

Adaptation of Themes and Elements of Shakespeare in Bengali Films

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Abstract

From Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen to the modern day directors, the legacy of adapting literary works into films remains a high-profile affair. When it comes to the Shakespearian dramas, the Bengali film history does not present a very encouraging picture barring few instances. The interpretation of the different elements of life –love and despair, conspiracy and connivance, jealousy and revenge, complexity and confrontation, destiny and fate, which are central to the Bard’s plays, becomes a challenging task for the film-makers. The present article delves deep into the unpromising attempts of adaptation of Shakespearian plays by the Bengali directors, comparing side-by-side the original plots, characters and climax scenes with those depicted in the Bengali films.

Key Words: Arshinagar, Hemanta, Hrid Majharey, Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet.

Introduction

Like Rabindranath, Shakespeare is also intimately associated with the cultural and educational domain of Bengali community. A student who has finished 12th standard curriculum, but has not gone through at least one excerpt of the Bard's play or a verse is hard to find. “All the world is a stage,” and “the men and women merely players” who have “their exits and their entrances” – the seven ‘ages’ of a man from childhood to the old age is beautifully described in this speech by Jaques in ‘As You Like It’. The long journey of life is strewn with love and despair, conspiracy and connivance, jealousy and revenge, complexity and confrontation, destiny and fate. All these ‘elements’ of ‘life’, present since antiquity till the modern age, find their expression in the most elegant and poetic fashion in the entire works of Shakespeare. And these elements are so universal in their appeal that they are represented in movies through adaptation of Bard’s works across continents.

Since films are supposed to be the most powerful medium for expression of thoughts, we find adaptations of Bard’s plays here in Bengal as well. One of the earliest references of

Shakespeare in Bengali cinema is found in *Saptapadi* (1961), where the evergreen romantic pair of Uttam Kumar and Suchitra Sen recreates the climacteric ending of the love affair of Othello and Desdemona. The dubbed voices of legendary stage actor Uptal Dutt and Jenifer Kapoor lend a charm and a lesson eternal for the aspiring artists. The first Bengali movie inspired by Shakespeare is *Bhranti Bilas* (1963), written by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. The theme of this popular novel as well as the movie is borrowed from *Comedy of Errors*. Directed by Manu Sen, the film still evokes laughter even after so many years, thanks to the performance by Uttam Kumar, Bhanu Banerjee and Sabitri Chatterjee. The movie is such a milestone in the history of popular Indian cinema that we can see the remake twice of this hilarious comedy in Hindi -*Do Dooni Char* (1968) and *Angoor* (1982) directed by Debu Sen and Gulzar respectively.

Ray and Shakespeare

There are films which do not acknowledge any direct reference or resemblance to a plot or a character from Bard's works. The way those plots and characters have been contextualised in regional films, however, are indicative of the influence that Shakespeare holds on creative minds. It's, therefore, no surprise that the King of the Ghosts and his boons in Satyajit Ray's fairytale movie *Goopy Gayne Bagha Byne* (The Adventures of Goopy and Bagha, 1968) may have been inspired by the supernatural elements found in many of the Bard's plays. Ray has inserted a 9-minute long sequence of dance drama by four different categories of ghosts into the film, written by his grandfather Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. These four types of ghosts are finally frozen in four horizontal rows in one frame, making way for the King to appear. Ray has also written and directed the cult movie in this genre, *Hirak Rajar Deshe* (In the Land of the Diamond King, 1980), a political satire under the disguise of a children's entertainer. With the help of the three boons conferred by the King of the Ghosts, Goopy and Bagha overthrows the tyrant king, amply supported by the local teacher, the role played by Soumitra Chatterjee. The presence of the ghosts, witches and their prophecy influencing the course of the incidents is seen in the romantic comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1596) or in the tragedies of the second period -*Hamlet* (1601), *Othello* (1606), *Mac Beth* (1606), *Romeo and Juliet* (1607) or in his later romance -*The Tempest* (1611). Existing literary tradition during the period might have influenced the Bard to include the mysterious elements in his plays. People then had a strong belief that stars had decisive effects on their life and activity as scientific progress was rudimentary. Shakespeare had fortunately survived the scare of The Black Death, a type of deadly pandemic in his childhood [1]. The religious beliefs the playwright imbibed from his early days might have prompted him to profusely incorporate supernatural elements in his works [2].

Shakespeare Plays and Bengali Films

There have been few whole-hearted attempts in adapting the Bard's play into Bengali movies; the number of movies in the list is also not that great. Most of them have been produced only in recent times: *Hrid Majharey* (2014), *Arshinagar* (2015), *Zulfiqar* (2016) and *Hemanta* (2016). During this long gap of 50 years since the *Bhranti Bilas* (1963) was made, Anjan Banerjee made a film *Srimati Bhayankari* in 2001 adapted from Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, which remained a less discussed venture. The Bengali version of the play, however, has become a very popular show on stage over the years in Kolkata and its suburbs. It is pertinent to note that the legendary Satyajit Ray or his contemporaries like Mrinal Sen or Ritwik Ghatak have not ever tried to adapt any of the Bard's plays into regional films. A close look at the plot selection and the narratives used in the Bengali versions by the contemporary directors would reveal the truth.

In *Hemanta* (2016), Anjan Dutt changes the royal setting of Denmark to a story of an elite family which is of late making huge profits by running a film production unit at Kolkata. The drama begins with Hemanta (Hamlet, Parambrata) receiving some spooky mobile SMS from anonymous source, that hints at his uncle Kalyan Sen (Claudius, Saswata Chatterjee), the boss of the company, being involved in the murder of his father. The SMS also purports his mother, Gayatri Sen (Queen Gertrude, Gargi Roychowdhury) having a hand in the bloody affair. Hirak, childhood friend of Hemanta (Horatio, Jisshu Sengupta) gives him constant company after his return from New York. A striking omission in this Bengali version of Hamlet is the absence of any prototype character of the ghost of King Hamlet who signals the prince about the alleged involvement of Claudius in the murder case. Anjan here deals with the electronic medium in lieu of the Ghost that fails to create any suspense in the audience mind. The storyline and the tragic ending of this immortal creation by Shakespeare are well-known, only interest is how the director handles the labyrinthine plot of the original play in his adapted version. We find the ensemble of six characters including Hamlet, Laertes, King Claudius, Queen Gertrude, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suffering death in the most horrific fashion in the last scene of Bard's play. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are presented as the body guards of Hemanta in the Bengali movie. Anjan Dutt, however, refrains from showing the violence in the crude form in his movie, rather has chosen to project the massacre suggestive by some insipid ways like using background score when the death scene is enacted and the scratchy sound to let the audience know that a car accident is the cause of death of both Hemanta and his uncle Kalyan Sen. The use of the background score when the people are dying one after another does not add to the ultimate impact at the end of the movie.

There can be more than one ways to represent the character of Hamlet in a movie, but the director should be careful in transforming the ideas in accordance with the Bard's play. Hemanta is convinced about the murderer of his father after receiving the SMS and decides to take revenge after coming back home. His conflicted psyche, however, prevents him to take the final action: this mood is nicely captured by Anjan Dutt when Hemanta fails to pull the trigger to his unescorted uncle Kalyan Sen, engaged in daily rituals. The contradiction within Hamlet and his procrastination for taking action against Claudius leads eventually to the loss of so many lives in sequential fashion. The soliloquies and many such actions in the original play reveal that the prince may be suffering from psychological disorder and mental depression [3]. In the dying scene, Hamlet is seen taking the life of Claudius all of a sudden. In his Bengali version, Anjan for unknown reasons completely overlooks these fine points of the original composition. There are lot many deviations on offer in this adapted version by Dutt.

The character of Laertes (brother of Ophelia, fiancée of Hamlet) is quite neglected in Anjan's movie. The complicated plan conjured by Claudius to kill Hamlet is totally missing in *Hemanta*: the sword fight between Hamlet and Laertes, wounding of Hamlet by Laertes with poisoned tip, exchange of poisoned sword in the scuffle and striking Laertes with the poisoned sword-tip by Hamlet, fall of the Queen because of taking poisoned drink. By that time, Laertes reveals the murder plot to Hamlet and explains that the poisoned sword is now in Hamlet's hands. An enraged Hamlet strikes the poisoned sword through Claudius, yelling, "Venom to thy work." Hamlet possesses so much hatred for Claudius that he pours the poisoned wine down the King's throat after stabbing. Hamlet and Laertes are found forgiving each other before both succumbing to death. This royal ending is replaced by an unexciting finish in Anjan's film. In the movie, Hirak (Horatio) hands over the key to Hemanta to drive

the car and encourage his friend to go for the final kill. Sitting by his side, Kalyan Sen reveals to Hemanta that the death of his father was an accident and the corrupt way he is following only for the prosperity of the company –exchange of words than any action suddenly goes off the screen accompanied with a disturbing noise in the background. A news report the next day discloses that the car accident has killed both the uncle and his nephew Hemanta. Anjan Dutt's narrative robs off the suspense elements and fails to reach the desired climax befitting of a successful adaptation of Shakespeare's play, turning the movie into a damp squib.

Working on her own story, Aparna Sen presents a musical romance drama in *Arshinagar* (2015), inspired by the tragic elements of Romeo and Juliet. Romeo and Juliet style love story has been filmed on innumerable occasions in different languages all over the world. Bengali audience is curious since this time a film on the similar theme has been made by none other than Sen. The unfortunate turn of events that brings a premature end to the young star-crossed lovers in Bard's evergreen creation, has been overlooked by Sen. The Montague-Capulet family enmity has been replaced by the feud of Mitra and Khan, and the story revolves mainly around the Hindu-Muslim divide. Adequate amount of violence is only highlighting the state sponsored communal riot, pushing the intrigue of the love-story to the second place.

Adaption of the period dramas always poses a big challenge for the directors. According to Francesca Amalie Militello, acclaimed Italian director Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 'Romeo and Juliet' is the more 'realistic' or 'accurate' than the 1996 movie *Romeo + Juliet*, in which Leonardo DiCaprio has played Romeo. Zeffirelli's production is the more classical and truthful adaptation, in accordance with Shakespeare's text, and the extremely accurate costumes by Danilo Donati has earned the film an Academy Award along with Best Cinematography [4]. Although the rhyming dialogue is refreshingly used in *Arshinagar*, Aparna Sen would have done justice to the character of Romeo, had she chosen some fresh actor for the role. Rittika as Julekha is no match for Deb, who is much aged and misfit according to original play. Bengali audience is denied to watch on screen the famous balcony scene, the wardrobes and the clandestine love affair: A young Romeo Montague falls in love with Juliet Capulet in their first sight, but the story follows the path of destiny by the turn of events. The marriage is secretly arranged by the nurse between Romeo and Juliet, who is due to marry her father's choice, the County Paris. Romeo's attempt to halt a street fight leads to the death of Juliet's own cousin, Tybalt, for which Romeo is banished. In desperation, Juliet follows the Friar's plot and fakes her own death. The message does not reach Romeo in time, as the messenger fails to turn up because of plague. Hearing from his servant that Juliet is dead, Romeo buys poison and takes his own life in her tomb. Juliet wakes to find Romeo's corpse beside her and kills herself. There are no such suspense moments in Sen's film, which ends up to be a failing love story between two people of unequal age and of opposite religion. Sen's narrative may be good if one considers this love story against the background of religious intolerance, but the memory of Romeo and Juliet as a Shakespearian adaptation will not take much time to pale into oblivion.

In an intelligent move, Ranjan Ghosh has woven a love story etched in mutual disbelief in *Hrid Majharey* (2014), inspired by the elements of Bard's plays. Again it is not a complete and faithful adaptation of a single play by Shakespeare. Ghosh has composed his own story for his directional debut, borrowing the central theme from Othello, and elements of Macbeth, Hamlet and Caesar (a lady soothsayer in a city restaurant sounding a warning to the Math teacher on the inevitable). The darker sides of the human character is unveiled nicely with the help of 'to be or not to be' type vacillating mind torn apart by cause and effect

paradigm. Elements of destiny, love, and jealousy make a ‘credible visual collage’ in this composite narrative [5]. “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy” –one of the most debated quotes of Hamlet truly bring about the essence of this movie: so many things we really don’t know about people who surround us. The climax of this movie is, however, again some sort of a clumsy affair, with the director keeps it open-ended and rely on audience imagination. In spite of these small loopholes, Ranjan Ghosh should be lauded for his honest effort in contextualising Bard’s work through a crisis of modern city life.



Hrid Majhare (2014)

Pic Courtesy: Shoma A Chatterjee, Upperstall

Inference

Adapting a novel or a story by a renowned author into a film remains always a daunting task. It becomes harder, when a Shakespeare’s play is adapted into a regional film. When we talk about the successful adaptation, *Charulata* (made from *Nastanir* by Tagore) and *Pather Panchali* (from a novel by Bibhuti Bhusan Bandyopadhyay) by the legendary Satyajit Ray are regarded as the ‘Gold Standard’ for any reference. Ray’s brilliance has elegantly translated the loneliness of Charu (*Charulata*) and ordinary life of rural Bengal (*Pather Panchali*) in cinematic language with measured aristocracy. Comments from a director and a Shakespearean scholar are relevant in this context. Franco Zeffirelli, who made three Shakespeare adaptations on film namely *The Taming of the Shrew* (1966), *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and *Hamlet* (1990), observes, “I have always felt sure I could break the myth that Shakespeare on stage and screen is only an exercise for the intellectual. I want his plays to be enjoyed by ordinary people” [6]. Prof Peter Alexander echoes similar thought, “The form in which Shakespeare cast his dramas, not being prescribed by the Rules of Art, was dictated by the dramatist’s desire to gratify, in his pursuit of gain, an ignorant and untaught audience” [7]. Attempts of the contemporary Bengali directors to portray Shakespeare on big screen are commendable, but in most cases they falter because they have not paid attention to the layered complexities of the Bard’s plots, which by themselves are the source of suspense and thrill for the common audience.

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