

The Shakespeare Salesman: Long Synopsis

This thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of Vishal Bhardwaj's Shakespeare trilogy that consists of the films *Maqbool* (Macbeth, 2003), *Omkaara* (Othello, 2006), and *Haider* (Hamlet, 2014). Considering the fact that Bhardwaj finished making this trilogy at the time the thesis was started, and that he has announced no further plans to direct any more Shakespeare films in the near future, this dissertation views the aforementioned films as comprising a neat group that can offer insight into the salesmanship of the film versions of Shakespeare's plays in relation to Bhardwaj, and in relation to Bollywood itself. The trilogy only recently being completed, previous attempts to study Bhardwaj's work have been confined to chapters in books, with their analysis often relegated to the understanding of a greater theme about the industry as a whole, and hence this work intends to accord due space to Bhardwaj's films by making them the centre of the discussion. And not least because the films, in many ways, differ quite significantly from other Shakespeare adaptations in Indian cinema.

Through the course of these three films, it will be shown, Bhardwaj's work is torn between issues of authenticity, fidelity, and originality, often leading to what will later be defined as "narrative crises" that are resolved with thought-provoking and unique results. Hence each of the three chapters, accorded to the respective film being discussed, focuses on the said crisis and the aim of the thesis, on a whole, is to examine, appreciate and do justice to the unique set of complexities and problems that Bhardwaj's method of adaptation produces. By focusing specifically on these aspects the argument does not, by any means, intend to lessen or mis-portray the achievements, contribution and importance of Bhardwaj's work. On the contrary, all the space that this thesis can afford is accorded to these 'problems' precisely because they have hitherto not been aptly discussed, as the *primary* subject, in previous literature regarding Bhardwaj's work. There have, in other words, been enough studies on Bhardwaj's excellent transposition, and differentiation, of the functions of the main characters,

the plot, and the setting in comparison to Shakespeare's play, as well as on the extensive cultural and political diversity displayed by the works. The argument of this thesis, however, does not seek to repeat an analysis of these transpositions (and it is for this reason the chapters do not go into these in detail) but, instead, looks specifically at the inconsistencies in these transpositions, relates them to the aforementioned narrative crises in all three films, and tries to do justice to their uniqueness and complexity.

The title of this thesis, and the reference to Bhardwaj as a Shakespeare salesman instead of, say, a director proceeds from an analysis of the distinctive way in which he presents his work which, in turn, calls for a unique approach to the study of Shakespeare adaptation in the contemporary film industry. Instead of catering to an Indian audience, among whom he suspects that the authority of Shakespeare stands eroded ("many have not read it, and most have forgotten"), he says that he turned to adapting Shakespeare because he "wanted to touch a chord with international audiences so there were many commercial considerations in my head. It was not for art or for literature" (Kumar 2014, Sen 2006). Furthermore, despite having produced a variety of non-Shakespeare films Bhardwaj nevertheless chooses to be credited in the trailer of his latest film *Rangoon* (2017), for instance, not as "the director of *Kaminey*" or "the director of *Makdee*" (his non-Shakespeare films that have done well) but instead as "the director of *Omkara* and *Haider*."

The thesis' title is itself borrowed from the Merchant-Ivory Productions' film *The Shakespeare Wallah* (The Shakespeare Salesman, 1965), which is discussed in the opening part of the Introduction, and from which the crucial "salesman" metaphor of the thesis that draws a relation between the Shakespeare director and/as the Shakespeare salesman has been borrowed. The film documents the life of a British acting troupe (Shakespeareana Company/The Buckingham Players)—and particularly the life of the troupe's head Tony Buckingham—in India after the country's independence from Britain in 1947. Adapted for the screen by Booker

Prize winning author Ruth Praver Jhabvala, it is based on the eponymous memoirs of Geoffrey Kendal who also plays the title character in the film. The movie traces how with the loss of the Empire's colonial power that fostered Shakespeare's reception, appreciation, and celebration it simply begins to die out in the newly emerging Indian film market which Bhardwaj ultimately inherits. "The Shakespeare Wallah can no longer market plays", Thomas Cartelli aptly summarizes, "whose ideological supports have been pulled out from under him" and whose "cultural authority" is in a process of "erosion" (105-6).

In Bhardwaj's case, however, producing acknowledged Shakespeare adaptations catered to "international audiences" turns out to be a "marketing tool" that has paid off quite well (Bhardwaj, quoted in Kumar 2014). Where Kendal, in a way, was one of the many British who came to export Shakespeare to India, Bhardwaj completes the circle by exporting Indian-Shakespeare back to the West. Such an approach is something that needs to be analysed in the contemporary Shakespeare film market because, as Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin put it, the extent to which these "non-Western" Shakespeare films "act as fetishized commodities in the global film market" is a "pressing question" (1). Not just for the indigenous markets from which these films are produced but also for the real or imagined audiences these films are produced in service of. To cater to "international audiences" of Shakespeare among whom, presumably, the authority of Shakespeare is not eroded or in a process of erosion opens a whole set of questions: "how does Shakespeare make other cultures legible to Anglo-American audiences?", "what does it entail for the British media to judge [...] productions of Shakespeare from around the world?", and "what roles do non-Western identities, aesthetics, and idioms play in the rise of Shakespearean cinema and theatre as global genres?" (Huang and Rivlin 1). The presentation of race and caste in *Omkaara*, of the Islamic underworld of Bombay in *Maqbool*, and terrorism in *Haider*, are all relevant for the concerns raised here. Of equal importance here is Parmita Kapadia's assertion that "the 'new Shakespeares' emerging from

the postcolonial/global community have not dislodged Shakespeare's texts but have *reified them instead*" (56, emphasis added). This reification may be said to contribute to the present functioning of Shakespeare in the West where, as Ton Hoenselaars points out, "Shakespeare [continues] to be the national poet who embodies the Romantic ideal of authorship, activating the concomitant notions of untranslatability, degradation and debasement" (18). It also arguably validates the existence an Anglo-American Shakespeare film industry that largely produces untranslated, original-text film adaptations even though the comprehensibility of Early Modern English in the contemporary world is debatable. Thus "to scrutinize the communities" or audiences that these adaptations cater to "as well as what or who is excluded from them, is to keep our sights trained on the broader human stakes" (Huang and Rivlin 17). It is this scrutiny that would be the pivot around which the methodology of the thesis is formed.

To speak of Vishal Bhardwaj's audience then "in Indian cinema" writes Neelesh Misra, "[Bhardwaj] is one of those rare straddlers whose work is often rooted in the dust and grime. His nuanced characters and layered screenplay are arthouse, but he has won accolades also as a commercial director—most of his movies have mass appeal" (Misra 2011). This is, moreover, in addition to the fact that he is not merely directing these films but is involved in other aspects as well. "Bhardwaj is a true Renaissance man", continues Misra, "—he directs, composes music, writes scripts and is a singer who also writes lyrics" (Misra 2011). Unlike Kendal then perhaps it would be unfair to label Bhardwaj as a 'Shakespeare' salesman specifically yet the fact that he chooses to be remembered as such is quite telling—in the trailer of his last film *Rangoon*, as discussed earlier, he is not credited as "the director of *Kaminey*" or "the director of *Makdee*" but rather as "the director of *Omkara* and *Haider*." And this is in addition to the fact that he claims that "Shakespeare is always looking over [his] shoulders" or that his favourite film character is Jahangir/Ducnan from *Maqbool* or that the toughest song he has ever had to compose is Bismil (The Mousetrap) from *Haider*.

To offer a brief summary of Bhardwaj's aforementioned "narrative crises" then his works are, firstly, characterized by an enthusiastic and bold liberation from Shakespeare. He does this by realizing in his films the varying interpretive possibilities present within the texts. This is followed by unique narrative crises in each chapter (that are discussed in detail below). The third and final step in Bhardwaj's work, this thesis argues, involves a resurgence of the Shakespeare text to neatly close the narrative instead of allowing the narrative crises to find their own denouement.

Chapter I takes into consideration *Maqbool* (2003), Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of *Macbeth*. The crucial thing about this adaptation is the liberties that Bhardwaj takes while adapting the Duncan character (Jahangir). Thus, through the core of the chapter, the implications this has for the development of the themes and the plot of the film as well as the adjustments that are made to the other characters, the action, as well as the tone of the film are examined. The discussion itself begins with an examination of the peculiarly filmed assassination of Duncan in Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015) which is then contrasted to the assassinations in other significant film adaptations of *Macbeth* (Roman Polanski's in 1971, and Orson Welles' in 1948). The gaze dynamic present in the assassination of Kurzel's Duncan, it is argued, involves not just the King's act of silently staring at his would-be assassin but also the assassin's "anxiety" generated from the "loss" of a "degree of autonomy upon realising that he or she is a visible object" (Lacan 1998, 73; Levine 118). It is then contrasted with the gaze dynamic present in the assassination of Jahangir where Maqbool, the assassin, shuts his own eyes. It is reasoned that due to a combination of verbal and non-verbal factors (like the gaze) the latter's death ends up becoming such a momentous, watershed moment in the film that it robs the narrative of its protagonist, so to speak, leaving the second half of the movie in a lopsided state. Hence, when midway through the film, in accordance with Shakespeare's play, Jahangir/Duncan is killed off by Maqbool/Macbeth the narrative of the film seems to end up

rather confused—the director incorporates scenes from Shakespeare’s work that fail to assimilate with the narrative, before finally closing the story off with a series of *deus ex machina* devices that are deployed in order to position Maqbool or Boti (Macduff) in situations where they can meet the witches’ prophecies from Shakespeare’s play.

The chapter notes that these inconsistencies in the latter half of the film have been observed by other critics, Douglas Lanier sees the said half as “closely parallel[ing] *Macbeth* in plot, motifs, and character” (217) and Daniel Rosenthal reads it as having a “structural imbalance” (123). The argument then goes ahead to examine these inconsistencies from two angles pertinent not just to the film in itself but also to Bhardwaj’s work in general. Firstly, from the perspective of the fidelity discourse—by arguing that even though the film liberates itself from textual fidelity (most of the dialogue bears little resemblance to Shakespeare’s) it is nevertheless caught up in other forms of fidelity like plot-centric, theme-centric, and character-centric ones. These “degrees of proximity to the original” to borrow Linda Hutcheon’s phrase, become a chief concern of the chapter (7). For after the liberties taken with Jahangir’s character in the first half, that ends up making the narrative about him and not Maqbool, returning to Shakespeare’s work in the second half seems rather counterproductive since the latter’s narrative was probably meant for developing Macbeth’s character and not Duncan’s.

Secondly, but also proceeding from this point, what is examined is the reason as to why Bhardwaj felt it necessary to return to Shakespeare—or streamline the narrative via a recourse to Shakespeare—in the second half. Drawing on the larger context of the arguments that are made in the Introduction, as well as the narrative crises of his other Shakespeare adaptations that are discussed, the chapter questions whether this was in fact done to cater to the real or imagined expectations of the “international audiences” for whom he turned to adapting Shakespeare in the first place (Sen 2006). His statement that if he does not remain “true to the spirit of the play” he’d “be a fool” since “that is what has worked for the past 400 years” (Sen

2006), it will be shown, raises issues not just relevant to the fidelity discourse but also to the real or imagined *gaze* of his international (Western) audiences that shapes his work. “The imperial gaze”, write Bill Ashcroft et al. “defines the identity of the subject, objectifies it within the identifying system of power relations and confirms its subalterneity and powerlessness [...] it corresponds to the ‘gaze of the *grande-autre*’ within which the identification, objectification and subjection of the subject are simultaneously enacted” (Ashcroft et al. 2007). There is, to borrow Lacan’s quote from earlier, a similar “loss” of a “degree of autonomy” for Bhardwaj when he is subjected to this gaze. A loss that is reflected in the movement from the free-rein first half of the film to the restrictive second half. Hence, has being loyal to the spirit of the play, or any such form of fidelity, “worked for the past 400 years” is something that is put to question. What is also examined is whether all the scenes from Shakespeare’s play that are forcefully inserted into the narrative in the latter half serve as token nods to Shakespeare that are meant for these international audiences who are (presumably) able to recognise them unlike the Indian audiences of whom, Bhardwaj says, “many have not read [Shakespeare], and most have forgotten” (quoted in Kumar 2014). Connecting this to the trope of the salesman from the Introduction the chapter finally examines the effect of the gaze of Mr. Buckingham’s audience, as portrayed in *Shakespeare Wallah*, that affects his Othello performance in relation to the gaze of Vishal Bhardwaj’s audience that affects his narrative too.

In Chapter II the approach taken by Vishal Bhardwaj to adapting *Othello* for Indian cinema seems, at first glance, straightforward: in his film *Omkara* he substitutes caste for race, so that Othello is of a lower caste than Desdemona, setting the scene for the tragedy. As the film progresses, however, one realizes that in addition to being of a higher caste, Desdemona’s skin is lighter than Othello’s—a fact that could be dismissed as coincidental (caste, after all, has nothing to do with the visual markers of race) were it not for the fact that it gradually becomes apparent that a lighter skin tone is shared by the Duke, Iago, and Cassio. Once this

has been realized, the film's strong colour hierarchy, mapped as it is onto caste hierarchy, is inescapably apparent. The chapter hence goes on to suggest that it is perhaps a similar fidelity discourse driven instinct to preserve the 'colour motif' of Shakespeare's play that accidentally ends up *racializing* an institution like caste in the film. The haphazard allusions to Hindu mythology that Bhardwaj uses in the narrative further end up buttressing the racialization of caste by creating the illusion of a history which validates colour mapping onto caste. Moreover, the drive to preserve this 'colour motif', the chapter tries to show, originates perhaps from the drive to preserve the language of Shakespeare's text and is hence possibly a problem of an attempt at translation that is haunted by a fidelity discourse. In order to substantiate this point, the argument first trawls through a brief history of blackface Othellos on screen, followed by an examination of the adaptations of the play in Indian cinema. This, in turn, is succeeded by an analysis of the caste/colour conflation in *Omkara* along with its reception by Indian and Western audiences. To overcome this crisis, towards the end, Bhardwaj eventually submits to Shakespeare's text in order to side-step the entire race/caste fusion altogether. The film chooses instead to focus on misogyny without providing any explanations or resolutions for the ahistorical racialization of caste that has taken place. To compound this the English language subtitles of the film, presumably authorized after the film's completion, use race and caste interchangeably. The whole colour and caste confusion, the argument of the chapter thus tries to assert, might have proceeded from Bhardwaj's desire to make a foreign culture 'legible' to an international audience.

Chapter III examines *Haider* (2014), Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptation of *Hamlet*. The film, set in the Muslim community of Indian administered Kashmir, turns Hamlet into a terrorist-like figure. And—as the plot and the themes of Shakespeare's play begin to mature by the fifth act—the production essentially finds itself in a tight spot. The sympathy that the genre of tragedy evokes on behalf of the protagonist—in this case the potential terrorist-protagonist—

is perhaps not palatable for the target audience of the film and this is what the chapter considers to be the narrative crisis of the said film. To resolve it, it is argued, Hamlet is deliberately hamstrung by the director and denied his revenge towards the end of the film. This is followed by a credit sequence that begins by absolving the Indian military presence in Kashmir, obfuscating the uninviting attitude of the Kashmiris towards the film cast and crew, commending the rise of tourism in the state, and finally acknowledging the film as an adaptation of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The obvious questions this raises regarding adaptation and (mis)representation form the core of this chapter. Unlike the narrative crises in the previous chapters—in response to which Bhardwaj had ended up taking recourse to Shakespeare's 'original' work—in this chapter the resolution of the crisis seems to happen by giving way to the authority asserted by the government of India and its Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) which ends up replacing the authority of Shakespeare.

The discussion begins by examining Bhardwaj's choice to cast Hamlet as a 'terrorist.' The chapter questions whether this has again been done to cater to Bhardwaj's "international audiences." Trawling through a list of adaptations that arguably cash on stereotypes about certain communities or nations the chapter problematizes the extent to which the expectations of Western/Anglophone audiences leads to the production of films that are less than fair towards the marginalised communities that they represent. Drawing on Douglas Lanier's critical use of the notion of the 'rhizome', which he derives from Deleuze and Guattari, the argument also examines how these films, at times, tend to borrow each other's adaptive strategies without much heed to Shakespeare's original work (Lanier 2014, Deleuze and Guattari 21). This discussion eventually leads the argument towards another adaptation of Hamlet that seems to have had an influence on *Haider*—Sulayman Al-Bassam's *The Al-Hamlet Summit* (2002). Margaret Litvin sees Al-Bassam's adaptation which, like *Haider*, is also set in an Islamic context, as catering to "a new audience" that comes into being after 9/11 and that

has an increased appetite for terrorism-related productions (107). She also problematizes the director Al-Bassam's role by seeing him as an "unelected" representative of the community he seeks to represent. The chapter draws on Litvin's arguments to shape its discussion of the audiences that led to the production of *Haider* and the audiences who stand excluded from the narrative—as becomes evident in The Mousetrap scene where blurred-out Kashmiris can be seen in the background of the performance. Similarly, the chapter draws on Litvin's "unelected representative" argument to scrutinize Bhardwaj's choice of Basharat Peer (a Kashmiri) as a co-writer of the film. Proceeding from these two concerns it finally examines the objectivity of adapting Hamlet as a terrorist in the first place as well as the pressing issue about the denial of his revenge which is something that happens not only in *Haider* but also in *The Al-Hamlet Summit*.

The movement of the narrative crises from being related to Shakespeare, to displaying a level of hybridity, to finally being completely independent of Shakespeare and—by Chapter III—being related to a new authority like the Government of India is a process that this thesis examines precisely by taking into account the history of Shakespeare adaptation in India, the complexities of mapping an early modern text into a post-colonial political situation, as well as the financial concerns that prompt Bhardwaj to undertake adapting Shakespeare. What is shown in such an examination of the three films is a complete overturning of Kendal's salesmanship. Instead of presenting Shakespeare to the Indians as a universal value like Kendal did Bhardwaj seems to shun the "universality" and present Shakespeare with his own unique method of salesmanship. A method that inherits some of the advantages and disadvantages inherent in the adaptations/productions of Shakespeare in India that come before Bhardwaj...but also, significantly, a method that produces its own unique set of complexities and problems which this thesis has tried to examine, appreciate and to which, most importantly, this thesis has tried to do justice.

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