

Western Text through Eastern Art: a Review on the Adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in *Yakshagana*

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Abstract

This paper makes an attempt to review the adaptation of Shakespearean play *Macbeth* in *Yakshagana*, a folk art of Coastal Karnataka. *Yakshagana* is popular in Chikmagalur, Shimoga districts and the coastal Districts of Karnataka, and the Kasargod district in Kerala. *Yakshagana* typically portrays episodes (known as *prasanga*) from Hindu epics and mythology. However, folk, historical, imaginary, social themes, legends of local temples and awareness-oriented themes have also been adapted in *Yakshagana*. While translations of Shakespearean texts into different languages and theatrical and film adaptations of Shakespearean Plays are not novel to us, adaptations of Shakespearean plays in folk arts are rare in India. An attempt has been made here to review the adaptation of *Macbeth* by Shakespeare into *Yakshagana*.

Key words: *Yakshagana, Macbeth, Shakespeare, adaptation, folk art.*

Introduction

Translations of Shakespearean texts into different languages and theatrical adaptations of Shakespearean Plays in film are not novel to India. Many plays of Shakespeare have been translated into most of the Indian languages and enacted on the stages in India. However, adaptations of Shakespearean plays in folk arts are rare in India. Traditionally, a *Yakshagana* show enacts episodes (known as *prasanga*) from Hindu epics and mythology. However, folk, historical, imaginary, social themes, legends of local temples and awareness-oriented themes have also been adapted in *Yakshagana*. But, adaptations of western texts into *yakshagana* are rare as such attempts pose different challenges that include barriers of culture, differences in names of places and persons and the challenge to retaining the authenticity of *yakshagana* art. Therefore, whenever such an attempt is made it draws the attention of art and literary enthusiasts. In this backdrop, an attempt has been made here to review the adaptation of *Macbeth* by Shakespeare into *Yakshagana*.

Review of Literature

How Does Shakespeare Become Shek Pir in Kannada by T. S. Satynath tries to identify and understand the cultural processes that went into the process of translating Shakespearean plays into Kannada during the Navodaya (renaissance) and Navya (modern) periods of modern Kannada literature. Tracing the process of translating Shakespeare in a chronological order from the colonial to the postcolonial period, the paper points out that the selections and avoidance of texts for translation, the popularity of certain texts revealed by multiple translations of a text, transformations in the title of translations, deviations in translation etc. actually reveal the processes of constructing dominations and counter constructions. The paper also attempts to incorporate the role of the theatre both professional and amateur, and its audience in bringing about such changes and transformations. He says that early Shakespearean translations need to be understood as an outcome of theatre-centred activity rather than as academic literature-centred translations.

Yet another Macbeth: A rich contribution to Kannada theatre by Dr. Shylaja S analyses the experiments of H. S. Shivaprakash with Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* in his Kannada play called '*Nattirulata*' which translates as *midnight game*. The paper peruses the novelty with which H.S. Shivaprakash has treated Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The paper highlights the author's attempt to transform the Shakespearean play into a totally women centered play where the hero *Macbeth* is just a shadow of Lady *Macbeth*'s evil spirited mind. As childbirth is associated with a woman's body, the playwright makes thoughtful use of the character of Lady *Macbeth* when she gives birth to evil in the form of a mute dead child. Shylaja adds that even though written for a particular actress on request the adaptation strikes the readers as a play with new perspectives. The evil in the play originates from the



Subrahmanya Sharma. V
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
University College of Arts,
Tumakuru, Karnataka, India

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womb of Lady Macbeth and the whole concept of the beginning of evil and its consequences has been associated with her character.

In their article titled *The Ramification of Shakespeare's Hamlet as Karmayogi: Reflecting the Cultural Traces of Post Colonial Kerala*, K.S. Shahanaaz Kowsar and Dr. Sangeetha Mukherjee try to analyze how the tragic play *Hamlet* has been re-contextualized in the Malayalam film, *Karmayogi*. The research article also explores the projection of the Orient exotic culture as far more superior to that of its Occidental counterpart. They argue that in order to highlight this cultural superiority of Orient over the Occident, the film has been enriched with local exotic traditions of *Kelipathram* and *Poorakkali* of Kerala. Simultaneously, the article also portrays the alterations between the scenes of original, Occidental meta narrative *Hamlet* and the exotic, Orient *Karmayogi*. The article argues that Shakespearean drama *Hamlet* is trans-cultured from the Occidental culture to the Orient in the post-colonial era.

Modern Themes in Yakshagana: Experimentation and Relevance by Padmanabha K. V. Dr. Sathish Kumar examines these experiments under the classification of interpolated themes, folk, historical, imaginary, social themes, legends of local temples and awareness-oriented themes. It critically evaluates how these experiments have been received by the audience, artistes and the scholars. The article concludes that there is a need to strike a balance between the preservation of the identity of *Yakshagana* and its social responsibility.

English Tragedy on Kannada Soil by Udbhavi Balakrishna, a review article on the version of *Macbeth* in *Yakshagana*. The article focuses more on the theatrical performance than on the adaptation. It focuses on the clever usage of light and sound, dialogue delivery and acting. The article says that using simple and understandable language, and emphasizing expression and background elements, the performers managed to both awe the viewers and get the plot across within two hours. The article concludes by lauding the fresh approach in adapting an English play in *Yakshagana*.

A review of these articles posits the idea that there have been ample translations and adaptations of Shakespearean plays into regional languages in India. The adaptations of Shakespearean plays on Indian stage have been successful. However, there are not many adaptations of Shakespearean plays into art forms of India that have a religious and traditional framework. In this backdrop it is worth reviewing how an art like *yakshagana* can imbibe a Western text.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in *Yakshagana*

The *Yakshagana*¹ lovers in the city of Tumakuru, Karnataka witnessed recently- a performance of *Yakshagana*, based on an adaptation of Shakespeare's tragic play *Macbeth*. The performance had many challenges before it, apart from the possibility of poor turn up of art enthusiasts owing to the pandemic covid -19. The *Yakshagana* art, being not a native art of Tumakuru, had to be aesthetically appealing. This traditional art known for

preserving the purity of Kannada language on stage, donned a modern look in Tumakuru as the *Bhagavatha* narrated the story of *Macbeth* accompanied by a team of instrumentalists at the back stage and an equally energetic artists playing the different characters on the front stage.

Traditionally, a *Yakshagana Prasanga* (ie, plot) is selected from *Dashavataara* or the stories of the ten *avataars* of Lord Vishnu. However, there had been many instances in the past when *Yakshagana* was used to create social awareness or borrowed plots from non-religious sources. This attempt of adapting *Macbeth*, an English play for *Yakshagana* was a bold attempt in the recent decades. In fact, way back in 1977, the play *Macbeth* was performed through its adaptation to *Yakshagana* in SDM College, Ujire, Karnataka by the students of the college. Since then, no attempt was made to perform it again in *Yakshagana*, until the recent one in Tumakuru.

It was Soorikumeru Govinda Bhatta, a renowned *Yakshagana* artist who had composed the *prasanga* of *Macbeth* in 1977, based on the Kannada translation of *Macbeth* by D. V. G. The same *prasanga* was hunted down after a mammoth effort and enacted in Tumakuru under the auspices of *Yaksha Deevige*, the only institution for *Yakshagana* in Tumakuru. People, who were already familiar with Shakespeare's Play *Macbeth*, eventually looked eagerly for the loyalty of the *Yakshagana* version to the original play. It was really a successful venture as the performance successfully blended the Shakespearean plot with the traditional practice of *Yakshagana*. The basic tragic flaw or *hamartia* of *Macbeth* is his vaulting ambition. It was aptly presented as *Macbeth*, clad in *Yakshagana* costume evolved majestically on stage. The three witches of the play, reduced to two in *Yakshagana* managed to impart evil to *Macbeth* and doom him to tragedy. The character of Lady *Macbeth*, wearing the traditional costume of *saree* for female characters in *Yakshagana* had imbibed the characteristic traits of Lady *Macbeth* accurately. The other characters, played by younger artists, added to the whole integrity of the performance.

There were certain unique characteristics in the show that are worth mentioning here. The *Yakshagana* version of *Macbeth* had retained all the original English names of places and characters. However, those names got embedded so neatly in the *prasanga* that they did not sound as anomalies on the stage. The basic theme of *Macbeth* is the conflict between good and evil, which all the traditional *prasangas* of *Yakshagana* too carry. Hence, it became quite conducive for the artists to enact the *prasanga* of *Macbeth* by striking a balance between the text and the art.

The famous "somnambulism" or the "sleep walking scene" of Lady *Macbeth* was too adapted well on the stage. With a red light on the stage, the psychologically depressed Lady *Macbeth* was unraveled before us with an added dramatic monologue, typical to such scenes in *Yakshagana*. Red light was also used during the scenes of murder

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and evil while white light was used during normal scenes. Though the framework of *Yakshagana* did not allow for a *catharsis* kind of experience during the downfall of Macbeth, it did end on the note of poetic justice- the victory of good over evil in the end.

One of the key factors behind the success of *Macbeth* in *Yakshagana* form was the dramatic quality that the artists were able to bring, wherever it was called for. Lady Macbeth's attempts of coercing Macbeth into killing king Duncan, the gradual but decisive psychological transformation of Macbeth from a loyal subordinate into an ambitious murderer, the repentance of Lady Macbeth and the valorous decision of Macbeth to continue with fighting even when on the verge of defeat- all were brought out with the required dramatic fervor of *Yakshagana*.

Conclusion

It is normal for a *Yakshagana* show to present stories that are known to the audience. Given the fact that the story of Macbeth was not familiar to every audience at the show, the show did not lag behind in casting dramatic and tragic spells on the audience. Apart from being able to present *Macbeth* effectively in the form of *Yakshagana*, the attempt had also brought out many possibilities and explorations that could be done- both for the sustenance of *Yakshagana* and for providing aesthetic experience to art enthusiasts.

Notes

1. Derived from *yaksha*, meaning spirit, and *gana*, meaning song, the theatrical folk art form *Yakshagana* amalgamates music, dance, descriptive songs, and dialogue to tell a story. The art form has gained worldwide recognition for the use of intricate headgear, colourful pieces of clothing, traditional instruments, and unique stage techniques. Although it is usually performed from dusk to dawn, daytime and early evening performances have also become increasingly common these days. Simply referred to as *Aata* by many, it is popular in Chikkamagalur, Shivamogga districts and the coastal regions of

Karnataka, and the Kasargod district in Kerala, as well as in different parts of the country and the world. Yakshagana typically portrays episodes (known as prasanga) from Hindu epics and mythology and presented in Kannada language. However, folk, historical, imaginary, social themes, legends of local temples and awareness-oriented themes have also been adapted in Yakshagana and some shows have done in Hindi and English languages to cater to the needs of those who speak those languages.

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