by it. The adaptation of Shakespeare’s works in Bollywood films which this article will investigate is one such method which has lent an ‘afterlife’ to his works. Adapting Shakespeare in Bollywood has to go through a complex process of negotiation to suit the context in which the films are to be marketed keeping in mind the audiences for which they are meant. Does the fact that Shakespeare’s works can be moulded to suit different geographical location and culture tend to bring his ‘universalism’ through the back-door? This is a question which defies a clear cut answer. The
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The present article will try to address if the persistence of Shakespeare in the world of Bollywood movies point to a sort of colonial hangover, or is it a process of reverse-colonization where Shakespeare is reshaped to suit the market forces capitalizing on his marketability.


The theme of mistaken identity derived from *The Comedy of Errors* has become an enduring subject-matter to be exploited by Bollywood films. The strong influence of this play can be easily spotted in films like *Do Dooni Char* (dir. Debu Sen, 1968), *Gustakhi Maaf* (dir. R.K. Bedi, 1969), *Angoor* (dir. Gulzar, 1982), *Anari No. 1* (dir. Sandesh Kohli, 1999), *Bade Miyan Chhote Miyan* (dir. David Dhawan, 1999). Gulzar’s *Angoor* stands singular amongst them because it deviates from the Bollywood trend of not acknowledging the Bard, by commemorating *The Comedy of Errors* giving credit to the playwright. The Shakespearean association is innovatively plotted at the beginning of the film – “This is William Shakespeare. He was a famous playwright of the 16th century. He is still considered to be the greatest” – announces the narrator in a three minutes shot.

From ‘no acknowledgement’ to ‘brief acknowledgement’, I now come to the stage of ‘acknowledged adaptations’ of Shakespeare. To adapt Shakespeare to Indian cinema is the new ‘in’ thing according to the film critic Priyanka Khanna. This acknowledged adaptation is spearheaded by Vishal Bhardwaj, who has carved a niche in Bollywood through his trilogy: *Maqbool, Omkara* and *Haider* based on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth, Othello* and *Hamlet* respectively. These three films now will the subject of discussion of my article. Peraigo succinctly contends: “In his approach to the Shakespearean text, Bhardwaj basically censors previous incarnations of his texts in India by owning its lineage, honouring the source, and preserving what are essentially considered unhappy and cathartic endings, departing from those films soaked in pathos and mawkish feelings. The implication is that there is no longer an explicit and generic transgression of the text, but a mere transposition to the Indian setting in an attempt to come to terms with Shakespeare” (2013 89-90).

In the opening montage, *Maqbool* clearly points to the fact that it is inspired by Shakespeare and shows it status as a remake. In the film Scotland is transposed to the murky Mumbai underworld constantly fuelled by violence to grab and retain power amidst a volatile situation. *Maqbool* retains the main plot and characters of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*–*Maqbool/Macbeth, Nimmi/Lady Macbeth, Abbaji/Duncan, Kaka/Banquo, Guddu/Fleance* and *Malcolm, and the witches/policemen*, although their characters undergo some transformations. In the Bhardwaj’s adaptation, Nimmi is not married to Maqbool (like Lady Macbeth and Macbeth), she is the mistress of Abbaji, and her secret liaison with Maqbool is a forbidden pleasure. Bhardwaj in his adaptation stresses the father-son relationship between Abbaji and Maqbool and hence Maqbool during the introductory part shuns from
making any foray into a relationship with Nimmi. However, as the film progresses his love for Nimmi gains upper-hand orchestrating in the betrayal and murder of his master. The conspicuous difference with Macbeth is that ambition is not the sole motivating factor and Maqbool has other incitements. Nimmi could not digest Abbaji’s replacement of her for a Bollywood actress and she carefully manipulates Maqbool by revealing the love between Guddu/Fleance and Malcolm (who substitutes Duncan’s sons) for Sameera – Abbaji’s daughter. Maqbool gets easily trapped and he presumes that after marrying Sameera, Guddu will jeopardise his high position in the gang, and so he murders Abbaji on the night before their wedding.

Maqbool’s elaboration of the supernatural is remarkable. Here Shakespeare’s ‘three weird sisters’ are transformed into the form of two corrupt policemen: Purohit and Pandit. For example, in the opening sequence the kundal motif on the window pane of a van is pressed into service by Bhardwaj which is utilized by Pandit and Purohit to monitor the underworld. Another notable image in the remake of Macbeth is the horoscope besmeared with blood, which is the ‘objective-correlative’ of the murder of the gangster by the police. Unlike the witches who simply predict the future in Macbeth, the cops in Maqbool have a consequential role, as they are responsible for the characters’ fate. Their decision not to kill Boti in the end ratifies their importance, allowing Boti to kill Maqbool bringing a kind of temporary balance. Interestingly, the director consciously decides to deprive the film of ghosts. Whenever a ghost is evoked in the Shakespearean play, in its Bollywood counterpart, Maqbool either hallucinates or is visibly disturbed, but never sees ghosts. Nimmi/Lady Macbeth does not commit suicide in Maqbool but dies as a result of childbirth and guilt. In the final scene, Maqbool sees Sameera and Guddu who lovingly cradles his son and abandons the hospital where he is finally shot dead by Boti.

In Omkara, Venice is skillfully remodeled in the hinterlands of Uttar Pradesh. Here, Bhardwaj retains the first letter of the names of Shakespeare’s dramatic personae and his main characters – Othello is Omkara ‘Omi’ Shukla, Desdemona is Dolly Mishra, Iago is Ishwar Tyagi (nicknamed Langda), Cassio is Kesu Upadhya and Roderiggo is Rajju. In Bhardwaj’s film Omkara and Dolly are not married in the opening scene, but do so in the course of the action through an elaborate and grand marriage ritual lending a distinct ethnic flavor to the narrative. The sine-quo-non ‘race’ in Othello is replaced by ‘caste’ in the adaptation though the film equally concentrates on jealousy. In the film, Omkara is half-caste as his father was a Brahmin and his mother a slave. Omkara’s choice of Kesu over Langda as the next bahubali/general takes place on screen, instead of off-screen as in Shakespeare’s play. Bhardwaj also lends more complex shades to his Iago/Langda preventing him from being a character of motiveless malignity. The scene in which the ceremonial plate is handed to Kesu, when Langda thinks he is going to receive it is very gripping and forebodes the forthcoming catastrophe. The shot in which Langda crowns himself as the bahubali with his own blood as he looks at himself in the mirror highlights his fantasy before the ceremony and its transformation to anger immediately after it. Finally, Langda is asked to announce to those waiting outside that Kesu has been appointed as the bahubali eliciting considerable sympathy from the audience. Langda hatches a nefarious scheme and turns Omkara against Dolly and Kesu by convincing him that they are having a love affair. He weaves a web of
trickery and presses into service the unwitting Kesu and his lover, Billo; the dancer, Rajjo; Dolly and his own wife Indu, the sister of Omkara. Desdemona’s misplaced ‘handkerchief’ which leads to the tragic end in Othello is replaced by a ‘waist band’ in the film. Unlike its Shakespearean counterpart, Omkara commences with Dolly and Rajju’s interrupted wedding due to Dolly’s elopement with Omkara, and ends in a circular movement with Omkara and Dolly’s ill-fated marriage ceremony, which depicts a miserable bride and a groom. The climactic moment of the film is the dreadful but beautifully cinematographed scene in which Dolly’s corpse in a red saree moves in a swing and Omkara’s body lies on the floor. Indu is a far more complex and nuanced character than her Shakespearean counterpart Emilia who can stab her husband to death, and so is Billo Chamanbahar/Bianca is who is a fiery independent spirit. It is through such innovative methods that Bhardwaj Indianises the Shakespearean play.

The last Bhardwaj film that I would like to discuss is Haider, an adaptation of Hamlet, released on 2014. The setting of Haider is the trouble-torn Kashmir of 1995 bearing the brunt of the draconian Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA). As Hamlet’s Denmark was rotten so is Kashmir. This law permits any soldier of the Indian Army to shoot upon or otherwise use power, even to the extent of fatality when laws are dishonoured. However in the movie, the protagonist Haider refers to it as the game of ‘Chutzpah’ questioning the horrific human rights violation in the valley that it entails. Throughout the film several army concentration camps have been shown, where people are being detained and inhumanly tortured on the suspect of being related to the pro-separatist group. Haider’s father, (Hilaal Meer) who as a doctor performed an appendicitis operation on the leader of a separatist group was taken away by the Indian Army under the accusation of providing refuge to terrorists. Haider keeps intact the theme and plot of its Shakespearean counterpart Hamlet, though the time, place and situation has been re-contextualized. The ghost of senior Hamlet has been supplanted by Roohdar who informs Haider that his father is dead and it was his wish to avenge his brother Khurram for his betrayal and to leave his wife Ghazala for God’s justice. It can be seen in the film that Roohdar possesses several false identities, and it may be inferred that the ghost in the Shakespearean text has been transformed into a person with ghost identities. Bhardwaj in his film gave an artistic touch to Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “To be or not to be” where at several stages in the play Haider says: “Hum hain ki nahin.” This trite expression portrays an exceptionally solipsistic protagonist reconstructed by adverse circumstances into a politically youth constantly engaged with the forces in outside world and bearing the agony within. The famous “mousetrap episode” in Hamlet is musically expressed through the song ‘Bismil’ where the veracity of Khurram being the betrayer is proven to Haider. Prior to that Haider stayed in a state of dilemma and confusion between the conflicting narrative of Khurram and Roohdar. Haider can be regarded as a bold attempt by Bhardwaj to unveil the miseries of the Kashmiris through the lens of Shakespeare’s adaptation, raising issues in the public domain which problematizes easy resolution.

The present article has analyzed the ways through which Shakespeare has been adopted and adapted in Bollywood films. Such variegated adaptations of Shakespeare in Bollywood films add to the broad domain in which the Bard has been re-worked and re-read from films, novels, poems to the theatre, be it Joyce, Pasternak, and Anna Akhmatova
reading *Hamlet* in novels and poems, or Jane Smiley’s reversal of the ethical structure of *King Lear* in *A Thousand Acres*. A few lines from the “Preface” to *Political Shakespeare* by Dollimore and Sinfield will make the point clear:

A play by Shakespeare is related to the contexts of its production – to the economic and political system of Elizabethan and Jacobean England and to the particular institutions of cultural production (the court, patronage, theatre, education, the church). Moreover, the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, for culture is made continuously and Shakespeare’s text is reconstructed, reappraised, reassigned all the time through diverse institutions in specific contexts. What the plays signify, how they signify, depends on the cultural field in which they are situated (Dollimore and Sinfield 1994, viii).

This text context mediation has engendered so many different Shakespeares hindering any attempt to contain him.

**Works Cited:**


-------*Omkara*, Eros International Entertainment, 2006

-------. *Haider*, UTV Motion Pictures, 2014


