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Shakespeare across Cultures: A Study with Reference to *Romeo And Juliet* and *Ram Leela*

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Abstract:

The canvas of English literature cannot be complete without the mention of William Shakespeare. From magnificently intriguing plays to deep-seated sonnets, Shakespeare has been bestowed upon with the sobriquet of “bard of Avon” for his enduring works. It is this perennial nature of his works which has been stealing the limelight since the sixteenth century. The wave which started with him is still alive in one art form or the other. This paper too is a humble attempt to show how a play of Shakespeare managed to travel across cultures and landed in the terrain of Indian cinema. *Ram Leela*, a Bollywood movie directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali which is based on Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, is an example of the timelessness that the bard stands for. With the help of a comparison between the play and the adaptation, this paper tries to explore and analyse some of the many reasons which have led to an ever-rising graph of Shakespearean re-workings and adaptations. Furthermore, the concept of “cultural materialism” has been deployed along with the reference to the larger canon of cultural studies to foreground the argument stated. Besides this, the paper relates the concept of *masala* to such adaptations and how reworking on Shakespeare are accepted by the viewers of twenty first century.

Keywords: *comparison, cross-culture, transformation, adaptation, Indian cinema, cultural studies, masala.*

“What’s in a name? that name which we call a rose

By any other name would smell as sweet.” (Shakespeare 1597)

There does not seem to be any better way to commence the study of Shakespeare across cultures than mentioning the much quoted line from *Romeo and Juliet*. No wonder that it still holds that firm ground with which the meaning conveyed strikes the right spot. When it comes to analysing Shakespeare and attempting to find out the answers to all the why’s, where’s, when’s and how’s, it becomes a tad too difficult to put everything in one coherent text. Considering the multitude of approaches, various studies have been done in this area to examine the relevance and significance of Shakespeare in shaping the modern canon of literature,

cinema and theatre. In case of Indian cinema, the picture seems quite convincing when one witnesses the popular culture's bend towards watching flicks like *Maqbool* , *Omkara* and so on. Hence, the urge to delve deeper into the theory lying behind such conceptions and making of the similar kinds takes one through the cultural moulding involved in materialising such leap. A study intending to elaborate Shakespeare across cultures will undoubtedly tread a path of cultural studies figuring out the way in which a playwright of sixteenth century is still in vogue in the modern times. Besides analysing the strand of the cultural studies involved in this entire act of re-working, re-assigning and adaptations, a study of Indian cinema too becomes an area mandatory to be explored. It has been acknowledged at the global level that Indian cinema stands for its rich heritage. It takes pride in the legacy that has been existing and evolving since the time of eminent artists like Dada Saheb Phalke, Manna De, Raj Kapoor, Nargis, etc. Being an embodiment of a diverse cultural domain, Indian cinema appears as an array of concepts and ideas aligned along diverse cultural, religious, social and economic lines. From movies revolving around nationalist fervour like *Mother India* and *Swades* to those dealing with day-to-day struggle of a common man as in *A Wednesday* and *English Vinglish* . However, if one considers the current trend of Indian cinema , a bend towards adaptation of age-old texts can also be noticed. When *The Last Leaf* becomes *Lootera* and *Emma* turned out to be *Aisha* , it is not only the context that has changed. It is rather the entire politics of engagement with the textual version that has been reformed and represented. However, what is under scrutiny here is the ever rising influence of Shakespeare on Bollywood. Despite the drastic change that is witnessed in modern viewership where 24x7 TV, YouTube and video selfies occupy the mainstream, movies based on the bard's works are still grabbing the eyeballs. From *Angoor*, based on *A Comedy of Errors* to the latest piece called *Haider* inspired by *Hamlet*, the presence of the bard in Bollywood is predominantly felt and highly acclaimed. To put it in a clichéd sense, "Shakespeare in Bollywood never goes out of style".

The answer to what makes the works of Shakespeare immensely global and transcendental in nature can be found in the domain of cultural studies and the related politics involved in such re-creations. Cultural studies emphasise upon a fact that ultimately what matters is the "material" that a text contains. Firstly, it studies literature within "the complex web of relations between the works of literature and the prevailing social, material , historical and ideological conditions of the time it was written in." Secondly, it moves beyond the domain of "great works" of literature and considered those lying outside the canon as equally significant. Bestowing the Nobel Prize for Literature upon Bob Dylan is a pertinent example of how the realm of literature is expanding and giving other works their due recognition. This steers one towards finding out the reason behind the increasing number of adaptations of Shakespearean works in Hindi cinema. *Goliyon ki Rasleela: Ram Leela* which hit the screens in 2013, is an adaptation of the bard's *Romeo and Juliet* . The play is a story of "a pair of star-crossed lovers" belonging to two warring clans. The story which then unfolds shows how the notion of forbidden love is deemed to be

transgressive and transcendental in nature. The playwright immortalised this love in the form of their tragic death in the end. The death of Romeo and Juliet in the end can also be seen as a cathartic event putting an end to all the rifts and tensions among the Montagues and the Capulets. On the other hand, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's picture of Ram and Leela is a tale based in Gujarat state of India revolving around regional power games, struggle within a social hierarchy and sexual politics put forth through various characters. What makes *Ram Leela* worth analysing is the way it captures the spirit and essence of the original text. However, the cultural leap that *Romeo and Juliet* undergoes does bring in light the dynamics involved in the execution of such a movie. The play which showcases the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets has been taken to an altogether different land where the warring clans are the Sanadas and the Rajadis.. Amidst the scathing verbal attacks and brawls, the love stories of Romeo-Juliet and Ram-Leela become a sign of impending doom and untimely demise.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the entire relationship between “star-crossed lovers” has been marred by the constant pressure for maintaining an identity instructed by their respective families. Hence, the whole concept of identity creation has been unveiled by the playwright which has always been existing in the human society. This is further concretised through the following exchange of words between the two.

“O, Romeo, Romeo, why is your name Romeo?, she said.

“Leave your family and change your name.”

Bhansali too catches this nerve and projects the complexities of social hierarchies prevalent in Nakhatrana, the village to which Ram and Leela belong. He gives a rural colour and raw texture to the caste politics by putting forth a statement saying, “Leave your family and change your name.” dense in terms of denotation and context. This can be further understood in the light of the following lines from Bhansali's movie,

“*Apna hi naam badal doon.*

Ya tera naam mita doon.”

(Should I change my name

Or should I obliterate your name?)

What turns out to be noteworthy here is the minute nuances that Bhansali has deployed in order to remain intact with the textual model. Such renditions found in adaptations of Shakespeare help keep the Shakespearean essence upbeat and alive. They serve as the linking threads between the original and the cinematic reworking. In broader terms, it can be remarked that *Ram Leela* appears to be a romantic saga of two people belonging to two clans who are at loggerheads. It is this rivalry between the Rajadis and the Sanadas which takes its toll on their lives, a fate similar to that of Romeo and Juliet but in a different manner. This trope of forbidden love

is further strengthened by the kind of songs penned for the movie. One of the songs says,

“Ye laal ishq, ye malaal ishq.

Ye aeb ishq, ye bair ishq!”

(This red love, this remorse is love.

This defect is love, this enmity is love!”)

Hence, the role of music and lyric has also acquired a significant niche in accentuating the effect of the scene portrayed. Shakespeare too used the device of music to let the audience seep into the right mood of the scene. For example, in Act I Scene V, the characters take relish in a royal feast organised by the Capulets so as to set a vibe of merriment and celebration. The music comes in the background of the scene where Juliet is supposed to be married off to Paris. The musicians add to the exuberance that people used to witness during such regal feasts and gatherings. Bhansali, in *Ram Leela*, too deploys music in a systematised manner which helps in bringing out the apt emotion among his viewers. The regal music of Verona is transformed into a Gujarati folk tune in Bhansali's work. In other words, the entire trajectory of Shakespeare across cultures can be understood through various changes the original text undergoes while being positioned in such mutations. The particular Gujarati song that Bhansali incorporates here says,

”More bane thanghat kare”

(My heart is dancing like a peacock.)

It is played every time Ram enters Leela's backyard to meet her. This explains how intricately the trope of music has been installed to bring home the right message. Just as Shakespeare used music to add to the easy acceptance of a particular scene among the audience, Bhansali too tries to fit in his shoes by locating a well-thought combination of situation and harmony. Moreover, borrowing the sound of a folk song as a background score is a reminder of the cultural affiliation the movie upholds and how the film maker has made it his own to a large extent. The play as well as the movie conforms to the centrality of music in dispatching the desired sense. When queried regarding music in his movie, Bhansali rests his faith in the resultant deep connection established by it. This continuum between the two is further felt when Bhansali exploits one of the popular tropes of Elizabethan theatre in *Ram Leela*, i.e., the balcony. It is the space where the relationship matures and eventually, the site where their love becomes immortal.

Such highly acclaimed adaptations of Shakespearean plays evoke one to feel inquisitive about how such link between Indian cinema and Shakespeare took birth in the first place. “I have always been influenced by literary works. It is a liberating experience for a film maker to make a film on Shakespeare, though.”, said Sanjay Leela Bhansali when asked about his aptitude for literature. Indian cinema and

Shakespeare have been clubbed together a fairly long time ago. The roots of Indian cinema lie in the Parsi theatre of Bombay which started in part by doing adaptation of Shakespeare in a variety of local languages. Gradually, it turned out to be Bombay Talkies having elements of forbidden love, songs and dances. In short, it came out to be popularly called as *masala*. The concept of *masala* in Indian cinema refers to exaggeration, outlandish sequences and make-believe worlds. It is an Indian coinage which literally means a mixture of variety of condiments but metaphorically, it is a term used for the blend of diverse cultures. When Indian cinema is laced with the concept of *masala*, it evokes a sense of desire and to some extent takes one to the domain of erotica. So, when the routine food tastes bland, adding *masala* to it becomes the need of the hour. In other words, a sprinkle of *masala* brings back the interest and the satiation. It is such blend of the ordinary and the extra ordinary that one comes across while watching Indian cinema, in general and Bollywood, in particular. The day-to-day movie trailers are leashed with scenes of a hero with bronze-physique grappling with over ten goons single-handedly. There are many episodes when a usual cop-thief chase becomes an eye-catching scene for bike lovers seeing thief's technologically-advanced motors! In wider sense, Indian cinema takes one to a journey replete with cheers and jeers, from dinghy streets of a suburb to the snow-clad Swiss mountains, dream sequence far away from reality to something as relatable as *Lunchbox*. A similar insertion of *masala* can be seen in Bhansali's work where the conventional meets the unconventional. The presence of theatrical cinematography in *Ram Leela*, the sight of peacocks in Leela's backyard, the seemingly-lifeless span of the Rann of Kutch, the frequent unabated use of guns, the sexual escapades that Ram, a vagabond in this case, indulges himself into and the god-motherish role of Dhankor add to the not-so-real-world aspect of Nakhatrana, a village where the Rajadis and the Sanadas are engaged in the power game. The various ups and downs, along with the sprinkle of Shakespearean flavour shapes such a Bollywood *masala* movie. Why this Shakespearean flavour works every time is because ,as Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield have remarked, he wrote about universal Man and Woman. The issues revolving around inter-racial and inter-caste relations, submissive feminine voices and oppressive power structures have been prevailing for quite a long time in human society in one way or the other and very often, the repercussions too follow the same trend across diverse social spaces. The basic human nature is the common thread running through the diverse social, political and cultural spaces which make the works of Shakespeare still relevant and relatable. Culture is not static and it is because of its dynamics that Shakespeare's texts are reconstructed, reappraised and reassigned all the time through diverse institutions of theatre, cinema and education. That is why the shift from Verona of Italy to Nakhatrana of Kutch in Gujarat happens in a subtle manner without letting go off the gist and "material" of the text.

Considering all the accolades that such a movie gains from the regular cinephiles, such re-workings and adaptations often receive diatribes from the literary intelligentsia. There is always a sense of unease among the people associated with

literature when it comes to analysing a Bollywood's take on Shakespeare's work . The major reason for such discontent is that cinema in the given case is often reduced to the level of a secondary medium. To maintain the right balance between the two, the associated histories and time-bound social complexities have to be followed. Another director from Bollywood ,Vishal Bhardwaj, who has *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider* in his kitty, once argued,"My films are inspired by Shakespeare's works but are not meant for Shakespearean scholars." It is this liberty that Bhansali meant when he called making a movie on Shakespeare a "liberating experience". This statement manages to justify how directors leapfrog certain aspects and accentuate another. It is this approach which gives birth to a constant trail of similarities as well as dissimilarities existing between the original text and the adaptation. It , then, has to be acknowledged that a comparison between the play and the movie is going to lead to dissatisfaction because they are done in terms of portrayal of the then society . This is the reason why such juxtaposition cannot be convincing. A filmmaker of twenty first century can never delve deeper into the reality of Victorian era because it is not a first-hand experience for him. Despite the dissatisfaction, movies based on Shakespeare are frequently witnessed as a part of literature of contemporary times. In other words, the Shakespearean *masala* is nevertheless savoured by distinct taste buds. The transcendental nature attributed to the bard's works is due to the sameness of the social, cultural, political and material conditions which have always been the space of struggle all over the world. The persistent battle among the variegated sections of the society in terms of race, caste, class, religion and power is a linking string which enables one to imagine the re-working of a text as old as *Romeo and Juliet* . When the august lifestyle of the Montague and the Capulets turns into an Indian version of life amidst the eerie yet awe-inspiring Rann of Kutch, the audience is bound to respond . A divergent understanding emerges on the surface when the meek Romeo becomes a casanova in Ram whereas a quiet Juliet turns out to be a rebellious Leela.

A study aiming to explore how Shakespeare across cultures is being deployed in cinema, theatre, classroom debates or translations, can hardly be put in a limited set of findings and observations. The dynamics involved between his plays and their adaptations in Indian cinema make the study all the more gripping. This is because of the way Indian space negotiates with the original text. When Muzzafar Ali came up with *Umrao Jan*, the movie, in 1981, he did not have to deviate much from Mirza Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada*(1905). The cinematic adaptation is precise and spot on in every sense because of the same cultural roots. However, the shift from Verona to Kutch creates a different picture altogether. It can be thus inferred that re-working on Shakespeare leads to the creation of a whole new canvas which is quintessentially Shakespearean and yet possesses the *desi* tint.

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