

Transcreating the Bard: A Case Study of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* in Hindi Celluloid

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Abstract

William Shakespeare's drama has been the staple for many Indian filmmakers who have 'transcreated' his plays to suit the Indian regional context and still managed to retain the plot frame, essence and themes of this brilliant Bard. This article will begin with understanding and defining the term 'transcreation', a popular term used in inter-semiotic translation studies and then argue to show how the varied adaptations of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet in Hindi celluloid are not mere adaptations but rather transcreations by creative minds. The article will offer a case study of a few transcreations of William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet in Hindi cinema. Bobby (1973), Ek Duuje Ke Liye (1981), Sanam Teri Kasam (1982), Qayamat se Qayamat Tak (1988), Saudagar (1991), Ishaqzaade (2010), and the most recent Sanjay Leela Bansali's Goliyon Ki Rasleela' Ram-Leela (2013). These films will be re-looked from the lens of 'transcreation' to assess their adaptability to the Indian region-specific milieu. These Hindi films made over the last five decades will be seen as creative renditions which harmoniously blend music, characters, tragic elements, camera techniques, local metaphors, and rustic locales and culturally amalgamate these myriad elements while still managing to balance the essence of Shakespeare's source play to appeal to the target audience. The paper will present a literature review of various articles previously published on the topic. It will further discuss how the play allows itself to be transcreated in the regional target space it occupies. The transition from stage to screen will be critiqued to see if justice has been done to the original text. The paper will appreciate

the efforts and creativity of filmmakers who 'transcreate' to make the sixteenth-century tragedy of 'star-crossed lovers', relevant and loved by Hindi film audiences, from the seventies till present times.

Keywords: Transcreation, Shakespeare, Hindi Cinema, Renditions.

William Shakespeare's plays have positioned themselves as sounding boards for the global players of celluloid. By far, the sixteenth-century Bard's literary oeuvre has ignited interest among filmmakers, playwrights, Youtubers and other artists, particularly in this digital age. William Shakespeare's plays continue to provide fodder and inspiration to several writers and creative artists due to their timeless themes ranging from love, jealousy, ambition, greed and hate among others. When Shakespeare's writing (1564-1616) is adapted into celluloid, it becomes a rave and transports the audience to a cinematic utopia (Mohsin and Taskeen 308). Mindful of this global cinematization with regional re-location, Shakespeare and his plays veritably turn to be focal inspirational lighthouses. Among the tragedies, he wrote till 1608, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, are the most popular and awe-inspiring to artists and filmmakers alike. His tragicomedies or romantic comedies are equally captivating and have been rendered into celluloid to educate and entertain the audience of contemporary times.

This article will look at *Romeo and Juliet*, one of the splendid tragedies written by the Bard to fathom how several Hindi filmmakers in India have rendered it to tickle the taste buds of the film-hungry Hindi audiences in the last few decades. The argument drawn here will be to see how it is not a mere adaptation of Shakespeare's play that is done by filmmakers, but creative handling through an inter-semiotic translation, better known as 'transcreation'.

Understanding Transcreation

The term ‘transcreation’ is coined by combining two ideas, ‘translation’ and ‘creation’. It was Purushottam Lal who in his work *Transcreation: Two Essays* (1972) used the term in an academic context and explicated it through his extensive writings. It was only after this, that the *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary* sanctified its usage in its fifth edition in 1996.

In Roman Jakobson’s triadic division of translation in *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* (1959), he articulates three ways of interpreting verbal signs: “it may be translated into other signs of the same language (intralingual translation), into another language (interlingual translation), or into another, a nonverbal system of signs (inter-semiotic translation)” (231). Transcreation is another word for an inter-semiotic translation i.e., a translation from one set of signs into another. It is the creative inter-/intra-lingual re-interpretation of texts in order to suit the characteristics of an intended audience (Benetello 29). For instance, from a play in English to a film in Hindi. It adapts and renders a text from one language and cultural context into another in such a complete and wholesome manner that the audience finds it extremely delectable and appealing in the target culture and language. This creative process manages to balance the various elements like style, tone, images and emotions from the source text while rendering it into the target text. Moreover, special attention is laid on blending and salvaging the cultural characteristics of the target audience.

The best example is the transcreation of Shakespearean plays as Hindi films which are rendered very skilfully keeping in mind the sensitive Indian Hindi film audience. Vishal Bharadwaj’s trilogy of *Maqbool* (2003) *Omkara* (2006) and *Haider* (2014) are outstanding transcreations which render the

three tragedies of Shakespeare viz. *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet* in a creative manner to fuse Indian culture, characters, language, music, milieu and ethos to make it favourable and enjoyable to the Indian film audience and suit its cultural context.

Defining Transcreation

There are several definitions of the term transcreation and it is pertinent that we use a theoretical frame to assist the present research article to enable a pertinent definition of translation. Millon and Olvera-Lobo's "Towards a Definition of Transcreation: A Systematic Literature Review" looks at defining the term transcreation from three perspectives: literary translation, communication and advertising.

As an enterprise of literary translation, transcreation can be used to make sure that the target text is the same as the source text in every aspect: the message it conveys, style, the images and emotions it evokes and its cultural background. One definition says that transcreation is taking a text in one language and recreating it in another. Yet another definition is: "Transcreation is an intra-/interlingual re-interpretation of the original work suited to the readers/audience of the target language which requires the translator to come up with new conceptual, linguistic and cultural constructs to make up for the lack of, or inadequacy of existing ones." This gives more importance to cultural relevance and fitness of purpose (Millon and Lobo 11).

In the realm of communication, transcreation is seen "as the process of planning and delivering interventions to reduce health disparities so that they resonate with the targeted community while achieving intended health outcomes" (ibid.). In the context of marketing and advertising, transcreation is usually concerned "with the adaptation of advertising material

into several different languages or for different markets.” (ibid.).

Thus, we see that the term transcreation is multi-pronged and has several contextual references. This article will be using the translation and adaptation linked definition of the term transcreation in order to make it relevant and meaningful.

Literature Review

A review of literature is undertaken at two levels:

Firstly, to get a strong base for the understanding of the theoretic frame of ‘transcreation’. Secondly, to survey the previous works that have been written on adaptations of William Shakespeare in Hindi celluloid. Only the relevant writings are used to substantiate the idea of ‘transcreation’ as a form of creative adaption as manifested in the films under study.

The most profound understanding of ‘transcreation’ is provided by Sujit Mukherjee in his essay “Transcreating Translation: An Indian Mode”. This is an address presented to the Asian literature in Translation Conference at Birmingham in May 1997. The first part of this essay discusses the term ‘transcreation’ as averred by P. Lal. In the latter half, Mukherjee stresses the translation of Indian languages into English. The former part of the essay is significant as Mukherjee quotes P. Lal saying how literal translation is easy, but what is challenging is the transportation of ethos, context and culture from one textual form into another. He illustrates this by showing the process of translating Sanskrit plays into other languages and art forms. When the translator departs from the literal manner of translation and employs creative strategies to make it naturalized in the target text in another culture, context and system of signs, transcreation ensues. Mukherjee agrees with Pal who states that translators often

consciously or unconsciously render their version to suit the social and moral climate of the age and times they live in. By doing so they bring in their own creative outpourings. This is the fundamental crux of the process of transcreation, wherein lies the creativity of the transcreator (Mukherjee 87).

Mukherjee's essay lays a strong foundation for the understanding of transcreation in the late nineties. He showed how the need for transcreation was necessitated particularly for the translation of languages like Sanskrit and Persian. The target audience prefers contemporariness. That was the reason why transcreations, and not literal translations were mandated.

In *Translation or Transcreation?* (2018), Spinzi-Rizzo and Zummo make a coherent attempt to demarcate the difference between the two terms in discourses, texts and visuals. The first essay "Translatere or Transcreare: In Theory and in Practice, and by Whom?" by David Katan, explores the evolution of "turns" in the discipline of translation studies and claims for a "transcreational turn" focussing on the need to understand the extent of mediation in translation and to value rather than criticize change through mediation and adaptation. In fact, this entire edited volume is a rich resource to assert a need to relook at lingua-cultural transfer in order to recognise the presence of creativity in every gesture of translation, as well as the agency of translation in every creative act. In another essay "Translation at the crossroads: Time for the transcreational turn?" published in *Perspectives* (2016), Katan highlights the significance of 'creativity' in the process of translational activity.

The book *Translation and Adaptation in Theatre and Film*, edited by Katja Krebs, provides an interesting understanding of transcreation, with particular reference to the adaptation of theatre to films. Krebs claims that contemporary adaptation studies have gone 'beyond discussions of faithfulness and

fidelity (3). Western discourse views adaptation as a 'transcreation'--- a creative re-rendering of a text from one cultural context to another. This is opposed to translation which focuses on sameness and fidelity to the source text. This book with three sections and ten essays offers a comprehensive understanding of the rich synergies between translation and adaptation studies. It explores the complexities of adaptation as a creative translational enterprise in a global culture where the local needs to be re-routed and re-rooted too. As its synopsis ascertains... "By exploring and investigating interdisciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives and approaches, this volume investigates the impact such occurrences of rewriting have on the constructions and experiences of cultures while at the same time developing a rigorous methodological framework which will form the basis of future scholarship on performance and film, translation and adaptation" (back page).

Mar Diaz-Millon and Maria Dolores Olvera-Lobo's "Towards a Definition of Transcreation: A Systematic Literature Review" is an eclectic deliberation on the understanding of modern-day transcreations. Eschewing the conventional idea of 'transcreation', this article refers to several critical perspectives on the topic to deepen our understanding of the term. The authors focus on three elements of transcreation viz. linguistic translation, cultural adaptation and creative re-interpretation. The authors here are not looking at transcreation only from the perspective of translation of content from one cultural context into another. Besides literature, they also explore other domains such as marketing, advertising, websites, and mobile applications among others. Thus, transcreation seen from a pragmatic lens gathers a broader momentum to make its application and reach much beyond the realm of literary texts to give it a catholic and global reach.

Numerous research articles on Shakespearean adaptations in Hindi celluloid are endemic via print and online sources. Among the most relevant ones is Mukesh Yadav's "Domesticating Shakespeare: A Study of Indian Adaptations of Shakespeare in Popular Culture", which engages with the idea of culturally amalgamating and domesticating the European model of Shakespeare onto the Hindi silver screen. By building a cultural and cinematic bridge, the author ascertains the role played by filmmakers like Vishal Bharadwaj (known for the famed Shakespearean trilogy in Bollywood) in bringing the Bard to a culturally familiar Indian space. The idea of 'domestication' is quite akin to the term transcreation. It negotiates the blurring of cultural boundaries in the process of adapting the Shakespearean play into Hindi celluloid. These adaptations are near-to transcreations as they merely use the Bard's plays as inspiration and render them as culturally close to the target audience as possible.

Sayed W. Mohsin and Shaista Takseen in their article "Cinematizing Shakespeare: A Study of Shakespearean Presence in Indian Cinema", look at the impact of 'glocal-cinematization' of Shakespearean plays on Indian cinema. They discuss how cinematic techniques have indigenized Shakespeare to make it enjoyable to the Indian audience. This phenomenon needs to be studied with an optimistic perspective; they assert. Likewise, Asma Qureshi's article, "A Study of Shakespearean Contribution to Indian Cinema", re-looks at the Bard's influence on Hindi celluloid and the creative adaptations of several Shakespearean plays. An interesting perspective is discussed in Mark Thornton Burnett's article "Shakespeare and Keraliyatha: *Romeo and Juliet*, Adaptation, and South Indian Cinemas", where the author shows how the regional South Indian cinema regionalises Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to retain the

Keraliyatha or Kerala-ness (the flavours of Malayalam culture) and make it enjoyable to the target audience.

Thus, the literature review is undertaken to provide broad and scholarly perspectives on the topic under study.

Transcreating Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* into Hindi Celluloid: A Discussion

While foregrounding the definition of transcreation of Million-Lobo as a re-interpretation of the original work suited to the readers/audience of the target language while negotiating and balancing the source and target cultures, this discussion will present a case study of *Romeo and Juliet* and the various creative ways it is rendered by Hindi filmmakers in the last few decades. Do the Indian filmmakers do justice to rendering the Bard's play on the Hindi silver screen? Does the audience find it culturally at-home and relevant in terms of values, locales, songs, music and cast? How do Hindi film-makers domesticate this Shakespearean classic to make it relevant to the audience?

Interestingly, *Bobby* (1973) gives a brilliant twist to the Bard's *Romeo and Juliet* by presenting the plot of 'the star-crossed lovers' from the Italian context, as the conflict between the rich and the poor. In this film starring Rishi Kapoor (Raj) the rich businessman's son and the debutante Dimple Kapadia (Bobby Braganza, a poor fisherman's daughter), are pitted against the backdrop of cultural and economic disparities. Montagues and Capulets are given a new twist in this Nath versus Braganza romance which is interspersed with music, song, passionate dialogue delivery and sprawling locales ranging from Kashmir to Goa. It is interesting to note how the lady from a Roman Catholic background, Bobby Braganza is represented as the heroine who struggles with her impoverished background and bravely manages to salvage her dignity as a woman, despite odds. A rich Hindu businessman's

son and a poor Catholic fisherman's daughter reach the brink of suicide and jump off a waterfall. The creative tweak is its end which is far from tragic. They are saved with timely intervention to make the end appealing to Hindi cinema lovers. Herein comes the element of re-interpretation, quintessential of a transcreation, giving a twist at the end to make a cultural compromise with the target audience. However, the couple in *Ek Duj Ke Liye* (1981), meet a fateful end which holds similitude to the tragic end of *Romeo and Juliet*. Here, the filmmaker has not dabbled with the frame of the Bard's plotline. Vasu and Sapna are made for each other (the literal meaning of *Ek Duj Ke Liye*) and mad for each other too. The creative re-enactment of Indian cultures comes to play as the film brings together a "Romeo-like" South Indian man and a North Indian "Juliet-like" beauty while taking the audience on an engrossing roller coaster with subplots interspersed with brilliant songs, musical interludes, dialogues and cultural nuances. The parents of the couple create conflicts to make sure the couple never unite. This cross-cultural romance across the two states of India which meets a tragic fate was not appreciated by the Indian audience of its times. Disgusted by the societal pressures to their romance, Vasu and Sapna decide to commit suicide. So unlike *Bobby*, this film held on to the tragic fate of the lovers which leads to their fateful end. The antagonism of Montagues and Capulets is presented as the cross-cultural tension between North and South Indian values and cultural exclusions which Vasu and Sapna find irreconcilable. They find suicide the best option. But this did not go well with the Indian audience who expected a joyous 'all's well that ends well' and the happy union of lovers. The filmmaker here has transcreated the source text with fidelity and carefully rendered it in Hindi celluloid to make it at-home in the target culture.

Battling complex tribulations, *Sanam Teri Kasam* (1982) negotiates an entire process of transcreating a Shakespearean classic with a garnish of Indian ethos to craft a narrative of sixteenth-century English theatre to suit and appeal to the Hindi film audience who enjoy happy endings. The 'star-crossed lovers' here battle adventures and misadventures in Indian locales ranging from Mumbai to Shimla. There is a complex reworking of the original plotline to suit the target culture and audience. Interspersed with Hindi songs, dance sequences and the clichéd finding of a long-lost son, made this Shakespearean rendition a blockbuster to the audience. Like *Bobby*, the happy ending is a creative tweak to the source text, making a pleasant end to a tragic play which inspired this creation.

The Montagues and Capulets are the two feuding clans, which are re-rendered as the Singhs and Rajputs in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988). Raj Singh (Amir Khan) and Rashmi Rajput (Juhi Chawla), decide to elope when they realize their respective families are sworn enemies and will go to any extent to vanquish their relationship. It gave a very regional twist to the tale of *Romeo and Juliet* and flavoured it with Bollywood music, Hindi ethos and a culturally familiar milieu. A tragic suicide in one family is the trigger for bitter enmity between the two clans. The fathers of the 'madly-in-love' couple connive go to any extent to annihilate their union. The end is as fateful as Shakespeare's play; the 'star-crossed lovers' lie dead near each other, united as souls for an after-life of eternity. The film maker remained faithful to the Shakespearean text to a great extent. His transcreation embodies splendid takes on Hindi dialogues, scenic locales for the shoot and momentous songs such as *Papa kahete hai, Ae mere haumsafar, Gazab hai din* and *Akele hai to kya gam hai*. Indeed, a well-crafted transcreation appealing to the target audience! The complexities are drawn through sub-plots and

comical interludes. Likewise, in *Saudagar* (1991) there is a creative re-enactment of Shakespeare's romance with an engaging plot (to stay in tune with the source text) as well as domestication by blending in the *masala* material quintessential to Hindi celluloid. Foregrounding a tale of three generations, *Saudagar* (which literally means 'merchant'), is presented in flashback. The grandchildren of Raju (Raj Kumar) and Veeru (Dilip Kumar), the seasoned friends-turned-foes are the Romeo-Juliet characters. They are captured by the devious villain Chuniya, which brings in the business deal to get back the captives. Love is challenged through a *sauda* or deal, which brings in a novel perspective to this transcreation.

The beauty of this rendition is the new twist at the end. The grandads who were sworn enemies, unite and fight the villain Chuniya and die in this battle. Consequently, Vasu (Vivek Mushran) and Radha (Manisha Koirala) unite to build an educational trust in the name of their grandfathers. The entire tale is narrated in flashback by the crippled Mandhari to the children in the school. The role of Mandhari can be paralleled to that of Friar Lawrence from *Romeo and Juliet*. A super-duper hit, this film received eight nominations and won two awards including the Best Director for Subhash Ghai at the 37th Filmfare. With memorable songs like *Ilu Ilu*, *Saudagar sauda kar* and *Imli ka buta*, this transcreation weaves in multiple domestic cultural elements to make it lovable to the audience. Along with *Sanam Teri Kasam* and *Bobby*, here too fidelity to the tragic end is negotiated to make it appealing to the target recipients.

The creativity of rendering the Bard's *Romeo and Juliet* reaches a new zenith with Habib Faisal's *Ishaqzaade* (2010). While *Saudagar* projected love as a *sauda*, here the political rift between the rival families of Parma Chauhan (Arjun Kapoor) and Zoya Qureshi (Parineeti Chopra) comes with

multiple challenges. *Bobby* had shown the lovers from the Hindu-Catholic communities: here a Hindu boy and Muslim girl fall in love while their families are at daggers drawn and attempt to kill them. The film addresses contemporary issues like premarital sex, inter-religious relationships, caste and the hard-hitting bane of honour-killing. It also re-looks at the gendering of roles and the stereotypes created by a patriarchal world where women's roles are pre-defined by patriarchy. This transcreation was noteworthy for throwing a spotlight on the struggles of Indian widows and portrayed sex workers with sympathy and sensitivity. With familiar locales of Lucknow and U.P. used for the film shoot, this movie is a brilliant re-enactment of Shakespeare's play in Hindi celluloid, weaving in its fabric contemporary issues and political realism.

A brilliant article by Mark Thornton Burnett titled "Shakespeare and Keraliyatha: *Romeo and Juliet*, Adaptation, and South Indian Cinemas", shows how South Indian (Malayalam) cinema has rendered *Romeo and Juliet* in a familiar regional milieu while sustaining the Keraliyatha or Kerala-ness of the transcreation. The two regional Malayalam films, *Annam Rasoolam* (dir. Rameez Ravi, 2013) and *Eeda* (dir. B. Ajithkumar, 2018), give Shakespeare a fresh Kerala habitation with a novelty and vigour to cater to the Netflix-gluttons of the digital age. They craftily use religious rituals, familiar political trysts, songs and dance sequences, action-packed dramatic interludes and familiar chocolate-skinned characters to bring in the regional flavours of a well-wrought transcreation.

In a similar experiment, Sanjay Leela Bansali's *Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela* (2013) is worthy of deliberation. This is outstanding domestication of *Romeo and Juliet* in the Indian ambience and ethos. The lovers, Ram (Ranveer Singh) and Leela (Deepika Padukone) battle their warring families, who

cannot forgo their five hundred yearlong enmity. Alongside the passionate love of Ram and Leela, the narrative on screen incorporates filthy politics, people dynamics and twisty subplots to end on a tragic note of martyrdom for love sake. When all seems well and the two families embrace, Ram and Leela decide to die at the hands of each other rather than succumb to their families' might. The transcreation transcends the mundane adaptation to incorporate high creativity through ethereal songs, cultural scenes, traditional and locally laced language and familiar landscapes to make it endearing to the Indian Hindi film audience. To reiterate P. Lal, the creative transportation of ethos, mythos and culture from the source text (in this case a Shakespearean play) to the target text (Hindi film) makes these adaptations veritable transcreations.

Conclusion

The transcreations of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* are varied renditions of the source text and offer kaleidoscopic perspectives. A sixteenth-century Shakespearean play has inspired so many Hindi film-makers to render them creatively to suit the Indian cultural ethos. Each rendition is unique, the plot frame is quite similar to the original, but the delivery to the audience of the silver screen is variegated. The filmmakers have negotiated with fidelity to the original plot, particularly its tragic end. *Bobby*, *Sanam Teri Kasam*, and *Saudagar* have tweaked the end to make it happy for the audience, while the others have faithfully rendered the tragic fate of the lovers. Besides, they have amalgamated cultural nuances, contemporary issues and socio-political themes in their celluloid fabric.

It is unfortunate that many film-makers have not duly credited Shakespeare's play in their credits list. Shakespeare is not even acknowledged for his source play which has inspired these myriad adaptations. The film-makers have used their own

ingenuity and brilliance to make a version in Hindi celluloid to suit the local target audience. They have negotiated with settings and communities, cultural spaces and regional specificities to bring in the Indian ethos or *Bhartiya parampara* in their respective transcreation. The political, religious and geographical elements are regionalized and contextualized in the Hindi regional space. The play's tragic end remains tragic in most silver screen versions, but in films such as *Bobby*, *Saudagar* and *Sanam Teri Kasam*, the happy ending is a new take to please the Indian audience who love them. The use of Hindi film songs, dance sequences, musical interludes, superhit cast and dialogue delivery has given a new face-lift to make these renditions surpass mere adaptations.

The Hindi films discussed above can be comfortably argued to be transcreations of *Romeo and Juliet*, re-written narratives and re-rendered portrayals of Shakespeare's eternal 'star-crossed lovers' and their tragic martyrdom for love on the silver screen. Hindi celluloid has indeed adopted and adapted Shakespeare to amalgamate this Western tale of a politically engineered feud of Montagues and Capulets by giving it a familiar cultural habitation through creative transcreations to make it veritably blend with the Indian cultural milieu and ethos. Such experiments "...string together aspects of a global trans-cultural history of art, across mediums of expression, adapting the English master in a foreign tongue and still managing to keep both cultural elements intact with all their nuances and flavour." (Yadav 10). These transcreations can be seen as emblems of world peace, knitting together the glocal Shakespeare who literally lives his celebrated adage that 'all the world's a stage.'

The global model of Shakespeare is a complex conundrum of myriad textures which transcreates and diffuses itself in varied genres ranging from musicals, plays, animations, web series

and films. The last fifty years have seen Indian cinema acclimatizing itself to the vibes of digitization, being significantly porous to William Shakespeare's plays. The inundations of Shakespeare-adaptations into Hindi celluloid are evident and unavoidable. They appeal to the Hindi audiences, are distinctive and far from being mere adaptations; they clearly deploy paradigms of transcreation. They are triumphant in helping Shakespeare acquire an Indian habitation and regional space. This trend continues in the digital age where the glocal cinematization of Shakespeare only results in the proliferation of the Bard-inspired transcreations. Shakespeare continues to live on through such renditions, inspiring copious filmmakers with his timeless classics.

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