

A Midsummer Night's Dream on Indian Stages

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Two adaptations of Shakespeare's comedy *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have been discussed in this paper. The first is Habib Tanvir's adaptation, *Kamdev Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna*. The second one is the adaptation by Raghubir Sahay, a prominent Hindi scholar. His adaptation is titled *Bagro Basant Hai*. It was staged by the final-year students of the National School of Drama in November 1997. The Mohan Maharshi directed the stage production. Both adaptations have some similarities as well as some differences, which we have discussed in this paper. An earlier adaptation of the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is done by Utpal Dutta, in 1964, with the title *Chaitali Rater Shopno*, which was in Bengali. One striking similarity that runs across the titles is the mention of the season or the month. No title mentions the word 'summer', which is mentioned in the original text. The adaptation by Tanvir and Sahay contains the word 'Basant', i.e., spring season. The adaptation by Utpal Dutta has the name of the Hindi month 'Chaitra', which falls during the break of the spring season. If we take a look at the titles of these three adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, we find that all three writers plot their adaptations in the spring season. Due to geographical and climatic differences, we cannot celebrate the summer in the way it is celebrated in the West. The paper contains the views of Habib Tanvir, too, on the specific mention of the spring season in his adaptation. The change in the name of the titles refers to a clear sign that the adaptations are done keeping in mind Indian culture and audience.

Referring to Shormistha Panja's essay on the NSD's production directed by Mohan Maharshi, we get enough details about the production. The essay is compiled in *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation, and Performance* edited by Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz with the title '*An Indian (Mid)Summer: Bagro Basant Hai*'. The essay tells us that Sahay had kept the original names as they are in his adaptation, but Maharshi has changed the names of the characters to Indian names for the stage

production. For example, Oberon and Titania were replaced with Inder and Indrani. Attendants of Titania were replaced with the Indian flora and fauna, hence got names like Juhi, Sarsi, and Phuli. Helena and Hermia were replaced with Champa and Chameli. Theseus and Hippolyta were replaced with Sambal Singh and Sadaphuli. Quince and his drama team also got another name followed by the title according to their respective professions.

The adaptation borrows elements from classical Sanskrit drama as well as from the Indian folk theatre. It reflects the characteristics of Rasa-Bhava, which are an essential part of Sanskrit Drama and Indian aesthetics. The Rasas are used with indicators like sidelong glances and the play of eyes and eyebrows. Sensors and indicators of the *Shringar Rasa* create the *Hasya Rasa* in the scene of Indrani and Paindyia Singh, who play the character of Bottom. Panja argues in her essay that this different effect of *Shringar Rasa* as 'Indrani's flirtatious, sidelong glances at Paindyia Singh in the ass's head were sensors for *Shringar/Rati* (eroticism), but the effect they created was one of *hasya* (mirth) in the audience' (Trivedi 188). She has highlighted the characteristics of Sanskrit drama, whose purpose is to edify and entertain, besides providing a model for human behavior that has little to do with conventional morality. This is apparent in Indrani's infatuation with Paindyia Singh. The use of music and dance forms like Chhau, Oddisi, and Bharanatyam in the play further establishes a connection between *Bagro Basant Hai* and Sanskrit drama. Sharon Lowen, the choreographer of the play, focused on the representations of lotus, deer, swan, etc., with the help of hand movements in the above-mentioned dance forms to differentiate the immortal characters of the play from mortal characters.

We can agree with Panja's observation about the play's connection with Sanskrit drama. The use of *Rasa*, classical music, and dance forms representing hand movements are what carries this production towards Sanskrit drama. Raghubir Sahay's adaptation was

transformed to an entire different form, during the production, with the usage of these elements. But, the production does not limit itself to Sanskrit drama. Apart from showing chief characteristics of Sanskrit drama the production goes to the folk theatre as well. Painsya Singh, who is playing the character of Bottom in *Bagro Basant Hai* and his drama team connect this play with the folk form. Maharshi names the drama company “Dilshad Nautanki Company”. Painsya Singh and his friends use the Harmonium and Dholak, which are the key instruments of the Nautanki, the folk performance art of Uttar Pradesh. Besides using the instruments, the female characters like Joru, the character of Thisbe, are played by the male character Paltu Singh. Though the character of Thisbe is played by Flute in the original play, it is a characteristic of Nautanki where the female characters are played by male actors. Thus, the production shows the characteristics of two different drama forms in a single play.

Habib Tanvir’s adaptation opens in the court of Theseus, Athens. He has not changed the names of the characters except the attendants of Titania. Her attendants’ names are replaced with their nearest Hindi translation. He has omitted the entire episode of Helena, Hermia, Demetrius, and Lysander in his adaptation. Theseus and Hippolyta’s dialogues are in the Hindustani dialect. Urdu words are dominant in their dialogues. The dialogues of Oberon and Titania are of the same kind. In contrast to the language used by the nobility, Quince and his drama group use the dialect of Bastar (Tanvir, 2001). The use of the Chhattisgarh language makes a clear distinction between the two classes. It is also mentioned in the original play that the actors who are performing the play have a practiced accent. Quince even has been portrayed as having less knowledge of where to take pauses in delivering the dialogues (Shakespeare 109 - 110).

The linguistic difference that is mentioned in the original text becomes clearer in Tanvir’s adaptation. However, linguistic hybridity is a feature of Habib Tanvir. We find instances of this linguistic hybridity in other of his plays as well. Tanvir has translated a play based on the Bhopal Gas tragedy, titled *Zahreeli Hawa*, in which Mr. Anderson uses English sentences in his dialogues, Izzat uses some regional dialects, and other characters speak in Hindi (Tanvir, 2010). This hybridity in his language is appreciated by various

critics. In ‘Upside-Down Midas: Habib Tanvir at 80’, Sudhanva Deshpande writes,

‘Habib Tanvir, then, is a citizen of the world, borrowing, reading, and soaking up influences indiscriminately, but he has become, through a long, hard, creative struggle, a resident of Chhattisgarh. Chhattisgarh is the prism that refracts Tanvir’s creative expression. His touch is Mida’s—reversed: whatever he touches loses its sheen, becomes rough, and turns to Chhattisgarhi’ (Deshpande 76).

Quince and Bottom speak in the Chhattisgarhi dialect in the play. But there is no such imposition of the words they are using. They have sufficient words in the English language, which they often use in the play. For example, Tanvir does not replace the words like a rehearsal, part, property, list, drop, etc. The commonality of these words during a play may be the reason why Tanvir did not replace them in the adaptation. Panja, in her article ‘Intercultural theatre and Shakespeare productions in Asia’, comments on this particular characteristic of Tanvir, ‘Tanvir’s art abolishes the hierarchies between folk and classic forms. At no point was his trained consciousness valorised over that of the unschooled tribal performers’ (Liu 508). Following Panja’s view on this particular characteristic of Tanvir, we find that Tanvir actually equalizes the schooled artists and unschooled artists.

Bottom mentions Ravana, Kansa, Shankar, Majnu, Ranjaha, and Babbar Sher in his dialogues and Flute mentions Laila, Heer, and Rana Pratap. Quince also mentions Ranjaha, Farhad, and Punnu while describing the characteristics of Piramus. The use of Indian mythological characters, Gods, legends, and idioms by these actors reverberates throughout the play, projecting a microcosmic India. The play then no longer appears that it is plotted in Athens. The artists also mention *Shringar Rasa* and *Veer Rasa*. We have already discussed the importance and impact of *Rasas* in Sanskrit Drama. Thus, the play merges any possible distinction between the West and the Orient.

Initially the play was performed on open stage in 1993. Later, it was performed in 2001 at the ‘Shakespeare on Indian Stage festival in Kasargode, Kerala’. The recording of this play is available on the website ‘Sahkespeare.mit.edu’³ which is referred to here. The video helps us to understand Tanvir’s creativity

closely. The play opens with the music of the snake charmer's flute. The music continues for more than three minutes. The snake charmer reappears during Puck's entry. India had been considered a land of snake charmers for a long time. Beginning a play, originally written in English and plotted in Athens, with a snake charmer has a lot to interpret. It can be associated with Tanvir's characteristics of combining folk theatre and politics, which Panja and other critics have acknowledged in their respective articles. To begin, a play with a long presence of a snake charmer can be considered as a response to those who used to call 'India a land of snake charmers.' It can be considered as giving enough authority to a snake charmer to begin a play originally written by Shakespeare.

During the play Quince asks his co-actors to get the script photocopied (MIT 11:00). The word 'photocopy' creates humour during the performance. But the use of English words with Chhattisgarhi is more than that for humour. Panja's observation in 'Intercultural theatre and Shakespeare productions in Asia' regarding the usage of English words helps us to understand that it is a hint to the omnipresence of the globalization.

The musicians are present on the stage. Tabla, Dholak, and Harmonium are used for the music and songs. Tanvir's rhymed part of the adaptation with music gives it the form of Nautanki. Some tribal instruments are also used in the play apart from those on stage. Theseus and Hippolyta are in royal dresses in the first scene. In contrast to the first scene, in the last scene, they are all in Indian traditional dresses like Kurta and Sari. Quince and his friends are in common dresses the Indian working class used to wear. All the other characters of the play are dressed in Indian costumes. Female characters are wearing jewellery and bindis also. Oberon's crown is made of the wings of Peacock. The production is fully music-packed. The music produced from traditional Indian instruments seems to be an eternal part of the play. The effect of the music leaves no space to consider the play as having any sort of connection with the West.

Tanveer considers the adaptation of the play to be a creative process. In his interview published in The Economic Times in 1994, he talks about adaptation according to Indian culture. He has also mentioned his views about the title. His views are quoted by Professor Jyotsana Singh in her article 'Traveling

Shakespeares in India: The Genesis of Habib Tanvir's A Midsummer Night's Dream'

"A Radical transformation must of necessity take place more particularly in Shakespeare, even when you try to remain as close to the original as possible. This is because a particular language is always encushioned in a particular culture. Metres differ from language to language; the music and rhythm inherent in metres differ accordingly. Likewise, genders, flora, fauna, foods, fruit, apparel, climate -- all have cultural distinctiveness. All these problems -- if these are problems -- abound in Shakespeare's, especially in A Midsummer Night's Dream.

The title itself resists a literal translation -- midsummer day and midsummer night being specific occasions for festivity for Britain and elsewhere in the West. Mid summer itself, particularly in tropical countries, does not exactly stand for convivial occasions. Even the meaning of autumn differs in East and West. Spring (Vasant) alone can perhaps be considered to conducive to feelings of love all over the world. Hence, the change in the play's title'" (Singh).

The hybridity in *Kamdev Ka Apna Basant Ritu Ka Sapna* is not limited to the linguistic level only. There is hybridity in the form of the play, also. The adaption is a fusion of *Rabindra Nritya* and Nautanki form. *Bagro Basant Hai*, the adaptation by Maharshi, as we have discussed earlier, reflects the characteristics of Sanskrit drama and Folk theatre. These adaptations depart from the Western dramaturgical standard and go on to embrace Indian art forms on all possible levels. The appreciation and success of these adaptations show how important hybridity is during the adaptations. The next thing that becomes very important is the adaptation of the plays in some definite indigenous art form and the possibility of its success. It is pertinent to us to know what factors are associated with a play that lead it to adapt into some folk forms.

B.V. Karanth's views on *Barnam Vana*, based on *Macbeth*, are very important here. *Barnam Vana* is in *Yakshagana* form, which is a form of folk theatre in Karnataka. Karantha focuses on the similarities between *Yakshagana* and the text of *Macbeth*, which leads its adaptation in *Yakshagana* style. He finds that

Macbeth has the same 'larger than life quality' which is there in *Yakshagana*. He also finds the Vira Rasa, Krodh Rasa, and Bhayanak Rasa in *Macbeth*. He considers the battle scenes in *Macbeth* closer to *Yakshagana*. He says that these characteristics make it suitable for *Macbeth* to adapt it in this form (Liu 507). If we compare Karanth's views with adaptations of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* we find that original text by Shakespeare has some features which are suitable to adapt it to folk forms like Nautanki, or Sanskrit Drama, or in *Rabindranritya*. For example, performance of a drama by the working class people paves the way to adapt the text in Nautanki form.

Thus we see that the adaptation of the play in various Indian art forms can be considered as a result of the creativity of the director. Their insight about the play is the thing that presents the play as it is written for Indian context only. On one hand, where *Bagro Basant Hai* reflects the characteristics of the Sanskrit theatre, on the other hand, *Kamdev Ka Apna Vasant Ritu Ka Sapna* had been designed and performed in such a way that one can hardly trace its origin from Shakespeare. The acceptance and appreciation of these adaptations by the audience, as well as critics, certify the success of these adaptations. We can take indications from these productions that purity in the art should not be the only parameter to adapt or judge an artistic piece. A play written on a Western background not only interacts with Indian art forms but also travels from one art form to another within the performance.

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