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Shakespeare In Indian Cinema

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ABSTRACT:

Shakespeare today is not confined to any particular nation or culture having truly attained the stature of one of the most important names in World Literature. Cinema, a relatively new art, but capturing the place of a parallel 'text' (in the academic sense) in the twenty-first century, has always been inspired by Shakespeare. This paper is an attempt to study Shakespeare's influence and the adaptation of his plays in mainstream Indian (Hindi) cinema. It aims at studying the plot of selected Hindi films and trace how they have been shaped by Shakespearean plays. The paper would focus upon the three major Shakespearean tragedies adapted by the veteran filmmaker Vishal Bhardwaj in his movies respectively: *Maqbool* (released in 2004; based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*), *Omkara* (released in 2006; based on Shakespeare's *Othello*), *Haider* (released in 2014; based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). These movies achieved great success in India and what made these Elizabethan plays to attract large number of audience in the mainstream (Hindi) Cinema could be an interesting study.

Keywords: World Literature, Influence Study, Adaptation, Mainstream (Hindi) Cinema

It is an endeavor to define what constitutes World Cinema. For some film critics, this broad classification can be sophisticated as: world cinema is, non-English or non-European and vitally, non-western in either origin or aesthetic achievement. Other definitions concentrate on its capacity to cross borders; others still consider the term itself as methodology and a discipline. (Burnett 3). The last twenty years have witnessed the burgeoning of film studies at universities. Cinema, being popular art develops with new techniques. This new discipline invites range of new ideologies in academics. Theoretic and critical studies are abound in comparisons of literary and cinematic history, rhetoric, language, genre and aesthetics. With the emergence of theatre, television and film industry, the art of storytelling and entertainment has become the common medium for all. The difference between high aesthetic quality and box office success has somehow blurred. (Rudolf, Preface) However, there still lies the distinction between the films as an art and as an entertainment. One outstanding British film-maker, Alfred Hitchcock suggested to reinvent works for a different medium, claiming, "I read a story once and, if I like the basic idea, I just forget all about the book and start to create cinema." When William Wyler's *Wuthering Heights* (1939) was attacked for omitting half of the original, the critic Dilys Powell regretted a cinema 'still beset by people who bring the book with them.' Radio and later television, offer much scope for the adaptations of 'classic serials' for over 50 years'. When a film is

generated from a play, a new ‘text’ emerges out of the old; and it is an interesting study to interrelate. While discussing about Shakespeare in cinema, critic Greg Colon Semenza seems to summon the mood of the moment when he anticipates that,

World cinema is likely to be the next, if not the final, frontier for Shakespeare on film scholarship. (Burnett, 2)

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, Shakespeare’s popularity on screen is imbricated in the dramatist’s status as a global icon. His works are being transported and globalized widely with adaptation and appropriation in cinema worldwide. While British is the prominent in adapting Shakespeare plays on screen, Vishal Bhardwaj in India has done this great job. His love for the bard is evident in his trilogy: *Maqbool* (adapts *Macbeth*), *Omkaara* (adapts *Othello*) and *Haider* (adapts *Hamlet*). Bhardwaj says in an interview at NYIFF (New York Indian Film Festival) with Prof. James Shapiro (Columbia University),

Shakespeare is the greatest storyteller ever. His stories have layers of spectacular

Human drama. I think they can be adapted anywhere and in any language. I can

Live my whole life on Shakespeare. (Bhardwaj 2015)

The etymology of the word ‘adapt’ is from Latin *adaptare* meaning to fit in. While adapting any literary work for the cinematic purpose, is not simply an act of imitation of reality but rather it translates the observed characteristics into the forms of a given medium. (Rudolf 3) Adapting any literary work in the mainstream cinema has been a trend that started early in India with the adaptation of the movie *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), the first Indian silent realistic movie based on the legend of Raja Harishchandra, recounted in Ramayana and Mahabharata. This trend of adaptations later on continued with Saratchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Devdas* on screen and followed by number of other movies including Rabindranath Tagore’s *Chokher Bali* et al. For Shakespeare, it started early with Parsi theatre between 1850 and 1930s. Its early plays presented Indianized version of Shakespearean plays converting them into folk performances and with the addition of songs. This adaptation of Shakespeare plays have all the ingredients and varieties that could attract Indian audience. Be it theme, character, motif, dialogues, songs, etc. however, changes were made most likely due to cultural and political reasons. One of such earliest adaptation is *Dil Farosh* (1927) that is also called *Merchant of Hearts*, is a silent movie adapting Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*. This trend of adapting Shakespeare’s plays continued later on with the films like *Hathili Dulhan* (1932) based on *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Kafir-e-ishq* (1936) based on *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Pak Daman* (1940) taking leaf from *Measure for Measure*. While Gulzar’s acclaimed “*Angoor*” based on “*The Comedy of Errors*” came out in 1960 and was appreciated. Thus from the silent films itself Shakespeare has entered into Indian Cinema. In the more recent years, his tragedies *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* adapted into films present the local culture patterns in Indian lenses witnessing an age of new cinema while restructuring the universal themes of Shakespeare. These are the first Indian films adaptations of Shakespeare to have gained International recognition. The movies have been screened at several International film festivals and we find the reference of *Maqbool* and *Omkaara* in Daniel Rosenthal’s 100 Shakespeare Films (2007) published by the British Film Institute. Also for the both movies Bhardwaj has been honored with special prize from London and admired by Asia Cinema Foundation.

Maqbool (adapted from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*):

Maqbool is the first movie based on *Macbeth* in Indian cinema. British do have *Throne of Blood* and *Scotland PA*. Although the film is set in the criminal underworld Mumbai, the different language (Hindi and Urdu), time and setting (present day Mumbai), featuring Bollywood actors, the film still remains highly

faithful to its original play and fits perfectly in the underworld Mumbai. He connects the central theme of *Macbeth* being ambition and guilt to contemporary gangster plot. Shakespeare used witches in the play as it was prevalent popular belief in the sixteenth century England and because of King James's interest in witchcraft. Whereas the film follows from two corrupted policemen who know astrology, play the roles of weird sisters. In the postmodern era supernaturalism is naturalized in the form of the prophesying, astrology et al. In the very opening scene of the movie, Om Puri (one of the policemen) draws horoscope on the car windscreen which suggests the filmic frame, while the misted glass hints off camera lens. They predict Maqbool's rise to power by means of horoscope. Most of their predictions come true and their roles provide comic relief amid the high seriousness of the movie. They are seen drawing horoscope with food items, cigarette stubs and ketchups. This shift from witches to policemen who are astrologers too suits the historic and cultural shift from Elizabethan age to contemporary India. They do not have the negative evil force like witches in *Macbeth* associate with throughout the play. But their role is to 'balance the power' amid all the actions in the film. They repeat the lines *Aag ke liye paani ka dar bana rehna chahiye. Shakti ka santulan bahut jaroori he sansar me* most often. It talks about the balance of power between opposing forces in the world. While the witches in *Macbeth* enigmatically state 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'. It was the astrological prediction of the inspector that led Maqbool to believe that he could take over Jahangir Khan (King Duncan in *Macbeth*). He also learns from the inspector how Jahangir killed his own mentor to rise for powers. This inspires Maqbool to fulfil his own ambition as well. Maqbool had no intention to kill Abbaji (Jahangir Khan) at the first thought, as he had been like a father to him. Here, Nimmi (Lady Macbeth) is Abbaji's concubine and is in love with Maqbool which creates the triangle relationship. This is an important change portraying an illicit love-affair between Maqbool and Nimmi which becomes the cause of their guilt later in the movie. Maqbool kills Abbaji (King Duncan) for the love of Nimmi as well as to fulfil his own ambition. Nimmi insists Maqbool to kill Abbaji. Harkening back to Lady Macbeth's shaming of her husband, Nimmi too provokes her husband to murder Abbaji when he is asleep. Also the movie shows the psychological condition of Maqbool's mind before killing Abbaji which is similar to Macbeth's hallucinations before killing King Duncan where he sees a dagger in the air while here Maqbool sees blood where it is none. It is their bloody intention that made him see the false impression. This shows Vishal Bhardwaj's understanding of the significance of the scene and his ability to redesign it. The film has avoided the supernatural elements and endeavored to make scenes more realistic. When Maqbool kills Abbaji, he dies looking at him and in the background, the sound of goat's bleat is well screened and is connected with the other scene. When Kaka's body is brought, Maqbool feels him gazing at him. That is how banquet scene was transformed into a small meet. The end of the movie is very much different to *Macbeth*. Instead of soliloquies like "tomorrow, tomorrow and tomorrow's we see Maqbool struggling with his own conscience towards the end of the movie. While Nimmi, like Lady Macbeth spirals into madness after the murder is committed. She imagines having blood on herself and on the wall of the room. At last when Nimmi dies in the arms of Maqbool, it arouses pity and sympathy for her despite the fact of her being responsible for the whole tragedy. The coming of the sea is parallel suggestion like Birnham wood.

Major similarity between the play and the film is the fall of the hero leading his ambition to power. However, the difference that could be found comparing both is the motive behind the murder. Macbeth killed King Duncan because of his ambition and instigation of Lady Macbeth. Whereas for Maqbool, love for Nimmi was the major motive to kill Jahangir than ambition. Therefore, *Macbeth* could be called the story of ambition leading to tragedy while *Maqbool* is the love story with unhappy end. The movie is a masterpiece interpreting text in a unique and artistic manner. The director has remained loyal to the source and transformed it into Hindi context successfully. The movie has adapted not just the plot or theme of Shakespeare but numerous other acts are also taken and transformed into wonderful scenes. There is forbidden love, crime, betrayal, violence, guilt etc. in the movie most of which borrowed from Shakespeare. The most creative aspect of the film is its end where Nimmi's new born baby is cradled by Guddu (Fleance) and Sameera (the daughter of Abbaji). It reminds of,

Pity like a naked new born babe...

...Shall blow the horrid deed of every eye

That tears shall drown the wind. (*Macbeth* I, Vii)

The camera stills on Maqbool's dropped gun and shawl which signify his surrender in remorse leaving a tear stain at the glass that marks his repentance and self-realization. When he is shoot dead, there is no blood spilling scene, indicating peace restored. However, the movie was not commercially successful but has been dominated in many film festivals all over.

Omkara (adapted from Shakespeare's *Othello*):

Shakespeare's *Othello* has been adapted to screen very often. Each of this versions maintain fidelity to Shakespeare where the black protagonist gets involved in murder and jealousy. These modern versions have often black men essaying the role of the moor and are quite a departure from the text. Even an Indian actor named Baishnav Charan Adhya playing the role of Othello with an English actress named Mrs. Anderson playing the role of Desdemona. (Dahiya) This event is unique in the cultural history of the British colonies in Asia at that time. Among Indian Hindi cinema, Vishal Bhardwaj followed this play after the critical acclaim of *Maqbool* (adaptation of *Macbeth*). The movie is set in the milieu of political and gangster welfare in the rustic interiors of Uttar Pradesh instead of Venice or Cyprus. Race and sexuality play a vital role in Shakespearean drama. Instead of a racial other (the moor of Venice), *Omkara* (Othello) is half-caste (half Brahmin). It is a remarkable significance upon the caste system prevalent in India and its relation with politics. In one of the scenes, power politics can be visualize very clearly where from the demand by any politician even the destination of train changes. The gang rivalry and gang violence replaces the war between Venice and the Ottoman Empire. In *Othello*, the reasons why Iago hates Othello is given briefly in his dialogues with Roderigo in the opening of the play. Whereas the movie *Omkara* begins much earlier than the time of the first scene of *Othello*. It shows Langda Tyagi (Iago) stopping the groom Rajju (Roderigo) with its guests to reach for his wedding with Dolly (Desdemona). Langda (Iago) is not happy with *Omkara*'s choice of Kesu (Cassio) as Bahubaali (lieutenant in Othello) whom *Omkara* chooses for the sake of votes from college students and he disobeys Langda's loyalty of fifteen years. His disappointment justifies audience's sympathy for him. He plans to take revenge with both Kesu and *Omkara*. Bhardwaj has very brilliantly cast his character in the movie, Langda means "lame crippled": a man with disability not just physically but also of conscience, he is socially disabled and isolated figure like Iago. What S.T.Coleridge described about Iago's soliloquy at the end of I, III as 'the motive hunting of motiveless malignity' proves true to his character.

In *Othello* the object of Desdemona's infidelity is handkerchief while in *Omkara*, it is waistband (*cummerbund*), the family heirloom. It suggests fragility and entrapment, relating to women's sexuality as it gives power of a temptress. Both have their own significance. Handkerchief is still given as the first token of love in Africa and gifting ornaments is considered auspicious in India. That is how adaptation forms in the cultural set up and transforms the text in the different society. When Indu (Emilia) learns from *Omkara* that her husband, Langda Tyagi (Iago) misused the waistband that she brought to create dispute between *Omkara* and Dolly, and it was Langda who was responsible for the whole tragedy, she kills her own husband. So her role is a step ahead to Emilia. In *Othello*, Emilia steals the handkerchief whereas in the film *Omkara*, Indu finds it and shows it to her husband. The language used in the movie is a dialect of Hindi and abounds in curse words. The movie ends with *Omkara* lying dead on the floor and Dolly's dead body swinging above his on their wedding night. There is a scene in the movie when a swooping hawk drops a cobra in the *uptan* (turmeric paste) as dark foreboding poison replacing purity. Bhardwaj's association with Indian mythology

gives the movie a sense of impending disaster. The whole movie dwells upon the complexity of human relationships

The central theme of both the play and the film remains intact that is, jealousy and revenge. Music in the movie is a center of attraction. Bhardwaj is well aware about the Indian audience that they might forget the film, but if the song gets popular, they always remember it. The film has also two popular songs called 'item numbers'. One another song in the movie is, *Nainon ki mat maaniyon ke suniyo...naina thag lenge* ("Do not listen to eyes, don't listen them; they will betray you") makes the concept 'appearance/reality' very clear. It shows Dolly's falling in love with Omkara and thus warning her against the deceptive poisonous vision. The songs in film simulate actions and emotions of the characters. The movie is an amazing semiotic reworking that portrays the hurt in betrayal.

Haider (adapted from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*):

Hamlet is considered by critics as William Shakespeare's longest and the most complex play. Of all the dramas of Shakespeare, *Hamlet* appears to be the most popular in India. However, the director, Vishal Bhardwaj along with Bashrat Peer has made a great endeavor to portray this adaptation. Bashrat Peer is also the author of the book *Curfewed Night*. Instead of Denmark, we see Kashmir of 1995. The entire film is located in the valley. It also brings back to the mind the unsolved issues of Kashmir conflict. To search his father, Haider Meer (Hamlet) returns to Kashmir from Aligarh where he studies and is a poet. It was the time when insurgency was at height. Haider whose father was seen as a doctor by profession is found guilty to help militant and was carried away by the armed force. The movie has left the character of Horatio who tells Hamlet first about the ghost of his father. The character of Roohdar (ghost of the King) is quite appealing and mysterious character like ghost who appears in the interval of the movie and tells Haider about the conspiracy design executed by his uncle to murder his father when the audience know it already. By delaying ghost, Haider has left with less time for his dilemma which is a very important point in Hamlet. Hamlet's most famous dialogue "to be or not to be" has also been translated here as *main rahoon ke main nahi*. These lines reflect up Haider's dilemma. He expresses his emotions in conversation and not in soliloquy.

Shaq pe hai yaqeen to, yaqeen pe he shaq mujhe.

Kiska jhoot jhoot hai, kiske sach mein sach nahi.

Hai ki hai nahi, bas yahi ek sawaal he.

Aur sawaal ka jawab bhi sawaal hai.

Dil ki gar sunu to hai, dimaag ki to hai nahi.

Jaan loon ki jaan doon, main rahoo ki main nahi. (Haider)

The movie has hard-hitting dialogues which elucidate the pain of the natives experiencing in Kashmir for years. When Haider's father who is doctor by profession, when asked if he is on militants or army's side, his response, *zindagi ki taraf* ("towards life") answers all the political intent and allegiance the movie faced. *Hum hain ki hum nahi* ("whether we exist or not") is very much identity crisis of Kashmiri youths in an hour of strife. A very pertinent dialogue in the end: *jab do haathi ladte hai, toh ghaas hi kuchli jaati hai*. ("When two elephants fight, only grass gets crushed"). It talks about Kashmir and the people living there. The use of 1400 years ancient temple for 'a play within play' (called Mouse Trap in Hamlet) with the sequence of dancers is symbolic too. The film has utilized this scene and converted into a folk performance. In Hamlet there are actors brought to play while here Haider himself performs the song 'Bismil' and also

dances so this is very likely to Indian cinema. But there is no Horatio who tries to gauge Claudius whether he was guilty or not. Also Kashmir has 200 year old tradition called 'Bhand Pather' where they perform stories by singing and dancing. Although this folk art is almost dying today. Bhardwaj brings this art back to stage. In Shakespeare's Hamlet, gravediggers' scene is one where seriousness intermingles with the comic elements. In Haider too, this scene provides relief from the seriousness with a song. Haider accidentally kills Pervaze (Polonius) while he came to meet his mother. Arshee like Ophelia is seen in her drowsiness before her death and she sings songs. Poetry is at the heart of Shakespeare's plays. While India too has music and dance deep rooted in culture. The end of the play is quite different from Hamlet. Here, Haider at last does not kill his uncle and does not die. Thus the movie ends with a moral 'revenge only begets revenge. Revenge does not set us free and freedom lies beyond revenge'. The director has taken liberties and has given Haider a moralist and open end. It leaves hope for Kashmir. The movie is successful not only in the adaptation of Shakespeare's plot and character but it is rich with emotions as well. Ophelia seems to be the most sensitive character in the film. Her love story remains unexplained. The film very simply and remarkably shows the condition of people living in Kashmir. One of such satires in the movie is when a civilian does not enter his own house unless he is frisked. It shows how people are frightened. Oedipus complex (the forbidden love between a mother and her son) too binds together the play and the film but the relationship shown between Ghazala and Haider are different from the movie keeping audience in mind. The concept of 'half widow' is bizarre. Like Shakespeare's tragedy, the movie too provokes strong emotions. It also transfers Shakespeare's political nature behind the play into the reality of Kashmir.

With its cast of major cinematic adaptations, the present three movies indicate that Shakespeare no longer functions as a colonial text for transculturation or just as a cultural icon but as a universal resource in global entertainment. Shakespeare rightly mentions 'world' as a 'stage' (*As You Like It* II, Vii). Bhardwaj remains true to the spirit of Shakespeare plays; what Shakespeare did verbally, Bhardwaj did visually. Shakespeare's plays are notable for their use of soliloquies. The language of Shakespeare is often rhetorical- written for actors to declaim rather than speak. While in cinema visual metaphors aid to interpret the scene visually instead of verbally. All the three films remain quiet close to the original text while relocating them in contemporary India. Apparently, Shakespeare set his own plays outside England because he was never permitted to insult or ridicule on London stage. Also, because many of his plays contained political satire and that was the main reason why he set his plays outside England. Similarly, while adapting these plays the director has very carefully shown how the parameters of this politics has changed with time but politics remains same. Apart from power politics, Vishal Bhardwaj has given a great deal of attention on emotions too. All the three movies contain the tragic flaw in the leading character like Shakespeare plays. To bring the story close to the original play, all the characters have been given close or at least their name's first letter similar to Shakespeare's characters; as Maqbool of Macbeth, Omkara of Othello, Haider of Hamlet and others. Since, nobody would have believed in ghosts and witches in the era of science and technology hence Vishal Bhardwaj has brilliantly cast the same role by giving them the human identity: from witches in Macbeth to corrupted policemen and from the ghost of Hamlet to the character named Roohdaar in the film. *Rooh* is an Urdu word meaning 'soul'.

In the words of veteran film actor Nasruddin Shah who has also played role in Maqbool and Omkara, in one of his interviews said:

The roots may look lost, but every big story in the Hindi film industry is from Shakespeare. (The Times of India)

This statement can be considered appropriate with reference to Shakespeare's themes like love, friendship, jealousy, betrayal, ambition, revenge etc. although Shakespeare wrote his plays for English society but people living in any country can identify themselves in his characters. As Dr. Johnson writes in his Preface,

“Shakespeare is above all writers, at
 Least above all modern writers, the
 Poet of nature; the poet that holds up
 To his readers a faithful mirror of
 Manners and life...”

This paper researches into Vishal Bhardwaj’s trilogy adapting Shakespeare’s Elizabethan locale, fitted into typically socio-political Indian setting. Thus, Shakespearean plays relocating into a radically different time and setting, still retains the original essence of the plays with the cinematic dynamics.

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