

THE BOOK REVIEW

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SHAKESPEARE AND INDIAN CINEMAS: 'LOCAL HABITATIONS'

Edited by Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti

Routledge, New York and London, 2019, pp. xiv+344, £120.00

Any survey of Shakespeare requires an intricate triangulation of history, politics and culture. Shakespeare is so integrally related to Cinema that movies which adapt Shakespeare are used to showcase the multidimensional growth of cinema itself—from the minute-long, B&W silent *King John* (1898) to the virtual reality 360-degree cinematic adaptation *Hamlet 360: Thy Father's Spirit* (2017). Although Shakespearean cinema became a subject of academic discussion in 1968, those from Indian cinema which has been producing Shakespeare cinema at least since 1923 and is the largest film industry in the world, with about 2000 feature films a year, has remained surprisingly overlooked. With its multiple histories and identities, mapping Shakespeare in multilingual and multicultural India is a complex affair involving page, stage, screen and virtual reality. There have been several piecemeal attempts to showcase Shakespeare in cinema from the viewpoint of individual movies, regions and languages. *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: 'Local Habitations'* gives a more comprehensive picture of Shakespeare in Indian cinema with the help of the contributions of fifteen renowned scholars from across India and the world.

The book tries to map the extent of Shakespeare's presence in Indian cinema which originated in Bombay. The metaphor of the localization of the anglicized names of these cities is an assertion of the local. In the same way, the practice and politics of the localization of 'foreign' Shakespeare in Indian cinema is the subject worth looking at. The British established the Calcutta Theatre with David Garrick's help in 1775 to promote the 'god of our bardolatory' and Bengali school children displayed talent for Shakespeare declamation even before Macaulay's *Minutes on Indian Education* (1835). Foreign Shakespeare fascinated them so much that Bengali intelligentsia frowned

upon a fellow Bengali who dared to play Othello opposite a white actress at Sans Souci Theatre in 1848. After the appearance of the university, one sees people preferring localized Shakespeare on stage, and after Indian Independence the Bengali Bollywood actor Utpal Dutt localized Shakespeare into local theatre Jatra, making Shakespeare palatable to the rural Indian audience. Delhi, the political capital which persisted with pro-English and pro-Shakespeare language and education policies even after Independence also promoted localizing him in theatre in different contexts. Even the first serious search for Shakespeare in India began with Delhi-based Sahitya Akademi's special edition of *Indian Literature on Shakespeare* in 1964. India's economic capital Bombay saw Marathi and Parsi theatres localizing him on stage and screen. Parsi theatre companies metamorphosed into film companies as soon as film was introduced and produced the first Indian Shakespeare film *Champraj Hadoi* in 1923 and helped to promote Shakespeare across Indian regional theatres and cinema. This survey of Shakespeare films produced by Indian language cinemas within India, and by the Indian diaspora complements the existing scholarship on Indian translations and stage productions of Shakespeare.

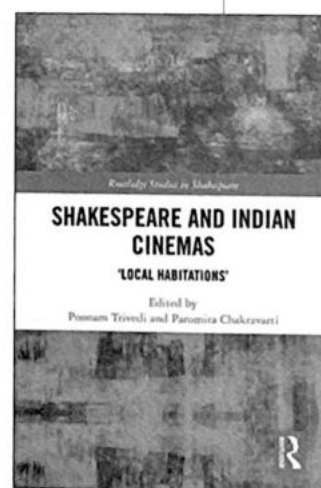
Right from its very inception in India, the East India Company had a Shakespeare connection. Its agent Thomas Roe who obtained trading licence from the Mughal Emperor came to Surat in 1607 on *Red Dragon* on whose deck her sailors, as Captain William Keeling's journal claims, had staged *Hamlet* and *Richard II* in 1607. The Company built its capital first at Kolkata and later in 'New' Delhi. Its Governor General Hardinge's proclamation preferring Indians competent in English language for jobs (1844), the Woods Despatch (1854), and his imperial promotion ensconced Shakespeare in India. The articles, interviews and appendices in this volume showcase and establish how Shakespeare is given a local habitation as he is being made anew for cinema audience across India.

The book extends Poonam Trivedi's 'Filmi Shakespeare' argument that Indian, especially Hindi, cinema which sprang up on the floorboards of Shakespeare-influenced Parsi theatre, is still nourished by Shakespeare as evidenced by his appropriations, recreations, relocations

and presences throughout Indian cinema's long engagement with Shakespeare from its early silent days. Shakespeare, as passed on to Indians through colonial education, collaborated with the Empire to build India anew by redefining India's cultural framework through literary works, performances and cinema. By popularizing Shakespeare, cinema also introduced new ideas through him into India and the new Indian middle class found Miranda and Desdemona as better models for Indian domestic virtues than Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*. The popularity of movies featuring characters like Portia and Cymbeline also testify to this.

Unlike Calcutta which favoured English education, Mumbai which preferred education in Oriental languages led in localizing Shakespeare and Parsi theatre ingeniously translated and adapted him to the Indian context. Writers and actors from across various regions, communities, castes, and classes served local audiences as they also carried Shakespeare across India using the newly introduced railway network. In the process, they spiced him up for the local palate by adding dance, songs, fights, lots of emotions and colour, the staple masala—something that survives in Bollywood films even today. Their success paved the way not only for the rise of regional theatres, but also the Indian movie industry. The introduction of film transformed Parsi theatres, which also relied on Shakespeare to give them fantastic plots, into cinema companies. Following the Indian idea of translation, they freely adapted, and reworked Shakespeare. The educational advantage of Calcutta and the political might of Delhi were complemented by Mumbai's popularization of the Bard in cinema.

The editors and Indian and British contributors who include academics, film makers, critics, and curators from different Indian languages and cultures give a macro- and pan-Indian perspective to catalogue and analyse the complex interplay of the aesthetic, historical, socio-political, and theoretical conditions under which Indian language cinema turns to Shakespeare and the various purposes which he is used for. This is evident in the six sections of the book. The section 'Indigenising the Tragic' analyses the commercially successful *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, *Haider*, *Ekalavya*, *Gunasundarikatha*, *Kaliyattam* and *Veeram* which adapt *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Romeo and Juliet* in different languages. The section



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'Critical Innovations' examines the Indian silent Shakespeare archive using the lens of Indian poetics. 'Between the Global and the Local' explains translocal collaborations by examining the adaptation of Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* as *King Lear* in Parsi, the different versions of *King Lear*, the role of 'Indie' films like Nagesh Kukunoor's *8x10 Tasveer* which adapts *Hamlet* and Sharat Kataria's *10ml Love* which adapts *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; and the Hollywood-Tamil collaboration in bringing *Romeo and Juliet* as *Ambikapathy*. In 'Reimagining Gender, Region and Nation', the editor of *Shakespeare and World Cinema*, Mark Thornton Burnett analyses the Kannada adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew* as *Nanjundi Kalyana*, and others examine how Tamil cinema uses Shakespeare, the journey of the Bengali adaptations of *The Comedy of Errors* as *Bhrantibilash*, and how Assamese Shakespeare cinema reflects the region. The 'Interviews' dated 2015 and 2016 with Pankaj Butalia, Roysten Abel and Aparna Sen who were involved with producing Shakespeare show the meticulous preparation the editors have made. Its 'Annotated Filmography' and chronological table of Shakespeare filmography comprehensively track the circulation of Shakespeare in India with '115 titles and growing!'. This thorough work corroborates the editors' claim that transcultural appropriation is a legitimate mode of interpreting Shakespeare.

As all authors in the volume come from different backgrounds, there are a few minor inconsistencies like the one about the first Shakespeare film in India. While Amrita Sen quotes an earlier work of Paromita Chakravarti, one of the editors, to say that it was *Dil Farosh* (1927) which adapted *The Merchant of Venice* (p. 253), Amrit Gangar claims *Champraj Hado* (1923) as an adaptation of *Cymbeline* (p.119). The editors recognize this in the 'Introduction' (p.12)

and in the 'Filmography Chronological' which lists *Champraj Hado* and adds *Savkari Pash* (1925) (p. 328) before *Dil Farosh*, saying these give Shakespeare greater antiquity in Indian cinema. It is a general problem that given the popular currency of his stories Shakespeare tends to get remade unacknowledged in several languages and cultures.

This Routledge volume makes up for the western disregard for Indian Shakespeare cinema in the context of India's increasing global presence and the increase in Shakespeare's onscreen presence. It highlights Indian cinema's unique contributions: the world's first *Hamlet* talkie film *Khoon ka Khoon* (1935), the semiotic splendour of *Othello* localizations like *Kaliyattam*, Vishal Bharadwaj's outstanding contemporizing of Shakespeare, the world's finest film version of *The Comedy of Errors*, and to the many unacknowledged embeddings of Shakespeare as scenes, titles, references etc.

The work significantly adds to the filmography of a hundred years appended in Kenneth Rothwell's *A History of Shakespeare on Screen* (1999) and complements and adds on to regionally-restricted works like *Bollywood Shakespeares* edited by Craig Dionne and Parmita Kapadia (2014). It is a pioneering work that covers Shakespeare cinemas in Assamese, Bengali, English, Hindi, Kannada, Malayalam, Telugu, and Urdu languages; analyses Marathi, Mizo, Punjabi, Urdu and the 'Indie' versions of Shakespeare; and discusses 'silent' era films. It refers to a total of 81 Indian film versions of 13 Shakespeare plays—*Antony and Cleopatra*, *Cymbeline*, *Hamlet*, *King John*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard III*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Comedy of Errors*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Twelfth Night*—in detail and lists 115 Indian language films—89 direct adaptations, and 26 others which refer to Shakespeare and his works. It traces the politics of intra-, inter- and multi-cultural crosscurrents between various film industries within India and explores the interplay of the aesthetic, historical, socio-political and theoretical contexts in which Indian language films turn towards Shakespeare. The discursive shift this book visualizes in how Shakespeare on screen is to be theorized could be its biggest contribution to global Shakespeare scholarship.

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Reel Life vs Real Life: The Intimate Interface

Amitabha Bhattacharya

REEL INDIA: CINEMA OFF THE BEATEN TRACK

By Namrata Joshi

Hachette India, 2019, pp. xxvii + 252, ₹599.00

Ever since cinema emerged as a dominant source of entertainment in the last century, its influence on the public psyche remains unsurpassed. Over time and across space, it has changed forms and with technological innovations, its range and capacity have hugely expanded, but the basic appeal of cinema as the most sensuous of all art forms or its definition as the highest form of commercial art, to paraphrase Satyajit Ray, remains largely unaltered. Whether one agrees with Oscar Wilde that 'Life imitates art far more than art imitates life', there is not much doubt about the intimate relation between reel life and real life, especially in the context of India which happens to be the largest producer of films in the world. A new book by Namrata Joshi, noted cinemate, cites evidence after evidence of how commercial films in Hindi (and also in Tamil, for example) continue to mesmerize large sections of our population, especially in small towns and other urban agglomerations, and seeks to fathom the reason behind such mass obsession.

As Joshi observes, based on her long experience, 'cinema is not merely medium of entertainment or an art form, but an intensely personal engagement and a significant sociological and economic constituent of some ordinary, unknown lives lived within commonplace homes and families in a few, rather unremarkable Indian towns.' The book is remarkable precisely because it brings to public notice the nature of this intense engagement, through a series of case-studies, covering different facets of popular cinema; how, 'for small towns, cinema has been the most immersive form of entertainment...', however escapist it may be.

In sixteen chapters, Joshi seeks to cover the whole gamut of such experience, portraying the obsession of individuals and groups with heroes and heroines, music directors and singers and narrating the manner in which cinema theatres and even the radio become cultural rallying points.

In *A Town Divided*, Joshi shows the unparalleled impact of Salman Khan on his