

Tragic Inheritance: Shakespeare's Heroes and the Postcolonial Crisis in Indian Culture and Society

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Abstract:

This paper looks at multiple ways in which Shakespeare's tragic heroes Macbeth, Othello, and Hamlet have been recreated in India to express the psychological and social crisis of post-colonial identity. Under colonial rule, the Shakespearean tragedies were first imposed as symbols of language and culture, and creatively appropriated by Indian writers, translators, and filmmakers who saw a metaphor for the fissures of a society divided between the colonial heritage and indigenous traditions in the tragedy of the protagonists' decline. Based on postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994); the rich scholarship on Indian Shakespeare (Narasimhaiah, 1964; Naikar, 2001; Trivedi & Bartholomeusz, 2005; Panja & Saraf, 2021), the paper charts this evolution from the Parsi theatre adaptations in the 19th century to the Mumbai underworld in *Maqbool* (2003), rural Uttar Pradesh in *Omkara* (2006), and conflict-ridden Kashmir in *Haider* (2014) by the director Vishal Bhardwaj. The tragic inheritance is not a simple aesthetic plunder; it is a form of postcolonial self-examination, in which the aspirations of self-interest, envy, and revenge are caught up with caste, communal, and subcontinental fears. The paper concludes that Shakespeare's tragic form persists in India less as a colonial relic than as a flexible grammar for narrating unresolved postcolonial crisis.

Keywords: Shakespeare, postcolonialism, tragic hero, Indian cinema, cultural hybridity, Vishal Bhardwaj, colonial legacy.

1. Introduction

William Shakespeare occupies a paradoxical place in Indian cultural memory. He arrived in the subcontinent as an instrument of empire, embedded in a curriculum designed to "civilize" colonial subjects through exposure to the moral and aesthetic authority of English letters, yet he has remained, more than seven decades after independence, one of the most frequently translated, performed, and reimagined dramatists in Indian languages and Indian cinema. This persistence is not simply a matter of literary taste; it reflects a deeper, unresolved negotiation between the colonial past and the postcolonial present. Nowhere is this negotiation more visible than in the Indian afterlives of Shakespeare's tragic heroes.

Macbeth, Othello, and Hamlet are figures of internal collapse: men undone by ambition, jealousy, and the impossibility of decisive action. When these figures are transplanted into Indian settings—as they have been most prominently in Vishal Bhardwaj's film trilogy *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider*

(2014)—their private tragedies acquire a second, collective register. The Scottish thane's ambition becomes the venality of the Mumbai underworld; the Moor's alienation becomes the fracture of caste and regional prejudice in rural Uttar Pradesh; the Danish prince's paralysis becomes the impossible mourning of a militarized Kashmir. In each case, the tragic hero's inheritance is doubled: he inherits both a Shakespearean plot and the unresolved inheritance of colonial history.

The choice of tragedy, rather than comedy or the history play, is not incidental to this argument. Shakespeare's tragic heroes are defined by an internal contradiction that outstrips their own understanding: Macbeth cannot reconcile his ambition with his conscience, Othello cannot reconcile his professed love with his cultivated insecurity, and Hamlet cannot reconcile the demand for revenge with his own scruples about action and certainty. These are not merely dramatic devices; they are structures of irresolvable contradiction, and it is precisely this irresolvability that has made the tragic hero so serviceable to Indian writers and filmmakers seeking to represent contradictions in their own society that similarly resist neat resolution.

This paper argues that the endurance of Shakespearean tragedy in Indian culture is best understood through this doubled inheritance. Section two situates Shakespeare's arrival in India within its colonial-pedagogical context and traces the emergence of an explicitly postcolonial critical program among Indian scholars. Section three considers why the tragic hero, specifically, has proved such a durable vehicle for postcolonial narration. Section four turns to close analysis of the Bhardwaj trilogy as the most sustained instance of this phenomenon in contemporary Indian culture. Section five draws on the theoretical vocabulary of hybridity and mimicry developed by Homi Bhabha and extended by scholars of Indian Shakespeare to explain the mechanics of this transformation. The paper concludes that what Indian culture has inherited from Shakespeare's tragedies is not a fixed colonial text but an adaptable structure of crisis—one flexible enough to hold the specific, ongoing traumas of postcolonial Indian society.

2. Shakespeare as Colonial Inheritance

Shakespeare's institutional presence in India predates the establishment of English universities' own systematic study of him. Indian colleges were offering degrees in English literature, with Shakespeare at their center, well before comparable programs existed in England itself, a fact frequently noted in histories of Shakespeare's Indian reception. The introduction of English education in India followed a series of colonial interventions, from Charles Grant's writings on Indian education to the Charter Act of 1813, which obliged the East India Company to support the moral and literary "improvement" of its Indian subjects. Located at the peak of English literary success, Shakespeare came to play a major pedagogic role in the process of instilling the culture of English superiority (Naikar 2001).

But the colonial transmission of Shakespeare was never a straightforward, top-down-to-bottom-up process. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian intellectuals such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore critically and creatively engaged with Shakespeare's works, using them as part of Bengali and other regional literatures, instead of absorbing them. (Naikar, 2001) Fort William College records as early as 1809 describe students producing Bengali translations of Shakespeare's plays as classroom exercises, an early sign that translation and adaptation, rather than passive reception, characterized Shakespeare's Indian career from its outset.

By the mid-twentieth century, a distinctly Indian critical apparatus had formed around Shakespeare. C. D. Narasimhaiah's edited volume *Shakespeare Came to India* (1964) and the collaborative comparative study

Shakespeare Turned East (Wells & Gowda, 1976) sought to read Shakespeare's plays alongside classical Indian dramatic traditions, treating the plays less as foreign artifacts than as texts amenable to indigenous critical frameworks. This comparative, assimilative mode gave way from the 1980s onward to an explicitly postcolonial program, associated with scholars such as Harish Trivedi and Poonam Trivedi, who began to interrogate Shakespeare's Indian reception through the lens of colonial power, gender, caste, and class rather than through comparative aesthetics alone. Naikar's edited volume, *Indian Response to Shakespeare* (2001), and Trivedi and Bartholomeusz's *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance* (2005), are two examples of such a shift, which places Shakespeare's Indian afterlife firmly in the postcolonial critical debate. In *Performing Shakespeare in India* (2021), Panja and Saraf expand this investigation of performance, translation, and visual culture, exploring the process of the construction and contestation of Indianness in Shakespearean adaptation within the theatre, cinema, and print.

This history matters because it establishes that the Indian relationship to Shakespeare has always been triangulated between imposition, appropriation, and critique. The tragic heroes at the center of this paper's analysis are best read against this longer history: they are figures who arrived as agents of colonial cultural authority and who have been progressively repurposed as vehicles through which Indian artists examine the unfinished business of that same colonial history.

It is important, too, not to flatten this history into a simple story of resistance following imposition. The Shakespeare Society of India and comparable institutions maintained an Anglophone, broadly celebratory relationship to Shakespeare well into the twentieth century, treating the plays as shared cultural property rather than as colonial imports to be interrogated. Alongside this Anglophone strand, an increasingly vernacular and regional tradition of Shakespearean engagement developed, encompassing translation, stage adaptation, and eventually cinema, in Bengali, Marathi, Gujarati, Hindi, and other Indian languages. These parallel strands—celebratory and critical, metropolitan and vernacular—continued to coexist throughout the twentieth century, and it is this coexistence, rather than any single, unified national attitude toward Shakespeare, that has shaped the diverse forms his tragic heroes have taken in Indian culture.

3. The Tragic Hero as Postcolonial Trope

Postcolonial theory offers a useful vocabulary for understanding why the tragic hero, in particular, has proved so adaptable to Indian retelling. Homi Bhabha's notion of 'hybridity' signifies that colonial and colonized cultures do not replace each other but enter and intertwine with one another, creating new, uncertain cultural entities that are neither indigenous nor colonial (Bhabha, 1994). Bhabha's related concept of mimicry describes how a colonized subject mimic the forms of the coloniser, but never in an exact copy, but rather in a form that is too much or too little, an ambivalence that may be used against the coloniser. Shakespearean tragedy, transplanted into an Indian setting, functions as precisely this kind of hybrid, ambivalent form: it is recognizably Shakespearean in structure while being unmistakably, disruptively Indian in content.

The tragic hero is a particularly apt vehicle for this hybridity because his defining condition—a fatal flaw or contradiction that he cannot resolve through will or reason alone—maps readily onto the unresolved contradictions of postcolonial identity. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin's edited volume *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* (1998) argues that Shakespeare's plays, when read from former colonies, expose fault lines around race, gender, and power that were latent in the original texts but that become newly legible when the plays are relocated to postcolonial contexts. Othello's anxieties about racial and cultural belonging,

Macbeth's corrosive relationship to legitimate authority, and Hamlet's paralysis before a corrupted political order are not incidental features of these plays; they are structural features that, Loomba and Orkin suggest, make the tragedies unusually receptive to postcolonial reinterpretation.

In the Indian context, this receptivity has a specific shape. Jyotsna Singh's account of the "discoveries" of India in colonial-era writing shows how Indian identity was repeatedly constructed by colonial texts as an object to be interpreted, managed, and corrected (Singh, 1996). The tragic hero, as inherited by Indian writers and filmmakers, becomes a means of reversing this dynamic: rather than India being read and diagnosed by an external, colonial gaze, the postcolonial tragic hero allows Indian artists to diagnose their own society's fractures—of caste, communal identity, political corruption, or regional conflict—using a dramatic form whose global prestige guarantees it a wide and serious hearing.

It is worth pausing on why this reversal specifically requires tragedy rather than some other genre. Comedy, as a form, characteristically moves toward reconciliation: misunderstandings are cleared up, lovers are united, and social order is restored by the final act. History plays, similarly, tend to affirm the legitimacy of an eventual settled order, even when that order emerges from considerable violence. Tragedy alone insists that some ruptures cannot be healed by the close of the narrative, and it is this insistence on irreparability that makes the form so suited to postcolonial subject matter, where the ruptures in question—caste hierarchy, communal mistrust, the militarization of contested territory—are, in reality, unresolved. To adapt Shakespeare's tragic heroes, rather than his comic or historical figures, is therefore to make an implicit claim about the nature of the postcolonial condition itself: that its central conflicts remain live, unresolved, and irreducible to comic reconciliation.

4. Case Studies in Cinematic Adaptation

No body of work illustrates this dynamic more thoroughly than Vishal Bhardwaj's trilogy of Shakespearean tragedies: *Maqbool* (2003), an adaptation of *Macbeth*; *Omkara* (2006), an adaptation of *Othello*; and *Haider* (2014), an adaptation of *Hamlet*. Bhardwaj's films are widely regarded among scholars of Indian cinema as the most sustained and critically successful attempt to indigenize Shakespearean tragedy for a contemporary Indian audience, achieving both popular success and international critical recognition.

4.1. Maqbool and the Tragedy of Ambition

Maqbool relocates *Macbeth* to Bombay's criminal underworld, recasting the Macbeths as Miyan Maqbool, a loyal lieutenant to an aging crime boss, and Nimmi, the boss's mistress, whose ambitions drive Maqbool toward betrayal and murder. Bhardwaj's adaptation has been described as unique among global cinematic adaptations of *Macbeth* for indigenizing the play's setting, plot, language, and generic conventions without diluting the moral complexity of Shakespeare's original text; rather than merely quoting Shakespeare, the film reroutes the mechanics of *Macbeth*'s ambition through the specific textures of Bombay's gangland economy, its codes of loyalty, and its own vernacular traditions of crime melodrama. The film's roots have been traced to the nineteenth-century Parsi theatre tradition, which pioneered the indigenization of Shakespeare for local audiences long before Indian cinema existed as a medium.

4.2. Omkara and the Tragedy of Otherness

Omkara transposes *Othello* to the caste- and politically-inflected badlands of rural Uttar Pradesh, where the Moor's racial otherness is refigured through the Indian idiom of caste and colour prejudice: *Omkara*, the film's protagonist, is marked as of mixed parentage and darker complexion, rendering Shakespeare's

anxieties about racial belonging newly legible within an entirely indigenous social hierarchy. Scholars analyzing Bhardwaj's trilogy have emphasized how each film critiques contemporary Indian politics, with *Omkara* illustrating the entanglement of caste prejudice, gang politics, and patriarchal control over women's sexuality and loyalty. Jealousy is not imported into this *Othello* but an invitation to explore the strength of caste-based suspicion and honor politics in the countryside of northern India.

4.3. Haider and the Tragedy of the Nation

Haider sets *Hamlet* in Kashmir in the middle of the insurgency and counter-insurgency conflicts of the 1990s, turning *Hamlet*'s personal quest for revenge and inaction into a metaphor for a place that is trapped between the militant violence and state repression of the insurgency and the feelings of historical wrongdoing. The music and lyrics of this film have been noted as particularly striking, and its themes of political oppression and resistance have been identified as a central focus in the film, and the latter's place in the canon of adaptation theory, Shakespearean adaptation and postcolonial cinema have been discussed. *Hamlet*'s famous paralysis—his inability to act despite overwhelming cause—becomes, in *Haider*, a means of dramatizing an entire population's suspension between mourning and survival, unable either to resolve its grief or to escape the machinery of ongoing conflict.

It is also worth noting what these adaptations choose not to preserve. Bhardwaj's films dispense with the supernatural apparatus that structures much of Shakespeare's original tragic machinery—the witches of *Macbeth*, the ghost of *Hamlet*'s father—replacing it, in *Maqbool*, with the mystical pronouncements of two corrupt policemen who function as oracular figures within the criminal underworld, and, in *Haider*, with a more oblique, dreamlike register of haunting tied to the disappearance and death of *Haider*'s father. This substitution suggests that what Bhardwaj's trilogy inherits from Shakespeare is not the supernatural furniture of early modern tragedy but its underlying structure of fate, complicity, and inevitable downfall, translated into idioms—corrupt policing, communal suspicion, militarized disappearance—that are immediately legible to a contemporary Indian audience.

Taken together, the three films demonstrate a consistent pattern: each transplants a Shakespearean tragic structure into a specifically Indian site of unresolved postcolonial tension—organized crime and class mobility in *Maqbool*, caste and regional prejudice in *Omkara*, and militarized nationalism in *Haider*. In every case, the tragic hero's downfall functions simultaneously as personal drama and as social diagnosis, allowing Bhardwaj to use the prestige and familiarity of Shakespearean tragedy to address subjects that might otherwise be too politically sensitive, or too painful, for direct treatment in mainstream Indian cinema.

5. Theorizing the Crisis: Hybridity, Mimicry, and Postcolonial Selfhood

The theoretical significance of these adaptations lies in what they reveal about the mechanics of postcolonial cultural production more broadly. Bhabha's notion of hybridity suggests that colonial and postcolonial cultures are never simply layered on top of one another; they interpenetrate to produce genuinely new forms (Bhabha, 1994). Bhardwaj's films are hybrid in precisely this sense: they are unmistakably Shakespearean in their tragic architecture—the ambitious lieutenant, the jealous outsider, the paralyzed avenger—while being unmistakably Indian in the specific social material through which that architecture is realized.

This hybridity produces what might be called a doubled crisis. On one level, each film dramatizes the personal crisis of its tragic protagonist, following the emotional and narrative logic already established by

Shakespeare's text. On another level, each film dramatizes a collective, postcolonial crisis specific to its Indian setting: the moral compromises of organized crime and its relationship to political power in *Maqbool*; the persistence of caste and colour prejudice beneath the surface of modern rural India in *Omkara*; and the unresolved trauma of a militarized borderland in *Haider*. The tragic hero becomes the site where these two levels of crisis intersect, allowing a single narrative to carry both the universalized pathos of Shakespearean tragedy and the historically specific weight of postcolonial Indian experience. This doubled function helps explain why postcolonial critics have found Shakespeare's tragedies especially generative, in contrast to his comedies or histories. Loomba and Orkin's argument that Shakespeare's plays expose latent fault lines around race, gender, and power when read from former colonies applies with particular force to the tragedies, where those fault lines are already the explicit engine of the plot (Loomba & Orkin, 1998). Whereas the comedies typically resolve social disorder through marriage and reconciliation, the tragedies refuse resolution, leaving their fault lines exposed and unhealed at the play's end. It is precisely this refusal of resolution that makes the tragic form so useful to postcolonial Indian filmmakers seeking to represent crises—of caste, of communal violence, of political corruption—that remain, in Indian society, similarly unresolved.

6. Discussion: Tragic Inheritance and Cultural Crisis

Reading the Bhardwaj trilogy alongside the longer history of Shakespeare's Indian reception suggests that "inheritance" in the Indian postcolonial context operates in at least three overlapping senses. First, there is the literal inheritance of Shakespeare's texts and reputation, transmitted through a colonial education system explicitly designed to secure British cultural authority (Naikar, 2001). Second, there is the inheritance of the critical and creative traditions that Indian scholars, translators, and theatre practitioners have built around Shakespeare since the nineteenth century, from early Bengali translations through Narasimhaiah's comparative criticism to the explicitly postcolonial scholarship of Trivedi, Loomba, and their successors. Third, and most significant for this paper's argument, there is the inheritance of the tragic form itself as a flexible grammar for narrating crisis—a grammar that Indian filmmakers and writers have increasingly redirected away from any anxiety about colonial authority and toward the specific, ongoing crises of Indian society itself.

This third sense of inheritance is what distinguishes contemporary adaptations such as Bhardwaj's trilogy from earlier, more comparativist engagements with Shakespeare. Where mid-twentieth-century critics such as Narasimhaiah were primarily concerned with demonstrating Shakespeare's compatibility with Indian aesthetic traditions, Bhardwaj's films use Shakespearean tragedy instrumentally, as a vehicle for social critique that might otherwise struggle to find a mainstream audience. The tragic hero's fall, in this sense, becomes less an object of admiration or emulation than a diagnostic tool: a way of asking, through the safety of an established and internationally prestigious dramatic form, what has gone wrong in postcolonial Indian society and why it remains unresolved.

It is worth noting, too, that this diagnostic use of tragedy is not confined to cinema. Panja and Saraf's *Performing Shakespeare in India* (2021) documents a comparable pattern across theatre, translation, and visual culture, in which Indianness itself becomes a contested category negotiated through Shakespearean performance. The persistence of this pattern across media suggests that the phenomenon examined in this paper is not an idiosyncrasy of Bhardwaj's particular directorial style but a broader feature of how

Shakespearean tragedy functions within contemporary Indian cultural production: as an inherited form that has been substantially repurposed to hold distinctly postcolonial content.

This repurposing also has implications for how we understand the category of "crisis" in postcolonial Indian culture more broadly. The crises dramatized in *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, and *Haider*—criminal violence bound up with political patronage, caste and colour prejudice masked by modern institutions, and the unresolved trauma of militarized conflict—are not presented in these films as residues of a colonial past that independence has simply failed to clear away. Rather, they are presented as ongoing, actively reproduced features of postcolonial Indian society, sustained by structures of power, patronage, and prejudice that long predate and also long outlast British colonial rule. The tragic hero's inheritance, in this sense, is double-edged: it allows these films to draw a connection between colonial history and present injustice without reducing the latter to a simple, passive legacy of the former. The tragic form insists that the protagonist bears some responsibility for his own downfall even as it acknowledges the structural forces working upon him, and it is this combination of individual agency and structural constraint that makes Shakespearean tragedy so well suited to representing crises that are neither purely historical nor purely contemporary, but persistently, uncomfortably both.

7. Conclusion

Shakespeare's tragic heroes arrived in India as instruments of colonial cultural authority, embedded in an education system designed to secure British prestige. More than two centuries later, those same heroes—*Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet*—have been substantially reclaimed, most visibly in Vishal Bhardwaj's cinematic trilogy, as vehicles for examining the specific, unresolved crises of postcolonial Indian society: the moral compromises of organized crime, the persistence of caste and colour prejudice, and the unhealed trauma of a militarized borderland. This paper has argued that this transformation is best understood through the postcolonial concepts of hybridity and mimicry (Bhabha, 1994), which describe how colonial cultural forms are never simply inherited intact but are reworked into new, ambivalent structures that can be turned back against the very authority that first introduced them.

What India has inherited from Shakespeare's tragedies, this analysis suggests, is not a fixed colonial text to be either revered or rejected, but an adaptable structure of crisis: a dramatic grammar flexible enough to hold ambition, jealousy, and paralysis in service of stories that are unmistakably, urgently Indian. The tragic hero's fall, transplanted from Renaissance England to the Mumbai underworld, rural Uttar Pradesh, and militarized Kashmir, becomes a means by which Indian culture continues to examine its own unfinished postcolonial condition. As long as those crises remain unresolved, Shakespeare's tragic heroes are likely to find new Indian inheritors.

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