



Shakespeare in the Orient screen: Cinematic adaptations in China, India and Japan

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Abstract— *This article presents the subtle coalescence of Occidental text with Oriental vision, our conception of Shakespeare's 'modernity', which is ever-changing, ever-progressing and being further enriched with cross-cultural revisions of form, content and character. It aims to assess Asian (Chinese, Indian, and Japanese) film adaptations of Shakespearean plays, of how perpetually universal themes have sustained the interest for re-creating these works. In other words, it investigates how narratives have evolved across different spatial and temporal dimensions, offering new perspectives, introducing different 'voices' and echoing certain sentiments characteristic of that sphere.*

Keywords— *cross-cultural, film adaptations, narratives, oriental, Shakespeare.*

INTRODUCTION

Margherita Laera describes adaptation as a “kind of interpretive intervention”, with “the act of returning and rewriting” adapting itself “to present contingencies and situations.” According to Judy Wakabayashi, the issues of originality and derivativeness, reverence towards the authority of written texts were familiarized in Japanese, Chinese and Indian thinking on translation as a consequence of cultural contact with the West. In *A Theory of Adaptation*, Linda Hutcheon writes that “as a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation”, which she says has been called both “appropriation and salvaging”, depending on individual perception, and crucially writes that adaptation is “extended intertextual engagement” and that we experience them as “palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.”

Cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespearean plays stand as one of the many testimonies of the Bard's timeless appeal. The world is but a reactive and dynamic stage; what holds it together in a Pangea of cohesion is a consistency in the patterns of human action and behavior. There is forever a

tantalizing precariousness in the balance between order and anarchy, conscience and decadence, the practical and whimsical, the frivolous and grim, love and hatred. Whether it is the capricious Lear or the vacillating Hamlet, the cynical Melancholy Jacques or the fatally ambitious Macbeth, the farcical Falstaff or the green-eyed Othello, there is a larger-than-life ‘humanness’, that we cannot help but empathize with because these are characters into which the very core of our own identities are deeply rooted. In his penetrative scrutiny of human intractability and intractable humanity, Shakespeare wields his pen with a sheerness that is almost prophetic; such that the very persona of his characters, when transplanted and reflected into a relocated spatiality and re-historicized temporality, shows little to almost no change. Shakespeare's plays are not fixed and stable anymore; they are “fluid and plural”, as Poonam Trivedi puts it, being subsumed and submerged into a host of different cultures. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said famously declared that: “rather than the manufactured clash of civilizations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or

inauthentic mode of understanding can allow."

The history of theatre adaptations of Shakespeare in Asia goes a long way- whether it is the "Xiqu" Opera in mainland China or Singapore, the *Noh* in Japan, or integration of Indian folk elements into the Shakespearean vein. Wole Soyinka famously pointed out the relevance of Shakespeare while pillorying those among the Arabs who would appropriate Shakespeare by claiming that he was literally an Arab called "Shaikh Zubeir"(or variants thereof).

CHINA: (THE TWO HAMLETS)

The Banquet (2006) embraces a highly stylized, sumptuous milieu where the story of Hamlet gets reintroduced in new allegories and re-historicized within a wuxia world. It progresses in rhythmic slow-motion that is almost anticipating of the impending death and destruction. The drama works an initial illusion of loosening the intrigues and intricacies, and in the process, getting further ensnared in a new mesh of knots that ultimately smothers the life out of all the characters. Wu Luan's (Prince Hamlet) feverish fretting, intense introspection and ear-splitting ruminations about duty, honor, resistance and survival are realistically rendered in the strife- ridden 10th century China, towards the end of the Tang dynasty. Life is fickle and vulnerable, ambition thicker than blood and things are liable to get bloody if one lacks insight and intuition. Molly Hand elucidates how the film is "sometimes poetic but sometimes tries too hard in its attempts at poeticism...The ghost is not a troubling figure in any theological or metaphysical sense. In addition, Horatio is absent, as are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. With no friends to talk to, Wu Luan reveals little in dialogue and he does not soliloquize." It also circumvents the Oedipal-incestuous dynamic, Hamlet's misogynistic treatment of Ophelia, the ghost of Hamlet's father by replacing family ties and slackening tensions.

Hamlet wore his madness like a 'mask', as an act of escape rather than rebellion. In *The Banquet*, Wu Luan dons a literal mask, whereby the difference between the shadow and ego is made conspicuous. Director Feng Xiaogang reverts Hamlet's philosophical broodings by situating him away from the court, not in a university, but an outdoor theatre where he divulges himself into the thespian world. Nevertheless, Wu Luan, like Hamlet, is weary, unobtrusive, retiring and passive like a recluse with a refined mind. Such characterization foresees his subsequent disillusionment and fatalistic farcicality, as Foucault propounded: "...madness fascinates because it is knowledge...all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult, hermetic, esoteric learning."

The aesthetic atmosphere soon descends into a scenario of bloodbath with two groups of assassins, one sent by Emperor Li (Claudius) to kill and the other by Empress Wan (Gertrude) to shield Prince Wu Luan. Ben Logan points out that the masked theatre has a long tradition of concomitance in Chinese culture, as Shaolin martial artists were also opera performers. The mask operates as metaphor, costume, concealment and cultural object. J. E. Cirlot in *A Dictionary of Symbols* (1958) propounds: "*All transformations are invested with something at once of profound mystery and of the shameful, since anything that is so modified as to become 'something else' while still remaining the thing that it was, must inevitably be productive of ambiguity and equivocation. Therefore, metamorphoses must be hidden from view—and hence the need for the mask. Secrecy tends towardstransfiguration: it helps what-one-is to become what-one-would-like-to-be...*"

Wu Luan explains how the mask "transports an actor to the highest state of his art. Without a mask, happiness, anger, sorrow and joy are simply written on his face. But with a mask, a great artist can convey to the audience the most complex and hidden emotions." Wan reasons differently saying, "Your sorrow, anger, bitterness and uncertainty are there for all to see ... You think hiding behind a mask can elevate your art. The highest level is to use your own face and turn it into a mask." The imitation is complete only then. If the mask is equivalent to the passive protection of a chrysalis, the sword is an open defense against physical destruction and psychic decision of safeguarding the spirit.

Oscar Wilde wrote: "...there is no such thing as Shakespeare's Hamlet. If Hamlet has something of the definiteness of a work of art, he also has all the obscurity that belongs to life. There are as many Hamlets as there are melancholies." In *Prince of the Himalayas* (2006), Prince Lhamoklodam, the Tibetan Hamlet, plunges into the pitfall of death, if not as "passion's slave", but as a man who yearns to free his soul from the piercing pangs of betrayal. He resists action, but at the same time, is unable to rise above the ascendancy of emotions that upsets the equilibrium of his being.

Hui Wu observes, "While Feng Xiaogang identifies China with ancient civilization, Hu Xuehua identifies Tibet with glorious nature." A sacred harmony persists in the snow-clad mountains and crystalline lakes, but also its traditional rituals such as like sky, fire and water burials.

However, the microcosm of interpersonal relationships exhibits a more tempestuous clime, coupled with misplaced identities and a fatal error of judgement (hamartia) stemming from innocuous ignorance (with the Himalayan Hamlet becoming a picture-perfect emblem of Aristotle's tragic hero). As psychological treatises, *The Banquet* is an

edition of Kydian anarchism while *Prince of the Himalayas* is a sermon that culminates in a Buddhist vision of love and philosophy. However, the latter's tragic refrain doesn't end with death; instead it is revived with the birth of Lhamoklodam's son, insinuating that the cycle of samsara has not been broken.

INDIA: (MACBETH, OTHELLO, HAMLET)

Julie Sanders claims, "...adaptation and appropriation are fundamental to the practice, and indeed, to the enjoyment, of literature." The Bard's presence and appropriation in India has come a long way, especially in local theatre, with its ever-relevant themes of forbidden love, conflicts of kingship, and religious conflict.

Vishal Bharadwaj's version of Shakespeare is recoded, contemporized, commercialized and indigenized as political statements to be read in light of current events. Relocated in the underworld domains and disputed diaspora, Bharadwaj intended to shake his audience out of complacency with all the grime and grisliness he could percolate into his films, in a tone tactfully adjusted between realism and melodrama. The sense of bitter apocalyptic endings is a break from the relatively elegiac, allegorical antiquity of the other films; it is a realm where lawlessness is the norm, and corruption is all-conquering.

The first of his trilogy *Maqbool* (2003) draws upon the tale of *Macbeth*, manifesting the same level of murkiness, with its people thriving upon superstitions, depravity and a conscious, deliberate Machiavellianism. *Maqbool* stood at the center of a collision of ambition and love; his assassination of Abbaji (who was like a father-figure to him) borders on patricide, so that his love for Nimmi (Lady Macbeth) bears semblance of an oedipal complex.

The image of the three 'Weird Sisters' is reincarnated in the form of two crooked, clairvoyant police officers, Pandit and Purohit. Poonam Trivedi points out the sardonic significance of their names: Purohit (literally, "a family priest) may be defined as "a sanctioned practitioner of religion with immense power wielding capacity in society" while Pandit (a scholar specialised in Sanskrit and Hindu philosophy) is "a producer of knowledge: one who is entrusted with the task of rationalising" thereby reinforcing their status and clout. Together they forebode ill-omens checking the 'kundal', a horoscope grid used by Indian astrologers. The film is replete with indigenous signifiers, and showcases the multi-ethnic, many-faced aspects of its people. Blair Orfall observes: "Like many contemporary film adaptations of Shakespeare, *Maqbool* uses no Shakespearean language. Instead, regionalized Urdu, which requires a bit of effort from Hindi viewers, marks the characters' Muslim identity and social world. The film

is filled with Islamic signifiers, ranging from clothing and eating and fasting practices to a dramatized trip to a darga, or Sufi temple, which includes a religious musical sequence.

Likewise, in *Omkara* (Othello), the debased jargon, use of expletives and sexist remarks reflect the rustic, uneducated subaltern station of his community. The gangs reek of liquor, chauvinism and are liable to erupt in criminal aggression anytime things go out of their control. Here, Langda (Iago), far from being the outsider, is one of Omkara's own; he takes his cue from his delinquent lot, venting his vengeance by carefully playing out his schemes with Dolly (Desdemona) as the pawn. Here, 'caste' (instead of 'race') becomes the determinant of cultural purity and privilege; and the film explores the fluctuating positions of victim and perpetrator, with one group enacting dominance and revenge upon the other. The constant reminders to Omkara's lineage as a half-caste resonate strongly with the prejudices of Indian society at large and sensitize its deeply ingrained fears of miscegenation.

Indian patriarchs are analogous to Shakespeare's fathers in their dominant, conservative nature, and face immense difficulty accepting "their replacement in their daughters' affections and as a result, they abuse their political power over their daughters ...behaving coercively and destructively" (MacEachern, 1988).

By her liaison with the racialized/oppressed 'Other', Desdemona seals her fate, will and being with Othello. In *Omkara*, we see the alienation most conspicuously, as both family and society turn their backs on and repudiate all responsibilities for Dolly, for her decision which was a private domestic matter. Othello/Omkara, like the disdained father, demands absolute control over and unconditional loyalty from Desdemona/Dolly- he prepares to cast her out at even the slightest speck of doubt. Marjorie St. Rose avows:

"Othello's blackness in no diminishes his power over Desdemona-in an almost perverse it increases it. Desdemona's pariah status leaves her totally unprotected by the patriarchal power of Venice, her father, or her kinsmen. She is therefore totally at the mercy of Othello, to whom she has given absolute power to decide her fate by the rebellious act of marrying him... The pathos of Desdemona's position is that she has simply exchanged one sort of dependence on a man for another."

In *Haider* (2014), the predicament at the individual level operates as the symbolic mood of the state at large: with controversies, conspiracies and martyrdom looming large, the conflict is both intercommunal and intra-communal. Samik Bandhopadhyay elucidates its "unexpected

transitions from the farcical to the melodramatic to the discursive to the fantastic to the grimly naturalistic, allowing Death itself a presence in a political scenario". Jammed between the counter-insurgency and government-run forces, Haider (Hamlet) is compelled to act impulsively, tips off (or seems to) the edges of sanity as a coping mechanism and bide his days for murdering his father's assailant. He seems to be at war with the vicissitudes of fate, encumbered with exacting justice but nothing he can do would avert his tragedy or lessen his own agony.

Here, Ophelia is honorably empowered (though she eventually succumbs to sorrow) and Polonius a practiced actor rehearsed in the ways of serving the self, like "a cyclops with one eye, and that eye placed in the back of his head" (Coleridge). The scene of the grave-diggers represents a droll morbidity about their circumstance: for all its connotations about suicide and carnage, they are seen through the lens of one whose feelings of revulsion have numbed. They go about their vocation, singing and digging as they have their whole lives, and for whom death and trepidation are familiar guests.

JAPAN: (MACBETH AND KING LEAR)

Akira Kurosawa's empire 'writes back' Shakespeare by analyzing the behavior of his "so many separate selves" (Harold Pinter) in *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985). Whether it is the blinking contrasts of light and dark (in *Throne of Blood*) or the "blood-stained painting" (as Kawamoto Saburo called *Ran*), Kurosawa stirs to life the visual delicacy and poetic sobriety that is buoyant in Yamato-e scrolls. The sheer translucence, luminous yet placid quality is reproduced in style in conversation scenes as well as the battle episodes, with warriors clashing down slopes in a rain of arrows. Minami was insightful in observing the Japanese proclivity of treating Shakespeare "as source material rather than as authority" and how playwrights do not "read Shakespeare for contemporary meanings, but they write contemporary meanings into Shakespeare."

Kurosawa revitalized the tradition of 'noh' into the Shakespearean panorama of feudal Japan by setting the action on bare thresholds, incorporating chorus sequences (that serve as both fable and interpreter) and employing theatrical stylization of manner, wherein facial expressions were caricatured as *noh* masks. In *Throne of Blood*, Washizu's (Macbeth) brusque dance-like movements, his puckered façade (characteristic of the *heida* mask) are juxtaposed against the slow, more calculated gait and frozen, furtive gaze (*shakumi*) of Asaji (Lady Macbeth), whose conflict is more internalized.

Throne of Blood, as its name suggests, refers to the internecine politics of warlords in their resolve to seize control and authority. Its original title *Kumonosu-jo* or "The Castle of Spider's Web" has morbid implications of death and ambush. Cirlot writes: "Because of its spiral shape, [the cobweb] also embraces the idea of creation and development—of the wheel and its centre. But in this case death and destruction lurk at the centre, so that the web with the spider in the middle comes to symbolize what Medusa the Gorgon represents when located in the centre of certain mosaics: the consuming whirlwind. It is probably a symbol of the negative aspect of the universe, representing the Gnostic view that evil is not only on the periphery of the Wheel of Transformations but in its very centre—that is, in its Origin."

The image of a mandala is also reconstructed in the scene where the witch enrobed in silk mumbles her oracular oration at her spinning wheel, decoying the two samurai into a labyrinth of fog and wilderness. The witch, despite her human form, seems less a corporeal entity than a seamy apparition of imagination ("we dream of what we wish"); thereby reinforcing it was but the disquieting shadow of Washizu's inner ambition. The Japanese Macbeth draws on the mythical traditions of *shuramono* and *senki bungaku* that sing about the ephemeral glories of battle and rebellion; the cycle of mutiny and betrayal revolves perpetually unlike in *Macbeth*, where Macduff's victory heralds a restoration of order, at least provisionally. The ending of *Kumonosu-jo* is a retraction from Shakespeare's original in that it explores more explicitly the duplicity and mutability of human nature: the samurai "gokenin" were bound to their lord not only with ties of property and military tradition but with familial piety and gratitude. Washizu is the first to violate the samurai code of "Bushido" and karma rebounds on him as his death takes on the tone of execution carried out by society. Like Shakespeare, Kurosawa presents the state of affairs, not as a pamphleteer or political activist, but at with the same strokes of subtlety and ambiguity that involves us intellectually just as it moves us emotionally.

According to Gunji Masakatsu, how a character is killed in kabuki is much more important than the dramatic plot element of the killing or dying itself, especially in the case of evil characters. While Washizu finds himself locked in the claustrophobic cage of action and circumstance,

Kurosawa's Lear stands in a catatonic trance deserted in his own universe, with only his guilt to gulp. Samuel Crowl reflects:

"*Lear and Macbeth are a study in contrasts: expanse and impasse; expression and repression; wasteland and labyrinth. Lear opens up and out; Macbeth constricts and*

closes in. Lear overflows; Macbeth contains. Both plays are driven by power and appetite but from widely divergent engines. Lear is a lightning bolt; Macbeth runs on alternating current. Both feed upon the body of the king and transform the sacred into the profane. Lear's terror is reflected in the universe; Macbeth's in the mind...If Throne of Blood seems permanently shrouded in fog and mist and rain, Ran is conceived all in vivid colors: blue, green, red, yellow, and black."

In *Ran*, ("ran" meaning "turbulence") Kurosawa relegates the father-children discord to the margins and focuses the limelight on the struggle of power with his daughter-in-law, Lady Kaede, who, in her part, acts as an avenger. However, revenge begets revenge and tragedy ensues. Tragedy, in turn, implies loss, a break with the natural order and chaos, external and internal. In one of the most memorable scenes, Hidetora Ichimonji (King Lear) plods in an endless expanse of outgrown reeds spiraling in madness, like blades or tentacles, to the ominous beat of his own heart as it flutters and falters. G. Wilson Knight observed: "a tremendous soul is, as it were, incongruously geared to a puerile intellect... Lear is mentally a child, in passion a titan."

As in the play, Lear's only companions in the heath are a fool (a fractured self that is still sane) and a madman; his fortress of pride is in pieces. The imagery is frothing; a conscious frenzy persists all through the buffeting, strain and strife, and at moments, of bodily tension to the point of agony. His face seems phantasmal, distraught from betrayal by his own blood and haunted by the manifest specter of senility. In addition, his clinical narcissism that blinded his judgement is symptomatic of his psychosis: "self-attachment is the first sign of madness, but it is because man is attached to himself that he accepts error as truth, lies as reality, violence and ugliness as beauty and justice." (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*) His mental and physical grip on this world is blurred in a blotch at the back of his mind; his abuse of authority seems to get back at him, in a galvanized gall of massacre. The film's color palette burns in brilliance as clouds of conflagration rage above combating armies. Stephen Prince posits these moments as the zenith of Kurosawa's cinematic prowess:

"These images have a ferocity, a dynamic rhythm, and a compositional richness that nothing else in the film attains. Ironically, Kurosawa musters his greatest energy for the bleakest and most unsparring section of the film."

CONCLUSION

Marjorie Garber rightly proclaimed:

"The word "Shakespearean" today has taken on its own set

of connotations, often quite distinct from any reference to Shakespeare or his plays... 'Shakespearean' is now an all-purpose adjective, meaning great, tragic, or resonant: it's applied to events, people, and emotions, whether or not they have any real relevance to Shakespeare."

The issue of Shakespeare's modernity has been best described by Ben Jonson in his poem prefixed to the 1623 Folio of *Shakespeare's Plays*: "He was not of an age, but for all Time". His willful dramatization of plots is telling of a wider perspective on community, disaster, isolation and social etiquettes, bringing out unpleasant truths in light of a general state of affairs that never ceases to be contemporary. As such, Shakespeare 'holds a mirror' (as his immortal brainchild Hamlet said we ought) to the paroxysms of mind and body, and sees deadlocks, discrepancies and inevitabilities essentially as parts that make up the ultimate reality. Kenneth Muir noted that "the subtlety of his [Shakespeare's] characterization survives the process of translation, the transplanting into alien cultures and the erosion of time."

Reality is protean and mutable, yet the theology of reason and tragic implications of human experience, the prison of the self and issues of loneliness and absurdity that constantly plague existence are explored in their most explicit, engulfing state. Shakespeare film adaptations, as José Angel Garcia Landa explains, have "multiple intertextual dimensions, connecting them — unlike most adaptations, or remakes — to the original text, to previous films of the same play and to stage productions, which in turn have an intertextual history of their own".

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