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Where the Context becomes Co-text: Shakespeare in Bollywood

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Abstract: Historical context ‘undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text.’ (Sinfield and Dollimore 6) Shakespeare’s plays have proved themselves ‘timeless’ (Barry 176) in the way they are read and enjoyed in our own times and through our own manners. However, it is interesting the way the classic period pieces of sole European soil have made their immense influence in the veteran film industry of India, Bollywood. Bollywood has been an inseparable part of the cultural thread of India and has witnessed severe political upheavals. Shakespeare play also significantly enough couldn’t ensure that culture cannot ‘transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it.’ (Sinfield and Dollimore 8) This paper seeks to address the particular enmeshment of history and culture in the reflection of Shakespeare over Bollywood movies.

Keywords: transcendent significance, timeless, enclosure, political upheavals, reflection.

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“A text can be read as saying something quite different from what it appears to be saying...it may be read as carrying a plurality of significance or as saying many different things which are fundamentally at variance with, contradictory to and subversive of what may be seen by criticism as a single ‘stable’ meaning.”

(From the entry on deconstruction; J.A.Cuddon)

The 400th death centenary of Shakespeare tends to look back to the various fields of adoption and reinterpretation of Shakespearean productions. It is an unconditional truth that the relevance and integrity of a Shakespearean text has forever remained. Shakespeare is probably the most feasible author for adaptation and re-discovering. But it is curious to note that the Hindi film industry of India has taken a fair amount of interest in producing some of the famous Shakespearean comedies and tragedies into filmic representation. What can be the connection that the classic productions of European literary soil have made a mark for a typical Indian sun-burnt head? How does an amalgamation be possible between the two contradictory cultures and what responses are given to Shakespearean history? How can the film become a text for a particular Shakespearean play? These questions can be raised in discussion of Shakespeare’s reflection over Bollywood.

There are a number of ventures of Shakespeare in Bollywood: *Zalim Saudagar* (1941), *Do Dooni Char* (1968), *Angoor* (1982), *Qayamat se Qayamat tak* (1988), *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006), *10ml Love* (2010), *Ishaqzaade* (2012), *Isaaq* (2013), *Goliyon ki Rasleela-Ram-Leela* (2013), *Haider* (2014). There may be significant time-gaps in between the productions, but there is one common thread- all those somehow or other carry the entourage of the literary bard.

While looking back to the Shakespeare’s time we see that in the Renaissance the existence of all norms and centres were taken for granted. That was the age of exploration and enunciation of the homo-centric world from the theocentric one. Man became the centre to measure all other things in universe. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola’s *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1486) has been called the “Manifesto of the Renaissance”.

Hamlet's speech "What a piece of work is Man!" (Act II. Sc II. ll. 256) also reflects upon the celebration of humanism.

Shakespeare's plays have minimal plots-characters are the *primum mobile*. Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello, Romeo and Juliet, Shylock, Julius Caesar, Coriolanus, Richard II and Richard III are all representatives of spirit of renaissance humanism, become victims of the irony of fate and meet their subsequent tragic falls. We know that Shakespeare's plots have semblance of various sources of history yet the stories became 'timeless' (Barry 176) through the ages and did not remain limited into a particular historical circumstance. However, the subsequent study tries to allow the literary texts to 'recover the histories.' (Barry 176) The kind of history recovered would involve relating the plays to such phenomena as according to Sinfield and Dollimore, "enclosures and the oppression of the rural poor, state power and resistance to it...witchcraft, the challenge and containment of the Carnavalesque." (3) On the other hand, the emphasis of political commitment signifies the influence of Marxist and feminist perspectives and break from the conservative-Christian framework that hitherto dominated Shakespeare criticism. However, it is found that the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, but that of including our own times in which Shakespeare is produced and re-produced.

India had gone through some major historical and political changes at the advent of freedom: the creation of Pakistan in 1947: partition of East and West Pakistan with India with the end of the British rule, the first battle of Kashmir in 1948, the first general election in 1952, the Emergency period of 1975 by Indira Gandhi, the demolition of Babri Masjid and Hindu-Muslim riots in 1992, the groundbreaking meeting between government and Kashmir separatists in 2004, India's governing BJP emerges for the first time as a major political player in the disputed Kashmir region after local elections in 2014. The aftermath of all these political upheavals gave birth to some challenging issues of regionalism, racial discrimination, the rising growth of terrorism and underworld mafia world, communal disharmony, corruption. We have seen earlier that a culture cannot escape from the economic and political system and thus it also cannot avoid the derogatory effect of power politics in the system. Movies, made in the meantime and

being very much a part of typical Indian culture mirror the very diabolical attitude of societal and political aspect.

Veteran Indian actor Naseeruddin Shah had once said, “The roots may look lost, but every big story in the Hindi film industry is from Shakespeare.” Hence we see that Shakespeare has much in store- drama, melody, crisis, climax, musical scores and all such humdrums that are enough to spice up a typical Indian Bolly movie. But the way the literary text recovers its history in the meta-text of films is a matter of consideration.

We may first take the example of *Qayamat se Qayamat tak*; *Ishaqzaade*, *Goliyon ka Rasleela-Ram-Leela* and *Isaaq*- the ubiquitous adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The epic saga of tragic romance believed to have been written within 1591 and 1595 and published in 1597 has been taken into oeuvre by four different productions in above movies. But the threads have been certainly different.

The young, doomed love of Shakespeare’s most-quoted play throbbed very vividly indeed in the Mansoor Khan film *Qayamat se Qayamat tak* (1988). But the fact that we have been making stories about star-crossed lovers forever might have more to do with the strong class division in India has been very much there than with some Romeo and Juliet tribute. The race, caste and class are terms almost synonymous with the Indian cultural jingoism especially in matters of marriages in some parts of Rajasthan, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh where the Khap Panchayat prevails. In the name of ‘honor killing’ the hapless lovers are thrust into the jaws of death. According to statistics from the United Nations, one in five cases of honor killing internationally every year comes from India. Of the 5000 cases reported internationally, 1000 from India.

Another realistic oeuvre of *Romeo and Juliet* is Habib Faisal’s *Ishaqzaade* (2012). That was a well-crafted and well-performed film but comparatively a shamefully regressive film, one where Romeo cons Juliet into sex and then ties her up until she falls for him. What is more important is politics that act as an embedded text in the film than the characteristic growth of romance. Political party agendas and election campaigns seem catalytic for the supposed love affair. Here Romeo and Juliet fall prey to their own political maneuver. They are the representatives of two political parties and remain

engaged into brawls and subsequent doomed fate. Religion has also played an important part in the film. The inter-religion marriage between the Hindu boy and the Muslim girl and the subsequent conflicts carry typical Indian flavor.

This kind of jingoism is also found in *Goliyon ki Rasleela-Ram-Leela* (2013), although in a different shade. Some reviews think that the *Romeo and Juliet* have really fallen short of the grade in the film. Bhansali said, “It is a liberating experience for a filmmaker to make a film on Shakespeare though I have taken away several portions from the original Shakespearean play.” (In an interview with the *MailOnlineIndia*) Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s opulent and characteristic film was nothing but a trigger-happy film mired in monumentally stupid plotting, made all the more annoying by the hero and heroine trying too hard to make things steamy. However, the scheming, plotting and scintillating depiction of sex has certainly marred the higher love and ideal culture that we found in Shakespeare.

Manish Tiwary film *Isaaq* (2013) is not just a weak Shakespeare adaptation. A horrid-Benaras based film; this is a repulsive take on *Romeo and Juliet*. The story is transposed to Benaras and its neighboring areas that are witness to violence unleashed by sand mafia controlled by urban elite and equally violent retaliation by Naxalite enemies. Disregarding the consequence, the Mishra hero fall in love with the Kashyap heroine and choose to go ahead with the dictations of their own hearts. What is interesting to note is that there is a vivid portrayal of mafia-raj and the Naxalite Movement that are very much a part of Indian political scenario. The recovering of 400 years old history tends to connect with the very power politics of the status quo of India.

Now we come to Shakespeare’s three masterpieces- *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* respectively revived in Vishal Bhardwaj’s three giant productions- *Maqbool* (2004), *Haider* (2014) and *Omkaara* (2006) as trade analyst Komal Nahta puts in, “Bollywood is largely influenced by crisp narration and strong characters created by Shakespeare. Filmmakers such as Vishal Bhardwaj have been boldly using the playwright’s plots and given them

Bollywood twists, which is an encouraging trend. However, there is more that can be explored.” (In an interview with the *MailOnlineIndia*)

Bhardwaj said, “My films are inspired by Shakespeare’s works but are not meant for Shakespearean scholars. I try to identify with the spirit and essence of the play by giving it a twirl that appeals the Indian audience.” (In an interview with the *MailOnlineIndia*) *Maqbool* (2004) the first from the trilogy tells the story of Macbeth, Shakespeare’s self-certified hero-villain though with a Bollywood twist. The tussle of ego, ids and thenatos is beautifully depicted in the much-applauded film. But where the story whimsically departs from the original text is that it is a striking mafia-based take on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (1606). Apart from *Maqbool*’s ambition and audaciousness what catches our attention is the power politics of the mafia world and the corruption that broods in the police administration. One thing is noteworthy in the film i.e. the role of the witches. We know Shakespeare had used witchcraft to cater to the taste of the Elizabethan audience. The role of the witches in *Macbeth* is one of passive soothsayers- they feed the context, help instigate the desire of Macbeth but never take active participation in the play. But the witches in the film *Maqbool* not only play an active role but they try to sustain what they refer as “balancing forces”, they also actively involve in shaping events, using subtle nuances to coerce *Maqbool* to shift loyalties and making an alliance between a rival politician and *Maqbool*’s deadliest enemy *Riyaz Boti* against *Maqbool*. They are the two corrupted police officers who also serve as the black comic relief. Another very important thing is that there is not any positive role played by anyone. Instead the whole world is corrupted. Even the good old king *Duncan* has been replaced with an underworld don and the valiant *Macduff* with the opportunist *Riyaz Boti*.

Next comes the project of *Omkara* (2006), an adaptation of *Othello* (1603) but certainly not of a Moorish one. Here we once again meet with the political enforcement of Indian society. But the story wonderfully keeps loyalty to the original text. Even some dialogues replicate the turn of phrase that was used by Shakespeare in *Othello*. *Omkara*, the *Othello* of Bhardwaj’s film is a hardened goon, equivalent to a capo, a man with principles who sees life in extremes, either as good or evil. He abducted *Dolly*, a bride

whose father Vakeel Saab attempts to kill Omi for the act when Bhaisaab intervenes and resolves the conflict by mentioning the current political conditions and prevents bloodshed. In order to bring an end to the issue Dolly appears to her father and says she eloped with Omi. This is where the director puts reference to one of the significant lines of Othello: “Look to the Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father and thee.” (Act I. Sc III. 289-290) reverberated in the line of Dolly’s father, the advocate, “She who can dupe her own father will never be anyone’s to claim.” and repeated twice by Omkara. Then when Langda gives proof against Dolly and Kesu “When I stayed at Kesu’s house, I heard him mutter in his sleep: ‘Dolly, if our love has to love, we’ll have to hide it from the entire world.’” That has a typical connection with Iago’s: “In sleep I heard him say: ‘Sweet Desdemona, Let us be wary, let us hide our loves...’” (Act III. Sc III. 413-414). That love is subject to dirty game of politics has been proved again.

Haider (2014) is another big project from Vishal Bhardwaj’s enterprise. Here Denmark is replaced with Kashmir. Typical in this film is the strange combination of the political intrigue and the history of Kashmir and the play’s sexual conflicts. The backdrop of the movie is Kashmir Insurgency Period of 1995 that has not remained a context just, but becomes a self certified text with the dexterity of direction. In an interview Vishal Bhardwaj said:

“It was the political turmoil and the 25 years of tragedy of Kashmir that compelled me. Our way of looking at Kashmir has either been cosmetic-only for shooting songs- or rhetoric, where we show a man in a phiran, holding a Kalashnikov. *Haider* is the first film where we see Kashmir from the inside. I don’t think we have made a mainstream film about the issue.”

(Bhardwaj on setting *Haider* in Kashmir; in an interview with *The Indian Express*)

Shakespeare’s Hamlet is here also a scholar in the name of Haider. The story strikingly matches with the original even with inter-weaving of characters with the famous line, “Kya karna hai; kya nehi, yehi to sawal hai.” Echoing “To be or not to be: that is

the question.” (Act III. Sc I. 64) Some another important scenes are the Grave-digging scene that almost match with the real one of *Hamlet* (1602) with a crude song and occasional comic interludes, Hamlet’s occasional madness and divergent soliloquies, the play-within-the play scene, Hamlet’s soliloquy over a skull. The effect of politics is no less: Shakespeare’s domestic politics has been transformed into the regional politics of Kashmir. We are attracted towards the culture of Kashmir, we feel sorry not just for Haider and his father but for other innocent people whose lives are at stake, moreover we feel sorry for the devastation of Kashmir’s scenic beauty. Vishal’s Haider does not take revenge at last but leaves his uncle lied with a heavy heart remembering his mother’s parting advice, “revenge only results in revenge.” And there in somewhere the story no longer remains one of personal revenge but situates itself with the very issue of Insurgency: Will Kashmir Problem ever end? Whether a perfect alliance with Pakistan is really possible? The conflict does not resolve. The film ends.

Shakespeare’s comedies are lighter- packed with occasional laughter, farcical situations, brilliant display of wit, chance romantic overtures and imaginary settings. *Do Dooni Char* (1968) and *Angoor* (1982)- both adapted from *The Comedy of Errors* (1595) maintain the legacy. Both written and directed by Gulzar have enough in store for our laughter. Yet somehow the later has a more refined and well-revised farce than the former. The comic timing of the entire cast makes the comedy on the silver screen amiable for the Indian audience and Indian culture. For example, in the film *Angoor* the character Bahadur, a counterpart of Dramio is a *bhaang* (an Indian concoction of Marijuana) lover. The Bollywood musical *Do Dooni Char* which is also a loose remake of the 1963 Bengali film *Bhrantibilas*, employs the ‘carnavalesque’ of Bakhtin when it reshuffles the role of a banker and his assistant mistakenly with a merchant and his servant. Both films highly flaunt the comic error of *mistaken identities*, another important motif of Shakespearean comedy. But there is also a thin layer of class division that was typically prominent in Shakespeare’s time and revived in the Indian context twice through the depiction and attitudes of the casts.

10ml Love (2010) is from a debutant director Sharat Katariya hit upon the fine idea by transposing the madness of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1597) to the setting of a big

Punjabi wedding. The big, fat Indian wedding has been a recurrent theme for most of the Bollywood films but when it is Shakespeare, it is something different. The film provokes fun and laughter with genuinely funny and clever moments with things unraveling fast at the climax. The concept of magic love potion in weaving a tale of love, desire and forbidden fantasies is certainly dear to the oriental country like India where magic suits well. Yet there is another thread. According to Louis Montrose's study, "Shakespeare's comedy symbolically neutralises the royal power to which it ostensibly pays homage." (127) even having female royal power on the throne it appears to make difference of Elizabeth with other women. In practice, patriarchy is mostly prevailed and the rights of fathers over the daughters and the husbands over their wives are imposed by default. The power of patriarchy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* has symbolical overtone in Indian soil where still the head of the family remains a man and after wedding wives become symbolically subjects to their husbands.

Zalim Saudagar (1941) is a Bollywood drama film based on *The Merchant of Venice* (1598). Few loose copies of the film exist today. It was directed by JJ Madan and probably the first venture before Independence. The ever-present and never-ending Jew-Christian conflict of Shakespeare's time that was presented in the dark comedy has been recovered on the screen.

Throughout the films we can see the strange play of historicity of text and textuality of history. To re-create the past with the actual feelings, emotions and meaning of an author can never be fully possible. According to Derrida's view "There is nothing outside the text." (157). It is in the special sense that everything about the past is only available to us in textualised form: it is 'thrice-processed' (Barry 169), first through the ideology, or outlook, or discursive practices of its own time, then through those of ours, and finally through the distorting web of language itself. Hence, Shakespeare's stories are remade; history is remade and recaptures the audiences' attention again and again. Bollywood's ventures to the literary bard may be decidedly not 'Shakespearean' but the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it.

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