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# Analysing Diverse Genres: Shakespeare in India

Joseph Koyippally

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

