

**Text and Event in Early Modern Europe (TEEME) Erasmus Mundus Joint Doctorate
PhD Dissertation**

Saksham Sharda – “The Shakespeare Salesman”

Examiner’s report

Rather than remaining trapped yet one more time in traditional questions of film adaptations’ fidelity to original literary source texts, this PhD dissertation focuses on Indian film director Vishal Bhardwaj’s film trilogy *Maqbool*, *Omkara* and *Haider*, based on three Shakespeare’s major tragedies (*Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*) in an attempt to show how they destabilize and resist this convention, yet ultimately end up subscribing to the authority of the original, producing “narrative crises”, which the film maker cannot resolve easily. Consequently, it is argued, *Maqbool* reverts to a “fidelity driven” plot, *Omkara* falls into a kind of “hybridity” with its “race-caste fusion”, also a way to make the film attractive for the Western audience, and ultimately *Haider* ends up subscribing to the authority of the state. As the first book-length study Bhardwaj’s films, it is a valuable contribution to the study of a range of culturally significant phenomena, from Shakespeare adaptations to the influence of Parsi theatre and Bollywood.

I consider the dissertation, in general, to be a successful engagement with the practice of adaptation conceived along the lines proclaimed in the Introduction. The aims outlined are fulfilled. The dissertation engages with a range of critical theories (from Greenblatt to Bhabha and Hutcheon) with good understanding. Perhaps a more critical attitude to the individual theoreticians and a greater spirit of debate with them could have worked even better. Especially in the case of the methodology of adaptation studies, the Introduction and subsequent chapters could have benefitted from a discussion of a larger number of available sources dealing with the issues around Shakespeare on film.

The dissertation reads well. It is clear, logically organized, overall competent. The formal aspects, including style, language, bibliography, quotations and references, are performed on a generally high level. Despite this overall praise, there are several problems which I consider relevant enough to require correction.

The main problem regarding the form of the dissertation is the repetition of quotations and whole sentences. This happens most often in the over-long and loosely structured Introduction and then in the individual case studies. Below I provide a list of the most blatant occasions this happens and would hope that either these be reformulated in the introduction or abbreviated in the subsequent chapters.

Page 30 – Mr Buckingham’s words about being in India – cp. page 17 (moreover, also the screenshot 54:20).

Page 40 – Mr Buckingham on the curriculum – cp. page 23 (31:05)

Page 65 – yet another repetition of the main problems of Bhardwaj’s films, without moving the argumentation in any way forward.

Page 77 – we hear again that the Indian audience has not read Shakespeare.

Page 85 – again, that “race-caste fusion” is a “non-issue”.

Page 86 – again, that Rosenthal and Lanier see *Maqbool* as structurally imbalanced. (Here also, one more time, is repeated nearly word for word what was said about this in the Introduction including the allusion to the government of India and the quotation from Greenblatt.)

Page 112/3 – a lengthy repetition of Manjula’s interruption of the performance in *Shakespeare Wallah*

Page 135 – repeats the quotation from Clifford Geertz (on page 41 to analyse the monkey scene, here to explain the “religious sanction” of the racialization of caste.

Page 144 – unnecessary repetition of the quote from Hogan about colour – cp. 119.

151/2 – repetition of the phrases already used in the analysis of the performance interruption and Mr Buckingham’s reaction (e.g. steps out of his role, bangs his scimitar on the edge of the stage and scolds his audience) – cp. 34

Page 212 – Litvin quotation

217 – Conclusion rewrites a section of Chapter III.

In relation to the Introduction itself, it is too full of detailed information about Bhardwaj’s career, and the account of *Shakespeare Wallah*, though interesting, seems rather superfluous when the connections to Bhardwaj’s films is not quite clear. Surely, the main point about Kendal and Bhardwaj being both in their respective ways Shakespeare salesmen is established fairly soon. Also, the relevance of all the so-called Reflective Notes for the principal argument is rather doubtful. Can they be made to tie in more appropriately? As yet, they are unstructured. (Also, the footnotes formatting here is peculiar.)

As mentioned above, the dissertation is written in an overall lucid style, only infrequently marred by spelling errors, which more careful proofreading could have eliminated. (For example, page 124: “Lawrence Olivier”; page 127: “we one). In Chapter II and later, quotation marks appear erratically even in indented block quotations.

Apart from these minor problems, I do not see major flaws in conception or argumentation. Underneath are a few questions that were inspired by the reading.

1. Why does the author insist on reading Alfredo Modenessi’s use of the word “half-caste” as pertaining only to the caste system? Surely, the word is also applied in a racial sense, and this would spare Modenessi from the accusation of confusing the two. This of course,

does not undermine the whole issue of the racialization of the caste as argued by the author of the dissertation.

2. I would like to see the short title of the dissertation explained by a sub-title. Would the author consider this? As it is, it indeed draws attention to the market phenomenon of Shakespeare, its colonial presence as an ideological tool of the Empire and also the expectation of Western audiences regarding especially non-Anglophone (i.e. exotic) adaptations. The range of its applications is potentially broad. Which do you see as key in relation to Bhardwaj?

3. To perhaps change the perspective and look away from Bhardwaj as a trader selling his wares to the consumer and to look at him as an “unelected representative”: I perceive all the three analysed films as embroiled in a range of political issues, from those on the local level to that of state. How does Bhardwaj articulate serious political questions and does this have any relevance for the Indian audience?

4. And, to bring back Shakespeare: Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* has been credited as an artistic success for managing to convey Shakespeare’s play without using a single word of the original and setting it in a non-Western culture. It does this by utilizing creatively the most “filmic” of filmic approaches (especially through the employing of visuals to metonymically capture psychological tension in the protagonist). Does Bhardwaj also attempt to convey Shakespeare in any such similar fashion?

Despite some shortcomings, I find the PhD dissertation in keeping with PhD standards and I recommend the dissertation for the viva voce examination.

Předložená dizertační práce splňuje požadavky kladené na dizertační práci, a proto ji doporučuji k obhajobě s předběžnou klasifikací “prospěl“.

Prague, 19 November 2018

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