

Introduction To Ovid Through Shakespeare- A Bridge Between Classical European Literature And 21st Century Indian Readers

Sanskriti Pujari

Research Scholar, Gangadhar Meher University

Abstract—This paper aims at presenting the works of William Shakespeare as a medium through which most of the Indian readers of the present century get acquainted with the Latin poet Ovid. It starts with a comprehensive analysis of the influence of Ovid on Shakespeare. The various Ovidian allusions used in the plays of the Bard, the direct and indirect references of the poet, as well as his works, made in the latter's creations, specifically his plays, and the skillful amalgamation of the aforementioned features in the already intricate plots are discussed in detail. Ovidian hues are highlighted in three of the most popular plays of Shakespeare in India, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Merchant of Venice. Ovid and his Metamorphoses are an integral part of most of Shakespeare's works and hold unparalleled importance in the same.

The paper further attempts to analyse the popularity of Shakespeare in the world of literature, specifically for the Indian readers (including but not limited to the students of literature). India has a distinct and rich classical literature of its own and in some ways or the other, Indian readers are mostly unaware, and therefore stay deprived, of the vibrancy of specifically classical Latin Literature and in a more general sense classical European Literature. Apart from the colonial connotations, Shakespeare has had a deep influence on the minds of Indian readers. A trial to establish a proposition that Willaim Shakespeare is the perfect medium to make a young, modern audience of a developing country aware of Ovid has been made. A brief description of how this can be, and is presently being, achieved by taking the approach of comparative mythology into consideration, is also included in the paper.

The proposition that Shakespeare can inspire an entire generation of readers to explore the beauty and grandeur of Ovidian works is pondered upon. The idea that, in the recent terminology, Shakespearean plays represent Ovid through beautifully crafted 'trailers' which further drive a person to traverse through the magnanimous 'movie' of the grandiloquent works of Ovid is also analysed. The paper concludes by establishing the relevance of the argument that Shakespeare is indeed the link that connects

the 21st-century Indian readers to classical European Literature, and precisely to Ovid.

Index Terms—Aesthetics, Comparative Mythology, Classical Literature, Decolonisation, Deconstruction, Elizabethan plays, Indian Theatre, Ovid, Ovidian Allusions, Popular Culture, Shakespeare.

I. INTRODUCTION

Publius Ovidius Naso, better known as Ovid, is a Latin poet, regarded as one of the best of his times. While talking about ancient classical European literature, it is difficult not to mention Ovid and his magnum opus-Metamorphoses. The work is an interesting representation of western mythology in all its grandeur and grace. Ovid's masterpiece has influenced some of the greatest writers of the West, to name a few, Geoffrey Chaucer, John Milton, Edmund Spencer, and William Shakespeare. Out of the aforementioned names, the vivid Ovidian influence on Shakespearean works is difficult to ignore. The stories and characters of Ovid's Metamorphoses have been immortalized by the works of William Shakespeare. Ovid is a very renowned poet and in certain artistic aspects surpasses the abilities of Shakespeare; nevertheless, in terms of popularity, Shakespeare exceeds the power of Ovid to reach the modern Indian audience.

It is important to note that there is a lack of proper Indian exposure to Ovid, specifically of those people who are not students of literature and more importantly the general mass. The already vibrant and extensive mythology of India somewhat overshadows, and on other occasions doesn't feel the need for an analysis of another culture's mythical beliefs and narratives. The notable studies in the field of comparative mythology (the study of the similar

themes and characteristics between two or more mythologies) over the past century have brought to light the importance of exploring Indo-European mythology, analysing the similarities between the two, and celebrating the differences whatsoever (Littleton). In 2016, Indian mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik published a book named- *Olympus: An Indian Retelling of Greek Myths*. The book explores the striking similarities between Indian and Greek mythology and tries to find a connection between the two. Through this book, Pattanaik explains that mythology helps us to understand the difference between what is ethical and what is not. It helps us to understand the enigma that is life and accept the inevitability of death and is therefore important for the philosophical upliftment of a person. Although he emphasizes the importance of local mythology, one cannot help but notice the similarities between Indian and Western mythological stories. According to Pattanaik, exposure to different mythologies of the world would help to bring in different values that our society might lack and thereby further diversify our culture more effectively (Pattanaik).

The crucial issue to ponder upon is how Ovid can be introduced to the 21st century Indian readers in a way that they do not feel like it is being imposed upon them and can grasp it as easily and interestingly as possible. For this, people can turn to Shakespeare, who has been accepted and lauded by Indians, the one whose works have traversed even the lesser-known roads of Indian culture and appealed Indian aesthetics, the one we see in movies, and last but not the least, the one we read in books. Shakespeare can act as a bridge between the classical European literature and Western mythology, and the 21st-century Indian art lovers, specifically the bibliophiles, the readers. An effective way to do so, the challenges that one may face, the patches that need to be covered, and the rough edges that need to be polished should be contemplated upon. II. PROCEDURE FOR PAPER SUBMISSION

II. INFLUENCE OF SHAKESPEARE ON INDIAN READERS

The preponderant role of Shakespeare in Literature is unquestionable. His influence on Indian literature, theatre, movies, and overall popular culture is paramount. The first recorded Shakespearean production in India is that of *Othello*, which was

staged in Calcutta Theatre (in present-day Kolkata) on the occasion of Christmas in 1780 (Putatunda). Ever since there has been a constant trial to accept Shakespeare's plays in all their originality and also to add flavours to the plays to make them more suitable to the Indian palates. His plays have been translated and performed not only in Hindi but also in Tamil, Parsi, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi, and many other vernacular languages. The translation of *The Merchant of Venice* by Bhartendu Harishchandra, Durlabh Bandhu (Rare Friend, 1880), was one of the earliest translations of Shakespeare in Hindi (Thakur). The Bengali plays of Utpal Dutt aimed at decolonizing and localising Shakespearean plays for the Indian audience by introducing Shakespeare into the local folk-theatre known as Jatra (García-Periágo).

The movies of Indian filmmaker Vishal Bharadwaj are perfect examples of how Indians are not only influenced by Shakespeare but also are fearlessly deconstructing and domesticating his works to produce art that appeals to Indian aesthetics (Trivedi, *Why Shakespeare is ... Indian*). *Maqbool* (*Macbeth*), *Haider* (*Hamlet*), and *Omkara* (*Othello*) considered as masterpieces of Indian Cinema, are inspired by the exceptional tragedies of Shakespeare. The 1963 Bengali film *Bhranti Bilas*, based on Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's play of the same name, was inspired by Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, which later inspired cult movies in Hindi Cinema like *Do Dooni Chaar* (1968) and *Angoor* (1982) (Trivedi and Chakravarti, *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: "Local Habitations"*). The Hindi movie *10ml Love* (2012) by Sharat Katariya is also a rather indianised version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Harris, *The Bard in Bollywood*). Several movies have also been inspired by *Romeo and Juliet*, e.g., Akhter Hussain's *Romeo and Juliet* (1947), which is a direct adaptation, and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's *Goliyon Ki Raasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) (Harris and Gill, *Masala Shakespeare: How a Firangi Writer Became Indian*).

The works of Shakespeare, specifically his plays, are not only studied at the university level but are also part of the curriculum of some of the major boards of higher secondary education. The Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) offers an excerpt from *Julius Caesar* as a part of their English syllabus (Nair). Even the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE) board offers the plays of

Shakespeare in both higher and higher secondary levels (CISCE). This not only gives young minds exposure to the plays of Shakespeare but also encourages them to do a detailed analysis of his plays. For instance, a student criticizing a Shakespearean play at the school level would go through the minute details and allusions used in the play those are mostly overlooked by other people and thereby, at a very early age, would be able to appreciate the works of the Bard. Therefore, it can be deduced that Indian minds are introduced to Shakespeare not only via his plays but also through education both inside the classroom and outside.

III. INFLUENCE OF OVID ON SHAKESPEARE

In the Elizabethan times, classical works were widely available not only in their original languages but also in French and English translations. As far as Ovid is concerned, William Golding's translation of the *Metamorphoses* (1567) was very popular in those times. Shakespeare, having a working knowledge of both Greek and Latin, would not only have been influenced by the aforementioned translated text but also would have interpreted and translated from the original work of Ovid (Blakeney). Apart from his educational background, the cultural influence of Elizabethan England, fascinated by Roman classics, on Shakespeare cannot be ignored (Barroll). Many consider Ovid to be Shakespeare's 'favourite poet' as the presence of Ovid in Shakespeare's plays cannot be overlooked. Ovid can not only be seen in Shakespeare's comedies, but also his tragedies and his narrative poetry (Bate). Out of all the classical writers, Ovid happens to be the only writer whose name has a direct reference in one of Shakespeare's play, *Love's Labour Lost* (4.2.123) (Shakespeare, *Love's Labour Lost*). The Bard refers to Ovid's works not only for descriptive purposes but tries to beautifully align the allusions in a manner that they run parallel to the desired portion of the play (Blakeney). Comparisons are drawn between plotlines, characters, and most importantly the theme of fate. Shakespeare quite artistically intertwines the fate of his characters with that of Ovid's in a pretty fluid and seamless manner.

In the play, *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia, Titus's daughter, was raped by Demetrius and Chiron, and the two cut off hands and her tongue so that she cannot

reveal their crime. Nevertheless, Lavinia tries to tell her father about the crime by tossing the pages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* exactly where the story of the rape of Philomela by Tereus is narrated, and she succeeds in doing so.

“PUER: Grandsire, 'tis Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.
My mother gave it me.

MARCUS: For love of her that's gone, perhaps she
culled it from among the rest.

TITUS: Soft, so busily she turns the leaves.
Help her. What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus' treason and his rape,
And rape, I fear, was root of thy annoy.”

(4.1.42-49)

(Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*)

Apart from this direct reference, there are several indirect references as well. Shakespeare not only imbibed the stories of the classical writer in his plays but he did it with an expectation that the Elizabethan audience would understand those popular references, and evidently, they did.

IV. OVIDIAN ALLUSIONS IN SHAKESPEAREAN PLAYS

This is a general analysis of the Ovidian hue in three of Shakespeare's plays- a comedy, a tragedy, and a tragicomedy. The following plays have been chosen based on general popularity, reach, and acceptance among a modern Indian audience, and also the vibrant use of allusions in them.

The most obvious and direct reference of Ovid has been made in the comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the Ovidian story of Pyramus and Thisbe (Book 4, *Metamorphoses*) is staged in the wedding of Theseus and Hippolyta, applying the “play within the play” technique (Gill). The theme of transformation, that is the main theme of *Metamorphoses*, lingers over the entire play as the characters transform into various creatures, for example, the transformation of Bottom's head into that of an “ass”. Another instance is when Helena overwhelmed with the rejection of her love for Demetrius follows the latter into the forest saying:

“HELENA: The wildest hath not such a heart as you.
Run when you will, the story shall be changed:
Apollo flies and Daphne holds the chase;”

(2.1.236-238)

(Shakespeare, A Midsummer Night's Dream)

Another popular and celebrated Shakespearean play in India is Romeo and Juliet. The play incorporates the mythical stories of Phaeton, Narcissus and Echo, and Pyramus and Thisbe from Book 2, Book 3, and Book 4 of Metamorphoses, respectively, in it. These allusions mostly act as elements that foreshadow an impending tragedy. The allusion of Pyramus and Thisbe is quite obvious, two star-crossed lovers, separated by the hostility between their families and ultimately united in death. The accelerated decline of the fate of Romeo and Juliet is foreshadowed by the allusion of Phaeton. Phaeton, the son of sun God Phoebus, while driving his father's chariot, is driven by lack of self-restraint and the power of his father, loses control of the chariot to a point that Zeus has to strike him with a thunderbolt ultimately leading to his death. A similar catastrophic end of the two lovers is foreshadowed in Juliet's speech in Act 3 of the play.

“JULIET: Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
Towards Phoebus' lodging; such a waggoner
As Phaeton would whip you to the west.”

(3.2.1-3)

(Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet)

After the iconic first meeting of the two lovers on Juliet's balcony, Juliet alludes to the story of Narcissus and Echo where she points at her speechlessness, and the fact that she can only call Romeo's name again and again, like Echo who can only repeat the last part of everything that is spoken to her.

“JULIET: Else would I tear the cave where Echo lies,
and make her airy tongue more hoarse than [mine]”

(2.2.161-62)

(Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet)

In The Merchant of Venice, a tragicomedy, there are no less than 28 allusions, most detailed and generally related to some of the most important advancements in the play (Root). The denouement act of the play starts with a romantic skirmish between Lorenzo and Jessica. In this segment, the stories of Pyramus and Thisbe (although not as explicitly as it has been done in A Midsummer Night's Dream), Dido and Aeneas (The pilgrimage of Aeneas), and Medea and Jason are

narrated in the form of anecdotes that vividly portray the influence of Ovid's works on Shakespeare.

“JESSICA: In such a night Did Thisby fearfully
o'ertrip the dew, and saw the lion's shadow ere himself,
and ran dismay'd away

LORENZO: In such a night Stood Dido with a willow
in her hand Upon the wild sea-banks, and waft her love
to come again to Carthage.

JESSICA: In such a night Medea gather'd the
enchanted herbs That did renew old Aeson.”

(5.1.6-15)

(Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice)

V. FINDING A LINK

An analysis of how Shakespeare was influenced by Ovid and subsequently, Indian readers by Shakespeare, shows that William Shakespeare and his works can be the missing link between Indians and Ovid and subsequently a passage to Western Classical Literature. The Bard's work will not only inform young minds about the works of Ovid but also inspire them to go through more of the same. A student at the high school level when introduced to the works of Shakespeare would be introduced to Ovid as well when they do a deep study and analysis of the text which is required of them. The entertaining and interesting anecdotes from Metamorphoses would encourage people to read more and more of these stories.

Indians would find the mythological stories of Ovid, not only relatable but also amusing. The stimulus can be a text that one has read in one's class, a movie adapted from one of Shakespeare's plays, or theatrical production. This psychological stimulus would eventually lead to curiosity in the minds of the audience or the reader. The 21st-century humans are known for their trait to go to the root of everything that they find intriguing. In this digital age, it wouldn't be difficult for them to find out the original stories of Metamorphoses and go through them. It wouldn't be long before the bridge of Shakespeare would be strengthened by this inquisitiveness, and Indians would finally be able to cross the humongous gap between the Indians and classical European Literature.

VI. CONCLUSION

The indianisation and decolonisation of Shakespeare have helped Indians not only to understand and appreciate Elizabethan ideals, culture, and values but also to connect the east to the west. The belief that western ideologies do more harm than they do good has long been debunked. Indians have not only accepted Shakespeare's works but also adapted his works to appeal to Indian aesthetics. Even in the education sector, slowly and steadily, the works of Shakespeare are being introduced in places where they weren't before. Plays such as Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice, Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream, and not to forget the trilogy of tragedies- Othello, Hamlet, and Macbeth are quite popular among the Indian audience.

The influence of Ovid on Shakespeare is undeniable. The works of Shakespeare that have been analysed in this paper, namely- A Midsummer Night's Dream, Romeo and Juliet, and The Merchant of Venice, are not only well-received by Indians but are also filled with Ovidian allusions. While analyzing these three plays, which belong to three different genres, one cannot help but notice and appreciate these allusions. A mere reference of an Ovidian story acts as a 'trailer' to the highly elaborate 'movie' that is Metamorphoses. An Indian living in the 21st century is suddenly taken through the Elizabethan England to the West that thrived due to its value for knowledge, arts, and ideals before the Common Era started. The person starts comparing the mythology that he knows of to that of the West, which is a comparative mythological analysis and begins to recognize and inculcate the values of that culture. It won't be long before Indians start reading other classical works of the Europeans, having been inspired by Ovid, and thereby be introduced to the beauty of Western Classical Literature. Brick by brick, stone by stone, through a span of centuries together, the bridge between classical European Literature and the 21st-century Indian readers has been building. Every brick and stone of the bridge hails the name of William Shakespeare.

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