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Shakespeare on Indian Stage

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Abstract

It is unanimously acknowledged that the entire world has become Shakespeare's stage as his plays are performed all over the world on several occasions. Shakespeare is called a great borrower who took material from different sources and served old wine with new flavor and taste. Now that borrower has become a great lender to the world as his plays can be well appropriated in any language and on any stage. Even after more than 450 years of Shakespeare's demise, his plays have not lost their recreational value. It is well recognized that Shakespeare has become a brand for the world of performance and entertainment. His plays continue to have the same appeal to the audience in present time as they had on the Elizabethan stage.

Shakespeare's plays were performed on the Indian stage with the arrival of Britishers but very soon he made his permanent abode in the heart of Indians as his plays are successfully performed on different regional stages after many years of the Britishers departure. As India is a vast country with different regional languages and cultures so it is hard to assess all the regional performances of Shakespeare in India. It will need a joint effort of many scholars to provide a full record of all these performances. In my research paper I have tried to present a record of Shakespeare's performances on three significant stages- Bengali, Parsi and Madras.

Keywords- Shakespeare in India, Bengali Theater, Parsi Theater, Madras Theater

Introduction

Theater has been a very powerful mode of popularizing any historical, mythological, religious and literary form. Theatrical performances cast a more lasting influence and attract people with instruction and entertainment. In England Biblical stories were performed at church to drag the attention of people towards morality and religion. At that time the clerks of church participated in these performances which were mainly based on the life and death of Jesus Christ and the lives and teachings of holy saints. These plays were performed on Easter and Christmas and were known as mystery and morality plays.

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In India theatrical performances laid a great classical tradition. We find the conscious account of theatrical techniques in Bharatmuni's *Natyashastra* which denotes that there was a great theatrical tradition in ancient India. Much like Aristotle, these theorists had carefully devised the principles of dramatic writings and their productions. Like Aristotle's *Poetics* these theoreticians laid emphasis on the techniques of stage craft and performances like-organic construction of plot, unity of impression and high moral tone, lyrical touch, diction and idealistic representation of characters. After the decline of classical drama many great theatrical traditions and many folk theater traditions like Ramleela, Rasleela, Nautanki, Yatra etc. came into existence and they are continuing even today.

Shakespeare's Reception in India-

During the reign of Mughal emperors in India, many other arts prosper in the courts but theater could never enjoy any favorable reception. On the other hand, Indian classical stage arts were also declining. Shakespeare appeared on the Indian stage in such a state of affairs. The performance of his plays in Calcutta and other big cities revived the interest of people in stage and drama. Sukanta Chaudhari in his essay *Shakespeare's India* finds three paths- academic study, translation/adaptation and performance on which the Indian response to Shakespeare was based. He points out that these three paths were overlapping, converging with the other and indicating their mutual interdependence upon one another⁽¹⁾.

Shakespeare has a unique relation with India since a long time. Poonam Trivedi in the introduction of her book *India's Shakespeare* states that Shakespeare's relation with India started before the death of Shakespeare as an Englishman Hakluyt published the first eye witness account of Shakespeare in 1588. Ralph Fitch who had sailed out on a voyage alluded to *Macbeth*. He returned to England in 1584 but he sent the account of his travels in India with a letter by John Newbery (leader of expedition) with date 20 January 1584⁽²⁾. This interaction with Shakespeare advanced and flourished with mercantile trade for we have evidences of Shakespeare's plays performed on ships sailing east. Under the command of William Keeling East India Company sent three ships in its third sponsored voyage in 1607. Out of these three ships named the Dragon, the Hector and the Consent; the Hector which was under the command of Hawkins was caught in a stormy weather during its embarkment on a visit to the court of then Mogul emperor and had to be anchored at Sierra Leone for about six weeks. During its stand on the shore, the sailors were entertained with two performances of Shakespeare's plays.

Shakespeare came as an entertainer on the ships arriving India. He touched the Indian shores and made his way to the modern theaters in Calcutta and Madras. After this these plays spread on many other regional stages and earned enormous popularity there. Most of these plays were performed in different languages. Here I discuss these plays on three stages one by one as I have stated earlier.

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Shakespeare on Bengali Stage-

Shakespeare performance in India was commenced for the reception of European Officers but it was propaganda of Britishers to promote their culture. Following the battle of Plassey in 1757 or possibly before it a European theatre was in existence in Calcutta. R.K. Yajnik in his book *The Indian Theatre; Its Origin and its Latest Development Under European* says that the Ex. Subedar and his army converted it into a battery to attack the old fort but it was rebuilt by public subscription among whom Warren Hastings is mentioned as one of the subscribers. This theatre can be seen as an inspiration to reform the Indian Stage⁽³⁾.

Scholars have various opinions regarding the earliest modern theatre established in India. Poonam Trivedi and Jyotsna Singh state that Calcutta Theatre was the earliest theatre in India founded as early as 1757 while some other theatre scholar like Susil Kumar Mukherjee and Kironmoy Raha find that the first English theatre to be set in Calcutta was the play house in 1753 that was promoted by David Garrick. At this Calcutta theatre sparkling comedies of messenger, Congreve and Sheridan and Shakespeare's tragedies like Richard III and Hamlet were performed by an artist from London who had been sent out by David Garrick⁽⁴⁾.

This theatre arose the interest of the people to modern trend into drama. The Calcutta theatre performed at least eight plays by Shakespeare- *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice and Richard III* etc. Many other theatres like Whelan Place Theatre, Mrs Bristoge Private Theatre, The Chowringee Theatre, The Damdam Theatre, and Sansauci Theatre sprang up there. Among these theatres Shakespeare's characters, plots, dialogues and some of the scenes became common for artists and audience. Among these theatres the Chowringee and Sansauci Theatres were renowned for their performances of Shakespeare's plays such as *Richard III, Henry IV, The Merry Wives of Windsor, The Merchant of Venice and Othello* etc. Girish Chandra Ghose established the famous National Theatre and himself played the titular role such as Macbeth. In 1852 the translation of *The Merchant of Venice* is recalled to be the first Indian Adaptation of any foreign play.⁽⁵⁾ while the *Taming of the Shrew* in Gujarati at the Andrews Library in Surat is recorded to be the first performance of Shakespeare. The text was translated as *Nathari Firangiz Thekani Abi* meaning A Bad Firangi Women Brought to Sense.

The Chowringee Theatre, established in 1813, was one of the most important theatres in Calcutta specially in terms of Shakespeare's performances. The first significant performance was Macbeth that was followed by *Henry IV, Coriolanus, Richard III and Taming of the Shrew*. The English Theatre opened a window before the natives to a new world. They were also encouraged to set up their own theatres. The Hindu theatre was opened in the garden house of Prasanna Kumar Tagore and it was inaugurated with the performance of act V of *Julius Caesar*. Sarottama Majumdar in the essay That Sublime Old Gentleman; Shakespeare plays in Calcutta 1775-1930 asserts-

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“-----following the establishment of National Theatre many other play houses were built in the city. The influence of Shakespeare and English Stage craft can be noted sometimes clearly and sometimes it is shadowed. But the presence of this influence is evident. ⁽⁶⁾”

We have the evidences of many other adaptations of Shakespeare in Calcutta- Kusum Kumari, an adaptation of *Cymbeline* by Chandrakali Ghosh was performed at the National theater, Rudrapal, an adaptation of *Macbeth*, performed at the Bengal Theater, Bhimpal, an adaptation of *Othello* in the Bengal Theater. Girishchandra Ghosh's adaptation of *Macbeth* for Minerva Theater failed due to its English characteristics while Amrendra Nath Dutt's adaptation of *Hamlet* as Hariraj won huge success among audience due to Indianizing Shakespeare. Amrendra Nath Dutt earned the title the Garrick of Bengal.

Shakespeare's plays got their significance in the Oriental Theatre which was established by the students and ex- students of Oriental Seminary in 1853 for staging Shakespeare's plays. It was opened with a production of *Othello*. This theatre ran for a short time and saw its last production of *Henry IV* part I. Julius Caesar was performed with much acclamation in 1854 in Pyari Mohan Bose's Jorsanko Natyashala.

The period of 1912 to 1922 was the period of degradation in Bengali Theatre. During this period the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays were not well received among the audience due to growing nationalism. We have description of some plays like an adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra* at Minerva Theatre and another was an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* at Star Theatre. But these plays were not well accepted by the audience. Although Shakespeare could not retain his place on Bengali Stage yet the syllabi of schools and universities were still flooded with his works. Sarottama Majumdar in the essay That Sublime Old Gentleman; Shakespeare plays in Calcutta 1775-1930 observes---

“----The shift seems to have been from the performatory to the intellectual and academic mode of appreciation. Perhaps the public stage and Bengali playwrights consciously attempted to free themselves from his influence in order to find an individual voice and identity in keeping with the growing flavor of nationalism in the country ⁽⁷⁾.”

It was only after independence that Bengali theater revived the production of Shakespeare's plays with new vigor. This zeal was evidently noticed in the production of these plays by Utpal Dutt. The National School of Drama staged *Samrat Lear* in 1997 by John Russell but it could not satisfy the expectations of audience for it was a straight telling of the story without creative interventions. A more recent example of Shakespeare's productions in Calcutta is Suman Mukhopadhyay's *Raja Lear* in 2011, in which Soumitra Chatterjee played the title role.

Shakespeare on Parsi Stage-

Parsi theater became an instrument for bringing Shakespeare out of the elite circle and it introduced him to the masses beyond the private theatres of the elite. We can say that

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Shakespeare became the hallmark of the Parsi theater which made every expert to transform Shakespeare plays into Indian context. Shakespeare and Parsi theatre helped each other. The Parsi theatre popularized Shakespeare among natives and Shakespeare provided a huge corpus of plays full of action, rhetoric, melodrama and thrill due to which Parsi theatre became a secure industry. The Parsi theatre had its root in Elphinstone college in Bombay in the early 1860s. The young educated Parsis were acquainted with Shakespeare during their studies in colleges and Universities and had been performing his plays mostly on Saturday nights under the supervision of their British teachers. Parsi theatre was established by the Parsi community to promote their civic and cultural activities. The playwrights took liberties in translating and adapting Shakespeare plays for stage. Javed Malick in *Appropriating Shakespeare Freely: Parsi Theatre's First Urdu Play Khurshid-*

The text commissioned and produced by Parsi theatre companies took great liberties with the original. They often departed radically from the Shakespearean text, investing it with a distinctly Indian texture tone and flavor. This practice of appropriating is termed nativizing. The Elizabethan playwrights acquired a new and radical significance when viewed in the light of the dominant cultural politics of the period.

The first public theatre of Bombay The Grant Road Theatre was opened in 1846 with the efforts of JeeJeebhoy and Fram Ji Cowasci and Shankar Nath. The first colonial theatre The Bombay Theatre was established around 1776 but it suffered due to increasing debt and was sold to JeeJeebhoy. This theatre remained closed for ten years but it had to be opened due to the increasing pressure of the public. The rebirth of this theatre proved a boon for the Parsi Theatre. It came out of narrow audience of elite class and made approach of theatre as well as Shakespeare to the middle class and lower class. Being a public theatre, the Parsi Theatre had to keep the interest of audience in mind and had to cater according to the need of audience which largely comprise the working class. This was the reason that they prefer Gujarati and Urdu Productions to English. There was a burst of different theatrical companies. All the companies had the same choice and taste. They liked thrill, melodramatic and sensational plots, spectacle and rhetoric, song and dance sequence. To fulfill these demands Shakespeare appeared a mine to them. The Parsi Theatrical playwrights depended a great deal on Shakespeare but they focused not only on linguistic translation but cultural adaptation also.

The Parsi Theatre followed many tradition and techniques of Elizabethan theatre. Like the Elizabethan audience, the Parsi theatre audiences were specially delighted by music and song. During performance in the Prosenium, folk forms like Bhavai and Lavani, Khayal and Gurva were used. Parsi theatre gave much importance to music and song it is variously referred as Opera. Dadi Patel is given the credit of introducing song on the Parsi stage. The songs were added to express the occasion of joy, war, death and courtship. Most of them followed the repertory system and painted curtain. They had the conventions to perform,

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comic scenes before the Proscenium and serious scenes on the full stage. The actors were experts who had to undergo the hard training of singing, dancing and acting. The professional rivalry among the managers of different theatres lead them to spend money lavishly on startling scenic displays, gorgeous dresses and to hire reputed actors.

Shakespeare proved beneficial for Parsi theatre from every aspect to allure a wide range of audience. The Parsi playwright freely edited Shakespeare's plays. They usually dropped any scene when it did not fit their design. Besides it they introduced many new scenes keeping the entertainment value in mind. In this way Parsi theatre did every effort to adopted, appropriate, assimilate and nativize Shakespeare in every way. As English language was unknown to the common people, the Parsi theatre started performing plays first in Gujarati and later on in Urdu. We have many records of Gujarati and Urdu adaptations of Shakespeare for Parsi theatre as Kedia Bhai- Adhli Beheru Kutavu (the twins- one blind and other deaf). An adaptation of Comedy of errors and Othello as Kasrivaj to Karstas (scheming Kasiraj) by Naha Bhai Rustamji.

After the 1960 Parsi theatre adopted Urdu/ Hindustani in place of Gujarati for its wider public appeal and financial gain. Sone Ke Mul Ki Khurshid, an adaptation of *Cymbeline* in 1871 by Edulji Khorji. It is regarded as the first Urdu adaptation of Shakespeare. The play was first translated into Gujarati by Khorji as Sunana Mulni Khurshid and then into Urdu by Behram ji Firdumji Merban. However, some scholars considered Karimuddin Murad Bareli Badsah Khudadad as the first Urdu adaptation of Shakespeare. The most flourishing and productive period of Parsi theatre came with the adaptation of Urdu playwrights like Sheikh Muhammad Raunak, Narain Prasad Betav, Agha Hasan Kashmiri and Ashan Mehdi. Due to his success in adaptations of Shakespeare's plays Agha Hasan Kashmiri earned the title Shakespeare –e-Hind.

We have many descriptions of Shakespeare's adaptations on Parsi stage. *King Lear* was adapted by Murad Ali as Hara-Jita for Victoria Theatrical Company in 1905 *Safed Khoon* by Agha Hasan Kashmiri. Munshi Mehdi Hasan adapted *Othello* as Shaheed e Bafa for the empress Victoria Company and Najar Dehlvi adapted the same play as Sher Dil for Parsi Alfred Company in 1918. Other plays were also transformed as *Romeo and Juliet* as *Bazme Fani* by Mehdi Hasan and *Antony and Cleopatra* as Kali Nagin by Joseph David. Most of these tragedies were produced with happy ending as tragedy was absent on classical Indian theatre and folk theatre.

Later on, with the advent of cinema technique, the Parsi playwrights switched to this new medium. The Parsi playwrights retained their fascination towards Shakespeare in the film industry also. The early films were the screen version of Parsi theatre adaptations. The earliest example is the silent film *Dil Faros* (1927) which was based on *The Merchant of Venice*, produced by the Excelsior Film Company under the direction of Udvadia. The Radha film Industries produced another version of *The Merchant of Venice* as *Jaalim Saudagar*.

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Adaptations of *Hamlet* also were the screen versions of Parsi theatre adaptations as *Khoon-e-Nahak* by DadaAthwal in 1928, *Khoon ka Khoon* by Soharab Modi in 1935 and *Hamlet* by Kishor Sahu in 1954.

Shakespeare on Marathi Theater

The Marathi Theater was begun in 19th century and it promoted theater activities and love for Shakespeare on account of its business instinct and free use of Hindustani language. G.P. Deshpande, a well-known Marathi playwright and theater scholar gives credit for the rise of Marathi theater to Vishnudev Bhave who produced mythological plays in traditional Maharashtri form. Bhave wrote plays for the entertainment of royal court and formed his own company Sangli Karnatak Mandali.

The Marathi Theater flourished much with the establishment of Bombay University in 1857. Like Calcutta, the students of Bombay University participated in Shakespeare's performances in their colleges under the guidance of their expert and learned teachers. The students of Vishrambaug High School staged *Julius Caesar* in 1872 in Pune and similarly the students of Baba Gokhle School performed *The Merchant of Venice*. Some students of Pune Engineering College formed a company by the name Aryodharak in 1879 which performed *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Cymbeline*. There were translations of other playwrights like Moliere, Schiller, Goldsmith and Sheridan etc. following the example of English productions, college amateur students staged Sanskrit classics also. In this way there came a rich tradition of translating Sanskrit and English classics into Marathi.

Some of the best adaptations of *Hamlet* and *The Taming of the Shrew* were produced by the Shahunagarvavasi company in prose. This troupe had a brilliant galaxy of actors like Ganpatrao Joshi and Balavantrao Jog. Ganpatrao Joshi had special claim in performing Shakespeare's characters like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Othello*. He was known as the Garrick of Maharashtra. This theater mandali produced many successful adaptations of Shakespeare in the period of 25 years. Some of these famous adaptations are mentioned here- G.B. Deval's Zunzarrao, Adaptation of *Othello*, G.G. Agarkar's Kavilasita- *Hamlet*, V.B. Kolkar's *Tratika-Taming of the Shrew*, V.B. Kolkar's *Viramani* and *Sringarsundari- Antony and Cleopatra*, S.M. Paranjpe's *Manajirava- Macbeth*, L.N. Joshi's *Kapidhvaja- King John* and *Visvamisra- Timon of Athens*. As *Macbeth* was favorite among Marathi audience, it was adapted by other companies also as V.V. Shirwadkar produced it as *Rajmukut* in 1954.

Ichalkarajikar Natak Mandali produced a very successful adaptation of *Cymbeline* as *Taraby V.M. Mahajani* and *Tratika*, an adaptation of *Taming of The Shrew* by V.B. Kolkar. *Tara* became so popular that Ichalkarajikar Natak Mandali performed it in the wedding function of the king of Baroda in 1880. The play was beautifully presented following the Sanskrit tradition. Like Sanskrit plays it started with the invocation of Narayan, Ganesh and Saraswati. The character names were also Indianized for instance *Imogan* is translated as

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Tara, Cymbeline as Sambha ji etc. Besides it scenes take place in local as Britain is substituted as Suvarnpuri and Italy as Vijaypur.

If we make a survey of Marathi theater, we find this theater ranks next to the Bengali theater. It beautifully assimilated foreign influence and maintained a high standard in its productions. It made many experiments on western modals and accepted tragedies, social stories and farcical comedies.

Conclusion

Shakespeare has handed a legacy of his plays that are performed, translated, adapted and appropriated in various countries and in various languages. In India after the end of British Raj and with the arrival of new cinema technique, these troupes and theaters performing Shakespeare's plays faced a bad time. The audience were delighted in a new medium of moving images. Shakespeare Wallah (1965) produced by Merchant Ivory tells the story of a British acting troupe Buckingham Players that has fallen on hard times because they can no longer count on enthusiastic audience to attend their performances. Now Shakespeare has made his access to the remote corners with the world of cinema that took shelter in Shakespeare and produced blockbuster hit movies. Even today Shakespeare is favorite among the teachers, students, theater artists and producers who rely on his plays. The success of PiyaBahrupiya- an adaptation of *Twelfth Night* cannot be ignored. This play translated by Amitosh Nagpal and directed by Atul Kumar in Bollywood style. Its popularity and enthusiasm of audience towards Shakespeare can be well observed as this play was commissioned by London's Globe Theater and the Mumbai based Company Theater has performed it over a hundred times.

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