

The Creative Launcher

Journal URL: <https://www.thecreativelauncher.com/index.php/tcl>

ISSN: 2455-6580

Issue: Vol. 7 & Issue 6, (December, 2022)

Publisher: Perception Publishing

Published on: 30th December, 2022

Peer Reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access: Yes

Journal DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.53032/issn.2455-6580>

©The Creative Launcher (2022). This Open Access article is published under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>, which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. For citation use the DOI. For commercial re-use, please contact editor on: thecreativelauncher@gmail.com

Licensing:  <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



Article History: Abstract and complete research article received on: 29 September 2022 | Revised article received: 14 October 2022 | Accepted: 30 October 2022 | First Published: 30 December 2022

Research Article



Evaluating the Relevance and Significance of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Indian Context

Satyam Kumar

PhD Research Scholar

Department of English

University of Delhi, Delhi

Email Id: satyamratwara@gmail.com

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6666-0181>

 <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2022.7.6.06>

Pages: 57-65

Abstract

Hamlet has always been remembered as Shakespeare's masterpiece creation. The play has enjoyed unmatched popularity among the audience of all ages. Since its first public performance, till date, the play has always remained relevant to the audience, in some way or the other. The history of *Hamlet* in India dates back to the colonial era. The play was first introduced by the troupes which performed it for the English traders. Later on, as a consequence of the colonial education, it became the part of the formal English education and travelled to

the other groups of the society. Shakespeare was a big name even then, and the ever-praised elements of the play greatly influenced the local audience. With the development, translation and movie-adaptation also greatly helped in the wider circulation of the play, and it never went totally out of discussion. The present research paper focuses on some of the major elements which helped in this larger popularity of the play in a non-English-speaking country like India. It will try to analyse the relevance and significance of *Hamlet* to the audience in the Indian context. The focus will also be on the translation and the different kinds of adaptations of the play which have greatly helped in a wider circulation of Shakespeare's creative genius. The paper begins with a general discussion of the play, mostly taking accounts from the English literary critics, and moves on to the analysis of the play in the Indian context.

Keywords: Adaptation, English-education, Hamlet, India, Shakespeare, Translation

Hamlet is undoubtedly one of the most famous plays by William Shakespeare. It is generally regarded as the first play among the so-called four Great Tragedies, the others being *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. According to most critics, the play was first performed in the year 1601. And since its first public performance during the last years of the Elizabethan age, it has always attracted the attention of the critics across the world. This is perhaps the most discussed play in the entire history of English literature. Shakespeare's plot and characters open multiple layers of meanings, and there are countless critical interpretations of the play. Critics have put forth different opinions, based on their respective understanding and critical analysis of the play, but no one has totally discarded it ever. The magic of *Hamlet* still continues, even in the countries other than England. This is evident from the enormous popularity of the play across the world. Shakespeare's plays have always occupied special attention among the authors, the literary critics, and even the general audience, and when it comes to *Hamlet*, the popularity and fascination is even more. A man who has not even read the work or seen the performances of Shakespeare's plays can also easily tell that it is a great tragedy by him. Ben Jonson had perhaps rightly remarked about Shakespeare that "He was not of an age but for all time!"

In his introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of the play, Philip Edwards perhaps rightly opines that "It is probably safe to say that in the world's literature no single work has been so extensively talked about as *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*. There are numerous histories, summaries and analyses of this great body of criticism, or parts of it, and numerous anthologies give selections from it" (Edwards 32). Since the beginning, the play has attracted the attention of the critics. It is evident that almost all reputed critics have given their opinions on the play. In the view of Dr Samuel Johnson, "if the dramas of Shakespeare were to be characterized, each by the particular excellence which distinguishes it from the rest, we must allow to the tragedy of *Hamlet* the praise of variety" (Johnson, *Preface*). Samuel Taylor Coleridge confesses that "I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so." He further says, "I believe the character of Hamlet may be traced to Shakspeare's deep and accurate science in mental philosophy. Indeed, that this character must have some connection with the common

fundamental laws of our nature may be assumed from the fact, that Hamlet has been the darling of every country in which the literature of England has been fostered” (Coleridge 136).

Though most of these thoughts are based on critics’ own respective perceptions of the play, there are certain bodies of criticism which seem authentic and based on the rational arguments. Most of the critics have praised the play for its characterization and the treatment of its themes. For instance, in his Introduction to *Hamlet*, Bernard Lott has observed that “the play contributes to command interest because it is among the very few plays in the world in which character and plot are co-ordinated to almost everyone’s satisfaction” (Lott, *Introduction*). In Philip Edwards’ opinion, “The habit of identifying oneself with Hamlet is ... enshrined in the remark of William Hazlitt when he says that “the speeches and sayings of *Hamlet* are “as real as our own thoughts” ... it is we who are Hamlet” (Edwards 33). With the publication of the *Shakespearean Tragedy (1904)*, A. C. Bradley’s analysis of the play renewed critics’ attention on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in the early years of the twentieth century. In his interpretation of the play, Bradley has mostly focused on the analysis of Hamlet’s character. He attributes Hamlet’s failure to take action to “a state of deep melancholy amounting almost to a disease of the mind”. But he totally discards the view that Hamlet suffered insanity, at any point in the play. In his opinion, “if Hamlet were really mad at any time in the story [he] would cease to be tragic character” (Bradley). He further asserts his view by mentioning that Hamlet never shows the signs of madness when he is alone or with Horatio. His behaviour towards his fellow men is also good most of the times.

Where there is much praise for *Hamlet* in the criticism of the older critics, the most severe criticism comes in the early twentieth century when T. S. Eliot calls the play “an artistic failure”. In Eliot’s opinion, “*Hamlet* the play is the primary problem, and Hamlet the character only secondary”. He rather praises Thomas Kyd who had earlier written an older version of *Hamlet*, and points out that the “The alteration [in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*] is not complete enough ... to be convincing. Furthermore, there are verbal parallels so close to *The Spanish Tragedy* as to leave no doubt that in places Shakespeare was merely revising the text of Kyd.” According to Eliot, “In several ways the play is puzzling, and disquieting as is none of the others. Of all the plays it is the longest and is possibly the one on which Shakespeare spent most pains; and yet he has left in it superfluous and inconsistent scenes which even hasty revision should have noticed.” In his opinion, “probably more people have thought *Hamlet* a work of art because they found it interesting, than have found it interesting because it is a work of art. It is the “Mona Lisa” of literature” (Eliot, *Hamlet and His Problems*).

Apart from all the praises and criticisms, the play has always enjoyed enormous popularity among the general audience. As a play *Hamlet* operates on various levels and can be analysed from different perspectives. In the play there are many life-like events and they all can be dealt with separately. In this way, the play offers something for all. People can choose what they like most. It can be analysed from the perspectives of the father-son relationship, the mother-son relationship, the brother-sister relationship, the relationship between two lovers, and many others, at the same time. There are incidents and events related to both the day-to-

day family life, and the large-scale state-affairs. Thus, from the personal relationships to the political and public appearances, everything finds place in the play.

There has been an entire history of watching, reading and interpreting *Hamlet* and other Shakespearean plays in India, like anywhere else in the world. This history dates back to the colonial era which played a very significant role behind the huge popularity of Shakespeare's plays in India. The spread of English language across the world made it easier. English literature came to India as a consequence of the teaching of English. The early interests were in the classics, and the newly English-educated Indians found such literary masterpieces much fascinating to them. "During the early phases of English education in India, the college and university students were initiated into English letters by British scholars who had themselves sat at the feet of English teachers, and were eager to prove worthy of the profession of literature" (Iyengar 6). This kind of education developed a healthy environment for the spread of English drama in India. Indian students of that time were quite fascinated by the plays of Shakespeare. As early as 1829, the performance of the passages and scenes from *Hamlet* began at Hindu College, Calcutta. Even before that the play was performed for the entertainment of the European traders in Calcutta. "Mimicry of Shakespearean works in colonial Calcutta also aimed at the "civilizing mission" of the British rulers. Visiting troupes from overseas like the Bandmann's Company staged *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Richard III* in 1882. Later, in 1909, another troupe with well-known actors like Matherson Lang and Charles Vane performed in Calcutta" (Mohanty 33). As S. K. Bhattacharyya notes in his essay, *Shakespeare and Bengali Theatre*, an adaptation of *Hamlet*, by Nagendra Chaudhury, entitled, *Hariraja*, was produced in the Classic Theatre, Calcutta, on 21st June 1897 (Bhattacharyya 30). At this time there were frequent productions of many other Shakespearean plays in Bengal. This was small a beginning which later on much helped in the spread of the plays in the regional Indian languages.

In this way, the English education supplied Shakespeare's plays to the other parts of the country, and gradually they became popular with the general public of that time. As Jyotsna Singh points out in her essay, *Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India*, "the notion of a universal Shakespeare "loved" by all Indians is clearly a colonial legacy-one that continues to influence postcolonial academic discourse in India (Singh 450). Acquaintance with Shakespeare's plays secured the literary sensibility of the elite Indians in the eyes of the colonial masters. This was also one of the reasons why most of the newly English educated people wanted to devour all the works of Shakespeare, along with the other classics of English literature. This gave them a new cultural identity and secured their place in the elite social circle of the Britishers. Thus, "Shakespeare became a "fashion" among the elite Bengalis at the time" (Singh 450). Specially, a multi-layered play like *Hamlet* appealed to a larger section of the society. The philosophical nature of the play directed the men to think about the basic question of "To be, or not to be" (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*). The new audience, very much like Hamlet himself, found themselves entangled in the questions of action and inaction in life, and with its other exquisite qualities, the play became much popular among the Indian literature-lovers. This was a little beginning, but with the development in the English education-system, and English as a language in India, this small beginning grew into a

countrywide fascinating experience. Like anywhere else in the world, especially in English colonies, English literature became an integral part of the Post-independent Indian education system, and thus, a play like *Hamlet* never went outside of the interest. Not many years after the Independence, in 1964, noted Sanskrit scholar, V. Raghavan, observed that:

“The most prominent among those who influenced the English educated Sanskritists was Shakespeare whose plays all of them studied in their colleges. They not only came to hold Shakespeare as the model or high watermark of dramatic excellence, but even when they studied Kalidasa and other Sanskrit dramatists, they applied to their appreciation of Sanskrit drama the conceptions and values which they had learnt in their study of Shakespearean criticism. This was so not only among the vast ranks of Sanskrit teachers in colleges. Even among the celebrated writers and thinkers such as Tagore and Aurobindo, the evaluation of Sanskrit drama or of Kalidasa in particular always brought in comparisons with Shakespeare and his plays. Among the English-teaching Indian professors themselves, there were those who had a traditional background and knew some Sanskrit and who applied their knowledge and equipment to a review of Sanskrit poetry and drama” (Raghavan 109).

Translation of Shakespeare’s plays into the Indian languages much helped in the spread of *Hamlet* among the local readers. As the performance was not easily and accurately available, the play was mostly read in most cases. Thus, the translated version of the play reached even to the distant readers. A celebrated writer like Shakespeare had a great reputation among the readers, and when the play became available in the regional languages, people became able to read and enjoy themselves what they had just heard about hitherto. These translations were first started into Bengali, and later on the writers from the other languages adapted Shakespeare’s plays into their own languages. For example, “The first Sanskrit renderings of Shakespeare’s plays may be said to date from the closing decades of the last [19th] century” (Raghavan 110). Similarly, “The first Hindi rendering of a Shakespeare play was that of *The Merchant of Venice* adapted by Bharatendu Harishchandra, the father of modern Hindi drama, ... in 1880 by the name of *Durlabh Bandhu*” (Awasthi 53). Later on, in 1963, Amrit Rai, Munshi Premchand’s son, took up the translation of *Hamlet* into Hindi (Srilata). In the same way, Nana Jog translated William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* into Marathi in 1957 (Mathur).

With the development of literary adaptations, and later on the movie adaptations, it became easier to pass on the play to a much larger audience. It helped in bringing the play among the non-academic sections of the society, as now everyone was able to connect to the different adaptations of the play. A little later, India saw the movie adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays. As the original performance mostly remained available to just a limited number of people, due to various reasons, including the lack of the background knowledge and interest, mainly, these movie adaptations opened up new spaces, and made the plays available for a larger audience. It was even interesting to watch these innovative adaptations as they provided something new for the common audience. An early effort in India in this field was Sohrab Modi’s recreation of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in his 1935 film, *Khoon ka Khoon* (Srilata). In more recent times, Vishal Bhardwaj’s Hindi language Bollywood movie *Haider* (2014) has

emerged as a befitting new step in this long tradition of adapting the play for a film. It goes further than most adaptations in delving into Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to make a bolder, and more political statement than attempted before. Similarly, *Karmayogi* is a recent Malayalam film based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* which relocates the story within the power dynamics of a Shiv-Yogi bhakti cult of Kerala to find regional roots for Hamlet's aversion to taking up arms for revenge. Thus, with these serious efforts in the field of adaptations, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* has been contextualised in the local culture, and regional milieu. People find these adaptations appealing, as they find themselves more familiar with the recreated context and setting. At the same time, they also find an opportunity to know more about the original play.

Thus, the translations and the adaptations of *Hamlet* have taken the play to the far-reaching audience in India. Though perhaps it is not possible for everyone to connect with the play with the equal level of understanding, one certainly finds in it some interesting element of one's own choice. In this way, the play offers something interesting for all, based on the respective choices of the people who read or watch it. In this way, in most cases, "Shakespeare continues to exist in Indian society and cultural life in two distinct hierarchical levels: the Shakespeare in the English language and the Shakespeare in its Indian versions. The first Shakespeare exists exclusively for the English educated elite and the other Shakespeare that exists in the form of translations and adaptations though often resisted and criticised, has penetrated into the different strata of Indian society and eventually encompassed a much wider circle" (Mohanty 30). The growth of English literature in India has resulted in a greater demand of the literary works. Particularly, the newly educated people always find a work like *Hamlet* valuable for themselves. Specially the translated and the adapted versions of the play present the incidents and events in a better and more comprehensive way which help people in easily connecting to the themes and action of the play. The recent translations have levelled the barriers which earlier used to be present in the forms of the archaic language and the complex use of metaphors and other poetic devices. Moreover, it is comparatively easier to convey the present-day contemporary realities through the adapted versions of the play, so the adaptations have become more familiar and entertaining for the local audience. In this way, the life of the original text has also increased, as people have become accustomed to see the traditional storyline with the new additions which have greatly contributed in a better understanding of the original play by Shakespeare. Moreover, one such adaptation always influences and encourages others, and thus, the original text continuously travels from the one context to the other. In fact, this entire process of adaptation has evolved in this way since the beginning. As a result, on the one hand, it has immensely contributed in firmly establishing the towering reputation of Shakespeare across the world, and on the other, has much helped in the artistic apprehensions of the people from the non-English-speaking countries who have become able to taste the creative genius of Shakespeare's works, including *Hamlet*.

A work like *Hamlet* is so engaging that one cannot restrain oneself from its charm. It has certain incidents and events which make it relevant even in the modern times. For example, the main incidents of the play revolve around the family dispute which has always been a universal issue. Greed for the crown - power and wealth in the modern sense - is another theme

which makes it engaging. At the same time, there is the mention of larger state-affairs which very much resembles to the present-day politics and power-management. *Hamlet* presents these things vividly. Even in most of the adapted versions of the play, these basic elements are retained with a little change. Thus, some of the typical Shakespearean features always remain there to fascinate the newer audience. There are universal lessons which instruct people and make them aware of the worldly realities. This makes the play relevant for the contemporary age. E.M.W. Tillyard has perhaps rightly observed in his work, *Shakespeare's Problem Plays*, that "*Hamlet* is one of the most medieval as well as one of the most acutely modern of Shakespeare's plays" (Tillyard). In the words of K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar,

Shakespeare is one of the great universalists. The withdrawal of Britain from India in 1947 as a political force hasn't seriously affected the study of Shakespeare (and of English literature) in our colleges and universities. The 'Shakespeare industry' is a flourishing concern - even in India. The teacher, the annotator, the examiner, the printer, the publisher, the bookseller, the translator, the adapter, the producer - Shakespeare keeps them all busy, and helps them to thrive. (Iyengar 1).

He has perhaps rightly pointed out that "Apart from U. K. and U. S. A., in no other country perhaps is Shakespeare so dearly loved or so widely (if not always wisely) read as in India. Half-understanding or little understanding him, students still seem to prefer a Shakespeare play to a carefully fabricated 'functional' prose text within the prescribed vocabulary range" (Iyengar 5-6). This observation was made just a few years after the Independence, but the situation remained almost the same in the following decades as well. Shakespeare's plays continued to be taught in the Indian English-classrooms with much zeal. Though with the development in the new fields of study in literature, some more literary perspectives have emerged to engage the attention of the students and the academics, a multi-layered play like *Hamlet* has never gone out of the critical attention. Still, most of the English departments in India teach the play in their post graduate curriculum. Similarly, the non-academic involvement with the play remained active in the form of movie adaptations, and other visual mediums.

According to Iyengar, "Shakespeare is important because he talks to us here and now, and reading his plays we have, as it were, an appointment with him" (Iyengar 6). This seems true in many ways. Even at the present time, no one can completely deny the powerful impact of Shakespeare on the literature of the world. He has created the models which the others have followed after him. In the case of India as well, Shakespeare's influence has been crucial. There have been authors, scholars, translators and movie-directors who have experienced the merits of Shakespeare's plays and have come up with various kinds of adapted versions of his original creations. Specially, with the retention of English as an official language after the Independence, the importance of English literature in India increased to a great extent. The same happened with the works of Shakespeare. They never left the prestigious status they had enjoyed since their introduction in the country. With the introduction of the new techniques of adaptations, these plays travelled across the country, from the academics to the general public. Thus, the popularity of Shakespeare never got affected, rather, it increased with the time and

the new innovative efforts in the field of adaptations. It is evident from the fact that many of the adapted versions of the plays, including that of *Hamlet*, have enjoyed enormous popularity among the readers and the audience. Due to the lasting effect, it has had in the past, and its all-time universal appeal, the younger generations have received the play with the same degree of warmth and affection. As a consequence, *Hamlet* continues to enjoy the same kind of reputation among the literary creations which Shakespeare enjoys among the literature creators.

References

- Awasthi, Suresh. "Shakespeare in Hindi." *Indian Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1964, pp. 51–62. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23329679>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2022.
- Bhardwaj, Vishal. *Haider* (2014). YouTube Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FSFLiWNOxsg>.
- Bhattacharyya, S. K. "Shakespeare and Bengali Theatre." *Indian Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1964, pp. 27–40. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23329677>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2022.
- Bloom, Harold. *Bloom's Guides: William Shakespeare's Hamlet*. Infobase Publishing, 2004.
- Bradley, A. C. *Shakespearean Tragedy*. The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 2005.
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *Coleridge's Lectures on Shakespeare and Other Poets and Dramatists*. Everyman's Library, 1914.
- Edwards, Philip. "Introduction." *Hamlet*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Eliot, T. S. "Hamlet and His Problems." Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69399/hamlet>.
- Hazlitt, William. "Hamlet." *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Iyengar, K. R. Srinivasa. "Shakespeare in India." *Indian Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1964, pp. 1-11. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23329674>. Accessed 22 Nov. 2022.
- Johnson, Samuel. "Hamlet." *Preface to Shakespeare*. The Project Gutenberg E-Book, 2004.
- Jonson, Ben. "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare." Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44466/to-the-memory-of-my-beloved-the-author-mr-william-shakespeare>.
- Lott, Bernard. "Introduction." *Hamlet*. New Swan Shakespeare Advanced Series. Longman, 1968, <https://www.google.com/amp/s/docplayer.net/amp/56063593-New-swan-shakespeare-advanced-series-bernard-lott-m-a-ph-d-general-editor-hamlet.html>.
- Mathur, Barkha. "Marathi adaptation of Hamlet, a treat to watch." *The Times of India*, Nov 17, 2018, https://www.google.com/amp/s/m.timesofindia.com/city/nagpur/marathi-adaptation-of-hamlet-a-treat-to-watch/amp_articles/66659873.cms.
- Mohanty, Sangeeta. *The Indian Response to Hamlet: Shakespeare's Reception in India and a Study of Hamlet in Sanskrit Poetics*. PhD Thesis, University of Basel, 2010.
- Prakash, V. K. *Karmayogi (2012)*. Malayalam Movie Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.
- Raffel, Burton. "Introduction." *Hamlet*. Yale University Press, 2003.
- Raghavan, V. "Shakespeare in Sanskrit." *Indian Literature*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1964, pp. 109–14. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23329685>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2022.

- Shakespeare, William. *Four Tragedies: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, Othello, The Moor of Venice, King Lear, Macbeth*. Bantam Classic, 2005.
- Singh, Jyotsna. "Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 41, no. 4, 1989, pp. 445–58. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3208007>. Accessed 23 Nov. 2022.
- Srilata, K. "Shakespeare in Indian languages." *The Hindu*, March 2, 2008, <https://anuvad.wordpress.com/2008/04/03/shakespear-in-indian-languages/>.
- Tillyard, E.M.W. *Shakespeare's History Plays*. Penguin Books Ltd., 1962.
- Wilson, John Dover. *Hamlet*. Cambridge University Press, 2009.