

## Vernacular Shakespeare in India and Agha Hashar Kashmiri's *Safed Khoon* (2004)

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### Abstract

Looking back at Shakespeare in India before partition, one finds a dichotomy between the literary or academic Shakespeare and the vernacular one. Though works such as Gauri Vishwanathan's have engaged with the politics that went into producing the academic Shakespeare as one of the codes of the British empire in India, the vernacular Shakespeare has not been processed much: either from the outside, from its difference from the original Shakespeare, or from within where differences in indigenous cultures and their resultant economies as well as artistic motivations determined the nature and level of engagement with the original. This paper looks at one such Urdu adaptation *Safed Khoon* by Agha Hashar Kashmiri looking at the process through which it subjected Shakespeare's original *King Lear* to the process of erasure and overwriting refusing to let it work as a complicit of the colonial project.

Keywords: vernacular Shakespeare, adaptation, Indian theatre, Urdu drama, colonialism

Shakespeare came to India with colonialism. The Anglicists in their desire to produce a class modeled on the British gentry that could act as their ally against the locals, asserted for an English education in the classroom. This led to the introduction of English literature as a subject to be taught in colleges in the beginning of the nineteenth century in India with teachers like Henry Derozio and D. L. Richardson focusing on the literary and performative aspects of Shakespeare's plays. During this era a single volume of Shakespearean plays came to be regarded more educating than a whole shelf filled with Indian and Arabic literary texts. Shakespeare's inclusion in the classroom by the British kept the indigenous works out in order to cultivate a class that was "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" (qtd. in Singh 450). Gauri Viswanathan has pointed the difference in which Shakespeare was put to use in the English classroom and its counterpart in India by examining the nature of questions on which the students were tested. Where the students in England were asked to comment on the grammar or some such aspect of the Bard's writing the latter were asked to answer questions that demanded critical engagement with his writing and the culture and society that shaped it. In 1855 English and English literature's inclusion in civil service examination in India could get candidates 1000 points, the same as Mathematics. Even scholarly engagement with indigenous works used Shakespeare as a yardstick for measuring the literary merit of the work; as early as the eighteenth century we find evidence of Sir William Jones labeling the most acclaimed playwright of the subcontinent Kalidaas as the Shakespeare of India ignoring the fact that Kalidaas wrote hundreds of years before Shakespeare and his art emerged from a completely different

consciousness, cultural milieu and artistic tradition. The implicit superiority of the colonizer's culture that informed such titles was later on assimilated by the colonized to the effect that local dramatists such as Agha Hashar Kashmiri till date are titled as the "Shakespeare of Urdu" by scholars and academics alike.

Tridevi and Bartholomeusz in tracing the effects of the Education Act of 1835 on the reception of the British literature point to the dichotomy it created between the English-educated elites and the natives educated in vernacular language, "it had its consequences on the reception of Shakespeare too: there developed two mutually exclusive streams- of an 'academic' literary Shakespeare led by Anglicized Indians and a popular Shakespeare on stage, transformed and transmuted in translation." (15) Academic readings of Shakespeare in both England and India portrayed him as a transcendentalist and humanist figure which was in keeping with the colonial agenda of legitimizing the rule of British over the colonized eventually turning the colonial project into a cultural one. In the government-funded classroom it was an easy task but when Shakespeare began to be performed on the Indian stage things began to take a different turn. The kind of passive acceptance that was demanded of the Indian native could not work for long. With the failure of the Anglicist methods and the revival of the orientalist administrative policies in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the local engagement with Shakespeare became dialogic. Translations of Shakespeare began to be done as early as 1852 in Bengali and Marathi and were mainly popularized by the Parsee theatre that took many liberties with the original works melding them into plots that were suited to the tastes of the Indian masses. Although the native Indian was still subjected to

epistemic violence, it did unfix the passive position of the locals in addition to opening up spaces where the instability of the colonial codes manifested themselves. Hence the colonial efforts at universalizing Shakespeare did not become undifferentiated and monolithic in its effect.

The English Shakespeare taught in college classrooms was Indianized to varying degrees when translated into vernacular languages with varying effects. To determine the engagement of a local translator with Shakespeare one needs to re-examine the process by which individual translations and adaptations came into being, the nature of the cultural forces that motivated them and the availability as well as limitations of the methods that transformed them into finished literary products. Many of the vernacular translations/adaptations (I am going to use the two terms interchangeably as theatres in that time did not make a distinction between the two. In fact, many translations were adaptations as they did not faithfully adhere to the original in terms of plot, characters or dialogue) subjected Shakespeare's plays to the process of erasure and overwriting, refusing to engage with them as expressions of a superior society and culture and thereby countered the oriental gaze that subjected them to the position of inferiority.

According to "Beyond Dichotomies: Translation/Transculturation and the Colonial Difference" by Walter D. Mignolo and Freya Schiwy the issue of translation is not simply a linguistic one. As they say, "It is our assumption that translation is more than a syntactic and semantic transaction between two languages. It also involves historical and geopolitical configurations: historical, because a given language has not only a grammatical logic but also a historical memory engrained in it, and thus forms

the subjectivity of its speakers.” (Mignolo 251-252) .They describe the process not as “translation” but as “transculturation” whereby our own cultural sensibilities and experiences are transferred into the colonizer’s narrative thereby debunking all claims of its fixity and immutability as a symbol of western cultural authority.

In “Beyond Dichotomies: Communicative Action and Cultural Hegemony” Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze also questions the generalizing and totalizing narratives presented by the west. He challenges Europe’s “normative” position in the world of culture and literature which declares everything that deviates from that position as abnormal or aberrant. According to him the strict dichotomies between cultures must be abolished as only by their abolition can we put an end to Europe’s cultural hegemony. As he says, “What is lacking is adequate attention to histories of specific peoples and the contradictions that such histories reveal about precipitous claims to normativity and universality.” (Eze 62) In a similar vein South-Asian renditions of Shakespearean plays, which subject his works to modification and cultural transformation, disintegrate the supposed cultural superiority of Shakespeare.

The Indian playwrights, in adapting Shakespeare, subverted the power of the original texts as complicit of the colonial project and rewrote them to cater to the Indian taste for the exotica as in the case of Agha Hashar’s adaptation of *King Lear* by the title of *Safed Khoon*. Since texts also create their context this and other adaptations then can be read as the way Shakespeare was dethroned from the pedestal on which it was set by the colonizer and made to feed the industrial interests of the Parsee theatre companies that performed Urdu adaptations of his plays. To look into the colonial Shakespeare then,

one needs to revert to historical readings as they, in Loomba and Orkin's words, allow for "a new kind of literary criticism, where history does not just provide a background to the study of texts, but forms an essential part of textual meaning; conversely, texts or representations are seen as fundamental to the creation of history and culture." (3)

Nandi Bhatia in her article "Shakespeare and the Codes of Empire in India" links the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act of 1876 with the rise of vernacular Shakespeare in India but claims that vernacular adaptations of Shakespeare in performance, under the guise of accepting the master-discourse, acted as sites of resistance. Citing the example of the 1848 native production of *Othello* at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta where a native boy performed the role of the moor, they claim that the play raised "the possibility of undoing the 'master discourse' not in entirely oppositional terms but through partial displacement and subversion of the fixedness of the English text via both the speech and racial difference of the native that act against authorized colonial versions" (109). She also argues that many playwrights intentionally adapted Shakespeare in order to escape government policing; one such instance being Harishchandra's *Durlabh Bandhu* (1880) that used the plot of *The Merchant of Venice* to show ways in which the Indian native can outwit his colonial master and thereby counter the "growing encroachment of British authority" (113). Her argument allows for possible readings of Shakespearean plays as a site of resistance to the very master whose cultural legacy the play sets out to appropriate.

The Urdu adaptations of Shakespearean plays were mostly staged by the Parsee theatre which was apolitical and completely commercial. According to Poonam Trivedi

and Minami Ryuta “in India beginning around 1860, popular troupes in and around Bombay performing in Gujarati, Marathi and Urdu languages melded Shakespeare’s plots and characters so thoroughly into local cultural images that the audiences were often unaware that a “foreign” play was being staged.” (27). Shakespeare’s Urdu adaptations were a far cry from the original plays and were done to simply keep up with competing theatrical companies. Hence *Safed Khoon* (2004) was thrice staged by the title of “King Lear” and was only later published under its present title. Most companies in Bombay and elsewhere were owned by Parsees who were quite successful in the entertainment industry. In fact the growing influence of the middle-class mercantile class in Bombay at that time was swiftly turning a new urban space where indigenous communities like those of Parsees and Gujaratis had come to exert civic as well as commercial control. Kathryn Hansen for that matter shows how theatre in Bombay during the late nineteenth century had become a site where changing relationships between classes and cultures could be observed both in the production and reception of the plays that were performed there. Pointing out the rivalry between the old theatres on Grant Road and the new ones built near Victoria Terminus by the Parsee companies (who firmly wanted to establish themselves in the heart of the city, one that was already marked by Victorian-styled public buildings constructed by the British) she delineates the way the new theatre came to signify an ambivalent space for the people:

Enclosed in the European-style playhouse, the Parsi theatre presented new solutions to the problems of boundaries and visibility. The building’s design symbolised status and order.... Through its internal

compartmentalisation it could separate groups by assigned seating within the pit or orchestra, galleries, and boxes. Yet its location within a densely populated area, criss-crossed by the commerce of multiple groups, also made it available and connected to the world outside. The space of theatre was inscribed at times with different, even opposed, meanings. Sometimes it tended to enclosure and separation, working in the interests of class differentiation. At others it yielded to openness and excess, merging into the liminal space of its surroundings. (45)

Parsee theatre had by then become popular for adapting canonical works of Shakespeare to cater to the public appetite for sensationalism and farcical entertainment. A hybrid Shakespeare emerged out of these adaptations that were culturally suitable to be performed in front of the local spectators. In “Signs Taken for Wonders” Bhabha points out the relationship between the English subject of authority and its Indian object of submission. In 1817 when the various missionaries in India tried to convert the Hindus by giving them the Bible to read the Hindus did accept it readily since it was one of the first printed books they had seen. However the Bible had to be translated into a language understandable by the people and in that process they only picked and chose those elements from it that did not clash with their own religious beliefs. For instance they said that they were ready to agree to all the other customs of Christians but not to the Sacrament, because the Europeans ate cow flesh, and the cows were sacred to them. According to Bhabha “when the natives demand an Indianized Gospel, they are using the powers of hybridity to resist baptism.” (160) Similarly, the hybrid Shakespeare

resisted all efforts at redefining the Indian literary taste. The loose adaptations estranged Shakespeare from the English language and culture and thereby destabilized the authority of the original.

Shakespeare's adaptations in Urdu hence manifested subversive potential by exposing the artificiality of those cultural codes that were used by the British to exercise power on their Indian subjugates. The adaptations never really reaffirmed but reduced and challenged the power of the original. When new outlooks and new forms of knowledge entered the existing dominant discourse to produce adaptations that were completely different, an ambivalent third space was created that neither solely belonged to the British nor the Indians which to use Bhabha's expression terrorized "authority with the ruse of recognition" (157) and unsettled the "mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power". (154) Shakespeare in the vernacular languages tapped into a space that could not be solely claimed by the colonizer and thereby undermined colonial cultural hegemony. The Indian Shakespeare in effect did not reflect the sublimity with which the colonizer had invested the original Shakespeare and hence failed to affect people's consciousness the way it was meant to do by the British.

Before getting into a headlong discussion into the ways Urdu adaptations of Shakespeare functioned in the society we need to first go into the history of Urdu drama and the Parsee theatre that flourished it. Dr. Abdul Aleem links the origin of Urdu drama to the arrival of British merchants in Bombay who staged plays in their houses to entertain themselves. In 1750, the English constructed a make-shift theatre that staged plays for the English gentry till 1835. A decade later a new theatre was built by the

name of Bombay Theatre where initial Urdu plays were staged. Most plays produced at that time were adaptations that paid more attention to the public taste than adherence to the original text. In fact not all who were adapting these plays had read the original text or had command over the English language, an interesting case being Agha Hashar Kashmiri who was adept in Arabic, Urdu and Persian but had little familiarity with English. Since at that time learning English was considered to be a form of betrayal to their own culture, most Muslims made it a point to not educate their children in the language of their colonizer master. Their antipathy towards the adaptation of the English culture is evident from one of the incidents where Agha Hashar Kashmiri after getting an English haircut was dragged to a nearby tailor's shop by his father who had his head shaved. In fact Kashmiri was an active member of Anjuman-e-Hamaiyat-e-Islam and regularly made speeches against the English missionaries in its processions. However, by the time Kashmiri started writing Shakespeare had transformed from a literary force into a commercial one. The Parsee theatre of Bombay in this regard was the first modern theatre and played its part in popularizing Shakespeare among the masses. Its success rested on the way it tapped into the new cosmopolitan, cultural and economic currents. The Parsee theatre had its own methods of engaging with Shakespearean plays as it showed little desire to portray the psychological dilemmas of Shakespearean characters or delve into the existential concerns of the original plays.

Most probably after the passing of such acts as Performances Censorship Act in 1876 and Vernacular Press Act in 1879, playwrights needed avenues that were safe from government policing and hence turned to appropriations. Many vernacular translations

were produced in the 1870's and 1880's that were simply interested in keeping the melodramatic elements and the sensationalism these plays offered. Kashmiri's play *Safed Khoon* played also by the title of *King Lear* and published in 1906 is one such example. In *Safed Khoon* the interpolation of songs and a quite extended comic subplot takes away the more serious aspects of the original tragedy. In fact Parsee theatre since it was in Scandal's words a "direct ancestor to the song-dance-action stereotype of the Hindi cinema" (398) was mostly apolitical and mainly for entertainment purposes. However the evolution of theatre itself in Bombay had by then become an important physical space reflecting the shifting cultural and social structures of the city. Theatre in Bombay at that time was then swiftly changing into a new cultural space and like all transitional times allowed for it to play multiple roles even differing ones and without being aware of it destabilized the cultural codes on which rested the superior and unchallenged position of the British. Speaking of the content of the plays, Shakespeare in Urdu language was completely Indianized. No more was it a tool to instruct the natives into higher morality and civility. More than that it debunked the universality of Shakespeare and heightened cultural differences instead of washing them out or to use Flemming Brahm's words revealed the "ethnocentrically sealed world" (65) in which they were staged. Shakespeare thus was transformed more into a commercial brand which was a far cry from the fetishization of him as an icon of cultural hegemony that the British had initially hoped for.

In his article "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Difference" Bhabha favours the process of hybridization as it allows for a more dialogic as opposed to a more rigid

view of cultures. He says about hybridization that, “such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force,” and thereby dismisses all claims of the western culture’s superiority. (208) When we view their art as susceptible to molding and transformation on our end according to our cultural sensibility and artistic traditions we simultaneously deny any “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures” (208) viewing their cultural authority as not something fixed, unchangeable and sacred but as something malleable that can be shaped by us as we see fit. As Bhabha says, “the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity...even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.” (208) The free mixing of elements of Shakespearean drama with indigenous traditions and customs to create a new hybridized form of theatre on the part of playwrights like Kashmiri, consciously or unconsciously, diminished Shakespeare’s authority as a monolithic superior discourse and showed an implicit refusal to see him as “an amalgam of universal value, morality, truth and rationality.” (Singh and Shahani 128)

Focusing on *Safed Khoon* primarily one can clearly observe that Kashmiri does not try to stay completely true to the original in any way whatsoever. It won’t be an exaggeration to say that this rendering of Shakespeare is nothing but an amalgamation of various bits and pieces inspired from Shakespearean drama to create something new. His version contains a lot of elimination and addition of themes that were in turn present and lacking in Shakespeare’s original. It would not be wrong to say that he took Shakespeare and erased all those elements that would have been incompatible with

the Indian culture or unacceptable for the people. For instance the religious theme that was an imperative though not explicit part of Shakespeare's *King Lear* didn't take the forefront in his play. Christian readings of *King Lear* well into the 1950's were quite a norm in western-centric scholarship. Gauri Viswanathan too brings attention to the ulterior motives behind introducing the Indian people to English literary texts in the following words:

If not in quite the same colorful terms,... missionaries pointed out that though the government claimed it taught no Christianity, a great deal was actually taught, for English education was so replete with Christian references that much more of scriptural teaching was imparted than generally admitted. The Rev. William Keane attempted to persuade officials that Shakespeare, though by no means a good standard, is full of religion; it is full of the common sense principles which none but Christian men can recognize. (80)

The original *King Lear* could be easily read as a Christian allegory where Cordelia was presented as an almost Christ-like figure, someone who embodied attributes of grace, benevolence and forgiveness that hold immense importance in Christian theology. As Jessica Vanden Berg discusses in her article that *King Lear* appeared to be redeemed and saved by her sacrifice towards the end just like Christ became a source of salvation for his people. A lot of emphasis is also paid in the Christian faith on the consequences of sin and how man has to bear some punishment of his sins in this mortal world as well. Lear's death in the original can be seen as a part of that punishment. However

the change of the ending in Kashmiri's play enables the character of Lear (Khaqaan) to escape death going against the Christian idea of sins and their penance. While the British intended to firmly embed and imprint Shakespeare and his Christian values into the minds of the people the colonized here subverted these values through an overwriting of the end and disrupting any attempt to do a philosophic or religious reading of the play. The most major change was the change of the ending from a tragic to a happy one in order to satisfy the Indian audience's desire for happy endings and resolutions. In his version King Lear (Khaqaan) and Cordelia (Zara) never die and the whole festive mood of celebration at the end almost seems to be mimicking the ending of a Shakespearean comedy rather than a tragedy.

Most adaptations produced by Parsee theatres played freely with the original plots of Shakespeare's plays. There was an addition of numerous song sequences, all merry in mood, to satiate the appetite of an Indian audience for song and dance. These interpolations were quite a necessity at times. For instance, beginning the play with a song allowed for the spectators to settle in their seats before they could be introduced to the main action. Also there was an addition of sub-plots which were mostly comedic though rather than providing just comic relief from the more tragic moments of the play they ended up overpowering the serious narrative at times and disrupting the entire mood of the play. All these are quite evident in Kashmiri's adaptation where the more serious scenes are almost farcical in their content reminiscent of Shakespearean comedies like *Merry Wives of Windsor* for instance when Baghlol accidentally ends up beating Pharak thinking he's Gul Khairu hiding instead. *Safed Khoon* hence can be viewed as a farce with songs interpolated with dance and a fully developed comic subplot.

The play however is not just a free mixing of elements of a Shakespearean comedy and tragedy but of several of Shakespeare's plays creating a hodgepodge of sorts. For instance Mahpara's (Goneril's) speech of seeking aid from evil forces to remove all kindness from within her is highly reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's similar speech and Zara's (Cordelia's) speech while begging for mercy from the murderers vaguely reminds one of Portia begging for mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*. Kashmiri also uses several expressions and terms unique to Urdu language ("Yeh kis khait ki mooli hai") in his play that would have only made sense to an audience familiar to them, distancing his version even further from Shakespeare. His characters also appear to lack the proper character development Shakespeare is so renowned for. The characters of the play especially the characters found only in the comic portions of the play are more similar to the stereotypical characters found in old Roman comedies than the ones found in Shakespeare's plays. For instance, the use of a cunning female servant (Gul Dum) who plays tricks on the dim-witted master (Baghlol) and also of lecherous old men (Karak, Pharak) who constantly flirts with the beautiful servant in order to provoke laughter. It is safe then to say that Kashmiri incorporated not only various Shakespearean plays but various theatrical traditions as well. In fact the play was completely Indianized with even the names of the characters in Urdu to efface any European markers of identity, the same being done to the classical and biblical allusions so that any Christian reading of the adaptation would turn out be an exercise in futility. Since any adaptation is also a phenomena involving cultural translatability, many of the similes and metaphors are reconstructed to resonate with the Indian audiences. For instance as Kaleem Raza Khan says the famous line of Lear "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" was translated

as, “Do not come between the drawn arrow and the bow” (152) keeping in mind the fact that the locals might not be familiar with the western mythical fire-breathing reptile.

Kashmiri’s rendition of Shakespeare sets itself apart from post-colonial adaptations of him today as they display a certain degree of political awareness lacking in his work and use Shakespeare more or less as a tool to actively comment upon their own cultural and contemporary issues. For instance the movie *Kaliyattam* made by the South Indian director Jaya raj Rajasekharan Nair. The movie was a remake of Shakespeare’s play *Othello* in which the race issue was replaced by that of caste, an issue that has held great importance in the Hindu religious community. Another example is Indian academic and writer Shishir Kurup’s version of the play *The Merchant of Venice* which replaces the Christian-Jew conflict at the centre of it with a Hindu-Muslim conflict which is more relevant in a South-Asian context and has been an important issue of debate ever since the separation of the two states of India and Pakistan in 1947. Though these texts are important in the way they appropriate Shakespeare for addressing contemporary national, religious and social problems a trajectory tracing the Indianization of Shakespeare since its inception in India can lead one to a more reflexive engagement with the history of Shakespeare in colonial India and thereby address the question of colonialism from a experiential point of view rather than a purely discursive one. As Cartelli puts it:

Only history, not a change in discursive preferences or models, will make colonial disappear from view, though not even history is liable to check or monitor its continued circulation in the political unconscious where it may continue to operate long after the material effects of colonization have ceased to resonate. (14)

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