
Staging Shakespeare in Indian Cinema: The Art of Adaptation

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Abstract:

Adaptation is the act or process of adjusting oneself to suit a new situation or environment. In the cinema context, an adaptation entails the whole or partial integration of aspects such as stories, concepts, motifs, and other features from a preexisting work of art into a film. Adaptation refers to the act of converting a work of literature into a cinematic production. Since 1938, the Indian cinema industry has often utilised versions of Shakespearean works. Vishal Bhardwaj garnered extensive acclaim and multiple accolades for his contributions as a screenwriter and filmmaker in the Indian cinema. He specifically transformed three tragic plays written by William Shakespeare: *Maqbool* (2003) which was based on *Macbeth*, *Omkara* (2006) which was based on *Othello*, and *Haider* (2014) which was based on *Hamlet*. When it comes to literature and film, each medium has distinct characteristics and limitations. When modifying a source for a particular medium, it is imperative to make appropriate alterations considering the limitations and attributes of that medium. This procedure entails the deliberate

relinquishment of certain components, the incorporation of fresh materials, and the rigorous execution of comprehensive testing. Viewers should approach film adaptations of Shakespearean literature with a receptive and receptive mindset, ready to embrace and comprehend.

Keywords: adaptation, films, literature, Shakespearean works, storylines, historical events, oral traditions etc.

Within ten years of Dadasaheb Phalke's groundbreaking moving picture exhibitions in 1913, cinema quickly emerged as the primary form of public entertainment in 20th-century India. Among the various topics of early programmes, adaptations of literature, especially theatre works, have gained prominence. Throughout history, humans have shown a remarkable ability to convert texts into different formats.

Paintings, sculptures, plays, written tales, stained glass windows, and novels were inspired by historical events and oral

traditions. Throughout the history of screen adaptations, there has always been a clash between the worlds of literature and film. The practice of turning literary and theatrical works into films has been around since the early days of cinema. Leo Tolstoy saw the film as a direct challenge to the methods of literary art, while Virginia Woolf held the belief that cinema, particularly adaptations of literature, contributed to the decline and corruption of modern society. She characterised cinema as a "parasite" and literature as its "prey," drawing upon the biological aspect.

According to Robert Stam (2008), there are several reasons why literature is often given more importance than film and other media forms. These factors include class bias, a lack of trust in the visual, a preference for written language, and a distaste for the physical effects that cinema has on the viewer's body. Linda Hutcheon (2006) provides a definition of adaptation that emphasises its intentional and thorough nature, highlighting the process of transforming a particular piece or body of work. It involves the process of transforming a story from one form of media to another. It has the option to either closely adhere to the original text or undergo a significant transformation in its structure, style, and content. The appeal of adaptations lies in the chance to relive a specific event and observe the imaginative retelling of a story that we once found pleasurable to read. This could involve a change in medium or genre or a shift in context. Evaluating the excellence of the end result can be quite a task, given the

numerous transformations and adjustments that take place throughout the process of implementing alterations, additions, and conducting experiments. The resulting work takes on a unique identity of its own, separate from the original, and cannot be assessed or judged in terms of its quality. Film adaptation involves the transformation of a story from one medium to another. The distinct qualities and specific limitations of a medium are the main factors that require adjustment and influence the result.

The key element that drives the adaptation process is the individual's ability to be flexible and resourceful. In order to successfully adapt literature, it is crucial to have a deep understanding of both the original source material and the medium it is being adapted to. This study examines the adaptation of two different mediums. A skilled scholar should aim to maintain the core essence of the original piece and transform it into a work of art. In addition, when adapting a novel, it is often necessary to remove substantial sections. On the other hand, when working on an adaptation of a short story, it is more likely that additional content will be required rather than removing any. Given the concise nature of a brief narrative, a film adaptation offers the opportunity for greater length and ample space to explore different possibilities.

In the realm of the Bollywood industry, a multitude of Bollywood films find their origins in literary works. Firstly, Raja Harishchandra, widely considered as the first Indian feature film, is a cinematic retelling of the Indian mythological story of Harishchandra. Indian cinema has

experienced numerous transformations over the course of its history. As an example, in 1938, Krishnaswami Subramaniam adapted Premchand's novel *Sevasadan* into a film. In 1966, the film adaptation of *Gaban* was released, while in 1977, Satyajit Ray brought Premchand's short story *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* to life on the big screen. Satyajit Ray has expertly transformed numerous literary masterpieces into cinematic gems, such as *Pather Panchali*, *Apur Sansar*, *Aprajito*, and *Ghare Baire*. In 1965, a film adaptation of R.K. Narayan's novel *Guide* was directed by Vijay Anand. Ruskin Bond's creative writings, like *Junoon*, *Blue Umbrella*, and *7 Khoon Maaf*, are a great source of inspiration. The list features Prakash Jha's *Parinati*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Devdas*, Anurag Kashyap's *Black Friday*, Amol Palekar's *Paheli*, and Aparna Sen's *The Japanese Wife*.

Throughout the years following his passing, Shakespeare has left a lasting impact that goes far beyond his literary creations. His plays have been a great source of inspiration for filmmakers all around the world, across different generations. These films have qualities that make them well-suited for mainstream audiences across different languages and cultures. They explore a range of themes, including time, space, relationships, and ethnic backgrounds. The author's writings have a timeless quality that transcends the constraints of written language, despite being written in an archaic form of English. The characters in his works are from a distinct era and culture. The Indian film

industry started incorporating Shakespearean literature even before gaining independence. *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935) is an Indian film that draws inspiration from Hamlet and was skillfully directed by Sohrab Modi. Modi's directorial debut film is highly acclaimed for its portrayal of Shakespeare on the Indian screen. The story and storyline were written by Mehdi Hassan Ahsan, who adapted Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for his Urdu drama.

Sohrab Modi played the role of Hamlet in the film *Khoon Ka Khoon*, while Naseem Banu made her film debut as *Ophelia*. The remaining members of the cast consisted of Shamshadbai, Ghulam Hussain, Obali Mai, Fazal Karim, and Eruch Tarapore. In 1941, J. J. Madan created an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* for his Hindi film called *Zalim Saudagar*, inspired by the work of Sohrab Modi. A Gujarati environment provided the backdrop for Sanjay Leela Bhansali's adaptation of the play *Romeo and Juliet*, titled *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013). The long-standing rivalry between the Montague and Capulet families found its parallel in the intense feud between the Rajadi and Sanera families. The tragic fate of Ram (Romeo) and his beloved Leela (Juliet) ultimately served as a catalyst for the resolution of the violent conflict between their respective households. The film was an impressive and lavish production, showcasing a star-studded cast. The emphasis was placed on the passionate elements of the connection between the lovers, rather than the conflicts within the family. However, the matriarch's portrayal

was exaggerated and theatrical.

In the latter part of the twentieth century, there was a growing trend of adapting works, exemplified by the release of *Angeer* (1982), a film directed by Sampooran Singh Kalra, also known as Gulzar. *Angeer* was a film adaptation of *Vranti Bilas* (1963), a Bengali comedy that was originally based on a Bengali play with the same name, written by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. Vidyasagar's play was an impressive theatrical production that drew inspiration from Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*. The movie *Humshakals*, directed by Sajid Khan, was a reimagining of *Angeer*. However, it was a twisted adaptation that turned out to be a nightmare and, luckily, it didn't succeed at the box office. The Bengali film adaptation of *Vranti Bilas*, on the other hand, has enjoyed remarkable economic success and remains immensely popular among dedicated television viewers even today. Vishal Bhardwaj's films *Maqbool* (2004), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haidar* (2014) delve into the intricate relationship between Shakespeare's plays and Indian culture, specifically within the socio-political landscape of Northern India. These films represent a thoughtful exploration and understanding of this adaptation process. These films explore the class divisions and social structures of the region while also serving as independent works of art. Throughout the history of film, adaptations have been subject to harsh scrutiny. Alan Resnais, a highly respected French filmmaker and screenwriter, shared his reservations about adapting novels into

films, likening the process to reheating a meal.

Many filmmakers, writers, and audience members believe that an adaptation should closely follow its source text and faithfully depict the literary work, historical context, or period. Straying from the original text is seen as a subpar adaptation, while closely sticking to the text is seen as a mere imitation that doesn't quite measure up to the original. Every observer longs for a representation that resonates with their understanding of the book, showcasing the challenges that arise from the diverse and individualistic readings and interpretations of a story. The variety of interpretations of a text is broader in the realm of Shakespearean theatre, as every Indian reader imagines the characters and settings in their own distinct manner.

Vishal Bhardwaj is widely recognised for his deep admiration of the literary works crafted by William Shakespeare. In 2003, he crafted the acclaimed film *Maqbool*, drawing inspiration from *Macbeth*. Then, in 2006, he directed another film called *Omkara*, offering his own unique take on *Othello*. Nevertheless, his third picture, *Haidar*, which draws inspiration from the work of an English writer, is generating significant attention from the media due to its controversial backdrop. The setting of the film is in Indian-administered Kashmir. Shahid Kapoor brings the character of Haidar (Hamlet) to life, while Shraddha Kapoor plays Arshia (Ophelia). Tabu takes on the role of Ghazala (Gertrude), and Kay Kay Menon portrays Khurram Meer

(Claudius) in Bhardwaj's film.

The film showcases the renowned plot twists and developments of the play, against the backdrop of the armed rebellion in 1990s Kashmir. Haider, the main character, returns to Kashmir during the height of the insurgency and is shocked to find that his father is nowhere to be found and his mother is now romantically involved with his uncle. The movie revolves around the main character, Shahid, as he embarks on a dangerous journey to find his father and gets caught up in the complex political environment of the region. Bhardwaj expertly captures the profound emotions of Hamlet in the film, all while keeping a powerful focus on the Kashmir backdrop. Throughout the 1990s, the region experienced a significant armed conflict as separatist organisations clashed with security authorities in a series of deadly confrontations. Their objective was to achieve independence from "Indian rule". Kashmir, a region in India, has been a cause of concern for nearly six decades. Pakistan also asserts its control over this region, resulting in two wars and a smaller conflict between the two South Asian nations. India has often accused Pakistan of interfering in its internal affairs and supporting militant organisations.

However, Bhardwaj's film primarily focuses on the alleged violations of human rights in the state, rather than depicting the conflict between the neighbours. Activists often make claims that security personnel are involved in the torture and abduction of local teenagers in unauthorised detention facilities, but the

army consistently denies these accusations. According to Rajiva Varma (2005), "*Haider* portrays explicit instances of torture in Indian army camps and other violations of human rights committed by Indian officials." *Haider* is an intellectual production that draws inspiration from the narrative of Hamlet. It delves into the political events that have taken place in Kashmir with a direct and honest approach. An argument arose after the film was released.

Despite the film's overwhelming popularity at the box office, some Shakespeare enthusiasts were disappointed by the changes made to the storyline and the addition of a geopolitical aspect in the picture. These analyses of adaptations showcase a strong conviction in the preeminence of literature over cinema. There is a prevailing belief that media designed for mass consumption often lacks the depth and nuance found in literature. Undoubtedly, Shakespeare's works garnered immense acclaim and widespread recognition during his lifetime. In the time of Shakespeare, his plays were performed at the Globe Theatre in London, which has been rebuilt as the modern-day Shakespeare's Globe. Admission at the Globe Theatre was only one penny for entry into the 'pit', an open-air section where spectators would stand to watch the performance. The accessible price enabled trade labourers and merchants to attend performances at the Globe, while affluent patrons paid a premium for seats in the gallery. The Lord Chamberlain's Men, later called the King's Men, also performed plays

at the Blackfriars Theatre, an enclosed venue where audiences sat on benches to enjoy the shows.

The admission fee for the Blackfriars was higher than the most affordable ticket for the Globe, costing sixpence. Shakespeare also crafted numerous theatrical adaptations of literary works by other authors. He consistently embraces poetic freedom. He employed the literary device known as 'poetic licence'. More generally, this term refers to the various methods in which poets and other literary authors are considered to have the freedom to intentionally break the usual rules of everyday language and even factual accuracy to create specific effects. This includes disregarding the rules of metre and rhyme, using established literary techniques, and creating fictional characters and events. In *Henry IV*, Part 1, Shakespeare deviates from Samuel Daniel's historical account of the Wars of Roses by portraying the courageous Hotspur as younger than he was.

This alteration is intended to create a stronger contrast with the seemingly debauched Prince Hal, so enhancing the dramatic impact of their interactions. An anachronism is the act of placing an event, person, or thing outside of its appropriate historical epoch. Shakespeare portrayed Cleopatra in his play as wearing corsets from the Elizabethan era. The main inspiration for the play *Antony and Cleopatra* comes from the *Life of Antony* by Plutarch, as translated by Sir Thomas Nashe. Shakespeare closely followed this source material in certain parts of the play.

In *Julius Caesar*, which is also based on Plutarch's works and is set in ancient Rome, Shakespeare included a clock that strikes the hour. Therefore, as a work of art, it is not obligatory for any adaptations to strictly adhere to their sources. Renowned British filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock famously expressed his approach to storytelling in an interview, stating, "Upon discovering a captivating concept within a book, I promptly disregard the source material and embark on the process of crafting a cinematic experience." Viewers should transcend fidelity criticism and consider the source material as one of the multiple texts that influenced or are included in the film. Viewers should also analyse how the film conveys meaning through many elements such as dialogue, visuals, cinematography, mise-en-scene, and music. Rather than dismissing adaptations as mere replicas of the original, viewers should regard them as interpretations that have the potential to offer fresh perspectives on the source work.

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