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## Re-creating Shakespeare Through the Indigenous Narratives

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### **Abstract:**

The ability of Shakespeare's plays to be constantly re-invented is perhaps its greatest achievement. Cutting across barriers of language, culture, social factors Shakespeare's plays have provided enough fodder for a global interpretation of themes, agencies, and social impacts. India with its cultural milieu and diversities provides a very potent ground for adaptation of Shakespeare. Cinema, theatre, translation, and adaptations through the lens of cultural interpretations bring out the nuances of the broad relevance and applicability of Shakespeare in the South Asian context. The most popular in recent times is Vishal Bharadwaj's trilogy of Shakespeare's tragedies appropriately named as *Maqbool (Macbeth)* (2003), *Omkara (Othello)* (2006) and *Haider (Hamlet)* (2014). Each of the narratives evoke the tensions of a Shakespearean tragedy within a systemic representation of the underworld and conflict zones. The broad scope that Shakespeare's plays can provide is deftly articulated in hands of a seasoned director. The play *Piya Berupiya* (theatrical production) an adaptation of Shakespeare's comedy *Twelfth Night* is another remarkable representation with ample songs, banter and mirth keeping intact the musical nature of the play.

Every artist's creativity finds a natural expression through Shakespeare and will always remain a challenge to explore avenues through adaptations of Shakespeare. In my paper I would like

to look at two Bengali productions *Saptapadi* (1961) and *Hridmajharey* (2014) that situates and contextualises Shakespeare adaptations within the fold of a transitory society. My paper will analyse in detail the two productions and attempt to focus on the ways in which emotions, characters can be easily put into contexts within a socio-cultural backdrop. The celluloid derivation brings out a deep-rooted problematic representation in the ways in which political and oppressive powers of patriarchal control use and abuse relationships for manipulation.

**Keywords: Shakespeare, films, adaptations, social concerns.**

The fascination for Shakespeare proved to be irresistible with the coming of world cinema in the early twentieth century. In countries like India with a colonial past the presence of Shakespeare in schools and colleges curriculum were part of the colonial agenda to acquaint and familiarise the population with canonised subject matter.

The formal study of Shakespeare's text began with English schools set up in the eighteenth century by missionaries, by lay English or Anglo-Indian proprietors, and surprisingly often by Indians. As surprisingly, their first Indian students were chiefly from the humbler castes and classes, seeking employment under the British. (Chaudhuri 33)

In subsequent years Shakespeare emerges as a popular choice of theatrical engagement and cinematic interpretations with the phenomenal rise of cinema in the 1930s and 1940s in India. Over the years the plays of Shakespeare have been represented with authenticity and genuineness adhering to the textual interpretations in the closest possible way yet Indian cinema with its multiplicity and diverse social, economic and political conditions have engaged in a great deal of multi-layered interpretations of Shakespeare. This paper attempts to analyse postcolonial representations of Shakespeare's texts in Bengali cinema with particular focus on contemporary works.

The preoccupation with Shakespeare in Bengal can be traced as early as the beginning of the nineteenth century with considerable enthusiasm in theatrical productions. The contact of the Indians with the European intellectual culture was most vividly felt in Calcutta, the then capital of colonial India. However, the English residents of Calcutta would stage plays primarily for their own entertainment and their taste for performing Shakespeare's plays created an interest among the Bengali intelligentsia who were already witnessing the impact of western literature and philosophy. The mid-nineteenth century is testimony to a plethora of performance of Shakespeare's plays in the English language by students of Hindu College and some schools which had Englishmen like Derozio and David Lester Richardson as their teachers. Some of the popular early performances from Shakespeare were the Court Scene of Merchant of Venice in 1839, Othello in 1853, the entire production of Merchant of Venice in 1854 and Henry IV in 1855. To assume that all performances were about the plays of Shakespeare would be untrue as Bengali plays with mythological themes were equally popular with the masses. But Shakespeare's plays asserted a certain influence upon the masses and began to appear in translation: Rudrapal a translation of Macbeth appeared in 1874, Othello in 1875, Macbeth in 1893 and Nagendra Nath Chaudhuri's Hariraja, a translation of Hamlet appeared in 1897 which was based on the Parsi style theatre and successfully ran for almost three years. Shakespeare's influence within the literary circle in Bengal is deep and continuous and as S.K. Bhattacharya puts it

[F]rom him they learnt the concept of tragedy, the meaning of conflict, the art of characterisation, orchestration, in a word, the knowledge of how to make drama a dynamic expression of life in its severest moments of conflict, crisis and catastrophe (31).

Cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare had a fairly early and consistent history in India being adapted as cinematic versions as early as the decades of the silent era of the film industry. Koel

Chatterjee traces the earliest productions to *Khoon ka Khoon* an adaptation of *Hamlet* directed by Sohrab Modi in 1935, *Zalim Saudagar* an adaptation of *Merchant of Venice* by J.J. Madan in 1941, *Romeo and Juliet* directed by Akhtar Hussain in 1948, Kishore Sahu's *Hamlet* (1954). These films were primarily copies of western productions of Shakespeare's plays. Ivory Merchant's *Shakespearewallah* (1965) documents the tragic decline of full-length performances of Shakespeare on stage and pre-empted the eventual dominance of the then fledgling Hindi cinema in India. Shakespeare on stage and theatre as an art form both faced an indomitable challenger in the motion pictures. Adaptations of Shakespeare along with theatrical performances declined simultaneously. A couple of decades into post India's independence era sees a surge towards themes of Nehruvian ideologies of nationhood, independence, freedom struggle and the 1962 war with China as dominant themes of the Hindi film industry. It is the 1960s that provided a breath of fresh air to adaptations from Shakespeare in the Indian film industry. Production houses showed a keen interest in transforming Shakespeare into a hybrid identity to make it more adaptable and include contemporary politics within its narrative ambit. This led to a widespread decolonisation of Shakespeare in India. It opened its doors once again to return to Shakespeare not in the sense of the way it was perceived as authentic but to deintellectualise Shakespeare and come closer to the middle classes thereby exploring contemporary socio-political concerns. *Saptapadi* (1961), *Bhrantibilash* (1963), *Do Duni Char* (1968) *Angoor* (1982) *Ek Dujhe Ke Liye* (1981) *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) are all examples of new emerging versions of Shakespeare's plays. The culmination point of adaptations reaches its high point with Vishal Bharadwaj's Shakespearean trilogy of *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014). In my paper I wish to follow this path and analyse two Bengali films, *Saptapadi* (1961) and *Hrid Majharay* (2014), both adaptations of *Othello* signifying the manner in which the texts are appropriated and contextualised revealing topical issues with emerging concepts of identities.

Adaptation as Deborah Cartmell mentions in *Interpreting Shakespeare on Screen*, mentions that film adaptations should be seen as a separate body of work. Initial adaptations of Shakespeare focussed on imitating western productions of settings, text, diction and costumes with a clear purpose of staying as close to the original as possible. It was looked upon as a western import which inevitably led to its rejection by the masses due to the projection of high culture, being foreign and eventually becoming dated as was dealt with in *Ivory Merchant's Shakespearewallah*. However, with the huge box office success of *Saptabadi* (1961) and *Bhrantibilash* (1963) in Bengal and Bangladesh (being viewed in movie halls and television) it was amply clear that even though Shakespeare had been rejected in the earlier decades, the audience was willing to accept a more 'Indianised' and home-grown version of Shakespeare. Eminent director Ajay Kar's *Saptapadi* (1961) set in colonial Bengal had the sixties hit pair Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen in the lead roles was based on a novel by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay. *Saptapadi* borrows the theme of racism from *Othello*. The protagonists Krishnendu Mukherjee and an Anglo-Indian Rina Brown are promising students of Calcutta Medical College who get into minor trifles during their early interactions. A group of medicos decide to perform the murder scene from *Othello* for the college annual day with Krishnendu playing *Othello* and Rina playing *Desdemona*. The first choice was an Englishman named Clayton, also a student of Calcutta Medical College, to play the role of *Othello*, but he is replaced by a native, Krishnendu, this replacement becomes a symbolic appropriation of Shakespeare into the local ethos of the Indian heartland and a shedding of colonial trappings related to Shakespeare and Shakespeare performances. Both *Saptapadi* and *Hridhmajharey* have the murder scene as the focal point of the narrative of the movie- using it as an example to accentuate the inevitable crisis between the protagonists. When Rina attempts to derogate Krishnendu, by calling him 'blackie', the latter counters it by declaring that they are all sons of the Goddess Kali. Therefore, the racial connotation is substituted with references to low

caste socially backward dark-skinned natives usually scheduled castes and tribals and countered with a perfectly logical assertion.

It is during this performance that love blossoms between Krishnendu and Rina delving into a new kind of secular modernity in post-independence India. The rest of the movie which is played out in flashback becomes a period of pain and separation for the couple who face hurdles due to Krishnendu's father's unmoving orthodoxical beliefs. Krishnendu whose name means "black moon" signifying the dark Hindu God Krishna, is a curious mix symbolising the liberated young middle-class Bengali as he almost unthinkingly converts to Christianity as demanded by Rina Brown's father to marry Rina. The delayed marriage between Krishnendu and Rina become a site for interrogating issues of race, nationalism, and India's secular identity. The colour theme is introduced through Krishnendu's name and the appearance of Krishnendu as Othello. He will henceforth sport the beard and physically imbibe the role that he played in the play Othello. Saptapadi is able to negotiate itself and address more topical and pertinent issues of race and miscegenation and apprehends interracial/interfaith alliances during pre-independence era. When the lead pair unite in the backdrop of World War II, Kar in emulation of Orson Welles's Othello (1954) directs a shot when Krishnendu's image is reflected on the mirror, this shot becomes a unifying moment in the movie with Krishnendu like Othello becomes a site for absolving the disruptions due to religion, race and Hindu orthodoxy.

Othello's racial inheritance has been questioned and challenged, with critics claiming that he was perhaps not really a "Moor" but a "mestizo," a racial affiliation that would make him into a "hybrid" figure who relatively might have more agency than a "black" person. (Mitra 96)

Saptapadi's adaptation of Shakespeare's most domestic tragedy involves the transfer of narrative interpretations by creating a new entity that aims to indigenise as well appropriate.

The year 2014 saw the release of two important Shakespeare adaptations, Haider and Hridmajharay. The new millennium witnessed a rise in popularity of Shakespeare adaptation in Indian cinema. Ranjan Ghosh's debut venture Hridhmajharey draws on Othello, Hamlet, Julius Caesar and Macbeth. With supernatural predictions, internal conflicts, uncertainties, individual crisis and murder the movie throbs with intertextual references and mise-en-scene to accentuate the conflicts in the protagonist. Hridmajharey set in contemporary Calcutta, begins with the protagonist Abhijit Mukherjee, a teacher of Mathematics at a well-known College in Calcutta and it is chance encounter with a lady sooth sayer Ho Chi Huan at a Chinese eatery that sets in motion psychological impacts and turmoils of the protagonist. She singles out Abhjit and warns him of the trials of the heart, "is dil se bach ke rehna, ajeeb aur garib khel khelta rehta hai zalim, chain jitna lata hai, dard usse bhi zyada deta hai yeh kamina". Othellian in its context, the prophecy at once alerts the audience with an impending sense of calamity. Abhijit an orphan, lives with his younger sister Mallika, he has a stable career and an affable relationship with his friends and students. Like Othello he excels in his public life. It is once again a chance encounter on a rainy evening with the young and beautiful cardiologist Debjani that he falls in love with. A series of events completely turns over his stable life in Calcutta and he is forced to take recourse in Port Blair with Debjani and a compromised professional life. Abhijit is no Moor, he is not an outsider either, yet like Othello he is overcome with jealousy, internal turmoil with a constant recalling of the warning of Ho Chi Huan. His failures in his professional life increases his anxieties and reinforces the doubts that had already made home in his mind. Debjani like Desdemona becomes the supposed cause of all his failures. Hridmajhary emphasises upon the heart as the undoing of Abhijit and jealousy the green-eyed monster, as Iago puts it:

“O beware, my lord, of jealousy;

It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock the meat it feeds on.” (3.3)

The failure of Abhijit is at multiple levels: as a teacher, brother, lover he simply succumbs to self-doubt and suspicion. Ranjan Ghosh adds a Hamlet like feature to the protagonist who constantly broods over his condition and like Macbeth he searches for external agencies to consummate the words of Ho Chu Huan. The second half of the film regresses into domestic drama complete with a confrontation, misunderstandings and bitter conjugal quarrels followed by a dual ending to the story. The island city of Port Blair becomes the Cyprus of Abhijit’s life where the rest of the events unfold. Away from his workplace, the fears and uncertainties begin to burden the mind of Abhijit and he becomes a victim of his own anxieties. Ghosh is able to circumvent the colonial implications and gravitas of Bengal’s literary/cultural heritage – frameworks that are usually employed in a discussion of Shakespeare in Bengal – modifying and playing with Shakespeare’s characters/styles to make his own statement about what Shakespeare means to a contemporary audience. In an interview, Ghosh had said,

“Hrid Majharey has characters inspired by Othello, Desdemona and Cassius from Othello, the Witch from Macbeth, and the Soothsayer from Julius Caesar. Yet, the film is not an adaptation of any of his plays, but has simply drawn on a few characters from them. For someone who has studied Shakespeare, these references will be easily accessible. For others who aren’t familiar with Shakespeare, they’ll see a new kind of a love story!”

(<https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/bengali-filmmaker-ranjan-ghosh-on-his-upcoming-film-ahaa-re-and-what-he-learnt-from-mentor-aparna-sen-6118261.html>)

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).

Adaptations from Shakespeare have happened before and continue to do so and have survived the test of time by constantly reinventing itself. One reason could be the universal nature of Shakespeare's characters and the human condition presented in them. Parthajit Baruah, a noted film critic mentions that "another reason may be an Oriental fascination for Western masters, where Shakespeare is just an image of the West and its literary products." (qtd, in Joshi 2) A play like *Othello* which is about racial otherness is transformed to an experience of otherness conditioned by social hierarchy and taboo which can find a foothold in multiple ways in countries far away from the English island. The play has the inherent ability to be adapted into cultural situations that are not close to Shakespeare's time or geography. Adaptation or appropriation in a socially and culturally packed country like India that deviates its interpretations through the lens of caste, tribe, religion provides the ground for broader definitions of Shakespeare's texts. The medium of cinema is popular and experimental allowing for such a domestic drama to emerge as a social marker through possibilities of creating important narratives that resonate with the cine-goers.

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