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## **Postmodern Transpositions of Shakespeare in Malayalam Cinema – A Transformative Discourse of Regional Tragedy**

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The evolution of Malayalam cinema into a new format of experimental filmmaking is central to the analysis of Shakespearean adaptations in the contemporary era of what can be referred to as a postmodern “New Wave” Malayalam cinema. This is an age where Shakespeare departs from his conventional past, both literary and cinematic, to a new realm of highly disoriented imaginations and fragmented identities. The tragedies that defined Shakespeare are now integrated with the changing landscapes, narratives, and perceptions of the Malayali identity. Therefore, this analysis looks beyond the acclaimed Jayaraj adaptations in Malayalam to understand how this new trend of transposing canonical works of Shakespeare replaces a different localized setting, which is essentially devoid of the previously established characteristics such as the invocation of a mythological tone, visualization of the traditional past of Kerala, and the artistic overindulgence on acting and narration. The outright rejection of this attitude defines the post-Jayaraj Shakespeare adaptations of Malayalam cinema, and films like *Annam Rasoolam* (2013), *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014), *Eeda* (2018), and *Joji* (2021) are examples of this new approach.

Shakespeare was abducted into the visual medium of Malayalam cinema through a set of adaptations that enforce a typical regional aesthetics of the land of Kerala and its sociocultural past. This includes the acknowledged Jayaraj trilogy of adaptations; *Kaliyattam* (1997), *Kannaki* (2001), *Veeram* (2016), and V.K. Prakash's *Karmayogi* (2012). Suturing the elemental themes of Shakespeare into a traditional discourse of mythical and folklorist legacy, these films rendered tragedies of an indigenous nature, which, through the eyes of the popular culture, suffers from being overtly artistic and symbolic. Although it makes a case that suits the idiosyncrasies of the traditional Malayali consciousness, the problem of defamiliarization persists in these texts which make them familiar and strange at the same time; or one could call them *familiarly strange*. Here, a Western Shakespeare is replaced with the essence of the Malayaliness. This particular style of contextualization is observed by Venkiteswaran as 'transpositions' that reinforce the local over the global:

Such adaptations involve cultural negotiations between the Shakespearean dramatic elements and structure, and the mythical, storytelling and performative traditions of the local community creating new synergies, in which a local tragic idiom is rendered using a global/universal tragic template. (78).

The result of this approach alienated the source from its audience in a way that refused to infuse the cinematic text with a familiar social, political, and cultural context. The academia always tried to attribute a sense of authority to Shakespeare, an artistic superiority that led to the canonization of his works which protected them from the 'harm' of mere adaptations. Therefore, Shakespearean adaptations required to authorize or legitimize itself with a specific and authentic cultural value (Pittman). This affirms the fact that Malayalam adaptations that came in the late nineties and the early twentieth century have collectively neglected to reflect the contemporary spatial and temporal coordinates of the land. Their alternative was to adopt a parallel narrative that sanctifies an artistic cinematic form with regional theatre-like performances, as one sees in the use of Kerala's cultural and artistic ritual *Theyyam* in *Kaliyattam* for instance. The fear of losing the Shakespearean spirit and the reluctance to adapt Shakespeare into a more contemporary world of affairs forced these filmmakers to uphold a detached cinematic form that needs to constantly remind its metafictional artificiality. It is from this vantage point, along with some radical shifts in the collective body of Malayalam cinema, a set of new methods of adaptations gave rise to transpositions that strictly violated its established prototypes.

Margaret Jane Kidnie argues in *Shakespeare and the Problem of Adaptation* that the Shakespearean play is not an isolated textual object in time, but a "dynamic process" constantly evolving in accordance with the "needs and sensibilities of its users" (2). The changed circumstances that influenced the cinematic production in Malayalam shows a shift in conventional attitudes, especially the way films are made is not much reflective of its earlier preconditions. The use of non-linear narratives, intertextuality, pastiche, non-heroic protagonists, hybridized genres, magical realism, and unconventional filming styles are a few examples of what came to be known as the "New generation/new wave Malayalam cinema" in the twenty-first century. The emergence of this as a phenomenon blended information from different interdisciplinary areas to challenge the typified perceptions about the imminent realities of cultural and artistic divides.

The postmodern incredulities that deconstruct the metanarrative structural authority of Shakespeare are the new defining parameters of such cinematic endeavours. The

utilization of the contemporary postmodern aesthetics through a set of new critical and rhetorical paradigms helped a postmodernist Shakespeare (Grady) universe that replaced the previous idealizations of the Shakespearian drama and its different adaptations to emerge. The postmodern adaptations of Shakespeare in Malayalam tend to show a form of simplicity in character formation and is aided with a realistic plot in which they are embedded in a modernized contemporary space of Kerala. For example, *Annayum Rasoolum* is set in the urban outskirts of Kochi, *Iyyobinte Pusthakam* in the hilltops of Munnar, *Eeda* in North Malabar, and *Joji* within the rubber plantations of Kottayam. In all these films, the tragic element is deeply associated with the perception of the modern regional space of the land and its many social, cultural, and political complexities.

*Annayum Rasoolum* can be branded as the first New Generation adaptation of a Shakespearean tragedy in Malayalam cinema. It draws its inspiration from the popular *Romeo and Juliet* plot with which the story of Anna/Juliet and Rasool/Romeo is narrated against the regional backdrops of the urban landscape of Kochi where different religious, cultural, and linguistic identities not only collude in a common space but they decide the fate of the star-crossed lovers. An approach that consciously trivializes the magnitude of an idealistic and iconic Shakespearean romantic tragedy, Rajeev Ravi's tale focuses on the non-spectacular and non-theatrical representation of a local love affair. When Rasool, an ordinary taxi driver, falls in love with a poor sales girl Anna, their romantic endeavour becomes a conflict between the different religious communities they belong.

The tension between the Christian and Muslim identities of Anna and Rasool immediately remind the viewer about the conflict between the families of Romeo and Juliet. Using an angle of the regional communal politics that defines the social background of its community culture, the film contextualizes the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* with the sense of a local social tragedy. The protagonists escape, like in the original play, to unite in love, but as fate would have it, their expedition ends in eventual doom. Rajeev Ravi's loose adaptation of the play exploits the city life of Kerala to theorize its tragedy of love, which in its particular peculiarities of being realistically unforgiving and aesthetically pleasing, establishes a localized yet transgressing conceptualization about the transfer of primal emotions into spectacles of the stage/screen. In this way, the film does not stick to authentic Shakespearean roots to put forth its rationale for tragedy, instead it genuinely describes the tragedy of common life in a manner that juxtaposes the regionality of bodies with its natural romanticism. This form of tragedy is not merely universal in its action, on the contrary, it is precisely an emerged one as a natural response to a particular social situation in which the subjects are placed.

The social pressure that prevents the protagonists from uniting in love is reflected in contemporary Indian and Kerala politics in forms of caste discrimination, gendered violence, and honour killings. Burnett argues that adaptations like *Annayum Rasoolum* use the ritualistic customs of the *Keraliyatha* (Kerala-ness) to essentialize a hybridized complexional text of romantic tragedy. Therefore, the film had to insert song sequences, maintain a distance between the lovers to show their peeking gazes at each other, and mundane visuals of the city that engulf the lovers to narrate the love story as a diversion from the generalized normativity of real-life tragedy. Anna's suicide brings a tragic climax to this sequence of events, which in its unpredictability as well as familiarity reverses the Shakespearean original. When Anna commits suicide, it is not for the loss of Rasool, who is still alive in the film, but for reasons that prevent her from having an individual choice in pursuing her desires in a society that apparently harness

them without rationality. The tragedy in *Annayum Rasoolum* is “real” and therefore does not give the excuse of *suspending disbelief*. Rasool has to continue his tragic life in memory of Anna, and the film has no mercy on his character as it deliberately postpones closure, or rather accentuates how the infinity of time as the real villain allows the tragedy to continue in perpetuity. The influence of this type adaptation is further seen in the 2018 film *Eeda*, which appropriates both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Annayum Rasoolum* to tell the love story of a couple from northern Kerala, however, the only difference is that, instead of religious fundamentalism, the film uses the normalized political violence of Kerala as its background theme, and provides a happy ending for the lovers.

One of the other prominent themes of Shakespearean tragedy is the corruption of power. Amal Neerad’s *Iyobinte Pusthakam* (2014) adapts the narrative framework of *King Lear* to appropriate the themes of power, human relationships, and politics. The film is set in the time of the British rule in India, and the colonial aspect of a dominating power structure is explored through the family of Iyob and his three sons - Dimitri, Ivan and Alosy; which unmistakably reflects Lear and his three daughters. The film’s sudden reversal of gender gives a muscular dominance over the plot where a comparatively cruel Iyob/Lear disinherits a radical yet compassionate Alosy/Cordelia, the greedy brothers Dimitry and Ivan (Goneril and Regan) fights over Rahel/Edmund, and Alosy falls in love with an illegitimate lower-caste Martha/Edgar.

The tragic events that follow the story are entangled with problems of caste, nationalism, patrilineal heritage, aristocratic pride, toxic masculinity, and revolutionary action. The themes of revenge, suicide, betrayal, and murder prevail in the narrative, but they are contextualized according to the changes in character formation and background information. For example, Rahel/Edmund’s actions in the film are characterized by an indifference motivated by revenge. Her willingness to trade places with situations bring much inconsistency to her character arc which is deliberately needed until the very point of her suicide. These inconsistencies and deliberations upon the original *Lear* are amplified by the intertextual references to other literary works like *Brothers Karamazov*, the parable of the prodigal son, and the Book of Job from which the film’s thematic development is inspired. This kind of cinematic form confirms Michael Olsson’s observation that “Shakespeare in the 21st century is not a single monolith but a multitude of continually evolving author constructs” (29). Therefore, what we witness is the pastiche of a film that survives by reorganizing the existing parameters of the original work, and aligns with the socio-cultural dimensions of the contemporary era.

Similarly, Dileesh Pothan’s *Joji* has the eponymous character adapted from *Macbeth* and transposed to a typical patriarchal family setting of Kerala. Filled with unrestrained greed and ambition to become rich, the prodigal-son-turned-murderer Joji/Macbeth descends into a state of psychological derangement that eventually consumes his own existence. The film came out during the COVID-19 times and makes subtle reflections on the effect of the pandemic as a frustrated social situation for the people. Richard Brody of the *New Yorker* called *Joji* as the first important film of the COVID-19 pandemic and said the tragedy itself is an adaptation of the “medical crisis reflecting a world out of joint”. Joji’s failure to become successful in life is part of his identity as an unemployed and lazy youth of mainstream Kerala, and is differentiated with the authoritative patriarchal head of the family, the father. After killing his father and father-like brother, Joji’s thirst for eliminating everything that blocks his relentless journey turns into a state of transgression that defines the moral universe of the film. At this point, the film heavily draws its psychology from K. G. George’s *Irakal* (1985) to

fix the inexplicable character motivations which are symptomatic of deeper ambiguities about human nature, underdeveloped by evolutionary standards of modern civilization.

Using a Christian background with all its religious rituals playing the function of a social community, *Joji* is set in the rubber plantations of central Kerala to demonstrate a regional tragedy which, although reveals its imitations of *Macbeth*, fundamentally lacks Shakespearian proportions. Unlike *Macbeth*, the character of *Joji* is presented as a weak and scrawny youth, and this resembles how *Rasool/Romeo* is introduced in *Annayum Rasoolum*; both characters are played by the Malayalam actor Fahadh Faasil. In these adaptations, the narrative concept of a heroic figure and his fall is never well established in traditional dramatic terms, on the contrary, the new generation adaptations are filled with characters who are vulnerable, ordinary, and spontaneous. These narratives use the trope of "shrinking time" to elevate its pace and entropy (Venkiteswaran), hence, barring the lavishness of time for theatricality and character build-up; thereby destroying the notion of the Shakespearean hero. The horrors of *Joji* are not dramatically spectacular, but they are surprisingly realistic and are only an extension of the series of social crimes happening in Kerala families. The film is devoid of the tragic grandeur of *Macbeth* and its supernaturalism of the witches, instead, it uses air guns, medical drugs, and handmade bombs to incite violence.

The postmodern Shakespearean adaptations are less Shakespearian than earlier regional ones, and resemble a rather contemporary and familiar situation of everyday world and its multitudes of identity politics. Here, the protagonists are immersed in imminent tragedies, the tragedies of the present - the religious separationism in *Annayum Rasoolum*, political violence in *Eeda*, caste/class discriminations in *Iyobinte Pusthakam*, patriarchal violence in *Joji* - are examples of this. The tragedy that emerges out of these situations is part of its own spectatorship and regionality; they are continuous and indifferent, dominating and confusing, and most importantly, denies closure and catharsis.

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