

Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti, eds. 2018
Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: Local Habitations
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Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti's *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: Local Habitations* (2018) is a more-than-welcome addition to the field of Shakespeare film scholarship. It is a superb and groundbreaking collection that aims to explore Shakespeare on the Indian screen beyond Bollywood cinema. Thus, it moves away completely from previous research on Indian Shakespeares, which mainly focused on Bollywood cinema, *Bollywood Shakespeares* (Dionne and Kapadia 2014) being a case in point. Numerous articles and chapters have been devoted to this field. Jonathan Locke Hart's latest collection *Shakespeare and Asia* (2019) includes for instance a chapter on *Goliyon ki Rasleela Ram Leela* (a Bollywood movie based on *Romeo and Juliet*) and Jonathan Gil Harris' *Masala Shakespeare* (2018) discusses several Bollywood Shakespearean adaptations throughout. Those essays that have gone beyond Bollywood Shakespeares have mostly focused on Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy, either regarded as challenging Bollywood conventions (García-Periago 2014) or examples of "auteur" films (Burnett 2013). However, the way Shakespeare has been used or reinterpreted in Indian regional cinemas has been quite scarce and limited. Burnett's *Shakespeare and World Cinema* (2013) is one of the few instances with a chapter on the southern Indian filmmaker Jayaraj. Hence, this book opens uncharted territory, exploring in depth Shakespeare's presence outside the Bollywood arena, and claims for more visibility of regional cinemas. Trivedi and Chakravarti's collection is precisely distinctive in its emphasis on regionalism for further research in the relations between Indian film and Shakespeare.

One of this volume's greatest virtues is its wide film corpus (115 titles), which covers a wide range of movies that have never been discussed, such as *Ambikapathy* (1937) or *Nanjundi Kalyana* (1989). Even those that have previously been analyzed (Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy or Mansoor Khan's *Qayamat se Qayamat Tak*) are approached

differently, with a focus on Indianization. But *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: Local Habitations* even discovers a new movie for the Indian Shakespeare corpus: *Champraj Hado* (1923), which seems to be the first Indian adaptation of *Cymbeline* to date.

The book is neatly structured into four thematic sections, followed by three interviews and the filmography listed in two different formats. Instead of providing only a summary of the subsequent essays in the volume, Trivedi and Chakravarti's introduction is informative *per se*. The collection then starts with a first section entitled "Indianising the Tragic" whose central purpose is to spotlight the adaptation of the Shakespearean tragic into various Indian artistic idioms, "given the absence of the tragic genre in indigenous aesthetics" (10). The collection starts with a poetic and illuminating chapter on the expanded role of women in Bhardwaj's trilogy (*Maqbool* 2003; *Omkara* 2006; and *Haider* 2014); they are given more agency and voice. Furthermore, Trivedi also sheds light on how these female characters move beyond Indian female heroes and how they are affected or driven by different types of violence, being either the instruments of justice or violence. Hence, the kernel of Trivedi's argument is the feminization of the tragic in Bhardwaj's adaptations. Chapters 2 and 3 examine how the Shakespearean connection is not enough to understand the movies that are discussed, *Eklavya* (a free adaptation of *Hamlet*, 2007) and *Gunasundari Katha* (drawing on *King Lear*, 1949), respectively. Robert White in chapter 2 argues that *Eklavya* owes more to *The Mahabharata* than to Shakespeare, who is a spectral presence in the film, whereas Nishi Pulugurtha in chapter 3 claims that both sources are equally appropriated and mingled, resulting in a hybrid adaptation. Both adaptations encounter the tragic similarly. *Eklavya* disrupts it via allusions to *The Mahabharata* and *dharma*, whereas *Gunasundari Katha* turns the tragic ending into a comic resolution. Chapter 4 explores Malayalam Cinema. While there was an absence of Shakespeare in Malayalam Cinema for the greater part of the twentieth century, the situation changed considerably thanks to *Kaliyattam*, *Kannaki* and *Veeram* or *Karmayogi*. The chapter revolves around the four film adaptations, which follow Shakespeare's text closely, are set in rural backgrounds and borrow heavily from the traditions of Kerala. In chapter 5, Koel Chatterjee takes up the challenge of dealing with a frequently neglected adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Qayamat se Qayamat Tak*. Chatterjee mainly focuses on the resolution, since it

deviates from typical Bollywood movies including a tragic ending, which is precisely what makes the movie so Shakespearean. All the chapters within this section shed light on the cultural negotiation between the Shakespearean dramatic elements and structure and the local; all these adaptations “Indianize” the plays, with a special focus on the tragic.

The second section entitled “Critical innovations” only comprises two chapters, which are examined in the light of different aesthetics within film studies. The core of chapter 6 is the creation of an archive of “silent” Shakespeares on the Indian screen. Due to the lack of availability of these movies at the National Film Archive of Pune, the films are not analyzed. The main strength of this chapter resides in its discovery of the hitherto unknown Indian Shakespeare silent film, *Champraj Hado*. The chapter entitled “Shakespeare, Cinema and Indian Poetics” by Anil Zankar aims to apply the concept of *rasa-s* to the adaptation process, and analyses the opening scenes of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Vishal Bhardwaj’s film *Maqbool* and Akira Kurosawa’s film *Throne of Blood*, using the concepts of dramaturgy from the *Natyashastra*.

Of particular interest is part three of the collection, with adaptations that navigate between the global and the local. All the articles included in this section touch upon political issues. Chapter 8 is an engaging analysis of the novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991) and homonymous film (2002), based on *King Lear*, exploring the dilemma of the male Parsi colonial subject. The most interesting difference between them affects the use of Shakespeare in the novel and in the film. While the novel appropriates, quotes and misquotes Shakespeare to interrogate the Parsi relationship to the Raj, the film omits the Shakespearean allusions, depoliticizing the film, thus enhancing the nostalgic, exotic tone. In chapter 9 Paromita Chakravarti discusses four English-language films made both in India and the UK: *36 Chowringhee Lane*, *Second Generation*, *The Last Lear* and *Life Goes On*. The essay addresses how these films explore “Bengaliness,” how *King Lear* is used to construct a Bengali identity, “poised between the West and the East, tradition and modernity, colonial and postcolonial legacies” (161). Chakravarti finishes the chapter on a positive note, claiming that recent movies such as *Arshinagar*, *Hemanta* or *Zulfiqar* construct a new form of Bengaliness, which is more inclusive. The chapter by Varsha Panjwani is a

valuable asset to the collection because it analyzes Indian parallel cinema for the first time. The essay revolves around *8×10 Tasveer* and *10 ml Love*, based on *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* respectively. Panjwani argues that both movies shed light on the money issue, offering new and fresh insights into Shakespeare's plays. This section closes with an inspirational chapter on the film *Ambikapathy*, regarded by Thea Buckley as an excellent epitome of hybridity, being influenced by Hollywood Shakespeares and Tamil Cinema's Hybrid Heritage. The political engagement reaches its peak in this essay, since the film blends Shakespearean translation with political subversion. *Ambikapathy* "was perfectly placed to glorify Tamil sentiments, its release coinciding with the loosening of censorship laws in 1937" (207). The author convincingly argues how scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* symbolize political transgression, and even a kiss between the lovers could hint at political Independence. Politics offers an interesting discussion throughout the whole section.

The last section of the collection entitled "Reimagining Gender, Region and Nation" gathers together four chapters that analyze how these three issues mingle in the different adaptations. This last section opens with Mark Thornton Burnett's brilliant essay on the Kannada movie *Nanjundi Kalyana*, an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*. Apart from the individual engagement with Shakespeare, the film "places a regional gloss on the play, citing cultural practices and gendered attitudes related to southern parts of India and to Karnataka in particular" (222). Burnett offers a strong conclusion to the chapter by highlighting this regional gloss, which imbues the original play with new and fresh meanings. In chapter thirteen, A. Mangai does not concentrate on full-length films, but on citations, exploring the intersections between Tamil drama and cinema. The complex intertextuality across various regional language cinemas Mangai suggests is precisely one of the strengths of the chapter. In a smooth essay that flows easily and reads well, Amrita Sen focuses on the multiple adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* in Indian languages (relying primarily on *Bhranti Bilash*, *Angoor*, *Do Dooni Char*, *Ulta Palta* and *Double di Trouble*). One of the interesting discoveries of the essay is that these adaptations seem to engage with their predecessor, the result being "a unique clustering, wherein the films influence each other, informing the way each adaptation Indianizes its retelling of Shakespeare" (251). It is important to ponder here the significance of

the last chapter within the collection because it is the first analysis of Hemant Kumar Das's 2014 debut film *Othello (We Too Have Our Othellos)*. It is also the first Assamese film to address Shakespeare explicitly, and it does so by including three Othellos instead of only one. Via the characters' failure to achieve their revolutionary ends, the film offers a serious critique of the political scenario, since it is "a quiet but firm rejection of the political ideologies that have haunted the state for the last fifty years and more" (281). Hence, this essay, following on the footsteps of most of the chapters within the collection, emphasizes the inevitable connection between Shakespeare and politics that embeds the volume.

Two of the collection's greatest virtues are the splendid interviews with Pankaj Butalia, Roysten Abel and Aparna Sen, well-established names within the field of Indian Shakespeares and filmography. The three practitioners interviewed have adapted Shakespeare differently, but with tremendous success in all cases. The annotated filmography included at the end of the volume should not be overlooked either since it provides information about all the Indian Shakespearean adaptations to date. It is a valuable asset that can be used for reference because it certainly paves the way for future research in the field of Shakespeare and Indian cinema.¹

Of course, limitations in such an innovative volume can occur. With so many interesting chapters on the adaptation of Shakespeare into various Indian cinemas, the reader might appreciate more references from one essay to other essays within the collection, bringing out the similarities and differences in the approach to Shakespeare. This could potentially lend greater cohesion to the collection. Yet, it is in this variety of approaches to Shakespeare within the Indian *milieu* that the volume's strength resides. The collection as a whole helps to understand the Indianization and localization of the Bard, whose adaptations acquire new meanings and nuances in their reinterpretation. Trivedi and Chakravarti's

¹ See my annotated database of Indian Shakespeare adaptations, recently launched under the title *Shakespeare and Indian Cinematic Traditions*, Queen's University Belfast (April 2019) <http://www.qub.ac.uk/schools/ael/Research/English/CurrentResearchProjects-ENGLISH/INDIANSHAKESPEARES/shakespeare%20and%20indian%20cinematic%20traditions%20qub/>

pioneering work constitutes an important and significant contribution to the field of Shakespeare on screen. It paves the way for future research and opens the door to the mandatory study of the Indian Shakespeare film.

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