

Pritam Dhar, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 2, pp. 1508-1516

Date of Publication: 24th September 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.15081516>

This paper can be cited as: Dhar, P. (2018). *When Hamlet Visited India: A Study on the Indian*

Perspective of Adapting Hamlet. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 4(2), 1508-1516.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

WHEN HAMLET VISITED INDIA: A STUDY ON THE INDIAN PERSPECTIVE OF ADAPTING HAMLET

Pritam Dhar

Humanities and Management Department, Seacom Engineering College, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad University of Technology, Howrah, India

dharpritam1@gmail.com

Abstract

Through this article, we will explore what happens when we put William Shakespeare's Hamlet into the Indian perspective. The play is no longer only about themes such as revenge and insanity. The recent Indian adaptations try to address contemporary socio-economic problems more importantly. Now the question that arises is the fact that why is both Hamlet the character as well as Hamlet the play still relevant in the society. The solution is simple the themes which Shakespeare has used continues to keep it in the hunt for being a readymade solution to being successful from the adaptor's point of view. Then, there are a few more adaptations that are interesting beyond being an adaptation of the play itself. There are adaptations that look forward to present Hamlet as a next-door character. Then there are others where the focus is on Hamlet himself and the character has been dissected to various forms and shape. Like in Hamletmachine: The Images of Shakespeare in Us (2008), Hamlet has gone through a geographical shift and tries to solve issues in the contemporary Indian setting but fails miserably to relate to them. Then there are other areas where Shakespeare's play has not been directly adapted but the adaptation has been done from another adaptation making the play even more interesting. Most of the adaptations though are done keeping in mind the middle class audience and the story has been modified in relation to the expectation of the audience. Therefore, Hamlet does not belong to the regal family in the recent adaptations like Haider (2014) and Kashmakash (2016). He is a common man like us addressing issues which are very contemporary and global as well while themes like revenge and insanity has been viewed from a different perspective providing the play with a completely new dimension in the modern day setting.

Keywords

Hamlet, Shakespeare, Adaptations, Indian, Middle Class, Contemporary Issues

1. Introduction

Translations, adaptations and appropriations of William Shakespeare's works has been one of the commonest phenomena in the intellectual arena of India ever since the British invaded the country through the East-India Company. The same applies for the rest of the world as well, as Shakespeare, till date, is the author whose works have been translated and adapted the most number of time through various mediums such as films, tele-films, theatre, and many other sources. More importantly, what these adaptations have done is that they have addressed issues that are quite varied and distinctly different from what 'The Bard' had actually conceptualized. A very important observation regarding this issue has been generated from Martin Esslin's introduction to the famous book in this context written by Jan Kott:

"In the case of Shakespeare this process is particularly clear: Samuel Johnson's Shakespeare is very different indeed from the Shakespeare of Coleridge or Hazlitt, very different from the Shakespeare of Georg Brandes or Harley Granville-Barker, and equally different from the Shakespeare of our own time."

Now, the question that comes up from the above discussion is whether the adaptations of Shakespeare into different languages empower those for whom English is a second language or do they reinforce the cultural hegemony or result in him being studied as a contemporary for the German romantics, a spokesperson for the proletarian heroes, must read for the communists and even an icon of historical modernity in East-Asia. Quoting Martin Esslin again,

"Once a language had its fully adequate version of Shakespeare it became able to support the foundations of a nation, its institutions, its political autonomy. Only the Bible rivals Shakespeare in this aspect of archetypal significance." (Kott, 1964)

The evident reasons behind the success of the Shakespearian plots including *Hamlet* from the Indian perspective is the fact that the themes that are eminent in Shakespeare's major tragedies are such those are compatible to any situation and any background irrespective of the time, space and the characters used in the adapted versions. The political undertone in *Hamlet* is one of the major issues behind the success of its adaptations and the same applies for other major plays such as *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. What makes *Hamlet* even special is the presence of other themes such as deceit, lies, insanity, mortality, women, gender, etc. These are such themes, which contradict the very word contemporary as even after more than 400 years have passed by

since the composition has been done, they are quite evident and continue to arouse the interest quotient of the audiences. These themes are also responsible for the people across the globe and not only in India to continue to relate to the story in spite of there being a huge number of audiences who has no earlier acquaintance with the plot. Due to all these causes, *Hamlet* has become one of the most frequently adapted plays of William Shakespeare not only in India or the Sub-Continent but also across the world. In the subsequent proceedings of the discourse, we would try to figure out analytically the reasons behind the success of the most efficacious recent adaptations of *Hamlet* in the Indian circuit.

2. Hamlet Himself

When Hamlet, the character, is Indianized, multiple situations occur that purports to the fact that he is a misfit in the Indian society and culture. The very fact makes the adapted versions of the protagonist even more critical. Already, from Shakespeare's point of view, Hamlet might be viewed as one of the most critical character if not the most critical one the Bard has ever produced. What complements the discourse is the fact that Hamlet, as per the Shakespearian text, is a scholar par excellence, and, for him to relate to the happenings of India, which is still considered as a third world country, becomes very difficult and supports in the proof of the fact that the Indian adaptations of *Hamlet* are more critical than the Bard's version of the tragedy. However, on the contrary, it is William Shakespeare himself, who starts the process of getting the character of the tragic protagonist of his play closer to reality with instances such as Hamlet assuming madness in order to shield himself from reality so that it gets easier for him to complete the act of revenge (Edwards, 2003). However, later on the same insanity starts engulfing Hamlet although, it is not very evident from the Shakespearian version of the tragedy whether the assumed insanity turns into reality or not and there is still confusion among the critics regarding this fact. Nevertheless, the act of sheltering himself from reality through assumed madness does not come in the way of Hamlet being accepted by people both inside and outside the text. Another very important discussion regarding this point is Hamlet being a member of the royal family that has been strategically avoided in most of the Indian adaptations in order to bring the character closer to the mass and get the desired result as well as the desired effect out of the film or the theatre versions of the play in India. Then, his diction and his philosophy that is distinctly different from the common mass had to be there in order to distinguish the Hemants and the Haiders of the adaptation from the common Indian people. This manages to distinguish the high profile character from not only the common people but also from the other characters. This is evident not only in the adaptations but also in the original piece. The conceptualization of a bright scholar assuming insanity through mind games and the metaphors

used by him are all related to the earlier incident of the killing of his father as well as his mother, with whom, his attachment might be termed as the purest form of possessiveness, getting married to his uncle, which from the Indian perspective is quite abnormal. The fact that his uncle strategically removed his father and then married his mother is reason enough to contemplate the act of revenge as under normal circumstances; Oedipus Rex is something out of context in the Indian society. However, the process adapted by Hamlet and the criticalness of the process marks the progression of the play. The Indian background also helps in the development of the drama that are not necessarily meant only for the educated mass to relate to but are more commonly meant for the common visitors to the cinema halls and the theatres as well.

3. Haider (Vishal Bhardwaj, India, 2014)

When it comes to the discussion of the Indian adaptation of anything, the first thing that comes to people's mind is Bollywood. The primary search is regarding whether there is any Bollywood adaptation of this particular piece within the speculated period. In case of *Hamlet*, especially within the provided space, the first adaptation that people consider is Vishal Bhardwaj's film adaptation *Haider*. The primary reason behind the successfulness of this adaptation is the fact that it is based on the happenings of Kashmir in the 90's. Thus, the adaptation is about the most sensitive area of India during one of its most sensitive time in the history of independent India (Pandey, 7th October, 2014). The director even goes to the extent of stating in one of his interviews, "Kashmir is the Hamlet of my film" (Singh, 2014). However, the adaptation is not necessarily only about Hamlet and his story. This is a story regarding the families who were still staying in Kashmir during the time when terrorism had reached a new zenith over there. Rather than the story of Hamlet, this is about the oppression of the state machineries on the common person during that particular phase in the history of the state (Kumar, 2014, 2016). What makes the story even more interesting is the fact that the impersonation of the murdered king in the adaptation is no longer a royal character. He has been portrayed, by Vishal Bhardwaj, as a middle class doctor who treats all that comes his way. He even manages to treat the terrorists secretly owing to his vow, as a doctor regarding the treatment of all that is ill. Then, the mother is a teacher, uncle, a lawyer and aspiring political leader and Haider, the impersonation of Hamlet in this adaptation is a student of the famous Aligarh University. Further, Ophelia has been characterised as Arshee in the film who is an eminent press persona. The glorious Hamlet of Shakespeare receives a big blow as the film has a scene where Haider is stopped at the army check-post only to be saved by Arshee using the power of her press card. There are more instances where Hamlet has been brought down to the level of a common man when it is seen that he addresses the common mass regarding the implementation

of AFSPA in the disguise of a lunatic. This subsequently adds on to the drama as the state machineries starts keeping track of him. To make things even more realistic, the ghost in the Shakespearian version is got rid of and in the adaptation has been replaced by a character named Roohdar. This adds another dimension to the adaptation as through Roohdar it has been found out that Haider's father has not been killed right away. He has been kept under captivation without any trace of him to be found anywhere, commonly known as undergrounding of the criminals. Roohdar, in this film, has faced similar circumstances but managed to flee somehow or the other. This throws light on the actual happenings of the time in the contemporary Kashmir. Thus, Haider is a complete misfit to the system and his protest against his family gradually turns into a protest against the entire system giving the entire adaptation a serious political background and telling the story of the continuous oppression of the state machineries on the residents of Kashmir ever since independence.

4. Kashmakash (Jatin Sarna, India, 2016)

As per the author, Jatin Sarna himself, *Kashmakash*, is seen as a meagre potboiler and the eminent themes in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been used from the Indian perspective in order to draw the attention of the common public. There are themes such as betrayal and revenge, which is very common in the intellectual arena in India. Apart from that the illicit relationships and the politics related to that has all that is required to frame a very common potboiler from the Indian perspective. What Jatin Sarna has effectively done is to Indianize the entire plot with minor and effective changes. This has further instigated the social problems to automatically pop-up. Hemant, the impersonation of Hamlet in this play returns to his house only to know that his father has been killed by his uncle. Kailash, his uncle, further aspires to marry his mother Gayatri, which he finally implements building up the stage for Hemant to launch a counter attack and finally implement his revenge. Another effective change in the plot is the characterization of the ghost of the dead king. Primarily, the ghost has been shown in the theatre as a child. Gradually, it grows up signifying the fact that the enigma of the ghost keeps on getting larger on the rest of the characters. Further, once the ghost meets Hemant, the personification of Hamlet in the play, it disappears completely. Hemant further, picks up the Army uniform for the rest of the play to make up for the disappearance of the ghost. Thus, in spite of the fact that the ghost has completely disappeared from the play, the Army uniform symbolizes its presence and keep the audience regarding the act of betrayal on part of Kailash and Gayatri. The earlier part of the plot suggest the absence of Hemant's father for most of the time as he is an army officer and is posted somewhere far from home. Kailash takes opportunity of this absence and finally enjoys an illicit relationship with Gayatri. When the time of the father retiring from his services arise, they come

to the realization that all their illegal activities would be coming to a halt sooner rather than later. As the original husband of the woman as well as the original owner of the property would be coming back very soon. This time he would be back permanently and the illicit relationship would come to a standstill. Thus the murder. The murder of his father and further the illicit relationship between his mother and his uncle infuriates Hemant, the tragic protagonist of the play. The mother-son relationship from the Indian perspective is one of the purest form of love and a mother having a relationship with any other human being is very unacceptable. As such, Hemant gets mad with anger. This assumed madness make him speak in metaphors as he starts relating all his speech to the earlier events. In this case, all the events are related to a middle-class Indian family and the rest of what follows are centred on issues such as illegal relationships, love, betrayal, revenge, property, etc. These are things that every middle class person especially in the Indian culture would relate to, as they are parts and parcel of their day-to-day lives. Hemant, being distinctly different from the other characters around him, find it hard to relate to the happenings and as such, the entire play becomes a critique to the secret happenings of the contemporary Indian middle- class families. Thus, instead of the original themes of the Shakespearian *Hamlet*, this Indianized version becomes representative of the happenings of a common family based in Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand and instead of them being the rulers themselves, they are governed by the constitution of India. Then comes Hemant, the impersonation of Hamlet, who, from the perspective of a different time and space still finds it difficult to relate to the similar happenings although the happenings are more or less the same, the crisis of the character and the plot remains the same and just like the common mass of Elizabethan England, the common mass of the 21st century India also relates to the plot and the themes and thus celebrate the intellectual capacity of Shakespeare as well as his selection of the themes prevalent in the original version of the play.

5. Hamletmachine- *Images of Shakespeare in us* (Principal Text: Heiner Muller, Addition: Shamshur Rehman & Joy Goswami, Direction: Parnab Mukherjee, Bangla Adaptation: Janardan Ghosh; 2008)

Coming to the most interesting piece of the discourse for multiple reasons, *Hamletmachine- The Images of Shakespeare in us* might be termed unique solely from the point of view of the fact that it is an adaptation of an adaptation. The primary adaptation was done by the famous German playwright Heiner Muller in 1977. This was produced and staged from the Indian perspective in 2008. This interesting stage act was produced by The Best of Kolkata Campus. With effective additions to Muller's slim text by Shamshur Rehman and Joy Goswami and the rest of the adaptation completed by Janardan Ghosh, Parnab Mukherjee's direction

makes Muller's piece go through a political, geographical and national shift. The adaptation has become more interesting for the fact that it follows a fragmented style that gradually transits into a fragmented landscape. Interestingly at the very beginning of the play, there is a famous dialogue by Hamlet himself: "I am not Hamlet. This is not my play anymore..." To be very precise, the audience was left in shock when the adaptation was first staged in the 'Hamara Shakespeare' festival in 2008. The metaphorical symbolization of the piece with a series of photographs, hands and legs used as metaphors constituted in Hamlet undergoing a geographical shift and oscillating between movements, activist aspirations and dangerous dreams. The crisis within Hamlet has been transmitted to the crises of the contemporary society with the effective use of images. Striking images such as the one of Bobby Sands, who spend the last 9 years of his 27 years long life dies on the 66th day of his hunger strike, on 5th May 1991 do galore throughout the piece. Other significant images relating to Hamlet's internal crisis such as Leonard Peltier wrongfully captivated in the American prison since 1975, the brutal murder of Atefeh Rajabi for 'crime against chastity' in Iran on 20th June, 2007 follows. Further, there are images of Ronald de Silva, an effeminate male from Kolkata who got murdered by the brutal slashing of the abdomen on the pavement near the Maidan follows. Another important image is of Sharmila Irom, the iron lady of the Northeast who was probably undergoing the longest hunger strike in the world against the oppression of the army on women from the Northeast at that point in time. The problems those arise in the contemporary situation are further addressed by the references to the post Cold war Hamlet, the post Nandigram Hamlet, post Gundewar commission Hamlet and the post Naroda Patiya Hamlet.

The questions that arise after going through this unique piece are ones such as why, in the contemporary situation, we are failing to accept people as they are. As is the case of most of the characters presented through this piece. Then we come to another focal point on how this adaptation celebrates the diversity and the culturalness of the recent times. Hamlet tries to find the answers. He fails miserably. The failure converts Hamlet into a machine proving the point that both the internal and the external crisis of the contemporary world and the characters depicted through this adaptation are much more critical than the internal crisis of Hamlet.

6. Others

Apart from all these major discussions, there are other adaptations within this period, the 21st century, which are worth mention such as *Hemlat: The Prince of Garanhata* adapted and directed by Bratya Basu in 2006 for the Bengali stage. The very name of the adaptation suggests this as a play that does not centre on the happenings of a royal family. It is rather about the happenings and the political space of the contemporary rural part of Bengal. What builds up the

ambience of the play is the characterisations that are part of the day-to-day life in the interior villages in West Bengal. The characterisation comprises of the modern day politicians, promoters, owners of STD booths and Xerox centres, the goons, etc. Even more interestingly, the background score has been borrowed from Bollywood and this combined with the modern day diction manages to figure out the creation of an aura found only in rural Bengal (Sarkar, 2006). The Hamlet over here is the village boy encountering the same sort of mental crisis as Shakespeare's Hamlet. However, the external politics revolve around the happenings of a village. Hemlat however feels the same crisis in order to relate to the contemporary situation of rural Bengal. Coming to the Asian perspective there are interesting adaptations of Hamlet as well that are worth the mention. One such adaptation is *Shamlet*, directed by Lee Kuo-Hsiu in 1992. This multilingual adaptation is based on the incidents faced by a third grade theatre troop trying to stage *Hamlet*. Events take farcical turns as they falter while staging the play. The very name *Shamlet* has been derived from a printing error while printing the tickets for their upcoming show. Here the grand Hamlet has been diluted to the level of a third grade artist and the multilingualism of the play adds on to the chaos creating an effective palimpsest (Kuo-Shin, 1992-2014). There are other effective adaptations as well that importantly suggest that Shakespeare's plays possess such themes which contradict the very word contemporary and remains to be contemporary for ever.

7. Conclusion

Finally, we can conclude that this discourse is not only regarding the Indianization of *Hamlet* but also regarding bringing the Shakespearian character down to the level of the common mass. In most of the Indian adaptations of *Hamlet* not only from the given period but in case of most of the other works as well, the character has gone through several dissections and most of them from the point of view to bring him down to the level of the common mass who would be the actual audiences of the adapted versions. A larger than life character, from the perspective of the Indian as well as the Asian audience makes it very difficult for them to relate to. It always gets easier for the audience to understand the crisis within the character as well as the crisis in the outside world if the events are closer to the happenings they themselves either see or face in their day-to-day lives. Thus, the conceptualization regarding what would happen if Hamlet had visited India makes it even more easier to apprehend that the crisis within Hamlet would become even denser provided the crises that already are in the external world as a part and parcel of the life of the citizens of India and the other third world countries. As such, studying *Hamlet* from the point of view of India manages to make the already critical Shakespearian piece even more critical from the critic's point of view. Further, from the audience's side it becomes easier to

understand the crises of the character as well as the play as they find it easier to relate to the goings-on of their contemporary country. This manages in making the adapted versions more interesting for the mass who have not studied *Hamlet* before coming to watch the adaptation. Thus, the success of the adaptations must be credited to Shakespeare more than the writers and the directors of these adaptations as the themes of most of Shakespeare's major tragedies are such that manages to gate crash the time, space and character barriers and get used as formulae of instant success even after more than four centuries of them being written.

References

- Basu, B. (2006). *Hemlat, The Prince of Garanhata*. West Bengal, India: Bratyajon.
- Bhardwaj, V. (2014). *Haider*. India: UTV Motion Pictures, VB Pictures.
- Edwards, P. (2003). *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*. Cambridge University Press.
- Joubin, A. A. (2012). Shakespeare and Translation: Excerpt.
<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/blog/2012/02/07/shakespeare-and-translation-excerpt/>
- Joubin, A. A. (2014). Shamlet: Shakespeare as Palimpsest by Alexa Huang.
<http://globalshakespeares.mit.edu/blog/2014/07/20/shamlet-shakespeare-as-palimpsest-by-alexa-huang/>
- Kott, J. (1964). *Shakespeare our Contemporary (Translated by Boleslaw Taborsky)*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc.
- Kumar, A. (2014, 2016, October, May 5th, 23rd). 'If I am not a leftist, I am not an artist'. *The Hindu*.
- Kuo-Shin, L. (1992-2014). *Shamlet*. Taiwan: Ping Fong Acting Troupe.
- Mukherjee, P. (2008). *Hamletmachine: The Images of Shakespeare in us* .
http://www.hamarashakespeare.com/performance_new.html
- Pandey, V. (7th October, 2014). *Haider: Why is 'Indian Hamlet' controversial?* .
<http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-29502393>
- Parnab Mukherjee, S. R. (2008). *Hamletmachine: The Images of Shakespeare in Us (Principal Text Heiner Muller)*. India: Best of Kolkata Campus.
- Sarkar, S. (2006, July 15th). When Hamlet met Tridev. *The Telegraph*.
- Sarna, J. (2016). *Kashmakash*. India: Prism Theatre Society.
- Sarna, J. (2017, October 13). Critical Appreciation of Kashmakash. (P. Dhar, Interviewer)
- Singh, H. (2014, October 5th). 'Kashmir is the Hamlet of my film,' says Vishal Bhardwaj on Haider. *The Indian Express*.