



Research Paper

## Adaptation across Spatial, Linguistic and Societal Borders: Sang-e-Mah and Hamlet

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**ABSTRACT:** *The present paper seeks to study an unusual Shakespearean adaptation, set in the hilly tribal region of Pakistan, by using the comparative approach. The paper uses a visual and linguistic analysis of the TV series to study how it is set against the background of Hamlet, the epitome of tragedy. Focusing on the depiction of a crude tribal practice which has tormented the women of this region, it will be studied how Shakespeare has been used to highlight the plight of women through the dramatic aesthetics of 16<sup>th</sup> century Elizabethan England. The paper uses the theoretical framework of adaptation as enunciated by Linda Hutcheon.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Adaptation, Cultural Context, Feminism, Gag, Transposition.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare continues to permeate literary, media, cultural and social spaces across time and space. It would have hardly occurred to the Bard that his writings would be re-written, re-appropriated and re-placed in different cultural contexts in all parts of the world. More than his other works, it is the tragedies which have exerted a phenomenal influence on the minds of readers and audience alike. The present paper seeks to analyse one such adaptation, a TV series from Pakistan, *Sang-e-Mah* (2022) based on the epitome of tragedy, *Hamlet*. The paper will depend upon textual analysis of the primary text/script, based on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation, to show that *Hamlet* has 'inspired' *Sang-e-Mah*, due to the strong parallels in terms of plot and character depiction. The difference between the two works is in terms of the change of locational and cultural context from 12<sup>th</sup> century Denmark and the Elizabethan stage to contemporary Pakistan's interior tribal regions.

Adaptations, re-writings, intertexts, appropriations of the Bard have been the subject of scholarly enterprise over the last half a century with Linda Hutcheon's *Theory of Adaptation* clearly enunciating the theory and practice of the same, she describes adaptation as 'an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation and an extended inter-textual arrangement with the adapted work.' The important word here is 'transposition' as it implies a re-location and re-rendering of a 'recognizable' work, creating an 'inter-textual' arrangement. The present paper will show how *Hamlet* is 'transposed' and relocated in an arrangement which will serve the purpose of questioning societal and patriarchal norms in modern day Pakistan. Apart from Hutcheon, several other theorists and academics have examined how 'Shakespeare has found direct resonance across time and cultural differences, he 'regularly crosses national and linguistic barriers with apparent ease' (Kennedy 2). While the present study focusses on a TV series, Shakespeare has been re-worked for the big screen also, Mark Thornton Burnett, while looking at some recent films and TV productions has commented on the enduring stability of Shakespearean theatre by opening up new intermedialities between stage, screen and new media (4). Today, Shakespeare finds an enviable position in terms of digital presence also, with Shakespeare jokes giving way to Shakespeare memes with a strong digital media emerging around the Bard.

### II. DISCUSSION

Shakespeare came to the Indian subcontinent with the advent of the British era. In Pakistan, many adaptations and re-writings have invoked his stories to examine cultural and societal issues, *The Taming of the Shrew* has been adapted as *Ilaaj-i-Zia Dastyab Hay* (2012), *The Winter's Tale* as *Fasana-e-Ajaib* (2014), *Measure for Measure* as *Rahm* (2016) and the story of *Hamlet's Ophelia* as *A Girl in the River* (2015). Most of

these adaptations question patriarchy, the concept of honour and the subjugation of women, however *Sang-e-Mah* goes beyond these concerns to focus on the metaphysics of human nature and its flaws, through its protagonist Hilmand. There is very little scholarship on the place of Shakespeare on TV in Pakistan or in the subcontinent, even though Shakespeare continues to be taught at academic levels and has been adapted for the silver screen.

Indian film maker, Vishal Bhardwaj has adapted *Hamlet* to produce *Haider*, set in the Kashmir of the 1990s. Described as the 'Indian Hamlet' (BBC), the film was an unflinching depiction of the troubled times of insurgency. However, it was the blending of the original plot of *Hamlet* against this backdrop that made the film stand out in terms of transnational movement of stories and motifs. Considerable work has been on the other adaptations of Shakespeare by Bhardwaj, *Omkaara* (2006), based on *Othello* and *Maqbool* (2003) based on *Macbeth*. Keeping in mind the fluidity of stories across borders and genres, the paper will study *Sang-e-Mah* as an offshoot of *Hamlet*, looking at the location of Shakespeare in a post-colonial milieu and will endeavor to raise questions on the re-imagining of Shakespeare in contemporary Pakistan through a TV series, drawing parallels with the text of *Hamlet*, while also highlighting the differences in certain cases.

The series has been produced by Momina Doraid, directed by Saife Hassan and written by Mustafa Afridi, with singer/actor Atif Aslam playing the title role. The story of *Sang-e-Mah* (literally translated as the 'moon stone,' on the ring worn by Hilmand) is based in the tribal Pakhtoon region of Pakistan, where pride and honour are sacrosanct domains ruled by patriarchy. Forced marriages are common as the residents of this area believe in a tribal practice called *Gagh*, a proclamation by firing bullets at the threshold of a girl's house resulting in forced marriage. This is often done to settle village feuds. The series intertwines two tales, one of young love between two opposing families and the other of an uneasy father-son relationship, against this backdrop, with undertones of the Hamlet-Ophelia and Hamlet-Claudius relationships. The village where the story takes place is called Laspiran, strongly reminiscent of Shakespeare's Elsinore. The central character, Hilmand, is Hamletian not only in name but also in his philosophical meanderings. Hilmand's father, Haji Marjaan is the second husband of his mother, Zarghuna. Hilmand lives not in his home but near his father's grave, surrounded by his young friends, the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of *Hamlet*. All disputes are solved in the *Jirga*, the court of the village headman and the *panches*. *Sang-e-Mah* operates as a revenge tragedy, with Hilmand over-hearing his stepfather's conversation with the village apothecary, where he talks about the poison with which Marjaan Khan poisoned his elder brother, Hilmand's father, to death. That Hilmand's mother gets married to Marjaan Khan in a rather hasty manner furthers the argument that the series is indeed based on *Hamlet*. Haji Marjaan is troubled by fiery heat in his soles which keeps him awake at night, reminiscent of Lady Macbeth's bloody hands.

The series focusses on the character of Hamlet/ Hilmand who struggles to free himself from an impossible situation. He has a laidback approach to life and spends much of his time near his father's grave and often addressing his deceased father. The range of emotions in his conversations with his father is varied and the tone is elegiac as well as revenge seeking. Mehreen Odho calls Hilmand a 'mis-fit.' As the series opens, he is seen in a pensive mood, near his father's grave and ramshackle lodging, delivering a monologue. The supernatural agency of Hamlet's father's ghost in the opening of Shakespeare's text is given to the grave of Hilmand's father with an eerie atmosphere around it. That Hilmand has forsaken mainstream society like Hamlet is further testimony to the similarities in their characters. The character of Hilmand is humanized just like Hamlet, both suffer from angst and have experienced loss. Haji Marjaan accepts that Hilmand was fine earlier, but has recently 'gone mad' having distanced himself from his family, house and faith.

Notably, Hilmand speaks in verse and delivers monologues which carry the same weight as the soliloquies in *Hamlet*. Addressing the Gods, he deliberates upon suicide as the easy option to end the agony of human life, but considers it forbidden in Islam. In the first episode, he invokes Hamlet's soliloquy, 'to be or not to be' and explains that the question of life and death has been haunting him since childhood like a mad dog. He, himself, chooses to stay tethered to his father's burial place invoking the opening of *Hamlet*. He says that he has given up in the face of this cursed dog and is ready for his death at its hands. In Shakespeare, dogs are used as a metaphor for mindless and indiscriminate killers who will do simply as their masters order. They also represent those who seek revenge despite the violence that will prevail as a consequence (White). Hilmand himself is hell-bent on revenge for his father's death and the image of the dog provides a grizzly angle to the explication of the plot. His audience is his friends who are busy in preparing a concoction and ruminating, much like Shakespeare's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Hilmand then directly engages in a one-way conversation with his dead father, telling him that he cannot live in his home, as there is nothing left for him there and how he finds comfort being near the grave. The fact that Hilmand is unable to situate the purpose of life resonates with the modern TV audience just as it did on the Elizabethan stage.

Hilmand's friends spend the time lazing around in the graveyard where Hilmand's father is buried and live in a trance like intoxicated state with music and dance, just like the players in *Hamlet*. This Hamlet-like ambience is confirmed when the character of Sheherzaad, Hilmand's love interest, in a direct reference to

*Hamlet* says that ‘there is something rotten in Laspiran’ and that ‘there is a method to his (Hilmand’s) madness.’ The series almost assumes a self-reflexive tone here as the writer pays an indirect homage to Shakespeare.

What is indeed rotten in Laspiran is the practice of *Gagh* and Hilmand uses this practice to fire at his cousin’s door, knowing fully well that she is his brother’s love interest. Such acts of provocation and ‘antic disposition’ further show Hilmand as being directly inspired by Hamlet. It is his desire for revenge that permeates the play just as the practice of *Gagh* was and continues to be used to settle family feuds.

Regardless of how *ghag* is announced, the impact on the girl, her family, and her future is destructive. That’s because *ghag* is sometimes used to exact *badal* (revenge) on the girl’s family by claiming, without consent, their most prized possession.

The great injustice of *ghag* is that after marking his territory, it doesn’t matter if the man actually ever comes through on his alleged intention to marry. There is no obligation on him to marry, and sometimes, the announcement alone is all the revenge needed because the girl is now considered spoken for and can no longer be considered as marriage material. (Kari)

Such is the extent of this practice, that numerous girls commit suicide every year for fear of becoming life-long burdens to their families. That the creative team behind *Sang-e-Mah* chose to invoke the tale of Hamlet to comment on this practice testifies the nature and function of story telling. Through two creative works, separated by half a millenia and half the globe, the purpose of art comes full circle with this unabashed depiction of a horrific practice.

Through numerous twists and turns, the story reaches a point where Hilmand is stabbed, almost fatally, and recuperates for some time. Hilmand’s mother appears in front of the village court to announce that she is the one who had killed her first husband, as she was forcibly married due to the custom of *Gagh*. The ending of the series is on the lines of Shakespearean tragedy, with the suicides of Haji Marjaan/Claudius and Zarsanga/Gertrude. In an immensely poignant scene, Haji mixes an overdose of an intoxicant in their drinks and almost ‘nurses’ his wife to death. The scene creates a paradox when it shows a very religious and devout man committing suicide and that too by substance abuse. That the couple choose suicide over repentance and reconciliation is also problematic and did not go well with the audiences. But, the script was probably kept in line with the norms of tragedy and the deaths of Claudius and Gertrude by poisoned drinks. The audiences of the series were dissatisfied, who wanted a happy ending, though the ending of *Hamlet* is far more gory with the dead bodies on stage at the end.

### THE FEMINIST ANGLE

The series has been hailed as a celebration of feminism, Maham Sajid writes in *The Friday Times*, ‘Kudos to showing women as living, breathing, thinking rational creatures rather than playing hapless victims to their circumstances.’ The sub-plot figures a young, female, urban researcher, Sheherzaad, who travels to Laspiran to look closely at the practice of *Gagh*. Ophelia-like, she develops feelings for Hilmand, but is held back by his complicated and unpredictable personality. She emerges as a determined character who takes her work passionately and ardently. Like Ophelia, she too has a brother, but a distant cousin. While Laertes in *Hamlet*, tells Ophelia not to trust Hamlet and to never see him again, Sheherzaad’s cousin abused her as a child, taking advantage of her vulnerability. It is in diversions such as these that we see the transposition of *Hamlet* into relevant societal issues. All women in the series are victims, Zarsanga, Zarghuna and her daughter Gulmeena of *Gagh* and Sheherzaad of sexual abuse.

Though Gertrude has been described as an emotional, irrational woman, who is insignificant in the Shakespearean scheme of things, a closer study reveals that she was a woman in her own right, who negotiates the medieval court of Denmark. In her short story *Gertrude Talks Back* (1992), which is a re-writing of the closet scene, Margaret Atwood gives voice to Gertrude as she replies to Hamlet’s words, explaining what she thinks of Hamlet’s father (Act III, scene iv), ‘But handsome isn’t everything, especially in a man, and far be it from me to speak ill of the dead, but I think it’s about time I pointed out to you that your Dad just wasn’t a whole lot of fun.’ This revisionist writing not only opens up the canon to include the voice of the marginal subject, but also challenges the construction of the female character. Gertrude is ‘humanised’ through inter-textual links, like the women of Laspiran who challenge the *Jirga* to announce a punishment for *Gagh*.

Though the character of Gertrude corresponds to Hilmand’s mother, it is Hilmand’s maternal aunt, Zarghuna, who ‘voices’ the agony of the women who bear the brunt of patriarchy in this tribal off the map part of Pakistan. She herself is a victim of *Gagh* and is depicted as a powerful woman, who rides a horse and tends to her lands without the veil or *purdah*. She, alongwith her daughter Gulmeena and Sheherzaad go from house to house in the village, convincing all victims of *Gagh* to come together for justice. At the end it is Zarghuna who marches into the *Jirga*, the last male bastion, and demands justice for the young women of Laspiran, and legal interception so that the practice of *Gagh* is not used to destroy the futures of girls in the region. This scene invokes the sense of climax in Act V, scene ii of Hamlet, when things come to a head and a final resolution is arrived at, followed by the deaths of Hilmand’s step-father and mother.

### III. CONCLUSION

The series did invite a lot of debate and criticism in Pakistani media for the depiction of *Gagh* in bad light. However, the series was praised for having changed ‘the nature of narrative (of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*) according to the cultural demands and environment of the current times’ (Faisal) creating an intertextual web. Both *Hamlet* and *Sang-e-Mah* depict worlds where hatred rules initially, leading to a complication and then resolution albeit in different modes. What film theorist Andre Bazin says about cinema based on adaptations of Shakespeare could easily be extended to TV, ‘(films) may be used to popularise rather than threaten the existence of theatres...making plays accessible to those who would normally not go to the theatre...(120).’ In this era of constant re-invention, such crossovers should be hailed, even if dramatic fidelity is not observed in all aspects. The discourse of fidelity in adaptation studies has already moved on toward a discourse of intertextuality as part of a more multidirectional approach that emphasizes the multiple interlocutors of both source novel and adaptation (Stam). It is the idea of ‘influence’ that permeates the series under study and the use of Shakespeare to refer to pertinent issues of the day. The deployment of Shakespeare for social transformation is not new as literature and art continue to thrive because of their resounding themes, primality of basic human emotions in their depiction and the craving for essences. The re-configuration of Hamlet to suit the artistic and cultural legacies of the Asian subcontinent has reiterated the celebration of Shakespeare as a cultural icon. The play has become deeply and irrevocably entrenched in the sensibilities of mankind across time, language and space. The manifestation of Shakespearean tragedy on Pakistani television goes to show the relevance of Shakespeare in contemporary society.

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