

## Plays of William Shakespeare and their popular depictions

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### Abstract:

*This article examines the dynamic relationship between William Shakespeare's plays and its myriad depictions, ushering in a historical movement from colonial pedagogy to contemporary cinematic de. Beginning with the role of Shakespeare in colonial education and his early assimilation into Indian theatre, especially the Parsi stage, the paper highlights how Shakespearean drama was indigenized into eclectic cultural constructs. Theoretical perspectives on adaptation underscore this transformation as a dialogic process of reinterpretation, not replication. Central to this discussion is the influence of Parsi theatre in mediating Shakespeare for Indian audiences and its eventual transition into cinema. The study explores mainstream cinema's appropriations of Shakespearean tropes, such as mistaken identity and forbidden love. Vishal Bhardwaj's acclaimed trilogy—Maqbool, Omkara, and Haider—are examined as instances of creative adaptation. By situating these films within frameworks of postcolonial negotiation, cultural hybridity, and intertextuality, the article argues that Hindi cinema has transformed Shakespeare from a colonial imposition into a shared cultural resource. In doing so, Hindi cinema sustains an enduring dialogue between global canonical literature and local storytelling traditions.*

## Introduction

William Shakespeare famously uttered two maxims which imparted a timeless profoundness and fecundity to his work, wherein the twin dictums run true even today. The timeless adage of what's in a name and the other one bringing to the fore of contending that, "England is a nation of shopkeepers" and the one dwelling upon the theme of "Life is akin to a stage where older actors depart and new ones arrive with pomp, bombast and aplomb." In a manner, one may contend that the literary tradition initiated by Shakespeare the Bard reflected the culture, tradition, historicity and the *nom de plume* of general life in the larger context of the British lore and myth.

Another theme apart from royalty and forbidden love and mad cap and crazed kingship, the theme of nationalism too pervades the nook and cranny of the larger theme of British literary tradition. The dressage, life styles, the pomp and splendour of the royalty along with the grime of the masses, all seem to have been deciphered in a larger way as far as the Mass Media, theatrical and Cinematic depictions of Shakespearean works have been treated and managed by both the elitist literary traditions and even the popular culture and pop cannon in a post modern depiction of "Simulacra".

One may also contend that how can the nation be conveniently compared to a rich, flower strewn and verdant garden with birds and flies fluttering and jumping from one flower patch to the other. It was in Richard II, the Shakespearean play that the nation is compared to a terrain which is up for, "Playing for keeps". The Gardner is compared to a King which can maintain and sustain the peaceful vibrancy and verdancy of the nation and its citizens my tending to the plants flowers and the grassy knoll all in an allegorical manner. Its here that the ideational incarnation of Shakespearean works can find a reflection through the depictions in the Mass Media, primordially the Cinematic constructs, the world over. The idiom of the "Idea" can makeover the "Ides" of the popular culture and elitist pastime too. As an instance, North Campus Colleges used to arrange theatrical shoes called as "Plays in the campus with the depictions being backed by modern clothing, theatre characters along with the sight and sound spectacle and the accompaniment of trumpets, guitars and electric guitars and drums to synchronize the tenets of a modern and a mad crazed world all in grapples with the ecosystem of modernity. But, as the saying goes, one needs to act like a Roman while being in Rome and another dictum, Never disrespect the river Goddess while crossing the river."

What sense does it make to couple Shakespeare - Bard of Avon, icon of genius, highbrow *extraordinaire* - with 'popular culture'? Paul Prescott writes in his Book that, " If his writings are widely valued for their complexity, timelessness and universal human

truths, popular culture is for many synonymous with banality, the ephemeral and the trivial. If Shakespeare is deep and difficult, the typical products of popular culture are shallow and all too accessible.”<sup>1</sup>

The author further stresses and informs that, “To enjoy Shakespeare, the argument might run, requires training, time and long-term investment; the consumption of popular culture, by definition, requires little or no effort. From the perspective of these stark contrasts, 'Shakespeare and popular culture' looks like a dead-end of incompatibility.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, one may reinstate the ordinary argument that Shakespeare’s idiom and his literary cannon has permeated to the commoners, masses and the dark street plebians and off course the Ivy league campuses. How the shades of immorality, amorousness, ethereal love, the pageantry of the royal court and the intense clashes as an aftermath of tussle for the crown and power all have an identification with the local lives, live hoods and life-styles both at the bottom of the “realm” which Shakespeare refers to and also the middle class merchants of medieval Britain.

Yet Shakespeare is everywhere in contemporary culture. His presence is not confined to the 'official' locations of classrooms, universities and theatres, but permeates popular mass media such as cinema, television, tabloid journalism, computer games, pop

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Prescott, “Shakespeare and Popular Culture,” Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 2011

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

music, comics and advertisements. Shakespeare's face sells products and is familiar to millions, many of whom may never have read or seen his work; any bald-headed, bearded man need only don a ruff and grab a quill to be instantly recognizable as 'Shakespeare'. Someone this easily impersonated is a major celebrity. Shakespeare's words are quoted and misquoted (intentionally or otherwise) to amuse, persuade and impress. Many of Shakespeare's characters have been plucked from their plays to become freestanding cultural stereotypes of amorousness (Romeo), indecision (Hamlet) or steely 'un-feminine' ambition (Lady Macbeth). Shakespeare's plots are plundered to provide storylines for films, science fiction and soap operas. Shakespeare scholars have increasingly sought to analyse and theorize what Douglas Lanier has called 'Shakespop', the presence, citation and appropriation of Shakespeare across a range of popular mass media.<sup>3</sup>

### Indian Cinema and the Shakespearian depictions

The traces of Shakespeare's works can be found in Indian cinema since the very beginning of films in the country<sup>i</sup>, and the nexus between Indian cinema and European drama becomes clearer when we look back at the origins of celluloid in India.<sup>ii</sup> In those early years, it was often impossible to stage a complete drama—whether a tragedy or a comedy—so selected portions from plays, including Shakespeare's, were performed. To connect the different scenes, elements such as farces, music, and other entertaining

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

interludes were inevitably added. The audience, more inclined toward action and gesticulation than lengthy dialogue, preferred an abundance of songs, energetic dancing, clowning, and spectacle. They especially enjoyed supernatural scenes and expected a touch of romance even in serious narratives. Interestingly, this theatrical condition was not unique to India; it closely resembled the popular expectations of audiences in Shakespeare's own England.<sup>iii</sup> However, there are only a few directors who acknowledge borrowing from the Bard. Vishal Bhardwaj, the writer and director of three Shakespearean Hindi film adaptations, is one such filmmaker, as he credits *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* as source plays for *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, and *Haider*, respectively.<sup>iv</sup> The father of Indian cinema, Dadasaheb Phalke, produced the first full-length motion picture titled *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. This was a Marathi silent film.<sup>v</sup> Phalke's film, though rooted in Hindu religious traditions, established a narrative template that later allowed Indian cinema to accommodate not only indigenous epics but also global literary traditions such as Shakespeare.

Film adaptations have often been approached with a sense of doubt, particularly when the transpositions involved renewing a piece from the canon of world literature.<sup>vi</sup> The fidelity discourse—that is, the concern about how closely an adaptation adhered to the “original”—was often at the heart of such scepticism. Yet, Indian cinema began its journey into adaptation quite early. The first Indian talking film, *Alam Ara* (1931), directed by Ardeshir

Irani,<sup>vii</sup> paved the way for cinema as a narrative art form that could combine multiple traditions. Despite initial criticism shaped by anxieties over fidelity, adaptation studies have since emerged as a prolific area of research, both in India and globally.<sup>viii</sup>

## The Parsi Origins

The history of Indian cinema reveals that Parsi theatre was the locus of immense theatrical activity<sup>ix</sup> and played a central role in preparing audiences for Shakespearean narratives on stage and later on screen. Parsi theatre's hybridity—its eclectic mix of Western dramaturgy and Indian aesthetic traditions—acted as a cultural bridge. As Kathryn Hansen observes, it “synthesized elements of Asian and European origin, lending it a hybrid, middle-brow character.”<sup>x</sup> This performative hybridity not only popularized Western stories but also made them accessible across Indian audiences by embedding them in local idioms of music, spectacle, and melodrama.<sup>xi</sup>

Theorists such as Linda Hutcheon, Gordon E. Slethaug, Robert Stam, and Alessandra Raengo (2004) have argued strongly in favour of the significance of adaptation. Hutcheon insists that adaptations should be understood as “re-interpretations and re-creations rather than mere copies.”<sup>xii</sup> This is particularly relevant to the Indian context, where Shakespeare's plays were not replicated word for word, but rather reimagined within indigenous cultural frameworks, infused with music, dance, and local social realities. Similarly, Slethaug emphasizes that adaptations transform not

only texts but also cultures as they shift across media and geography. He categorizes adaptation strategies into "faithfulness/fidelity" (remaining close to the original), "supplementation and surplus" (adding new layers of interpretation), and "freeplay" (taking creative liberties to generate fresh meaning).<sup>xiii</sup> These approaches resonate with the Indian experience, where cinema has been the most powerful tool of storytelling, reaching audiences across class, caste, and regional divides.

## Conclusion

The encounter of audiences the world over varies from one instrument of Mass Media to another. Also, one may argue that the adaptations of Shakespeare vary from one indigenous ecosystem to another where in Indian Cinema has played a key role in the depiction and in a manner ideational and dramatic plagiarising of the sentiments of the order of forbidden love, chivalry, vindication, revenge and amorousness amongst the royalty along with a larger pantheon of eclecticism in depictions of all human sentiments. The encounter between Shakespeare and Hindi cinema reveals a journey of cultural transformation. Once embedded in India as part of the colonial curriculum, Shakespeare became a pliable resource through translation, Parsi theatre, and eventually cinema. The transition from stage to screen ensured that his plays were not preserved as static canonical texts but reimagined through Indian languages, music, politics, and aesthetics. Hindi cinema, with its

vast reach, reconstituted Shakespearean plots of tragic love, mistaken identity, and political intrigue as popular narratives deeply resonant with Indian audiences.

Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy marks the culmination of this process, where Shakespeare's tragedies are not merely retold but indigenized into Indian sociopolitical realities—caste, corruption, and insurgency. These adaptations exemplify how Hindi cinema enacts a dialogic negotiation with colonial cultural authority, asserting interpretive freedom while retaining Shakespeare's universality.

Ultimately, the interweaving of Shakespeare with Hindi cinema underscores the resilience of adaptation as cultural practice. It demonstrates how a text once imposed as a symbol of imperial power has been absorbed, contested, and reimagined within India's own storytelling traditions. This ongoing dialogue affirms Shakespeare's relevance not as a colonial master but as a global resource continually reshaped by local imaginations.

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<sup>i</sup> Anchal Dhara and Neelima Kanwar, "Shakespeare in Hindi Films: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's Cinematic Interpretations," *The Achievers Journal* 8.1 (2022), pp. 1

<sup>ii</sup> Syed Wahaj Mohsin and Shaista Taskeen, "Cinematizing Shakespeare: A Study of Shakespearean Presence in Indian Cinema," Volume II Issue X (February 2015), pp. 309.

<sup>iii</sup> Kathryn Hansen, "Parsi Theatre and the Origins of Indian Cinema," *Theatre Journal*, 36, 2001, no. 3 (1986): 9

<sup>iv</sup> Anchal Dhara and Neelima Kanwar, "Shakespeare in Hindi Films: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's Cinematic Interpretations," *The Achievers Journal* 8.1 (2022): 1-16, pp. 1

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- <sup>v</sup> Syed Wahaj Mohsin and Shaista Taskeen, "Cinematizing Shakespeare: A Study of Shakespearean Presence in Indian Cinema," Volume II Issue X (February 2015): 309
- <sup>vi</sup> Anchal Dhara and Neelima Kanwar, "Shakespeare in Hindi Films: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's Cinematic Interpretations," *The Achievers Journal* 8.1 (2022): 1-16, pp. 2
- <sup>vii</sup> Syed Wahaj Mohsin and Shaista Taskeen, "Cinematizing Shakespeare: A Study of Shakespearean Presence in Indian Cinema," Volume II Issue X (February 2015): 309
- <sup>viii</sup> Anchal Dhara and Neelima Kanwar, "Shakespeare in Hindi Films: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's Cinematic Interpretations," *The Achievers Journal* 8.1 (2022): 1-16, pp. 2
- <sup>ix</sup> Anchal Dhara and Neelima Kanwar, "Shakespeare in Hindi Films: Reading Vishal Bhardwaj's Cinematic Interpretations," *The Achievers Journal* 8.1 (2022): 1-16, pp. 2-3
- <sup>x</sup> Kathryn Hansen, *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), 03.
- <sup>xi</sup> Kathryn Hansen, *Stages of Life: Indian Theatre Autobiographies* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011), 01-07.
- <sup>xii</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 172.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Gordon E. Slethaug, *Adaptation Theory and Criticism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 07.