

Shakespeare's Shadow: Historical Legacy, Alienation, and Postcolonial Reception among Indian Writers and Dramatists

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Abstract:

Shakespeare entered India not as a literary discovery but as an instrument of colonial governance, installed through the English education system consolidated after Macaulay's Minute of 1835 and the subsequent expansion of university curricula. This paper examines the long afterlife of that installation, tracing how Indian writers, translators, and dramatists have negotiated Shakespeare's authority across roughly two centuries. It argues that Shakespeare's Indian presence is best understood not as influence but as a shadow: a persistent structure of literary authority that simultaneously enabled and constrained indigenous creative practice. The paper is organised around three interlocking concerns. First, it reconstructs the historical mechanisms — pedagogical, theatrical, and institutional — by which Shakespeare acquired canonical standing in colonial India. Second, it analyses the condition of alienation produced by that standing, in which bilingual writers found their own literary traditions measured against an imported standard, generating what critics have described as a divided or mimic sensibility. Third, it examines postcolonial reception, where translation, regional-language performance, Parsi theatre, and Hindi cinema converted a colonial inheritance into a resource for cultural self-assertion. The paper concludes that Indian engagements with Shakespeare constitute neither straightforward derivation nor complete rejection, but a sustained practice of appropriation through which literary authority has been contested and redistributed.

Keywords: Shakespeare; postcolonial reception; Indian drama; colonial education; adaptation; alienation; translation; Indian theatre.

1. Introduction

The presence of William Shakespeare in India is one of the most durable and most contested legacies of British colonial rule. Unlike many artefacts of empire that receded with the withdrawal of colonial administration in 1947, Shakespeare remained — in school syllabi, in university English departments, in the repertoires of regional theatre companies, and, more recently, in commercial cinema. This persistence poses a problem that is at once literary and political. If Shakespeare arrived in India as part of an apparatus designed to produce colonial subjects, what does it mean that Indian writers and dramatists continued, and continue, to work with him?

The question has generated a substantial critical literature. Viswanathan (1989) demonstrated that the academic discipline of English literature was effectively invented in India before it was institutionalised in Britain, and that it was invented for purposes of moral and political management rather than aesthetic

cultivation. Within that discipline, Shakespeare occupied a privileged position: he was, as Singh (1989) argued, deployed as evidence of the moral and imaginative superiority of English civilisation, a "universal" author whose universality was in practice a claim about English particularity. Loomba and Orkin (1998) subsequently gathered a body of work showing that Shakespeare's global circulation cannot be separated from the histories of colonialism that carried him.

Yet the same body of scholarship insists that colonial imposition does not determine reception. Trivedi and Bartholomeusz (2005) assembled evidence of Indian Shakespearean practice that is neither obedient nor merely oppositional — a practice of translation, transposition, indigenisation, and sometimes outright plunder. Dionne and Kapadia (2008) framed such practices as "native" appropriations that reconstitute Shakespeare within local performance economies rather than paying tribute to a foreign original. Bhatia (2004) documented how Indian theatre used and refused Shakespeare in explicitly political ways during the nationalist period and after.

This paper synthesises and extends these lines of inquiry around a single organising figure: the shadow. A shadow is cast by something else; it is derivative in origin. But a shadow also falls across a landscape, shaping what can be seen there, and it changes shape according to the ground it falls on and the angle of the light. Shakespeare's Indian shadow has been, at different moments, an oppressive darkening, a shelter, a measure of distance from the source, and a shape available for reworking. The paper proceeds in four analytical movements. Section 2 reconstructs the historical installation of Shakespeare through colonial education and the colonial stage. Section 3 examines the resulting condition of alienation among Indian writers, particularly bilingual ones. Section 4 analyses the postcolonial reception of Shakespeare across translation, regional theatre, and film. Section 5 draws these together to argue for appropriation as the characteristic mode of Indian Shakespearean practice.

2. The Colonial Installation: Education, Canon, and the Stage

2.1 Macaulay's Minute and the Manufacture of a Canon

The conventional starting point for any account of English literature in India is Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Indian Education of February 1835, with its notorious ambition to form a class of persons Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinions, morals, and intellect (Macaulay, 1835/1972). The Minute is often read too simply, as though it single-handedly created the colonial education system; in fact, it intervened in an existing Orientalist–Anglicist controversy and its immediate administrative effects were more limited than its rhetorical afterlife suggests (Trivedi, 1995). Its significance for the present argument lies elsewhere. Macaulay articulated, with unusual candour, the logic by which English literary texts would function as a substitute for the religious instruction the East India Company could not politically afford to provide.

Viswanathan (1989) traced this logic through the administrative record, showing that English literature was assigned a specific governmental task: to cultivate moral disposition and political loyalty in a population whose religious sensitivities made direct Christian instruction hazardous. Literature was to do the work of religion by other means. The consequence was that the English literary canon entered India already burdened with an ethical and civilisational claim. It was not offered as one literature among others but as the repository of a superior humanity.

Shakespeare was uniquely suited to bear this burden. He was already, by the early nineteenth century, being consolidated within Britain as the national poet, a process of "bardolatry" that supplied the colonial curriculum with a figure whose authority appeared to precede and transcend politics. In the Indian

classroom, this apparent transcendence was precisely what made him useful. To study Shakespeare was to be inducted into a universal humanity that was, in practice, coextensive with Englishness (Singh, 1989). Das (1991) documented the resulting curricular saturation across the presidency colleges and the universities established at Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras in 1857, where Shakespearean texts became the standard against which literary value was defined and examinations were set.

2.2 The Colonial Stage

The classroom was not the only site of installation. English theatrical activity in the presidency towns predated the education reforms; playhouses in Calcutta staged English drama for European audiences from the late eighteenth century onward. What changed in the nineteenth century was the emergence of Indian participation — first as spectators, then as performers, then as adapters.

Chatterjee and Singh (1999) provided a detailed account of one revealing episode: the 1848 Calcutta production in which a Bengali actor, Baishnav Charan Adhya, performed Othello before a mixed audience. The colonial press response registered acute discomfort. A performance that might have been received as evidence of the success of English education instead provoked anxiety, because it made visible the racial contradiction at the heart of the civilising mission: the colonised subject who had successfully assimilated English culture was, for that very reason, a problem. The episode illustrates a structural feature of Shakespeare's Indian career. The invitation to emulate was always accompanied by an unstated prohibition against succeeding too completely — the condition Bhabha (1994) analysed as mimicry, in which the colonial subject is required to be "almost the same, but not quite."

Alongside the anglophone stage, a different theatrical formation was emerging. The Parsi theatre, developing in Bombay from the 1850s and touring extensively across the subcontinent and into Southeast Asia, absorbed Shakespearean plots into a commercial, multilingual, song-and-spectacle idiom (Gupt, 2005). Parsi theatre adaptations were rarely faithful in any philological sense. Plots were localised, characters renamed, subplots invented, songs interpolated, and endings altered to suit audience expectation. *The Comedy of Errors*, *Cymbeline*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *Romeo and Juliet* proved especially productive sources. This was Shakespeare not as scripture but as raw material — a repository of serviceable stories circulating in a popular entertainment economy that owed nothing to the colonial classroom.

The coexistence of these two Shakespeares — the examinable text and the plunderable plot — is fundamental to what follows. Indian engagement with Shakespeare was never a single relation, and the tension between reverence and raiding structures the entire subsequent history.

3. Alienation: The Bilingual Writer and the Divided Standard

3.1 The Structure of Literary Self-Doubt

The installation of an external literary standard produces a specific and durable form of alienation. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), writing of the Kenyan case, described colonial education as effecting a rupture between a child's language of everyday life and the language of formal learning, so that the world of the school comes to seem more real and more valuable than the world of the household. Nandy (1983) analysed a related process in the Indian context, arguing that colonialism operated most effectively not through coercion but by installing itself within the psychic life of the colonised, producing a self-divided against its own inheritance.

For Indian writers educated in the colonial system, Shakespeare was the most concentrated expression of this divided standard. The problem was not that Shakespeare was foreign — Indian literary cultures had

long absorbed Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit inheritances without evident crisis. The problem was that Shakespeare came attached to a hierarchy. To write in Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, or Hindi was to write in a medium that the examination system had already positioned as secondary. Das (1991) documented the resulting anxiety across nineteenth-century Indian literary criticism, in which regional-language authors were routinely praised by being compared to English models: a local dramatist was "the Shakespeare of Bengal," a poet "the Wordsworth of Maharashtra." Such formulations conferred honour while simultaneously confirming subordination, since the direction of comparison was never reversed.

3.2 Michael Madhusudan Dutt and the Costs of Emulation

The career of Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–1873) offers the clearest nineteenth-century illustration. Dutt began by writing in English, aspiring to a place in English letters, and converted to Christianity in 1843. His English poetry attracted little attention. He subsequently turned to Bengali, producing works — most notably *Meghnadbadh Kabya* (1861) — that transformed Bengali versification by importing blank verse, a form he took directly from English precedent, above all from Milton and Shakespeare (Das, 1991). Dutt's case resists both nationalist and colonialist readings. He is neither a straightforward victim of cultural alienation nor a triumphant indigeniser. The formal resource he seized was unambiguously colonial in provenance; the use he made of it was unambiguously transformative for Bengali literature. His *Meghnadbadh Kabya* redirects sympathy in the Ramayana narrative toward Meghnad and Ravana, a reorientation that has been read as an implicit critique of orthodox moral hierarchies. The blank verse that carried this reorientation was Shakespeare's inheritance put to work against the grain of the tradition that transmitted it.

What Dutt's career demonstrates is that alienation and creativity are not opposed conditions. The writer who feels the inadequacy of his own tradition when measured against an imported standard may respond by remaking the tradition — and the tools available for that remaking will often be the imported ones. Trivedi (1995) described this dynamic as a "colonial transaction," a term that usefully preserves the element of exchange without denying the asymmetry of power under which the exchange occurs.

3.3 Alienation in the Twentieth Century

The condition persisted well beyond independence. Karnad (1989) reflected on the situation of the postcolonial Indian dramatist confronting a modern theatre whose formal vocabulary was largely European while its audiences and materials were not. The English-educated playwright, he observed, inherited a set of dramaturgical assumptions — the proscenium stage, psychological realism, the five-act structure, the primacy of the written text over performance — that did not correspond to the folk and classical performance traditions available in India. Shakespeare stood at the origin of much of this inherited apparatus, and shedding it required deliberate effort.

Karnad's own practice, and that of contemporaries such as Vijay Tendulkar, Badal Sircar, and Habib Tanvir, involved a turn toward indigenous performance forms — yakshagana, tamasha, nautanki, folk narrative — as sources of dramaturgical structure. This was not a rejection of Shakespeare so much as a refusal of the exclusive authority attributed to him. The point was to widen the field of available models rather than to substitute one monopoly for another.

Meanwhile, in the English departments, the shadow lay heaviest. Critics have noted the peculiar situation of Indian scholars of English literature, trained to produce criticism of texts whose cultural context was remote and whose institutional prestige depended on that remoteness. The result was a discipline that could reproduce metropolitan critical fashions with great competence while finding it difficult to justify its own existence in local terms. It was substantially from within this discomfort that Indian postcolonial

criticism of Shakespeare emerged, as scholars turned the analytical resources of the discipline back upon the discipline's own colonial constitution (Loomba, 2002).

4. Postcolonial Reception: Translation, Performance, Screen

4.1 Translation as Appropriation

Translation has been the primary mechanism of Indian Shakespearean reception, and it has rarely been literal. Chaudhuri and Lim (2006) situated the Indian case within a wider survey of non-anglophone reception, noting that Shakespeare's circulation outside English almost invariably involves substantial reconstruction. In India, the scale is considerable: Shakespeare has been translated into virtually every major Indian language, in some cases repeatedly across two centuries, generating a body of texts whose relationship to the originals ranges from close philological rendering to free transposition.

Trivedi and Bartholomeusz (2005) documented the range across Bengali, Marathi, Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, Hindi, and Urdu traditions. Certain patterns recur. Character names are indigenised. Settings are relocated to recognisable Indian geographies. Religious and ritual frameworks are substituted — Christian references become Hindu or Islamic ones. Verse forms are adapted to prosodic conventions with no English equivalent. Endings are sometimes altered, particularly where tragic closure conflicts with generic expectation. Comic subplots may be expanded to accommodate performance conventions requiring song and dance.

Such transformations have often been described, in a metropolitan critical idiom, as infidelities. Postcolonial criticism has reframed them. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989) proposed "abrogation" and "appropriation" as the twin operations by which postcolonial writing dismantles the authority of the imperial text while seizing its resources. Applied to Indian Shakespearean translation, the framework suggests that departures from the source are not failures of competence but assertions of the translating culture's right to determine what the text will mean locally. Kapadia (in Dionne & Kapadia, 2008) argued along related lines that the very notion of an "authentic" Shakespeare against which adaptations are measured is itself a colonial residue, and that Indian appropriations are most usefully read as new works with their own conditions of intelligibility.

4.2 The Political Stage

Bhatia (2004) provided the most sustained account of Shakespeare's role in Indian political theatre. Her central argument is that the colonial state's own investment in Shakespeare as a civilising instrument created an opening for anticolonial appropriation: a Shakespearean production could carry political content that an openly nationalist play could not, because the colonial authorities were institutionally committed to Shakespeare's respectability. The Dramatic Performances Act of 1876, which empowered the colonial government to prohibit performances deemed seditious, sharpened the value of this cover.

Adaptations of the tragedies and histories proved especially serviceable. Plays concerned with usurpation, illegitimate authority, tyrannicide, and the loss of a kingdom mapped readily onto colonial circumstance. Audiences could recognise a critique of foreign rule in the presentation of a usurper's court without any line of the text needing to name the British. This is Shakespeare functioning as what might be called protective coloration — a strategy that depends entirely on the colonial regime's own canonisation of the author.

After independence, the political uses shifted. Utpal Dutt, working in Bengal with an explicitly Marxist theatrical programme, staged Shakespeare in Bengali for working-class and rural audiences, treating the plays as vehicles for class analysis and popular mobilisation (Dutt, 1982). Dutt's position was notable for

refusing the terms of the debate as usually posed. He did not defend Shakespeare as universal art, nor reject him as colonial imposition; he treated the plays as a technically superb dramaturgy available for redeployment in a different political struggle. Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) situated such practices within a broader postcolonial dramaturgy in which canonical Western texts are systematically rewritten to expose and reverse their embedded assumptions.

Habib Tanvir's work with the Naya Theatre company represents a further development. By integrating Chhattisgarhi folk performers, dialect, and regional performance idioms into productions that included Shakespearean material, Tanvir dissolved the distinction between "classic text" and "folk form" on which the colonial hierarchy had depended. The result was not Shakespeare translated into a folk idiom but a hybrid form in which neither element retained priority.

4.3 Shakespeare on Screen

The migration of Shakespeare into Indian cinema extended the Parsi theatre's practice of narrative appropriation into a mass medium. Verma (2005) traced a substantial body of Hindi films drawing on Shakespearean plots from the early sound period onward, frequently without acknowledgement and often mediated through Parsi theatre versions rather than the English texts. *The Comedy of Errors* supplied the plot for Gulzar's *Angoor* (1982); *Romeo and Juliet* has been reworked repeatedly.

Trivedi (2007) proposed the category of "filmi Shakespeare" to describe this practice, distinguishing it from the tradition of reverent screen adaptation associated with Anglo-American cinema. Filmi Shakespeare, on this account, subordinates the source to the generic requirements of popular Hindi cinema — the song sequence, the melodramatic register, the moral resolution — and treats plot as detachable from text.

The films of Vishal Bhardwaj mark a significant departure from this pattern while remaining within it. *Maqbool* (2003) relocates *Macbeth* to the Mumbai underworld; *Omkara* (2006) transposes *Othello* to caste and factional politics in western Uttar Pradesh; *Haider* (2014) sets *Hamlet* in Kashmir during the insurgency of the 1990s. Burnett (2013) analysed such films as instances of world cinema's Shakespeare, in which the source functions as a structure for engaging local political conditions rather than as an object of homage. *Haider* is the clearest case: the Hamlet plot becomes a vehicle for representing disappearance, military occupation, and the collapse of familial and political trust in Kashmir, and the play's concern with the impossibility of adequate action acquires an immediate and specific referent. Trivedi and Chakravarti (2019) collected further work situating Indian screen Shakespeares across regional cinemas, demonstrating that the phenomenon extends well beyond Hindi-language production into Malayalam, Bengali, Tamil, and Kannada film.

What these screen appropriations shares is a reversal of the colonial relation. Shakespeare no longer supplies the standard against which the local is measured; the local supplies the material conditions that make the Shakespearean structure legible and urgent. The play becomes a means of speaking about Kashmir, rather than Kashmir becoming an exotic setting for a play.

5. Discussion: Appropriation as the Characteristic Mode

Three conclusions follow from the foregoing survey.

First, the categories of influence and imitation are inadequate to the Indian material. Both presume a one-directional transmission in which the receiving culture is passive. The evidence points instead toward sustained, deliberate, and frequently irreverent reconstruction. Even the most apparently deferential Indian engagements with Shakespeare — the nineteenth-century verse translations, the college productions —

occurred within institutional contexts that Indian participants were actively negotiating rather than merely inhabiting.

Second, alienation and appropriation are not sequential stages but simultaneous conditions. It is tempting to construct a narrative in which colonial imposition produces alienation, which independence then resolves into confident appropriation. The record does not support this. Dutt was appropriating in 1861; Indian English departments were experiencing acute disciplinary self-doubt in the 1990s. The two conditions coexist and often inhabit the same writer. Said (1993) described the postcolonial cultural situation as characterised by overlapping territories and intertwined histories, and the formulation applies: the Indian writer's relation to Shakespeare is not a choice between inheritance and rejection but a continuous management of an inheritance that cannot be repudiated because it is constitutive.

Third, the political valence of Shakespeare in India has been unstable and context-dependent. The same author served as an instrument of colonial moral instruction, a cover for nationalist critique, a resource for Marxist popular theatre, a plot bank for commercial cinema, and a vehicle for representing state violence in Kashmir. No account that fixes Shakespeare's political meaning — as inherently imperial or inherently emancipatory — can accommodate this range. Loomba (2002) argued that Shakespeare's texts are themselves internally divided on questions of race, difference, and legitimate authority, and that this internal division is part of what makes them available for such varied redeployment. The plays contain the materials for their own contestation.

The metaphor of the shadow captures these findings better than that of influence. A shadow is not a thing transmitted but a relation of light, object, and ground. Its shape depends on where one stands. Indian writers and dramatists have not received Shakespeare so much as they have repeatedly repositioned themselves in relation to him, altering the shadow's shape by moving. Some have stood directly beneath it and found the light blocked; others have moved to the edge, where the shadow's boundary becomes a usable line; others have turned to face the source and found that the light was never as singular as it claimed.

6. Conclusion

Shakespeare's Indian career began as an exercise in colonial governance and has become something its architects would not recognise. The institutional apparatus that installed him — the Anglicist education policy, the presidency universities, the examination system — sought to produce a class of colonial intermediaries whose literary taste would guarantee their political loyalty. That apparatus succeeded in making Shakespeare unavoidable and failed entirely in determining what would be done with him.

The condition of alienation this paper has described is real and has exacted genuine costs, visible in the long subordination of Indian-language literatures to English models within Indian critical discourse and in the disciplinary uncertainty of Indian English studies. But alienation has not been the whole story, and treating it as such underestimates the agency of Indian writers, translators, and performers. From Parsi theatre's cheerful plunder of Shakespearean plots in the 1860s to Bhardwaj's Kashmiri *Hamlet* in 2014, the dominant Indian practice has been appropriative: taking what is useful, discarding what is not, and refusing the demand for fidelity that would preserve the original's authority.

Several directions for further inquiry follow. The regional-language archive remains substantially unexamined in English-language scholarship; systematic work on Marathi, Malayalam, Odia, and Assamese Shakespearean traditions would likely complicate the Bengali- and Hindi-centred accounts that currently predominate. The pedagogical dimension also warrants attention: how Shakespeare is actually

taught in Indian schools and colleges today, and what students make of him, is poorly documented relative to the volume of theoretical commentary. Finally, the relation between Shakespearean appropriation and questions of caste, region, and gender in contemporary Indian performance deserves fuller treatment than it has received.

What remains clear is that the shadow has not lifted, and that its persistence is no longer best described as a colonial residue. Shakespeare has been sufficiently reworked, translated, filmed, and argued over in India that he now belongs to Indian literary history in a sense that has little to do with his English provenance. The shadow, cast long enough and across sufficiently varied ground, has become part of the landscape.

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