

Imprints of Shakespeare's Themes and Forms on the Indian Theatrical World

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Abstract

The research article attempts to analyse the influence of Shakespeare's plays on Indian dramatists in terms of theme and form. It examines the interaction of Indian and European literature, a byproduct of colonisation, and puts forth the opinion that western strands continue to be an integral part of modern Indian theatrical output. The Shakespearean model heavily impacted the structure and themes of Indian Drama, which is characterised by its receptiveness of western theatrical modes and its integration with Indian dramatic traditions. The paper studies the literary works of several Indian dramatists and endeavours to find the imprints of Shakespeare's theatrical devices on the indigenous dramatic world.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, themes, theatrical devices, forms, imprints, integration.*

English drama attained full blossoming in the hands of William Shakespeare, who wrote tragedies, comedies, as well as historical plays. He is regarded as the undisputed king of English drama and has been an inspiration for playwrights all over the world. Shakespeare left behind a vast legacy of theatrical treasure that inspired dramatists all over the world and still continues to encourage a vast body of theatrical output across the globe. To this day, his work is honoured and celebrated, poems and dialogues are memorised and, scenes are enacted in schools, colleges and universities. Born in a humble family of modest means in England of the Elizabethan times, Shakespeare wrote at least 37 plays and a collection of Sonnets.

This paper aims to examine works of major Indian dramatists and find in them imprints of Shakespeare's literary style in terms of theme, plot, and characterisation. Shakespeare's presence in India can be attributed to colonialism, which resulted in the accidental development of a new breed of people, awakened to a new education system, a new language, and new literature in the English language.

In India, the origin of drama goes back to ancient times. Indian drama can be regarded as the most authentic and ancient art form, very indigenous in form and essence. In ancient India drama based on religious scriptures, legends, and myths were performed in temples. It was a synthesis of song and dance in praise of gods, and narrative recitation was later added. The tradition of dramatic activity in India can be traced to the Vedic period. The golden age of Sanskrit drama produced world-famous playwrights, among whom is Kalidasa (370- 450 CE), who is regarded as the Shakespeare of India.

At around the same time that Sanskrit drama flourished, South India boasted of a rich literary and dramatic tradition known as 'Sangam Literature', which was more of a dance- drama rather than drama proper. Sanskrit drama gradually shifted to the courts to be patronised by kings

and nobles and was reduced to being a pastime of scholars and learned men. Its growth was further limited due to political changes. With time vernacular or regional languages gained prominence.

Modern Indian English drama can be divided into two halves, Pre-Independence and Post- Independence Drama. Pre Independence Indian drama is located in the colonial era. The coming of the East India Company and the colonisation of India by the British Empire led to the evolution of a new and radical literary genre, widely known as Indian English Literature. Indian English drama is an important form of this literature. In 1789, Sir William Jones translated Kalidasa's play, *Shakuntala*, into English. The play created ripples in the literary circle. In 1831, the Hindi Rangmanch was established. Theatrical activities began in many cities like Mumbai and Kolkata and theatre groups from western countries started staging plays in India but a majority of these plays were English plays or their translations in regional languages. The earliest Indian English play from the pre-independence era was *The Persecuted or Dramatic Scenes Illustrative of the Present State of Hindoo Society in Calcutta* (1831) by Krishna Mohan Banerjee. The play appeared after the establishment of the Hindu College in Calcutta. Till then, nearly one generation has received English education and had inculcated western ideas. The play shows the conflict between traditional Indian orthodoxy and modern western ideas. The tides of reformation had thus begun

It is essential to trace the major Western influences on Indian English playwrights. The playwright, like other human beings, cannot remain unaffected to the tremors of change in society. They witness the change in society and fervently search for new tools to chisel out their thoughts. All major playwrights have been influenced by some writers and movements whose dramatic art reflects their purpose. Colonialism, nationalism, industrialism, urbanisation and westernisation got their respective reactions in literature. European dramatists like Shakespeare, Henrik Ibsen, Sartre, Shaw and Camus and movements like psychoanalysis, absurdism, existentialism, Marxism and Feminism, inspired Indian dramatists. The drama has thus been enriched due to the fusion of the rich classical tradition of the past and the modern western concepts. It makes an interesting study to trace the growth of European influences on Indian Dramatists.

When the British came to Calcutta, they brought with them, their love for Shakespeare. Shakespeare was taught in the Hindu College. Shakespearean plays were already being staged in theatres. The British passed on their love of Shakespeare to their Indian subjects as well. Indian English drama has been influenced by Elizabethan in general and Shakespearean drama in particular. The major contribution was the concept of tragedy, which was unheard of in Classical Sanskrit drama.

Both Sri Aurobindo and Rabindranath Tagore tried to create images of universal brotherhood and world culture though their effort was looked upon with scepticism. Sri Aurobindo was a voracious reader and had gone through literature of other countries as well. His plays show a great influence of Elizabethan and Romantic literature, particularly *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Tempest*, and *Henry IV*. Like Shakespeare, Aurobindo shows an intense liking for Greek and Latin Classical literature, as he believed that they show the universal truth behind human existence. Like Shakespeare, Aurobindo uses prose

for the lowly characters in his plays like Sheikh Ibrahim and Kaleem. Like Shakespeare, he shows how characters behave under pressure.

Professor Seetaraman compares Aurobindo's *The Viziers* with Shakespeare's *Henry IV*, in terms of theme, plot structure and human predicament, and also comments on the two playwrights differences. He says,

“Again Shakespeare started with the idea of comedy of the Middle Ages but depleted it of its religious atmosphere. His plays are characterised by the absence of religion. They have more of the Renaissance humanism and best for life. But *The Viziers* present in bold relief characters with a well-defined mental love for God and acceptance of His will.”(Sri Aurobindo 53)

Aurobindo was impressed by the World Classics. His *Perseus the Deliverer* draws its theme from Greek mythology. His *Viziers of Bassora* is inspired by stories from the *Arabian Nights*. Like Shakespeare, he wrote poetic plays and flavoured them with elements from classical Sanskrit literature. Sri Aurobindo placed Shakespeare among the top four supreme poets of the world, the other three being the epic poets Homer, Vyasa. He describes him 'as equal to the host'. Sri Aurobindo defines how life itself has taken hold of him in order to recreate itself in his image 'It is the sheer creative Ananda of life spirit which is Shakespeare' (Sri Aurobindo, 71) Indeed, as Tagore says, there is in Shakespeare 'a high observatory from which can be seen as a most comprehensive scene of human nature.'(Chatterjee 38)

The first tragic drama stemming from Bengal was Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nila Darpana* (1860). It depicts the shabby and deplorable state of indigo planters in India through the suffering of a native family at the hands of the Europeans. The playwright replaces the seven or ten acts traditional technique with Shakespeare's five-act formula and shows a deep crisis in Act III.

Sahajahan (1910) by Dvijendralal Ray strongly reminds of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. It depicts the story of Emperor Sahajahan, who is imprisoned and dethroned by his son Aurangzeb. Though the theme differs from *King Lear*, the emotions at play, the treatment of characters and the sense of high tragedy are reminiscent of the great English tragedy. The Emperor's agony and frenzy at his son's deeds resemble that of *King Lear*. The comic character, Dildar at the court of the Emperor is quite similar to *Lear's Fool*. As Sangeeta Mohanty says:

Like the Bengali stage, the subtle influence of Shakespeare is evident on the Marathi stage. Eminent dramatist K.P. Khadilkar has been profoundly influenced by the Shakespearean tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*. In the historical tragedy *Savai Madhavarawancha Mrityu* (1896), he has presented characters in the nature of *Hamlet* and *Iago*. Although the theme is totally different and he doesn't imitate scenes or passages from the originals, he has subtly drawn on certain ideas. Certain devices and expressions are reminiscent of Shakespeare. There is a selfish priest in the play who resembles *Iago*. The female character *Yasoda* reflects the innocence and charm of *Ophelia*. Her husband *Madhavarao* for some inexplicable cause gets fits of lunacy and when she tries to console him he exclaims that the touch of her hand is like the stings of thousands of scorpions on one spot. This expression recalls *Macbeth's* "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!"(45)

Shakespearean drama appealed to the Indian dramatists because of its similarity to the Sanskrit Drama. Masks, asides, invisibility, soliloquy, the comic fool, play within a play, off-

stage voices, pantomime, poetic diction, background music etc are present in classic Indian literature too.

The Shakespearean play *Hamlet* is extremely popular in India, owing to its likeness to Indian epics. Stories of fratricide exist in Indian literature as well. A brother usurping brother's kingdom and even his wife are not new to the Indian literary heritage. In the *Ramayana*, King Sugriva usurps his brother Bali's kingdom and also his wife. Pushkar swallows Nala's wealth in the tale of Nala and Damayanti. In *Mahabharata*, Duryodhana usurps the throne of Pandavas.

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