



Short Review Paper

When Hamlet is our neighbour: reading some of the recent Asian productions of Hamlet

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Abstract

Through this article we are trying to find out the reasons behind the eminent success of the adaptations of William Shakespeare's Hamlet. We would primarily have to remember that Hamlet, as a play, used to be successful even before it came to be known as a Shakespearean tragedy. Primarily it used to be a comedy and Shakespeare himself started the process of bringing him down to reality. Then, with the advent of modern day theatre works, there has been interesting innovations regarding Hamlet and further both the plot as well as the character Hamlet has gone through several dissections. There has been adaptations where Hamlet has been speaking different languages. Then there has been other works where Hamlet, the character, has been played by different artists within the corpus of the same play. Our work looks at finding out the reasons behind these subtle changes and how Hamlet, the play as well as the character, has been used as an instrument to address several issues which were not even present during the time of the Bard. From the Asian perspective, Hamlet, in the modern works, don't even belong to the royal family. Thus, Hamlet, no longer is a play about revenge and insanity. There are other and obviously broader issues which have been looked after in the recent times. Hamlet's protest against evil has been currently used as a source for highlighting global issues and that too quite successfully.

Keywords: Shakespeare, adaptations, Hamlet, Asian, contemporary, plays, films.

Introduction

William Shakespeare's plays have been translated and adapted into every major living language more than any other writer across the world. What is more important is the fact that these translations and adaptations have been quite varied and been equally successful in dealing with variety of issues which are quite different from what the plays actually address. As per Martin Esslin in his famous introduction to Jan Kott's Epoch making book Shakespeare Our Contemporary,

"In the case of Shakespeare this process is particularly clear: Samuel Johnson's Shakespeare is very different indeed from the Shakespeare of Coleridge or Hazlitt, very different from the Shakespeare of Georg Brandes or Harley Granville-Barker, and equally different from the Shakespeare of our own time¹."

Now, the question that comes up from the above discussion is whether the adaptations of Shakespeare into different languages empower those for whom English is a second language or do they reinforce the cultural hegemony or result in him being studied as a contemporary for the German romantics, a spokesperson for the proletarian heroes, must read for the communists and even an icon of historical modernity in East-Asia². Quoting Martin Esslin again,

"Once a language had its fully adequate version of Shakespeare it became able to support the foundations of a nation, its institutions, its political autonomy. Only the Bible rivals Shakespeare in this aspect of archetypal significance¹."

Further Studies regarding the adaptations clarify the fact that the themes on which the tragedies are based on pave way for the modern day directors to use the plots from the perspective of a contemporary background and that too quite successfully. The eminent themes in Hamlet, for example, such as mortality, madness, women, lies and deceit, sex, gender and most importantly political livelihood helps in contradicting the very term contemporary as these are such themes which would remain to be contemporary even for years to come. As such, Hamlet has become one of the most frequently adapted Shakespearean tragedies in the modern day.

Hamlet, the character

Hamlet, as a character might be termed as one of the most critical, if not the most, that Shakespeare has created. His nature provides the proof to this fact. His tendency to ask acute questions is one of the most important aspects of the criticalness of his character. However, we are in a hunt to discover how this critical persona might be considered as a neighbour and there

are areas in the main text itself that suggests that Shakespeare himself starts the process of bringing him down to reality³. One very important aspect amidst the multiple dimensions of Hamlet's character is the fact that his insanity is used as an effective aid of interdicting himself from the contemporary society and completing his act of revenge. Despite this desperate effort of shielding himself using the mask of insanity, which later on turns into reality he still becomes the people's hero. On the contrary, Shakespeare's Hamlet obviously has larger than life characteristics such as being too bright a scholar to be considered as a common man, possessing a philosophy distinctly different from the common mass, his diction and also being a member of the royal family beside many other focal points juxtaposes the fact that Hamlet is somebody who might be considered as our neighbour. However, in the recent adaptations, especially the Asian adaptations of the 21st century things are much more direct and they have come a long way in proving that Hamlet, definitely, is somebody who belongs to our society. The adaptations which are the basics of this discussion have not only celebrated the character of Hamlet as one who is not only a member of the middle class society or even an actor of a low grade theatre group who plays Hamlet, but have also put forward a different perspective of reading Shakespeare's masterpiece and viewing the character from a different angle altogether.

Haider: The most striking thing about Haider⁴, a film directed by Vishal Bhardwaj is the fact that it is based around the happenings of a family which is symbolic of the ones who stayed back in Kashmir even when terrorism was at its peak in the 90s⁵. The adaptation is more about what happened to those families and the never ending oppression of the state machineries towards the common man in Kashmir hampering their day to day lives. The murdered king in the main text has been characterised as a doctor who secretly treats the terrorists in accordance to the vow he has taken as a doctor that everybody is a patient and all ill must be taken care of. Then, his mother is a teacher, his uncle a lawyer and finally Haider, the embodiment of Hamlet in this adaptation, is a student of Aligarh University⁶. Thus, we can easily apprehend that here Hamlet is none but our neighbour who has to be saved from the army check post by Arshee, the characterization of Ophelia in the film, using the power of her press card, a lunatic who addresses the common mass against the oppression of the state machineries through the implementation of the AFSPA, and further the fact that his father went missing before being killed. The representation of the ghost here is through a character who just like his father was captivated and somehow managed to escape. Thus, the setting of the characters amidst the regular happenings in terrorism struck Kashmir of the 90s provide ample proof to the fact that Haider is none but our neighbour addressing long standing national problems alongside his personal issues⁷.

Shamlet: The success of Shamlet⁸ lies in the fact that it has given a completely new direction to Shakespeare palimpsest⁹.

This play by Lee Kuo-Hsiu has moved away from tragedy and paved a completely new path in reading Shakespeare from a satirical point of view. This innovative drama revolves around a theatrical group and their less than average attempt to stage Hamlet. Through this production, different scenes of Hamlet has been presented in the form of rehearsals which are faulty none the less and which frames the basis of this satirical piece. Once more, alienation effect has been an important feature of the play and it is mainly dependent on the fact that the characters have two roles to play at least. Primarily of the character within the play and then as a frame character in Hamlet while they rehearse as well as stage the performance which is a play within the play. Then in case of the dumb show, we can see the same characters as assuming the third roles in the play within the play. Thus, from all the regal aspects of Hamlet, we are brought down to the reality of a second grade theatre company who are so unprofessional that the very name of the play has been misprinted as Shamlet forming the title of this particular piece. Thus, through the effective use of alienation effect, the audience is brought back to reality with silly errors in staging of the performance once they start feeling for the reel life Hamlet. They are given the feeling that these are actually mediocre actors trying to stage Hamlet. Thus, once more, through a different perspective though, Hamlet has been brought down to a day-to-day life being and we are more concerned about the characters of Shamlet rather than those of Hamlet. Here Hamlet is no longer a character addressing personal problems but the theme of insanity has been represented by the performances and the rehearsals of the theatre group and also through use of different languages such as Mandarin, Taiwanese, Cantonese and English. Further, the theme of revenge has been presented through the interpersonal relationship between the different persons belonging to the theatre group that are pretty real life events in the contemporary society.

Kashmakash: Kashmakash, on the contrary is not so critical a piece. Jatin Sarna has not looked forward to make massive changes in the plot. He has rather tried to put the same plot into the contemporary Indian society with minor but necessary changes and the societal problems have automatically popped up¹⁰. Here Hamlet (Hemant) belongs to a middle class army family whose father, an army man, is out serving the country for most of the time. This becomes the deciding factor of the plot as his uncle Kailash takes this opportunity to form a relationship with Gayatri, Hemant's mother. Gradually the roller coaster ride is over as it is nearly time for Hemant's father to retire. His uncle from the point of view of the fact that once the real owner of the property as well as the real husband comes back, he would lose everything that has been a part and parcel of the enjoyment of his life this far. Then once the ghost meets Hemant, it is effectively got rid of for the rest of the play. Hemant wearing a military dress is from then on the representation of the ghost for the rest of the play. It is revenge, which is the only major theme in Sarna's adaptation where Hemant belonging to a middle class Indian family gets totally

disgusted of the relationship between Gayatri and Kailash and gets furiously mad. This is where Hemant starts speaking in metaphors and relates everything to the previous happenings. Thus, through the happenings centred around a middle class family based in Dehra Dun, Uttarakhand, Sarna provides a new dimension to the play which is the representation of an Elizabethan tragedy from the contemporary Indian perspective where not only Hamlet but all other characters are essentially middle class and the happenings are also found in the day to day lives once we look around ourselves¹¹.

Others: There are multiple other adaptations, which are quite interesting to say the least from the perspective of this particular discussion. Adaptations like Hemlat: The Prince of Garanhata¹², Search: Hamlet¹³, Hamlet machine: The Images of Shakespeare in Us¹⁴ have successfully provided us with a lot of pointers which have been immensely important for the development of the theme of the current discourse. Like the very name Hemlat: The Prince of Garanhata adapted and directed by Bratya Basu is proof enough that the entire story is based on the happenings of an interior village in West Bengal, India and the presence of the modern day diction along with effective characterization from the contemporary society with promoters, politicians, STD booth owners and owners of Xerox centres accompanied by the music of today brings Hamlet very close to the grass root level¹⁵. Then Search: Hamlet by Ong Keng Sen is a musical and dramatized work which searches for Hamlet in the modern day life. Finally, we need to focus upon one of the most haphazard and unique adaptations of Hamlet, Hamletmachine: The Images of Shakespeare in Us. The primary factor which differentiates this play from the others is the fact that this is an adaptation of an adaptation. This has been adapted into Bengali by Janardan Ghosh with additions from Shamsur Rehman and Joy Goswami and directed by Parnab Mukherjee from the principal adaptation of Heiner Muller. This adaptation is basically about the character Hamlet and here Hamlet himself conveys that "I am not Hamlet, this is not my text anymore..." Here Hamlet tries to search himself amidst a lot of negativity that has hampered the contemporary society by making Hamlet face a geographical dislocation and when he fails to relate to the milieu around him, he finally becomes a machine¹⁶.

Conclusion

Thus, the study suggests that there is no point in portraying Hamlet with all the elevations that Shakespeare had provided him with in the recent times. Both for the people who have or have not earlier knowledge about both Hamlet as a character and Hamlet the play, it is essential to relate to the story through the characters. Therefore, the characters' connections to the grass root level has been a telling force in the modern day adaptations all round the world. Especially the adaptations of the plays such as Hamlet, which has become a part of the culture of literature studies across the world. For the modern human being who is professional and self-obsessed, the characters need to be ones who are from the neighbourhood and

possess cultures that are found in the day-to-day lives. The success of these adaptations are ample proof of the fact that the only way to make the modern mass aware of the story, especially the people who are not accustomed to them, is by narrating it from the perspective of the contemporary society. On the flipside, Shakespeare's never ending appeal can never be ignored. The themes he had selected for his plays are the most important aspects in this regard, as they are still relevant to these days and are successful in addressing issues beyond all geographical and cultural boundaries.

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