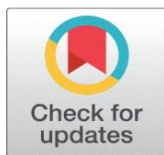
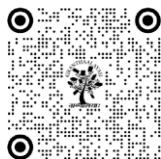


## SHAKESPEARE IN INDIA: A HISTORICAL EXPLORATION

Yogesh Kumar Dubey<sup>1</sup>✉, Bineet Kaur<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Delhi, Delhi, India

<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shyama Prasad Mukherjee College, University of Delhi, Delhi, India



### Corresponding Author

Yogesh Kumar Dubey,  
[yogeshdubey1980@yahoo.com](mailto:yogeshdubey1980@yahoo.com)

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## ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's journey from theatres to classrooms can be interpreted as a colonial strategy. His plays transcended geographical boundaries and impacted audiences beyond England. This paper analyses how Shakespeare's works were used as a tool by the British colonial government to inculcate a sense of British superiority among Indians. Nevertheless, Indian intellectuals embraced Shakespeare's works by incorporating native aesthetics and translating them into regional languages. Shakespeare's universal themes were accessible to the Indian masses and pertinent to Indian socio-political and philosophical contexts. The paper also explores the reception of Shakespeare's plays in India and how the colonial mission influenced the academic pursuits of Indian scholars such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, and R.V. Subbarao. Moreover, adaptations such as Haider and Maqbool provide insights into how Shakespeare's works are still incorporated in the postcolonial era, beyond historical and cultural barriers. This study highlights Shakespeare's influence in India through translations, adaptations, critical contributions, and educational practices that identify his works as symbols of colonial power, which have evolved into manifestations of Indian cultural identity.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, British Superiority, Imperialism, Adaptations, Reception

Shakespeare's works were never confined within a regional framework. If you are unexposed to the West, it is not hard to understand Shakespeare's works. How did his works transcend geographical boundaries? As it is rightly remarked, "no country other than Germany has engaged with Shakespeare for so long and so consistently as India has" (Koyippally 1). Or is this yet another instance of prioritising Western culture over Eastern traditions? What factors contributed to the widespread acclaim of Shakespeare's works throughout India? Shakespeare enjoys greater popularity in other countries than in his native England. "Shakespeare is more popular and better understood in emerging economies such as Brazil, India, China, Mexico, and Turkey than he is in the UK" ("Shakespeare More Popular in China, Mexico, and Turkey Than in the UK").

In order to facilitate the colonisation process, the British used the works of Shakespeare to educate the people of India. "Shakespeare was arguably the most successful component of the British colonial mission" (Menon 418). With colonial India being a cultural fabric, Shakespeare's thread achieves its exciting plot twist, pursued by the British "civilizing mission" on the one side and the Indian elite's aspirations on the other. Ultimately, this canvas of power and culture

games was woven cunningly, and Shakespeare's works were used as a tool to develop a sense of British superiority. Shakespeare became the symbol of that blight, enlightenment, sophistication, and high-grade culture.

This paper explores the impact of Shakespeare beyond England, particularly focusing on the introduction of his works in India. It examines the historical context and cultural integration of Shakespeare's works and how they were intentionally used as tools to support the colonial agenda. Additionally, it discusses the enduring prestige associated with Shakespeare, even in the 21st century. The calculated move of promoting Shakespeare in India aligned seamlessly with the colonial narrative. Britishers recognized the potential of Shakespeare's plays to establish and perpetuate British cultural hegemony. Through the prism of Shakespeare, the imposition of British cultural hegemony stands in for a crucial component of colonial growth and dominance.

Shakespeare's plays were deliberately used as powerful instruments of cultural imperialism by the British colonial government, reinforcing the notion of British cultural superiority and legitimising colonial rule. Shakespearean writings were systematically taught to the colonised populations through the formation of English literary curricula in colonial schools and universities, promoting Shakespeare as the pinnacle of high culture and refinement (Menon 418). By purposefully promoting Shakespeare, the British were able to exert control over the intellectual and cultural environment of the colonies and shape discursive notions about education, culture, and civilization that prioritised Western values and viewpoints.

The early Indian critics and scholars who engaged with Shakespeare's works often admired the bard, reflecting British culture's influence. Figures like R.V. Subbarao, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, and Rabindranath Tagore, among others, were well-versed in English literature and contributed significantly to the study of Shakespeare in India. However, this admiration was not merely passive; it involved a critical engagement with Shakespeare's texts, leading to numerous translations and adaptations in various vernacular languages. The works of Shakespeare were interpreted and often reinterpreted through the lens of Indian philosophical and cultural contexts, drawing parallels between the original texts and the desire to indigenize them for Indian readers.

The effort to bring Shakespeare and his plays closer to the Indian public is not limited to translating the works philologically. However, it is rather an ongoing process of transformation and reinterpretation of the original ideas and images that are crystallised into a story compatible with the emotions and thoughts of their viewers in India. The idea behind this process is the understanding that no matter how universal the meaning of Shakespeare's plays may be, their message can only have an impact and truly come alive if it is expressed in a manner that reflects the cultural perspective and the socioeconomic and political sensitivities of the Indian audience. Shakespeare's plays are not only made accessible to Indian audiences but are also imbued with new interpretations that reflect the complexity and diversity of Indian society.

However, these plays are not merely translated and transplanted into Indian culture but are also altered to fit local cultural traditions. Various techniques were used to "Indianise" Shakespeare. "To make the borrowing more acceptable to a wide variety of audiences, the plays were Indianised to a large extent by adding songs and dances in keeping with the "geetinatyas" (a kind of opera), which were very popular" (Trivedi 45). For example, it incorporates components from *Natyashastra*, an ancient Indian treatise on performing arts. "William Shakespeare's works were Indianised in the early 20th century Bengali stage by incorporating elements from Indian myths and the *Natyashastra*" ("William Shakespeare Infused into Indian Culture"). This picture of adaptation illustrates how artists like Girish Chandra Ghosh made these plays more accessible to Indian audiences by integrating local cultural components into Shakespeare's plays. Unlike the original play, Ghosh's adaptation begins with a *Naandi* (an invocatory verse), which aligns with the Sanskrit tradition of the theatre. It was a beautiful attempt to contribute to the evolution of Indian Shakespearean tradition. Such attempts continue to influence contemporary performances and interpretations of Shakespeare in India even today. For instance, adaptations like *Haider* and *Maqbool* bridge the gap between Shakespeare's Elizabethan England and contemporary India. Be it setting *Romeo and Juliet* against the backdrop of feuding families in rural India, as seen in *Goliyon ki Raasleela Ram-Leela*, or infusing *Hamlet* with elements of Indian philosophy and mythology in *Haider*, these adaptations, including *Omkara* (*Othello*) offer audiences a pathway to engage with timeless themes of love, power, greed, guilt, and redemption in a context that seems intimately familiar.

The Global reach of Shakespeare's works can be analysed through the fact that his plays were introduced to Indian audiences as early as 1775, and a team of actors certainly performed in the same year. This exposure leads to the foundation for Shakespeare's lasting influence in India. A team of travelling actors was invited by the East India Company, along with other local acting companies, which continued to perform Shakespeare's plays in India (Koyippally 3). Reviews of these performances laid the foundation for early Indian Shakespeare criticism, often serving as an introduction to Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1808), which became part of the academic curriculum and was translated into all major Indian languages. Students at various institutions, such as Metropolitan Academy (1852), David Hare Academy (1853), and Oriental Academy (1853, 1854, and 1855), performed scenes and plays as well including *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, and *Henry IV, Part 1* (Koyippally 3).

By the 1920s, approximately 20 Indian universities included Shakespeare in their Honours and Master's programs. Indian colleges had been providing degrees in "English Literature" long before English universities did, and the tradition of Shakespeare scholarship in India predates that of any other region ("Shakespeare in India"). The introduction of English in Indian Education resulted from efforts made by different British Individuals and laws. For example, Charles Grant's *Observation on the State of Society* played a crucial role in introducing English to Indian education; the Charter Act of 1813 was a law passed by the British government that required the British East India Company to educate the natives and also permit missionaries to teach Indians, Macauley's Minute of 1835, which privileged English education over Oriental education, and William Bentick's resolution on 7 March 1835, which made knowing English language and its literature important for people seeking employment. Teaching English facilitated the Imperial needs of the Empire to introduce their 'elite' literature in colonised literary spaces.

Many missionary institutions did not include Shakespeare in their syllabus. However, The Hindu College, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy and David Hare in 1917, championed Shakespeare studies with teachers like Henry Vivian Derozio (Koyippally 4). Initially, it was a private institution. As soon as it began receiving funds from the government, its syllabus was highly influenced by government policies. Teachers like Henry Vivian Derozio contributed significantly to establishing Shakespeare studies in India. In fact, his poem "Romeo and Juliet" is a testament to this contribution. In 1835, Shakespeare was introduced to the curriculum in Bengal and Madras, and early Shakespeare scholars came from these regions where Anglicist education was available. In pre-independent India, Englishmen were Shakespeare scholars who taught in Colleges and Universities. It includes Capt. David Lester Richards (1801-1865), Charles H. Tawney (1837-1922), Rev. J. C. Scrimgeour and James W. Holmes (University of Calcutta), John Mark Hunter (1865-1932), who taught at Coimbatore College and Presidency College, Madras, F. W. Kellett (Madras Christian College), William Miller (1828-1923), and Henry Stone (Madras); Walter Raleigh (Aligarh); R. Scott (Wilson College, Mumbai). A few British scholars were experienced in teaching Indians; they could prepare Indian editions and acquire them for Indian use (Koyippally 5).

Many of these scholars also edited Shakespeare's plays which Srinivasa Varadachari Press, Chennai, published ("Shakespeare in India"). For instance, Mark Hunter edited *Julius Caesar*, F.W. Kellet edited *As You Like It*, R. Scott revisited *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and J. H. Stone worked on *The Merchant of Venice*. William Miller found moral teaching as a purpose of teaching Shakespeare, even before Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904), appeared. His lectures on Shakespeare consisted of 'King Lear and Indian Politics,' 'Macbeth and Ruins of Souls,' 'Othello and the Crash of Character,' and *Hamlet and the Waste of Life*, which were collected in *Shakespeare's Chart of Life* (1905).

The tradition of translations and adaptations in various regional languages marked the reception of Shakespeare in India. Younghusband's essay "Shakespeare in India" should not be skipped when it comes to analysing Shakespeare's reception in India. *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, *Cymbeline*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Romeo and Juliet* are the plays he considered worthy of greatness. He remarked that Indians love Shakespeare for:

... his magic use of words, his gorgeous imagery, his love of nature and of humanity ... He creates heroes, and Indians love the heroic ... He shows delicacy of touch in handling the relations between men and women, and Indians love to keep that relation sacred. He praises home and home affections, and Indians love their homes and believe in the virtue of domestic affections .... (Younghusband, qtd. in Makepeace)

These instances showcased the universal charm of Shakespeare's works across diverse cultural settings. Early translations in India, such as those by Pundit Muktarama Vidyavagis, who translated Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1852, significantly made Shakespeare comprehensible to a broader Indian audience. It was accompanied by a critical preface contextualising Shakespeare's themes within the Indian philosophical framework. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's comparative essay 'Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona' (1873) is another example, where he also compared Kalidasa with Shakespeare and placed Kalidasa on a higher pedestal. It can be recognized as the first comparative analysis of different literatures in Bengali. Moreover, Shakespeare is said to have inspired influential men like Rabindranath Tagore, Aurobindo Ghosh, Jawaharlal Nehru, and Mahatma Gandhi, who decided the fate of India.

One prominent figure among Indian Shakespeare scholars is Subodh Chandra Sengupta (1903-1998), a Padma Bhushan awardee for his contributions to literature, who sought to apply the Indian theory of Rasa-Dhvani to Shakespeare. Subodh Chandra Sengupta, Tarak Nath Sen, Arun Kumar Dasgupta, V.K. Ayyappan Pillai, R. Krishnamurthy, K.D. Sethna, S. Nagarajan, and S. Vishwanathan, Phiroze Dustoor, Sarup Singh, A.N. Kaul, Homai Shroff, Kamal Wood, Jyotsna Singh, R.W. Desai, Sukanta Chaudhary, Vikram Chopra, Rajiva Verma, Shormishtha Panja and Poonam Trivedi, have made significant contributions to Shakespeare scholarship in India. Most of them were associated with the leading universities of the time which helped in shaping the discourse around Shakespeare in India.

Be it artistic experimentation, performance, or the growth of Indian academia, the 20<sup>th</sup> century witnessed dynamic engagements with Shakespeare's works. Some of the prominent contributions of 20<sup>th</sup> century are: R.V. Subbarao's *Othello Unveiled* (1906) and *Hamlet Unveiled* (1909); Israel Gollancz's *The Book of Homage* (1916); Smarajit Dutt's *Shakespeare's Macbeth: An Oriental Study* (1921), *Shakespeare's Othello: An Oriental Study* (1923), *Shakespeare's Hamlet: An Oriental Study* (1928); A.A. Narayanadasa's *Navarasatarangini* (1924) where he compared Shakespeare with Kalidasa; C Narayanan Menon's *Shakespeare Today through Indian Eyes and Shakespeare Criticism: An Essay in Synthesis* (1930); Ranjee G Shahani's *Shakespeare Through Eastern Eyes* (1932); Mohinimohan's Bhattacharya's *Courtesy in Shakespeare* (1940); SC Sengupta's *Shakespearean Comedy* (1950), *The Whirlgig of Time: The Problem of Duration in Shakespeare's Plays* (1961), *Shakespeare's Historical Plays* (1964), *A Shakespeare Manual* (1977), and *Aspects of Shakespearean Tragedy* (1972); S.K. Sen's *Capell and Malone and Modern Critical Bibliography* (1960); H.H. Anniah Gowda's *Shakespeare Turned East* (1976) and *Style and Structure of Shakespeare* (1979); *Hamlet Studies*, the journal also began in 1979 by R.W. Desai which is a significant contribution to Shakespeare studies; S Viswanathan's *The Shakespeare Play as Poem* (1980), and *On Shakespeare's Dramatology* (1993); Ania Loomba's *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (1989) and *Postcolonial Shakespeare* (1998); Rajiva Verma's *Myth, Ritual and Shakespeare* (1990); and Sudhakar Marathe's *TS Eliot's Shakespeare Criticism* (1991); and Sunita Paul's *A Tribute to Shakespeare* (1989).

This critical collaboration also extended to the ethical and philosophical dimensions, with scholars like Samarjeet Dutt analysing the moral implications of plays like *Macbeth* and *Othello* through the lens of Indian religious and ethical philosophies. Dutt's critique, which esteemed Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* higher than Shakespeare's plays on the grounds of ethical standards and formal logic, indicates a broader trend among Indian scholars to interpret Western literary works through Indian perspectives. This establishment enriched the study of Shakespeare in India and created a distinct Indian literary criticism that synthesised or blended Western and Indian intellectual traditions.

Since the colonial period, Indian scholarship in Shakespeare studies has steadily grown and yielded significant works. Specifically, some of the prominent works are *Shakespeare in India* (1987) by S. Nagarajan and S. Viswanathan, *Shakespeare in Indian Language* (1999) by D.A. Shankar, *Indian Response to Shakespeare* by Basavaraj Naikar, *India's Shakespeares: Translation, Interpretation and Performance* (2005) edited by Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz, *Masala Shakespeare* (2019) by Jonathan Gill Harris, *Performing Shakespeare in India* by Shoromishta Panja and Moitra Saraf, and *Shakespeare and the Political: Elizabethan Politics and Asian Exigencies* (2024) by Rita Banerjee and Yilin Chen. Through these works, the presence and impact of Shakespeare can be explored in Indian literature, theatre, cinema, and culture. These works are recognized internationally. Many of these scholars teach in Universities as experts in Shakespeare.

Many higher education institutions and universities have begun offering courses focusing more on communicative skills than literature. Koyippally has argued that the prestige of teaching Shakespeare has always been in the hands of the



senior faculty members in Indian university departments (Koyippally 7). As new and multidisciplinary research areas emerge, research in Shakespeare Studies is often seen as obsolete and antiquated. Maintaining the prestige of Shakespeare has become a challenge for English Departments. Incorporating modern theoretical ideas and exploring global and post-colonial interpretations of Shakespeare can rejuvenate and revive research in Shakespeare studies.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest between them.

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