

Translating Shakespeare's Hamlet into Indian Context

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Abstract

The changing times have witnessed the dire need for translation of prominent works, may it be literature or cinema. The word translation denotes 'carrying across', and has moved beyond the conventional moving of works across languages. Even the adaptation of a particular piece of work from one genre to another can be considered a work of translation. There has never been a playwright more prominently known than Shakespeare. There are numerous reasons for his popularity; his universal appeal stands as one of them. He is known to write for all ages and all societies. His characters, plots, and dramatic technique are unique as a beautiful pearl but can be woven into any thread to magnify its beauty on different levels. His various plays from The Comedy of Errors to Hamlet and Macbeth have been adapted into Hindi Cinema, and none of them lost the essence of being the work of a great dramatist. Drama and cinema share a lot in common, both focus on practical propositions. The advanced technology employed in cinema makes the artwork a bit easier, but the simplicity in the imperfect stage settings is unmatched. There is a reason we still strive to book tickets in advance for a performance of Hamlet in theatres. This research paper will try to discuss Hamlet as an adaptation of Shakespeare in the Indian context. It's a difficult task to understand Shakespeare and Indian culture independently and to amalgamate these two and perform magic is an even bigger task. An adaptation where both maintain their identity and none loses value must be the work of brilliant masters of cinema as well as great scholars. Haider is one of the very few movies which was not only part of the popular cinema but also gained critical acclaim. Eminent director and a Shakespeare fan, Vishal Bharadwaj did a splendid job by adapting one of the classic works into the Indian context.

Keywords: Hamlet, Haider, Indian context, Indian society, drama, cinema.

The Oxford Dictionary defines translation as – 1) expressing the sense of words or writing in another language. 2) convert or be converted into another form or medium. Among the many common methods of translation, we generally tend to indulge only in converting the text from one language to another. If we delve deep into the process, we realize more works unravel in front of us which are the result of translation only. The conversions of Ramayana and Mahabharata from Sanskrit to English or from text to drama stand as an example of translation.

Shakespeare is one of the most translated dramatists of all time. His works have not only been translated across languages and nations but also across mediums and contexts. One of the classic filmmakers, poets and litterateur, Gulzar, adapted The Comedy of Errors to create a wonderful film Angoor. The plot, characters and dialogues were translated to suit the Indian context and appeal to the gentry. The level of popularity drama reached in Elizabethan times is still unmatched. We have all the technology today but the magic Shakespeare is

known to have created on stage is impeccable. Drama was originally meant to be performed, which is why we call it the precursor of modern-day cinema. It wasn't until the late nineteenth century that writers started circulating manuscripts to gain more popularity. The difference between a drama and a play was established by Shaw who was one of the prominent initiators to write the modern closet drama, to publish them to reach a wider readership than a set audience. The plight of drama after Elizabethan times or the rising vulgarity of Restoration comedies which eventually led to the Bishop's ban can also be considered one of the reasons why, in later times, people started circulating manuscripts instead of focusing on the performances.

Shakespeare is popular as a courtly writer, for he wrote about all the rulers of his time and managed to please each one of them with his literary skills. He cleverly wove the contemporary society into his plays. Shakespeare's art of plot construction and his choice of themes are responsible for the universal appeal of his

plays. His fame also rests upon the portrayal of human characteristics. Shakespearean characters represent all humankind across the globe. His characters embody traits or, to say, tragic flaws that we all share. Qualities like jealousy, greed, insecurity, indecisiveness, procrastination – all share the nest inside our souls. The in-depth study of Hamlet helps us understand why the play is considered one of the classic works of all time.

Hamlet is one perfect example of a revenge tragedy. The plot revolves around the protagonist Hamlet who desires to avenge his father's murder by his uncle. The strong bonding in a mother-son relationship also forms one of the key aspects of the play. The theme of the Oedipus complex isn't new to the world but its portrayal in classic Greek plays, Shakespearean drama and Haider has been very different from one another. When the classic Greek tragedies dealt with the idea of a marital relationship between mother and son, Shakespeare drew a more acceptable picture around the bonding. Bharadwaj on the other hand, keeping the Indian society in mind, depicted a more subtle version of the Oedipus complex.

Ernest Jones, a colleague and biographer of Sigmund Freud, wrote about the case study of Hamlet by the latter. Jones explained that the procrastination of revenge happened because of the inner turmoil of Hamlet. Jones suggested Hamlet's identification with his uncle on the grounds of their emotional positioning with respect to Gertrude. Jones' investigation was first published as "The Oedipus-complex as an Explanation of Hamlet's Mystery: A Study in Motive" (in *The American Journal of Psychology*, January 1910); it was later expanded in a 1923 publication; before finally appearing as a book-length study (*Hamlet and Oedipus*) in 1949. The fantasy of marrying one's mother is brought open in the classical tragedy but somehow remains a repressed emotion in Hamlet. Hamlet appears more disturbed because of his mother's marriage than the death of his father. We are reminded of the famous procrastination when Haider misses the chance he gets to avenge his father's death.

There are various scenes in Haider where we see the protagonist kissing his mother on her neck, which is usually considered a sign of romantic love. Haider is taken aback when he sees his mother singing happily and having

a good time with his uncle after the protagonist has returned. He doesn't understand how his mother could be so happy, so soon after his father's disappearance. A subtle hint of their relationship is also given towards the end of the film when Ghazala (Gertrude) recalls the time of Haider's childhood when he had told about his desire to get married to his mother. The stature of a mother is worshipped in Indian society and the idea of her getting married to her son is unthinkable. Bharadwaj manipulated the plot to showcase the subtleties of the relationship and left the conclusions for the audience to derive according to their understanding.

Although Haider is adapted from one of Shakespeare's magnum opus, Bharadwaj made changes to the original plot to magnify the subtle nuances. We read about several incidents in history where blood killed blood to quench the thirst for power, and the succeeding ruler married the wife of the previous one. But as Haider is set in contemporary times and the royal games aren't played any more, Bharadwaj picked on another burning issue for his film. The disappearance of the accused Kashmiris did not make much news in mainstream India or mainstream cinema but the pathetic condition of the families of the disappeared is aptly portrayed in Haider.

"It was the political turmoil and the 25 years of tragedy in Kashmir that compelled me.Haider is the first film where we see Kashmir from the inside."

Bharadwaj on setting Haider in Kashmir (in an interview with *The Indian Express*)

The betrayal of Hamlet's friends Guildenstern and Rosencrantz also finds a place in the adaptation, showcasing that power rules above all. The fear of getting punished by the rulers precedes the bond of friendship. The love story of Hamlet and Ophelia also found its portrayal in the adaptation.

The play opens with Hamlet's mourning over his father's death, which appears as a ghost in some later scenes. The play begins with a clarity that the king is dead and the succeeding actions are based on the same piece of fact. On the other hand, the film begins with a doubt about the survival of the protagonist's father and we learn about his death almost after the first half. The film also derives inspiration for a subplot from Basharat Peer's

Curfewed Nights which deals with the topic of violence in Kashmir valley, and the scripting for the film was done by Bharadwaj and Peer together. The result of the hard work of prominent Indian writers and thinkers was the creation and omission of the famous soliloquies.

The famous 'To be or not to be' was translated into Hindi for the film whereas a few soliloquies were originally written to serve the purpose of the film. One of the famous scenes in the movie takes place when Haider is satirizing politics and society at the crossroads and his mother is distressed to see him. The scene caters to the adaptation of Hamlet's madness in Haider. Haider stands on the roundabout of Srinagar and delivers an iconic monologue on the Kashmir Armed Forces Act, popularly and politically known as AFSPA. The absurdity employed by Bhardwaj in the deliverance of the monologue stands in stark contrast in opposition to the normalized violence and atrocities against the local community. The age-old concept of employment of pathos and humour followed by prominent writers like Dickens, helps the writer to explore the situation at hand more elaborately and effectively. The same amalgamation of absurdity and seriousness is evident in Hamlet as well. While there are a number of scenes and situations which look directly out of the play, a number of scenes have been either altered or changed completely to suit the main theme of the film. Defending the altering Peer states that an adaptation doesn't have to follow the original butu needs to remain coherent with the entirety of the film and should support it harmoniously.

Sudhish Kamath wrote an article for The Hindu wherein he lauded the literary and cinema luminaries like Gulzar, Vishal Bhardwaj and Basharat Peer who, according to him, combined their mettle to churn out a classic. He wrote about the promising performances in the film and appreciated a conscious, genuine and authentic effort on the part of the team without considering the demands of a mainstream cinema. Vishal Bharadwaj, through his many Shakespearean adaptations so far has etched a name for his brilliance in intermingling substance of parallel cinema into mainstream one.

The adaptation of Gertrude in Haider as Ghazala also varies from the original. She is portrayed as a more naive person and a protective mother who loves her son no

matter what. She knows her husband is putting everyone's life in danger, which is why she chooses to send Haider away to receive higher education. She leaks her husband's secret now knowing that her brother-in-law is playing a two-faced game.

"Ghazala is torn between her idealistic husband, opportunistic brother-in-law, and her innocent and passionate son. Somewhere she feels she has the responsibility to keep everything in control but obviously, she can't. her love for her son is crazy. She is always trying to protect him from being misled and misguided. Bharadwaj cast me as Shahid's mother because he wanted the oddity of the relationship to come out which wouldn't have come across with a regular mother and son combination. Haider shares a love/hate relationship with Ghazala but it's a very passionate emotion. You almost feel off that these are mom and son. Haider's predicament is that he doesn't now what to do with his mother – whether to love her, hate her, believe her, kill her."

— Actress Tabu who plays the character "Ghazala", in an interview with The Indian Express.

Khurram is also portrayed in a different picture from the original Claudius in the sense that the latter was only blinded by ambition, whereas Khurram feels a strong affection towards his sister-in-law. Khurram is also power-hungry and kills his brother but where Claudius marries the queen because he is now the king, Khurram marries Ghazala and gradually paves his way to power. The climax of the movie emphasizes Khurram's love for Ghazala when he tries to save her by putting his own life in danger, thus putting his love over his ambition.

The climax of the movie is strikingly different from the end of the play. The play ends with the death of all main characters whereas, to instil morality and an Indian touch to the adaptation, Bharadwaj ends the movie with the suicide of Ghazala. She kills herself in an attempt to make her son realize that revenge cannot be the ultimate end to anything. The movie strikes a note that if everybody continues to take revenge nobody will see a better tomorrow. Haider and Khurram portrayed as the arch enemies, wake up to realize that they have lost what they were fighting for. When Haider gets a chance to kill his

father's murderer, he chooses to take the higher path for which his mother sacrificed her life. The end of the movie showcases the victory of good over evil which appears as one of the commonest morals in all of Indian literature. A well-known film critic Rajeev Masand reviewed Haider as an elegant and thrilling movie unveiling the Kashmir struggle in front of common citizens of mainstream nation. He applauded the director's effort of deviating from the original ending of the play by showcasing the devastation caused by cyclical revenge and violence.

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