

Unit: 34: Shakespeare and Cultures of Performance

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Culture, as Raymond Williams noticed, is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language. It is an all-encompassing word, covering almost everything that we do as humans, and has a wide variety of references. Shakespeare was temperamentally inclined to make use of the culture of this countryside in his plays. When he is taken to another culture, how he is made to fit in to make sense in the new cultural environment can be seen from his many adaptations in different cultures, in different formats.

Shakespeare's plays are subjected to discourses of gender, race, age, language, and theatre forms and their eclectic mixtures. These different performances range from traditional performances to radical theatres. To feature all would read like a history of theatre and so, let us limit ourselves to cultures of performance, and deal with them in terms of time, gender, place, theatre and race.

Cultures of Performance

Cultures of performance acculturate Shakespeare to specific cultures they represent. These could be linguistic, regional, national, gender, religious, and ideological. Acculturation is the process through which one adopts, acquires and adjusts to new culture through social, psychological, and cultural acclimatization. When Shakespeare is taken to another culture, Shakespeare changes to fit into the receiving culture and also affects it, balancing both. Depending on to which side this balance tilts, the degree of acculturation differs. These are evident in Shakespeare adaptations in various performance cultures around the world.

Shakespeare has inspired a wide variety of cultural interpretations, right from his own times. We can see a gradual change in Shakespeare's performances even from the days of The Theatre to the days of the Blackfriars. We have seen that the Earl of Essex's friends had asked Shakespeare to perform *Richard II* as they believed that this play would incite the spectators against the ageing Queen Elizabeth and justify their coup. Essex's friends thought that in the context of the impending coup the performance of *Richard II* will help them justify their action. Later, when John Dryden adapted Shakespeare to the Restoration stage, he made many fundamental changes to make the play to fit in the Restoration cultural context.

Shakespeare was a product of his time. He was connected to a specific acting company as its playwright and to an Elizabethan theatre. So, he was bound by its customs, conventions and expectations. If these are strictly followed in a modern Shakespeare production, it is not likely to succeed as the customs, conventions and expectations today are quite different. There have been many attempts to recreate Shakespeare after the customs, conventions and expectations of a period. Similarly, there were also many voices demanding one to go back to Shakespeare in his worn time and that the changes made should be compatible with his Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural context.

Time

There have been many specific differences between Shakespeare's time and theatres today. One of the most significant difference has been at the level of direction. Actors in Shakespeare's time were mostly self-directed. They depended on the understanding and synergy among the actors. Most of the actors

were given only their part and not the whole play. As the paper was expensive, actors were given only their parts with cue lines. They helped one another on the stage through verbal cues suggesting how to act and react. An example of this can be seen in *Macbeth*. When the third witch greets Macbeth with the words, "All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!", it is Banquo who reacts, not Macbeth. Banquo's lines serve a verbal cue for the actor playing Macbeth to act:

Banquo: Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? (Mac. 1.3)

Similar instances are there in plenty of the in Shakespeare. In *The Tempest*, when Prospero rebukes Miranda and renders Ferdinand powerless, he gives them verbal cues to react:

Prospero: ...Put thy sword up, traitor;
Who makest a show but darest not strike, ...
For I can here disarm thee with this stick
And make thy weapon drop. (*Tmp.* 1.2)

Later, he tells Ariel who helps him to attire "so, so, so" (5.1) directing Ariel how to dress him up. In *King Lear*, Cordelia prompts Lear saying, "No, sir, you must not kneel" (4.7). Here an actor himself directs his movements and gestures, and the writer was very conscious of the movements of the actors on the stage.

Today, actors work with the full script, rehearses with the team of actors for several days, may use more than one director in different aspects of the play, and every detail is worked out with the set designers. In Shakespeare's stage, on the other hand, a lot of it was left to imagination and actors expected the audience to imagine. The kind of distance that we feel today between actors and audience did not exist in Shakespeare's theatre they interacted directly. It was not uncommon for them to interrupt a play in progress when important persons walked in.

The Elizabethan audience did not suspend their disbelief in the theatre. Since the disguises were obvious to the audience, the audience became privileged insiders. They knew much more than the other actors on the stage. The soliloquies and asides were meant for them and further privileged to them, creating dramatic irony. The actor did not mind asking the audience, as the Chorus did in *Henry V*: "Can this cockpit hold/ the vasty fields of France?" and "Think when we talk of horses, that you see them / Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth; (*5H1.1*).

It was also a noisy and boisterous crowd, unlike the modern audience which is more silent. Perhaps the amphitheatre structure of The Globe Theatre made the audience interact freely with the actors. As they were surrounded by all the three sides, the actors had nothing to hide from their audience. It was not very easy to create illusions on such a stage. The audience was aware of the artificiality that was presented before them and was not uncomfortable with the disruption of theatrical illusion. It seems that more than the illusion, it was their inclusion that Shakespeare's audience liked.

However, his audience loved and special effects, as it is today. The thunder and lightning, the vanishing cauldron in *Macbeth*, the tempestuous noise and lightning and storm and the vanishing feast in *The Tempest*, the descent of the gods from the heavens above etc. fascinated Shakespeare's audience. They rolled a cannonball across the wooden plank to create the sound of the thunder, used gunpowder to create lightning, and used pulleys and ropes to make objects descend and also fly. This might appear crude in the world of digital enhancement of illusions today.

Gender

Another significant exception in Shakespeare's stage was the absence of women actors. He worked with an all-male crew of actors, and the role of women was performed by young boys and especially talented men. Shakespeare exploited this disadvantage to make boy actors playing female roles, crossdress as men, and played their natural self, creating an illusion. This can be seen in *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Twelfth Night*, and *As You Like It*.

Only 16% of Shakespeare's characters are women. Still, they are integral to his plays although some are central and some are marginal. Some like Cleopatra and Lady Macbeth appear strong and decisive, while some like Ophelia and Desdemona conform to patriarchal notions of femininity. The prominent female characters in Shakespeare apart from princesses and queens in the history plays were: Adriana (*Err.*), Beatrice (*Ado.*), Bianca (*Oth, Shr.*), Celia (*AYLI*), Charmion (*Ant.*), Cleopatra (*Ant.*), Cordelia (*Lr.*), Cressida (*Tro.*), Desdemona (*Oth.*), Emilia (*Oth.*), Gertrude (*Ham.*), Goneril (*Lr.*), Helena (*MND*), Hermia (*MND*), Hermione (*WT*), Hero (*Ado.*), Hippolyta (*MND*), Imogen (*Cym*), Iras (*Ant.*), Isabella (*MM*), Jessica (*MV*), Julia (*TGV*), Juliet (*Rom.*), Katherina (*Shr.*), Lady Macbeth (*Mac.*), Lady Macduff (*Mac.*), Lavinia (*Tit.*), Maria (*TN*), Mariana (*MM*), Miranda (*Tmp*), Mistress Quickly (4 Hen 1&2, 5 Hen, *MWW*), Nurse (*Rom*), Olivia (*TN*), Ophelia (*Ham.*), Paulina (*WT*), Perdita (*WT*), Portia (*JC, MV*), Regan (*Lr.*), Rosalind (*AYLI*), Tamora (*Tit.*), Titania (*MND*), Viola (*TN*), Virgilia (*Cor.*), Volumnia (*Cor.*), and Witches (*Mac.*). Some of the female characters like Queen Catherine, in the history plays, are also strong. He makes use of the exuberance of youth in his comedies. The twin young girls in his sunny comedies testify this.

Male actors continued to play the roles of women throughout Shakespeare's career. The change had to wait until the Restoration period. The Restoration stage redesigned Shakespeare's plays to highlight the sex appeal of the actresses. The "cinque-spotted" mole on Imogen's left breast (2.2.4) was exploited by the Restoration dramatists to expose the actresses playing the role. This seems to have offended the likes of the Bowdlers so much that they changed the position of the mole to the neck.

The reaction to the exclusion of women from Shakespeare's stage made many actresses perform Shakespeare's female as well as male characters. The first actress to perform a Shakespeare role is a contentious issue. Margaret 'Peg' Hughes (c. 1630 –1719), Anne Marshall, (Mrs. Anne Quin) (1661-1682), and Mrs Norris are the popular choices for this. The names of Mrs. Saunderson (Mrs. Betterton) and Katherine Corey are also suggested. Whether Mrs Hughes played Desdemona at Vere Street in December 1660 as an experiment is speculation.

Sarah Siddons (1755–1831) was the first woman to play a male character in Shakespeare. She performed Hamlet with élan. The French actress Sarah Bernhardt (1844–1923) was the first to play a Shakespeare male character, Hamlet again, in film. She also performed Hamlet on stage. The other major female actors who performed Shakespeare's male characters include Ellen Terry, Asta Nielsen, Neil Bartlett, and Maxine Peake.

Criticism about the absence of women in Shakespeare also led to the production of all-female Shakespeare plays. Phyllida Lloyd's all-female Donmar Shakespeare Trilogy: *Julius Caesar* (2012), *Henry IV* (2014) and *The Tempest* (2016) was the set in prison. Going even further, the Reversed Shakespeare Company performed Shakespeare with the gender of each character switched, with men playing female roles and women playing male roles. This examination and expansion of gender roles could be seen in its 'gender-bent' *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The feminist use Shakespeare is to highlight issues of gender by rewritings Shakespeare. By interpreting gender as a social construct, Bryony Lavery's *Ophelia*, Women's Theatre Group and Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters*, and Paula Vogel's *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* re-examine the traditional viewpoints about Ophelia, Desdemona and Cordelia. *Desdemona: A Play About a Handkerchief* by Paula Vogel and *Harlem Duet* by Djanet Sears are postmodern and feminist adaptations critiquing gender, class and race from alternative perspectives to suit the different audiences and their cultures.

Region

Shakespeare is adapted across geographic boundaries of nation-states. His reception in south Asia, Asia and Latin America have been significantly coloured by local performance cultures. In India and Pakistan, it was the Parsi theatre which Indianized Shakespeare and led to Bollywood cinema. The Parsi theatre took Shakespeare and modern drama across India adapted him and inspired local theatres to adapt him. This chain reaction has resulted in local adaptations of Shakespeare in several regional and folk formats like *Baul*, *Bein dia Khelm*, *Harikatha*, *kathaprasamgam*, *janapadam*, *Jatra*, *kalari*, *thira*, *theyyam*, *poorakkali*, *tholubommalata*, as well as *Nautanki*, *yakhagana*, *Kathakali*, *Koodiyattam*, *Chavittunatakam*, etc.

Bollywood is notorious for its unabashed remakes of literary adaptations without acknowledging them. Its hallmarks are its presentation than its originality. It freely adapts stories and acculturates them to the many regional/local cultures of India. Through translation, adaptation, rewriting, and transformation, Indian theatre and cinema have adapted almost Shakespeare plays. Although during the pre-independence era had been a deliberated antagonism towards Shakespeare for political reasons, later, Bollywood found it beneficial to acculturate Shakespeare instead of ignoring him. Such transformational and transcultural adaptations sometimes have excelled the original in Indian conditions (Trivedi and Chakravarti, Introduction 9). *Angoor*, *10 ml Love*, *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, and *Haider*, *Kaliyattam* etc. are some of the successful and internationally acclaimed Shakespeare movie adaptations from India.

An important Shakespeare director in India is Vishal Bhardwaj. He contemporizes Shakespeare by locating him in modern India and experiments with new localizations. To portray the violent world of *Macbeth* he chose the systemic violence of Mumbai underworld in *Maqbool*, the image of rustic chivalry and moral ambiguity of the UP badlands for capturing the spirit of *Othello* in *Omkara*, and the indecision and hesitancy of *Hamlet* by using the confusing and beguiling backdrop of the insurgency-hit Kashmir in *Haider*. His films also portray very violent and strong female figures who match their male protagonists. In *Maqbool*, Nimmi/Lady Macbeth forces Maqbool/Macbeth to accept her gunpoint, In *Omkara*, Dollly/Desdemona aggressively woos Omi/Othello, and in *Haider*, Ghazala/Gertrude is an avenger and Arshi/Ophelia use guns with ease. Such conceptions make the original richer.

Even within India, there are different approaches to Shakespeare. It appeared that these natural differences will get neutralized by the predominance of the Indian aesthetic theories, and Shakespeare dispersion across India through western acting companies and later by the Parsi theatre. Regional tastes and differences still dominate. Even as Shakespeare helps Indian cinema to create a site for intercultural dialogue, they also acculturate and accommodate western genres with Indian cultural expressions and tastes. Western cinema helps to internationalize these Indian versions through the universally acceptable Shakespeare platform. Despite the few glocal diaspora productions, regional Indian Shakespeare productions mostly remain local. This is also a strength as these balance the faithfulness to Shakespeare and the absolute Indianness by negotiating local-global tension through interculturality at regional-Indian-universal plains at different levels.

Tamil Shakespeare tradition explains this. The early Tamil film *Ambikapathy* (1937) hybridized *Romeo and Juliet* with a 12th Century Tamil tragic romance between Amaravathy, the daughter of the Chola king Kulothunga and Ambikapathy, the talented son of the court poet Kamabar. This successful intercultural exercise directed by the American film director Ellis R Duncan. He liberally used western movie conventions and tropes to the conventional Tamil film. Till then, Tamil cinema was operating only within the framework of epics and Puranas.

It set the tale of tragic love using Romeo and Juliet motif, in the wake of the success of George Cukor's Hollywood film *Romeo and Juliet* (1936). It added the balcony scene and nurse, giving it shades of *Romeo and Juliet* although it differs in details from the play. It also translated a few lines faithfully.

thookkam en kankale thazhuvattum
amaithi nin nenchil nilaottum
antha thukkavum amaithiyum nanaanaal!

It is a direct translation of

Sleep dwell upon thine eyes, peace in thy breast!
Would I were sleep and peace, so sweet to rest! (*Rom.* 2.2).

Some scholars think that the genesis of the “flowery songs in *Ambikapathy* can be traced to the early Indian stage musicals, influenced by the translations and adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*” (Buckley 206). Some of these elements indeed come from and Parsi and Tamil musical stage Shakespeare. However, the convention is not foreign to Tamil which is rich in its own musical and *pattu* tradition. This rhizomatic acculturation of Shakespeare can be seen in Shakespeare's imbrication with cultural processes of adaptation”. His plays are more “collaborators” than as “privileged sources” and reveal the interdependence between Shakespeare and local forms. In this, the amount of acculturation could tilt towards Shakespeare or the local culture(s) (White 48). More and more Indian movies showcase India as they adapt Shakespeare and modern ‘Indie’ films reverse the Duncan-paradigm to showcase Shakespeare in Indian terms.

Religion

Alternative modes of understating Indian Shakespeare adaptation is yet to be recognized although there have been several attempts to use Indian literary theories to explain Shakespeare. This becomes even more difficult as the language in which these theories are discussed does not match dominant Indian reality and the western discourses which are used to explain Shakespeare are based on western aesthetics. As religion permeates Indian reality when Shakespeare is adapted into Indian theatre, it does not escape gods, goddesses, prayers and sages. Indian aesthetic theory which is the base of Indian sensibility in general is closely linked to Indian religious philosophy.

One of the major issues in Indian Shakespeare appreciation is the moral void in Shakespearean tragedy. Indian literary appreciation is not oriented towards tragedy as such. Although one can have tragic twists and turns, the faith in all-knowing and benevolent god helps characters overcome tragi trials. This approach mandates a happy ending. Even in Parsi theatre adaptation, religion played a significant role. An example is the Telugu film adaptation of *King Lear* as *Ginasundarikatha*.

Gunasundarikatha exploits the local folklore (*janapadam*). It tells the story of a princess Gunasundari, who her father banishes as she failed the love test. He marries her away to Daivadeenam, a lame man who in reality was a prince under a curse. Later, the illtreated and sick king requires *mahendramani*, a

magic stone, to cure him. Daivadeenam finds it out but is turned into a hideous bear. The other sons-in-law steal the stone from him and take it to the king. Gunasundar's constant devotion to her husband pleases Lord Shiva and Parvati who appear to them as a tribal couple and bless them. Daivadeenam is turned to his handsome shape, he cures the king and is crowned the prince.

Asian theatre

In Asian presentations, it is not the plot, but the manner of presentation that comes into focus. It is the elaborated and nuanced presentation that matters in the eastern performance traditions. The elaborate performance of a five-minute scene into a 6-hour performance in Kathakali is not unusual. It is not the story or even how the story unfolds that interests the audience as the story and the plot are well-known to the audience. These performances are similar to the western opera as its audience who already know the story only await graceful enunciations of articular scenes.

Kabuki in Japan, Kathakali and Koodiyattam in Kerala, and the classical dances of India like Bharatanatyam, Kuchipudi, Mohiniyattam, etc. do the same. Shakespeare is presented in all these formats, but only in part. Enacting the whole story might last a long time. As most of these art forms are performed by hereditary performers, their acting gets compared. The merit of these performances is judged by comparing it with its past performances and in the actor theatres, the focus is on the actor and not on the story.

Shakespeare enunciates story through rich dialogues. These rich literary expressions display emotion and movements as they unfurl episodes. On the other hand, Asian theatres express a story through visual elements. Its lyrical poetry is more acted out making action move from point to point. In between these lyrical dialogues, the actors act, mime, and dance based on complex codes of its theatre making it predominantly visual. The codification of Asian theatres constitutes a semiotic universe within which Shakespearean story is only a pretext for the display of performance skills. *Kathakali Lear*, *Kabuki Macbeth* etc. become significant within the performance codes of these theatres.

The intercultural nature of the productions can be seen in the modern forms of Shakespeare productions in Asian countries. Manga graphic novels feature Shakespeare in the background of contemporary nightlife and use recreated images of characters in contemporary Japan. Gangsters, butlers, maids etc. feature in these pop culture forms, animation films and computer games. The Female-Body Shakespeare productions of *Noh-satsu Hamlet* (2011) and *Zeccho Macbeth* (2012) by the all-female troupe, *Kaki Kuu Kyaku* use unconventional verbal style and all-female troupe create a sense of emotional alienation or detachment between word and body. Nakayashiki emphasizes sensuality using provocative titles like *Seductive Hamlet*, *Macbeth at the Climax*, *Horny Julius Caesar*, and *Juliet on the Loose* etc. emphasizing erotic impressions.

Race

Ira Aldridge was the first black actor to appear in Shakespeare. He went on the recent *Macbeth* and *Richard III* also in the 1820s on the stage. Since then black actors have successfully played roles of white characters on the stage and on the screen. Paul Robeson was the first to play *Othello* in Britain since Aldridge. Apart from playing *Othello*, James Earl Jones, Denzel Washington, Morgan Freeman, Adrian Lester, Condola Rashad, Noma Dumezweni are some of the black actors who have played Shakespeare roles.

Two significant black Shakespeare discourses are Charles Marowitz's *An Othello* (1972) with a black Iago despising the black *Othello* for enabling whites to cheat the black. It also uses the revolutionary

ideas of black activists like Malcolm X. The French-West Indian Aime Cesaire's *Une Tempête* foregrounds the idea of 'negritude' with a black Caliban instigating the servile black Ariel revolt against the white coloniser Prospero.

The *British Black and Asian Shakespeare Performance Database* maintained by the University of Warwick lists 653 black Shakespeare performances in the UK from 1931: *MND* (93), *TN* (72), *AYLI* (58), *MV* (54), *Tmp* (49), *Ado* (45), *MM* (32), *Shr.* (30), *WT* (30), *Err* (29), *LLL* (19), *Per* (19), *TGV* (12), *AWW* (11), *MWW* (7), and *TNK* (3). These black discourses of Shakespeare are significant multicultural exercises.

All-Black Shakespeare is another reaction to the all-white Shakespeare productions. There were many all-black productions. The 20-year old director Orson Welles made *Voodoo Macbeth* (as a Federal Theatre Project in 1936) promoting Afro-American theatre. Relocating *Macbeth* to a Caribbean island and using Haitian voodoo, he challenged traditional reading of *Macbeth*, inspiring many black Shakespeare productions later. Peter Coe's exotic all-black *Black Macbeth* (1972) was set in South Africa and localised *Macbeth* with cow-bells and bongo-drum music, gyrating dances, banquet served on the floor, coconut shell cups, and magic. Its *Macbeth* (Mbeth), is a bearded, gleaming black giant wielding a wooden spear and roars like a lion. Welcome Msomi's *uMabatha* (1979) is another celebrated example.

Shakespeare is seen as a neutral but universal platform to articulate new ideas and theories. Regional theatres and movements which need to disseminate their ideas find Shakespeare as an easy vehicle to carry their ideas across.

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