



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Shakespeare in Popular Digital Literary Culture

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Abstract

There have been paradigmatic shifts in recent literary writings. Scholarly attention is being paid to the cultural context of the literary endeavors. It has rightly been remarked that different readings, re-readings often land one into an enriched vocabulary and different meanings of the same content but in differing contexts. William Shakespeare has and perhaps will remain the most fascinating writers of the literary world and the present article is an attempt to trace the trajectory of development into the digital literary traditions inspired by Shakespearean writings. His works can be analyzed from differing viewpoint and perspectives and this is the prime reason why we have chosen it to be the main theme of the present study.

Keywords

Identities, digital, popular perceptions, literary writings, narrative,

Main Article

The present article, as noted above is a survey of the impact of Shakespearean tradition of the popular culture. Amongst the many famous works of Shakespeare, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear have been adapted into vernaculars and non-English popular cinema. Sometimes the school and college-based enactments are also nicely woven around the Shakespearean writings. Stories do not emerge without any purpose. Any story or writing can be seen as the effort of the particular society to construct a narrative which suits their purpose. Representations and re-enactments at times aim to ratify the existing social norms. At times, some corroboration is also required to achieve some sanctity for the narrative. Texts at times can be site for the convergence of political ideologies.

For instance, power in early modern England was theatrical and Shakespearean works need to be placed in the correct chronological and spatial perspective and context. ¹This contextualizing of a narrative

¹Jonathan Bate, *Shakespearean Constitutions: Politics, Theatre, Criticism 1730-1830*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1989.

often adds to the value and beauty of the narrative. Then it is no more a mere conglomeration of facts, data and information. In fact, narrations are never free from subjectivity and when the narrative is being used for contesting a particular belief or an ideology, this subjectivity adds to the inherent heterogeneity.²

Admittedly, there are more than one way in which Shakespearean drama engages with digital and popular culture as it has had several sites of performance. There are different ways through which one can engage with Shakespeare, from the pages of a printed material, from radio, disks, cassette, big screens, theatres, drama and stages. Gone are the days when people had just two options of interconnecting these works, either from page or from stage. Now we have a range of popular and digital means through which these works can be experienced.

The digital culture and digital technology have shaped our current understanding and imagination of Shakespearean drama. The trend of digitalization has not left any branch or field untouched, and Shakespeare's works also do not remain untouched. Jon McKenzie opines that the recent developments in the field of computer technology have almost made it a "meta technology" which incorporates a variety of other popular means.³ However, the principal means of carrying the basic knowledge still remains associated with book and the printed material, day by day increasing audio-visuals have also made a lasting impact on the popular perceptions of the Shakespearean works recently. For example, the cinema or a television series would naturally combine a set of fictional narratives along with the original narrative to create a new version of a popular meta-narrative.

Western culture has seen the emergence of a sort of "dualism" as far as the relationship between page and stage is concerned. Similar developments can be seen in Indian context as well where we have a large number of speakers of English language. But the development of "dualism" has not been the same in both the contexts. Even while admitting the growing popularity of the digital technologies, we need to be careful about the distinctive ways in which these platforms operate. The responses of the audiences to the things presented before them, perhaps holds the key to this understanding.

The digital means attempt to relocate the original narrative in a new cultural and technological context.⁴ For instance, the episodes read from a printed material (book) when seen onscreen after several years may give a mixed feeling to the audience. Another aspect is that while, prints and mechanical reproduction provide a kind of stability to the content and narrative, the digital reproduction has a better chance of evoking new feelings as the settings and technologies undergo a change.

Some scholars and critics regard digital as a weak successor to the printed version, however when seen from a long-term perspective the digital contents can provide a better and lasting stability in comparison to the non-digital ones.⁵ The co modification of information certainly has its own share of problems but in the present-day scenario digitalization has been a kind of liberator and to most of the literary narratives.

This brings us to the point where it is very essential to identify the distinction between information and knowledge because seen from a cultural phenomenon, the readers and audiences generally come from

²Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey, "Literature as an Ideological Form", Oxford Literary Review, 3.1, 1978.

³Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London, Routledge, 2001, p. 186.

⁴Diana Henderson (ed.), *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2006, pp. 1-7.

⁵Jon McKenzie, *Perform or Else: From Discipline to Performance*, London, Routledge, 2001, p.113.

distinct backgrounds and it is futile to expect homogeneity in their perceptions of the narrative and content served to them. Some homogeneity may have been in this case a few decades ago when technology had a limited spread, but in the recent past audio-visuals have started travelling faster than the printed narratives and this accounts for the differences in the responses they generate from both, reader and the audiences. We need to keep in mind that there is a distinction between “the Shakespeare Play” and “the Shakespeare performance” and perhaps the differences of the same type can be observed in non-digital and digital narratives.

To carry forward the argument part, one can refer to what Derrida says regarding the theory of dissemination and the ways in which the meanings of a given word may spread amongst the people generating many new and different meanings of the same word in accordance to the cultural background in which this spread takes place. At times ideology regulates the infinite play of any literary narrative or text. But such a pattern is very difficult to note in the case of Shakespearian re-enactments as the written, printed or the literary narrative has perhaps an altogether different impact on the popular mind than the much later audio-visual recreations presented to the audience. It can also be said the reader some 4 or 5 decades ago would have visualized the plays in his/her own cultural background and may not have been impacted much with different printed versions than the audience who has viewed these re-enactment in recent past. The differences emerge perhaps because the recent presentations are deeply rooted in technological advancement and there is less scope for the audience to visualize and imagine, in fact most of the audio-visual nowadays make serious attempt to take the audience (viewer) live into the narration while such was not the case with printed versions where the reader was fully aware of the gaps between the narrative and the reality in which he/she was reading the narrative. Here again the speed of visualization depends upon the speed with which the reader is reading and understanding the narrative which is not there in the case of the audio-visual where the speed of the narration is well regulated and even at times controlled by the director or technical head.

Any social order makes attempts to provide some permanence to the dominant ideology. Education also does not remain aloof. Automatically, stereotypes in the context of gender identities, representations of the not so good characters, etc. emerge on their own. It also needs to be emphasized that the heroes of Shakespearean plays in literary descriptions may not be as active as in the case of the audio-visual where the character has to strike a chord with the popular imagination and expectation of the audience/viewer. Sometimes, commercialization of the audio-visual mode is also responsible for the generation of different impacts and responses from the end consumer (the audience or the viewer).

Subjectivity, reality construction, discourses and genres are inherent parts of the popular narratives. The contextualization of these aspects by the readers and writers also make a lasting impact on the popular perceptions.⁶It needs to be highlighted that the processes involved in the reception of the works of Shakespeare have many dimensions and perspectives often centered around subjectivity and ideological dimensions. The Shakespearean works have been globally recognized as the “Shakespeare Industry” perhaps because of the place it has enjoyed in popular culture and perceptions. Narratives may differ but the reception, response and

⁶John Brannigan, “History, Power and Politics in the literary Artifact”, in Julian Wolfreys (ed.), *Introducing Literary Theories, A Guide and Glossary*, New Delhi, Atlantic, 2005.

reaction of the audience and the viewer has always been forthcoming and has added to the richness of the works.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, one can take the example of the various English, Hindi and regional language reproductions of Shakespearian works. *Cleopatra* created many times for the western audience has catered to the needs of the English-speaking world while Hindi movies like *Kayamat se KayamatTak*, *Haider* and *Omkaara* are Indian adaptations of the famous plays Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet and Othello respectively. The story line remains to be inspired by the Shakespearian traditions, but the screenplay, performance, settings and backgrounds are tuned to the needs and tastes of the Indian audiences. If one were to compare and contrast the printed versions of the storyline, the original by Shakespeare himself and the adaptations in Indian context would certainly throw up some major patterns of change as far as the rendition of the narratives are concerned.

