

Chapter 21

Adaptation of Shakespeare in Bengali Theatre and Cinema

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ABSTRACT

The mastery and majestic aestheticism of Shakespeare has a global influence. The extensive presence of Shakespeare began in India as a part of the colonial strategy. The Bard's works were first introduced in schools and colleges as a scheme of the British government to get cheap administrative services from the natives. Gradually, Shakespeare entered the theatres of India, beginning with Calcutta, the then capital of India. With time, when the theatres were experiencing "dark stage," Shakespeare got adopted and adapted in the film industry. From Bollywood to regional Indian cinemas, like the Bengali film industry, all felt the influence as well as drew inspiration. This chapter discusses in details about the introduction of Shakespeare in India, Calcutta, his movement from page to stage, and then stage to screen. Movies like Saptapadi, Bhranti Bilas, Srimati Bhayankari, Hrid Majhare, Arshinagar, Hemanta, and Zulfiqar have been discussed.

INTRODUCTION

For centuries artists have taken up the medium of literature and film to expose the disillusion of the "world", bare open the deepest emotions and desires of men, stage the reality to educate "men and women", spread awareness in the hope of raising consciousness and responsive actions from the "players". Owing to colonialism, Indian culture, specifically literature and film, have experienced the influence of Shakespeare even after 400 years of Bard's death and 72 years of India's independence. Within India's colonial education system "a proliferation of Western literature, mainly Shakespeare...was important for a political reason too" (Yadav, 2014). Besides high aesthetic value, Shakespeare's plays and poems demonstrated the fundamental values of Western tradition and culture. Post-independence, India still witnesses Shakespeare being adapted in many Indian literature and films, translated in many Indian languages and incorporated in the works of great Indian artists. The contemporary Indian film

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industry “has in the recent past been subject to considerable critical attention and exegesis, particularly in its embodiment of a public domain that is expressive of a people’s desires, quests, and achievements” (Trivedi, 2007) as well as the democratic authority governing the country. Not only Hindi language films, or Bollywood, but also regional films like Tollywood or Bengali language films, have also been quite successful in realistic representation of the society through art and intensifying people’s interest, questioning people’s blind beliefs and using films as a means to educate and disseminate knowledge.

UNDERSTANDING THE BACKGROUND

Shakespeare in India

Postcolonial India did not renounce the abundant and significant amount of literature that the British brought with itself. The Bard’s theatrical works which were first used to provide entertainment to the English colonizers and the merchants were later used to civilize the natives of the Indian continent. The Britishers imposed exclusive Western education, including Shakespeare in literature, to the elite class of the country. While missionaries anticipated spreading Christianity through the preaching of the Bible, the government authority aimed at creating an elite group of natives through literature to aid the Britishers with the dealings of trade. Running administration with the help of native officials would become very cheap. This established a master/slave relationship between the colonizers and the colonized, building and directing the new education and culture according to their advantages. This decision of “imparting standards of proper moral behaviour to the natives” (Laurea, 2018) resulted in the establishment of colleges to bring in the western influence for their benefit. From the 19th century to the 20th, Indian society underwent substantial aesthetic interaction with the Western idea, technology, art and much more. This period was considered to be the “Indian Renaissance, social and economic no less than artistic and cultural” (Chaudhuri, 2016).

The first English-medium College established in Asia was Hindu College (1817) in Calcutta, the then capital of India. The British government took over the Hindu College in 1857, along with similar institutions in Chennai (Madras) and Mumbai (Bombay). These three cities witnessed the first hit of western influence in academics in that year. Within 1920, almost 20 universities and numerous colleges had come up across India. Even before Britain, Indian Universities had English literature Honors and Masters courses and Shakespeare was the primary fare in the curriculum. Shakespeare’s works which were defined by the elements of “morality” and “wisdom”(Bhatia, 1998) was started to be taught in Indian schools and colleges to uplift, enlighten the “uncivilized” and “morally depraved” Indians (Singh, 1989). In the mid 19th to early 20th century many English educators came from Britain to teach English literature to the students, like- J. W. Holme, J. C. Scrimgeour and D. L. Richardson in Calcutta; R. Scott in Bombay (now Mumbai); W. Raleigh in Aligarh; in Madras (now Chennai) there were W. Miller, F. W. Kellet, H. Stone and M. Hunter. Famous British authors like Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Defoe, Shakespeare and many others were included in the courses. Milton’s *Paradise Lost* was not initially taught as it was considered to be explicitly religious in images as well as themes (Kapadia, 1997; Chaudhuri, 2016).

The academic institutions instilled in the students a penchant for western influence in drama and admiration for the playwright. Under the guidance of the professors like Henry Derozio and David L. Richardson, students staged the plays of Shakespeare and began attending various productions of his plays

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