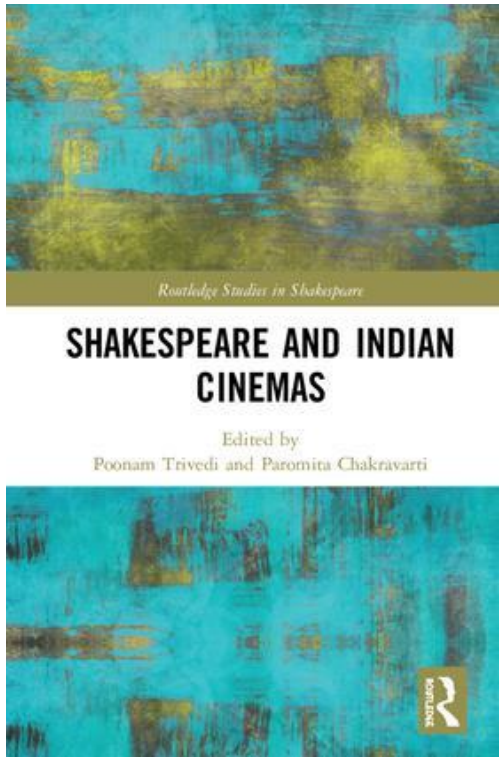
Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti, eds. *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: "Local Habitations*." New York, London: Routledge, 2019. 358 pp. ISBN 978-0-367-14764-8.



The book *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: "Local Habitations*," edited by Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti, is a truly commendable work that brings together fifteen rich and diverse essays on Shakespeare adaptations in India, weaving together an interesting canvas of histories and experiences of cinema in a plethora of languages – Hindi, Tamil, Kannada, Bangla, Assamese and Malayalam. The book is certainly an important contribution to the field of current studies in global Shakespeare and marks a shift at two levels – it revisits the modalities of studying Shakespeare on screen and by engaging with Indian cinemas' encounter with Shakespeare, it tries to bring to light an alternative history spanning almost 160 years, from the first production of a Shakespeare adaptation in 1923 to the most recent ones in 2016.

As a member of the English studies fraternity, what charmed me was the total absence of questions in the book that attempted to study whether the film was faithful to the literary text, whether Shakespeare has been turning in his grave

seeing the post-orientalist move in adapting his work to a variety of regions and locales in Indian cinema that has little or no bearing to the source narrative, whether the adaptations were successful renderings or not and a host of similar apprehensions that marked discourses on cinematic adaptations a few decades ago. In fact, the hostility towards cinematic adaptations seems to be thankfully a thing of the past and what is striking about the book is to see the films which are either adaptations or inspired by a Shakespearean play as largely independent texts which form part of a genre categorised as the "Indian Shakespeare film."

Post-fidelity discourses on adaptation centres on the notion of adaptation being a creative transposition that re-contextualises, relocates and thereby appropriates the source text to comment on the times. The manner in which the Bard is invoked in the Indian adaptations is unique in more ways than one. The liberal ways in which narratives are grafted together calls for an examination of the emergent representational economy and marketing strategy where the source text is a mere spectre that lurks rather than looms somewhere in the background. Interestingly, Shakespeare's universality lies in this very malleability as his works can be invoked to strike roots in alien climes. One of the major takeaways of this book is the plethora of fresh perspectives it provides through a study of the reworkings of Shakespeare's plays. Adaptation then becomes a mode of "redescribing the world" as Nishi Pulugurtha suggests by referring to Salman Rushdie as it extends the plays' scope leading to a renewal, albeit in an altered light. The three ways in which Shakespeare appropriation works is aptly described by Thomas Cartelli's *Repositioning Shakespeare: National Formations, Postcolonial Appropriations* (1999) as "confrontational," "transpositional" and "dialogic." The adaptations that are discussed in the book are largely transpositional in nature while a few take recourse to the dialogic frame.

In "Cinematic *Lears* and Bengaliness: Locus, Identity, Language," Paromita Chakravarti points out that "Shakespeare is not a signifier of a culture or an identity but merely a resource to be used to narrate the story of millennial Kolkata and its denizens. Shakespeare provides a medium for articulating local identities and paradoxically, it is through these increasing forms of localisations that Shakespeare's universality survives" (177). Referring to Aparna Sen directed *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and Rituparno Ghosh directed *Last Lear* (2006), Chakravarti pushes us to re-think adaptations as mere borrowings, as the reworking of the literary text might be at the level of theme, location, characterisation, style of narration, images that are largely fragmentary and truncated in nature. While she engages with the character of Violet Stoneham in *36 Chowringhee Lane*, in whose English classes students are bored with her teaching of *Twelfth Night,* the unmistakeable play of names – "Viola," one of the principal characters in Shakespeare's play and "Violet," the reference to Chowringhee Lane as Anglo-Indian *Shaheb paara*, that houses many theatres including Chowringhee Theatre (1813-39) in which many Shakespeare plays were staged and which was

later re-named "Theatre Road" and subsequently "Shakespeare Sarani," her wandering alone at night as an outcast in the streets befriending a dog who patiently listens to her recitation of lines from *King Lear* work as infixes that harkens back to the character of Lear and the setting of the play - several times removed from the source text and yet with unmistakable traces of the same that tells us the fate of not only Violet Stoneham but the life of Calcutta as a city that has a rich colonial legacy despite being also the centre of several histories of political resistance. Interestingly, Ghosh's *Last Lear* cinematically picks up to visualise the same speech of *King Lear* where Harry is seen as "god's spies" looking at CCTV camera images of the city of Calcutta and in both films the harkening back to the source text may be seen as adaptations in terms of displaced renderings of pasts and presents that are integrally tied to a sense of decay and colossal waste with no hope for a future yet to be born.

Nishi Pulugurtha in "Reworking Shakespeare in Telugu Cinema: *King Lear* to *Gunasundari Katha*," examines how adaptations are largely creative transpositions. She demonstrates how "[t]he Shakespearean text of *King Lear* has been incorporated into the mythological along with the folklore format, or the *janapadam*, in an interesting cultural amalgam" (65) and considers it as

> an example of a hybrid adaptation in which the nuances of the hybrid structure reveal a multilayered reading of the nature of intercultural exchange. The ease with which elements of the Shakespearean text and the Telugu folk format work reveals the dynamics of such exchange. The film appropriates a Shakespeare text within an indigenous art form and situates *King Lear* in an intertextual and intercultural literary and cinematic milieu. (73)

However, though the Telugu film was successful, the Tamil version that was done six years later did not do as well and one wonders why the success of it in one language and the failure of it in another does not inspire further inquiry.

C.S. Venkiteswaran's reading of cinematic adaptations of Shakespeare in Malayalam by Jayaraj – *Kaliyattam* (1997) based on *Othello*, *Kannaki* (2001) based on *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Veeram* (2016) on *Macbeth* and V. K. Prakash's *Karmayogi* (2012) based on *Hamlet* interestingly begs comparison with the modalities of adaptation in Telugu as here too there is an attempt to borrow heavily from "the ritualistic and folk narrative traditions of Kerala" (78). The chapter "Shakespeare in Malayalam Cinema: Cultural and Mythic Interface, Narrative Negotiations" draws attention to the interesting juxtaposition of *theyyam* performances in *Kaliyattam,* cockfighting in *Kannaki* and the *kalari* martial art performers in *Veeram* with the basic themes and dilemmas in the respective Shakespeare plays transmuted with mythic overtones. The fact that these films veer away from any reference to contemporary Kerala and rather focus on fostering a cultural dialogue might be seen in terms of "a tactical response of a

'regional' (or regionalised) cinema trying to find its distinctive place or voice within global cinema where Shakespeare has more currency and acceptance" (91) is an important observation that begs further elaboration. If this is true, then it should hold good for Indian cinema as well. In the three decades post '90s, 36 adaptations of Shakespeare have been made in India and there are 15 films with scenes, characters and references to Shakespeare which validate the claim of using Shakespeare in terms of a tactical move to gain currency in world cinema. Again, Shakespeare's works having all the ingredients for a box office hit, be it romance, greed for power, ego conflicts, murder, back-stabbing, sexual intrigues, along with the potential for music, song and dance, turning to the Bard, needless to say, makes it a commercially viable project.

While one mode of domesticating Shakespeare in Indian cinema has been through narrative dispersals largely in the form of creative transpositions, the other has been to alter the point of view of the discourse. Poonam Trivedi's essay "Woman as Avenger: 'Indianising' the Shakespearean Tragic in the Films of Vishal Bhardwaj" intelligently demonstrates how he has modified the configuration of the genre by altering the endings and the role of women investing them with an agency akin to those in his comedies. She writes: "Clearly, Vishal Bhardwaj's reconfiguration of Shakespeare's tragedies hinges upon the transgressive dimensions of the women's extended roles. In fact, it is possible to read his tragic trilogy as 'women's films'" (25). Her essay goes on to investigate "the re-gendering of the course of justice" and its implications through contextualising the changes "by looking at the place, influence and assimilation of Shakespearean tragedy in Indian literary and performative cultures; the filming of Shakespeare tragedies in Hindi cinema; and the genre and conventions the particular films intersect with" (25). The nature of Indianisation of Bhardwaj's Shakespeare trilogy is attributed to his understanding of Indian philosophy "which reserves a stronger, more proactive potency for the female principle than the familiar Western Aristotelian division of male reason versus female nature. Indian goddesses are invested with powers that are not only in consonance with the male gods but also with paradoxically opposed attributes like the erotic and maternal, seductive and grotesque, life giver and destroyer" (41). Female intervention in Bhardwaj's trilogy ushers in the understanding of the process of adaptation in terms of a dialogic encounter of two cultural contexts and histories paving the way for understanding the present through the prism of Shakespeare.

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