



Research Paper

The Impact of Indian Epics on Shakespeare's Works: A Study of Orientalism and Cultural Exchange

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Abstract

Such a comparative analysis of the Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata with William Shakespeare's works would find common themes running in the work, like ethical dilemmas, power struggle, and supernatural elements. though Shakespeare did not borrow material directly from the Indian text, yet the theme lines of his literature parallel those at the heart of Indian imagination. This paper also explores into how Shakespeare's work introduced into the Indian subcontinent during the period of British colonial rule has been translated and adapted in Indian languages and can further the dialogue between East and West. Through this research, it can be able to highlight present-day relevance of both works about Shakespeare and the Indian epics in today's literature which can even be widely read across different cultures and time.

Keywords: Indian epics, cultural exchange, Orientalism, Shakuntala, moral dilemmas, supernatural elements.

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I. Introduction

1. Shakespeare's and its work

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, known as one of the most remarkable writers and playwrights of English history. Relatively little can be learned about his earlier education, but he most likely attended the local grammar school in Stratford and thus would have been properly grounded in classical literature and language (Orlin, 2021).

Shakespeare's career was successful in London. He joined as an actor, writer, and shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which later became known as the King's Men. There are 40 plays written by him, 160 sonnets, and some other poetic works during his lifetime. Some of his best dramas include the most celebrated tragedies: Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth. He is performed more than any other playwright (Potter, 2012).

The 19th century only increased Shakespeare's influence and popularity when his plays were interpreted in so many various artistic and political contexts. His works were translated into many languages and continue to inspire across generations. He died in 1616 but lives on in posterity as the "Bard of Avon" and England's national poet (Shakespeare, William, 1&2).

2. Infusion of Shakespeare in Indian culture

The Indian Renaissance was a phenomenon that had an influence on every aspect of contemporary cultural heritage, including the socio-political, artistic, as well as economic spheres (Karim, 2019). Shakespeare's influence, albeit modest in comparison to the whole, unquestionably supplied the largest individual conduit for not just literary or artistic advancements but also fundamental changes in attitudes in a significant way, Indian traditions as well as principles were grafted on or even expanded via Shakespeare's written pieces, going beyond simply being ingrained throughout or via him.

Indian epics such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana prove to give one a deep insight into the emotions of human beings, issues born from moral dilemmas, and struggles for power, all of which become pertinent themes within the literature of William Shakespeare. To name a few, some plays that come to mind are Hamlet and Macbeth, which mirror similar conflicts, such as those belonging to the realm of ethics, even in Indian epics, through characters such as Arjuna trying to struggle between his duty and what is right? (Sen, 2020). Of course, one can explain that the works by Shakespeare include extended treatments of intricate moral questions

as well as the slim boundary between illusion and reality, much like those in Indian tale folklore (**Putatunda, 2019**). The theme of the supernatural within these epics and Shakespearian drama further goes to point that there was a lot of cultural exchange, what with divine intervention and miraculous resolution sounding throughout the narrative arcs. Shared motifs of moral dilemmas and supernatural influences merge to create a significant point of linkage between Indian and Western literature, and viewed from this platform, they reveal a deep cross-cultural dialogue.

As a result, Shakespeare began to be associated with a society as well as a competitive landscape that can only be compared to Western advancements (**Putatunda, 2019**). In case of India, props are accepted more in drama than the characters and to some extent, Indian dramatists are focused to portray women character as the simple one whereas making women character witchy is a symbol of Shakespearean play (**Shaminaet, 2019**). Hence, infusion of Shakespeare in Indian culture is a long way and modifications have been ensured throughout the process of adaptation. Therefore, the second objective is: "To analyze the cultural exchange between Indian and Western literature through a comparative study of Shakespeare's plays and Indian epics." demonstrated here.

3. Introduction to Indian epics: Mahabharata, Ramayana and other significant texts

"The Vedas, Puranas, Ramayana, and Mahabharata "represent the fundamental and timeless building blocks of the immense and majestic structure of Indian civilization & its cultural heritage. The enduring allure of these treatises continues to significantly shape the social, cultural, as well as behavioral patterns of millions of Indians. Both of the epics are the fundamental works of Hinduism. However, comparing them would be akin to equating chalk with cheese. While both convey an identical message, they possess distinct characteristics and approaches in dealing with their topic matter. There are numerous lessons to be derived from notably epics, many of which can still be applied to current circumstances in the business community, among which are the comparison between the two types of devotion, spirituality quotient requirements in a human being, and women independence (**Gupta, 2019**).

The Ramayana:

The Valmiki composed Ramayana is a tale of Rama, who, following his request to the order of his stepmother, Kaikeyi, gets exiled for 14 years. In those 14 years, his wife is kidnapped by the demon king Ravana, leading to a great battle in which Rama defeats Ravana along with Hanuman and the army of Vanaras and rescues Sita. Later brought back to Ayodhya, Sita's chaste values are questioned and she is finally abandoned. She takes shelter in Valmiki's ashram and gives birth to twin sons Kusha and Lava (**Sharma, 2019**).

Mahabharata:

Vyasa's Mahabharata is the longest poetic composition in the world and tells the saga of the struggle for power among the Pandavas and the Kauravas (**Sukthankar, 2016**) they are forced out of their country after losing their kingdom to a deceptive game of dice. The Pandavas eventually return to reclaim their share which results in the great battle of Kurukshetra. The Bhagavad Gita, a spiritual discourse given by Krishna to Arjuna, is also contained within the epic to teach lessons on duty, righteousness, and human life at its complex best (**Dharma, 2020**)

William Shakespeare's works are not directly based on Indian epics, but the Indian mythology and tales have given rise to broader perspectives of literature and culture which bear a loose connection with the themes of Shakespeare's plays (**Pallathadka, 2020**). While Ramayana and Mahabharata remain the two most prominent Indian epics, some of the other ancient texts to have indirectly influenced literature and drama include:

Abhigyan Shakuntalam:

The story of Shakuntala is one of the most renowned of Kalidasa's works, and it has its origin in the epic Mahabharata. The story is also related in the Padmapurana and in the Buddhist Jātaka stories. In the Mahabharata, it is an important preface to the PāṇḍavaKaurava lineages as Shakuntala and King Duṣyanta's son Bharata lay the founding of this dynasty. It is about Duṣyanta finding Shakuntala in the forest, marrying her, and then forgetting her owing to a Sage Durvasa's curse. The reason is that Shakuntala, in a distraught mood over Duṣyanta, does not show respect to the coming sage.

Abhijanashakuntalam by Kalidasa refines the portrayal in the Mahabharata with the addition of elements of supernatural intervention to soften the harshness of rejection and betrayal. Rejected by the amnesiac Duṣyanta and the accompanying priests, Shakuntala is whisked away to the hermitage of Aditi and Maricha, beyond the mortal world, by Mishrakeshi, an apsara and friend of her mother Menaka. That would imply that Shakuntala either transcended the mortal body or was worthy of the spiritual world owing to her divine nature. Ultimately, Duṣyanta regains his memory and is reunited with Shakuntala and their son Bharata-an act that represents the reconciliation of the mortal and the divine. In this dramatic and poetically told manner, Kalidasa

further ensures his masterpiece as one that weaves a myth into human emotions in a way that will remain timeless.

Vikramorvasiyam and Malavikagnimitram:

Kalidasa's *Vikramorvasiyam* and Bhavabhuti's *Maltimadhava* are classical Sanskrit plays known for their thematic preoccupations with love, sacrifice, and the complexities of human relationships. *Vikramorvasiyam* narrates the story of King Pururavas and the celestial nymph Urvashi, whose love is put to test by divine curses and earthly challenges. As will be seen despite the trials they go through, including Urvashi's curse which forces her back into heaven-in the end, they are allowed to live together on Earth. A tale of crossing boundaries in love, Kalidasa is in his element as a poet and storyteller in the poignancy lent to the characters, the usage of symbolism, and Prakrit songs to bring out Pururavas's grief and longing. *Maltimadhava* by Bhavabhuti is a romance between Malti, the daughter of a minister, and Madhava, a nobleman. The love story of the protagonists is mixed with the subplot concerning Makaranda and Madhyantika, where varieties of sentiment-erotic, heroic, and pathetic-are combined. Detailed accounts of dramaturgic incidents, such as rescue from a tiger, are replete with different emotional tones to make the play full of literary rasas. The works had a deep impact on society within the context of Indian values and moral dilemmas, and the agape-love, duty, sacrifice-thus formed an indelible mark upon Indian social and cultural history, even more so upon their literatures (Sinha, 2022).

4. Exploring the impact of Indian epics on Shakespeare's writings

Dissect how the Indian epics influenced Shakespeare's works; there is a strong interaction of the two traditions that identify the common theme and cultural adaptations evident in the works. Indian epics such as *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* speak volumes to Shakespeare's probing into human emotions, moral dilemmas, and power struggles evinced through plays like "Hamlet" and "Macbeth." The ethical conflicts of characters in these Shakespearean works often emerge to reflect the moral dilemmas presented by Indian epics, spoken out through figures such as Arjuna, who wrestles with duty and righteousness (Yadav, 2014). There have also been Indian adaptations of Shakespeare where filmmakers and playwrights incorporate local culture into the story. Amongst the most famous renditions are Vishal Bhardwaj's "Maqbool" and "Omkara," which demonstrate how the stories of Shakespeare are brought into context in Indian society and mingled with traditional approaches to storytelling for better relatability in Indian society. The resonance of Indian epics in the search for reality and morality, as reflected in Shakespeare's thematic explorations, is more pronounced, especially with respect to illusion and blurred lines concerning ethics. Nevertheless, the adaptation process has not been without its own challenges; Indian dramatists have sailed through cultural rifts at character levels and societal norms, coming up with their own unique interpretations that reflect Indian values while retaining the very core of Shakespeare's tales (Mitra, 2020). While Indian culture has continuously imbibed Shakespeare, it has indeed evolved over a stretch of time. It is this interaction that is further developed in the contemporary adaptations between the West and Indian literature. The conversation going on today not only pays homage to Shakespeare's legacy but also deepens our concern for human experiences across different cultural topographies, showing clearly how Indian epics and the works of Shakespeare remain relevant to the continuing discourse in our times (Putatunda, Sarbani, 2019). Thus, the first and fourth objective: "To explore the influence of Indian epics such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* on Shakespeare's works" and "To assess the role of Indian epics in shaping literary techniques in Shakespeare's plays" is demonstrated here.

Abhigyan Shakuntalam by Kalidasa, otherwise known as *Shakuntala*, bears evidence of influence on the plays of Shakespeare and is representative of love, separation, and reunion. This Sanskrit epic narrates the story of *Shakuntala* and her love for King *Dushyanta*, constituting the bone of contention in life's fates and divine intervention. The narrative of love, memory, and identity in the story befits most of the thematic concerns of a Shakespeare play. On the other hand, Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* have a couple of parallels with *Shakuntala* in the trial of love and miraculous reunion. The use of the lost token-a ring-to retrieve love in *Shakuntala* is similar to the use of the same motif in *A Winter's Tale*. There is separation, mistaken identity, and reconciliation common in both the narratives from the two traditions. While direct evidence regarding Shakespeare's awareness of *Shakuntala* is rare, the thematic similarities appear to underline a wider cross-cultural influence. The influence underlines the global nature of inspiration in literature (Ghosh, 2014).

Among the two epics of India that are held in the highest regard-and strongly integrated into moral dilemmas, ethical conflicts, and even supernatural elements that have echoed in Shakespearean works-are the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

Shakespeare's works and Indian epics, such as moral dilemmas, power struggles, and ethical conflicts.

The main conflict in the *Ramayana* arises over the banishment of Lord Rama, who epitomizes dharma (righteousness) as he goes through various challenges forwarded by the demon king Ravana. The same moral

dilemmas he faces-loyalty to his father versus loyalty to his wife-are the same that Shakespearean characters face when they balance their stand on ethical boundaries of life. For example, the struggle of Hamlet between action and inaction gives a cue that lies within the heart of the Shakespearean characters. The supernatural also forms a significant part of the story with divine interventions and existence of mythical beings enriching the narrative with complexity, fate, and layers that parallel the ghostly apparitions and supernatural elements seen in Shakespeare's Hamlet (**Parhi, A. R. 2022**).

On the other hand, Mahabharata has been based on Kurukshetra War and discusses the issues of justice and morality in the light of Pandavas and Kauravas. The ethical clashes of war, duty, and familial loyalty in this epic could be debated, like the case of Arjuna who refuses to fight his kinsmen in the battle, similar to Macbeth, shocked by his ambition and guilt. This, in the form of a philosophical discourse on duty and morality delivered by Lord Krishna to Arjuna, places this work within the framework of supernatural guidance given to Arjuna, similar to that of the prophetic visions and moral dilemmas in characters Shakespearean tragedies (**DEV, A. Krishna, 2021**).

Together, the epics present a rich tapestry of moral complexity and supernatural influence drawing parallels to Shakespeare's portrayals of ethical conflicts and dilemmas in his narratives as it mirrors the universal nature through these issues across different cultures and time lines (**Dhulapkar, 2024**). The third objective is demonstrated here: "To identify common themes in Shakespeare's works and Indian epics, such as moral dilemmas, power struggles, and ethical conflicts."

5. Orientalism

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon, known as one of the most remarkable writers and playwrights of English history. Relatively little can be learned about his earlier education, but he most likely attended the local grammar school in Stratford and thus would have been properly grounded in classical literature and language (**Said, Edward 2023**).

Shakespeare's career was successful in London. He joined as an actor, writer, and shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which later became known as the King's Men (**Saeed, et. al, 2023**). There are 40 plays written by him, 160 sonnets, and some other poetic works during his lifetime. Some of his best dramas include the most celebrated tragedies: Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, and Macbeth (**Mallin, E. S. 2004**). He is performed more than any other playwright (**Harris, J. G. 2010**).

The 19th century only increased Shakespeare's influence and popularity when his plays were interpreted in so many various artistic and political contexts (**Mongia, P. 2021**). His works were translated into many languages and continue to inspire across generations. He died in 1616 but lives on in posterity as the "Bard of Avon" and England's national poet.

6. Cultural Exchange

Cultural exchange can be defined as ways in which people from different cultural backgrounds meet, learn from each other, share in and adopt the customs, traditions, ideas, languages, arts, and social behavior of one another. Cultural exchange is made possible through interactions between members of different cultural backgrounds; the interactions promote mutual understanding and appreciation and influence cultural changes in either or both cultures (**Dyble, et. al, 2020**).

Cultural exchange will occur through travel, trade, migration, education, media, and art. Cultural exchange could be done between two interacting cultures regarding traditional foods, art forms, languages, or even a way of thought. (**Cronin, S. 2023**). It encourages diversity, tolerance, and the expansion of perception towards the worldview, allowing individuals to perceive and understand cultures other than their own (**Yung, et. al, 2021**).

William Shakespeare's writings have always invited changing modes of perceiving them. But in the last four or five decades the meaning of Shakespeare has been radically transformed. He has become a storehouse from which all kinds of value and implication have been extracted Shakespeare has gained in political importance in a rather astounding way. He has been increasingly seen as a weapon used by the British colonial mind which could be placed next to the canons, guns and the gunpowder with which the colonizer tamed and conquered the inhabitant of the colonized nations. Only unlike the weapons that could breed violence, this weapon conquered the mind and thereby simultaneously made the colonizer an object of respect rather than mere brutish aggressiveness. Due to this new light which has been gaining in intensity certain texts of Shakespeare have been given more importance than others (**Wright, et. al, 2024**). Therefore, the fifth objective: "To understand the ongoing relevance of both Indian epics and Shakespeare's works in modern Indian and global literature" is illustrated here.

7. Objective of Study

1. To explore the influence of Indian epics such as the Ramayana and Mahabharata on Shakespeare's works.
2. To analyze the cultural exchange between Indian and Western literature through a comparative study of Shakespeare's plays and Indian epics.
3. To identify common themes in Shakespeare's works and Indian epics, such as moral dilemmas, power struggles, and ethical conflicts.
4. To assess the role of Indian epics in shaping literary techniques in Shakespeare's plays.
5. To understand the ongoing relevance of both Indian epics and Shakespeare's works in modern Indian and global literature.

8. Discussion

Other similar works that come into comparison and build on the shared theme of cultural exchange between Indian epics and Shakespearean plays include "The Impact of Indian Epics on Shakespeare's Works: A Study of Orientalism and Cultural Exchange" (Ghosh, 2014), trace the use of supernatural elements in the romances of Shakespeare and in the epics of Kalidasa, such as divine interventions and miraculous resolutions of conflicts, illustrating how such motifs are pressed into service to address moral and ethical dilemmas in both the traditions. Along a related line of inquiry, (Yadav 2014) talks about the usage of Shakespeare's plays through Indian cultural adaptation-that is, how Shakespeare's plays embed Indian societal norms-which relates closely with the thematic fusions discussed in the given study (Putatunda 2019), traces the incorporation of Shakespeare into Indian culture as a result of British colonial education, similar to an emphasis on broader Indian literary themes infused into Shakespeare's works in the given study. This is further extended by (Sen 2020) to explore the cross-cultural adaptations between India and Europe, including in the extent to which Indian epics influenced European Shakespeare readings in ways consonant with the study at hand on cultural exchanges. Lastly, Gupta and (Singh 2019) conduct a comparative analysis of Mahabharata and Ramayana, finding general themes of justice and duty which also permeate Shakespeare's plays and hence place these literary traditions as intertwined. Taken together, these studies underline the rich flow of cultural influence and thematic resonance both ways between Indian epics and Shakespearean drama.

9. Conclusion

The study concludes with great importance attached to the rich and multifaceted cultural exchange between Indian epics and the works of Shakespeare, in spite of the latter having no possible borrowing directly from Indian texts, as it shows common themes of moral dilemmas, supernatural elements, and ethical conflicts in his works. The adaptations of Shakespeare's plays in the Indian cultures justify this on-going dialogue further and reflect how the narratives are reinterpreted to incorporate local values but still have their core at the Centre.

The paper goes on to maintain that the ethical struggles presented through Shakespearean drama are paralleled by the rich moral frameworks existing within both the Ramayana and Mahabharata. Characters like Arjuna and Hamlet exemplify a similar conflict between duty and personal ethics, while demonstrating a universal search for understanding morality cross-culturally. Such interplay between cultures finally enriches both literary traditions to prove relevant in today's discourse and timeless in their themes. This leads to the conclusion that Indian epics' influence on Shakespeare's works promotes a better understanding of how works of world literary legacy are interconnected.

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