

Mythical Transaction: Negotiating Spaces of Cultural Appropriation in Three Indian Film Adaptations of Shaw's *Pygmalion*

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Abstract: *This paper tries to deal with the Indian film adaptations of Shaw's play Pygmalion and how the films like Ogo Bodhu Shundari, Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye and Man Pasand act as cross-cultural representations of the Western myth of Pygmalion and Galatea. Moreover, post-colonial theories are applied in order to trace the in-between space of colonial hybridity represented in the films.*

Introduction:

We, Indians, have assimilated and incorporated many Western concepts into our own culture and society; for example, the phenomenon of following a Gregorian calendar touches upon the issue of colonial borrowing and its predominance. Recent trends of emulation that have come up in the context of arrange marriages are where matters of finding brides and grooms are just a click away and traditional *ghataks* have been replaced by a more modernized term 'relationship managers'. Whether this cultural appropriation functions as a boon or a bane is largely governed by the popular culture depicted in films which in turn influences the thought processes of its viewers. More significantly, what happens when a canonical English text of the coloniser becomes the subject of gaze for an Indian filmmaker who attempts an appropriation of the literary text keeping in mind the cultural and popular tastes of mainstream Indian cinema? Does this result in a symbolic marriage between the past coloniser and the present decolonised nation? Moreover the process of culmination of this mythical union is regulated by a number of factors like cultural negotiation and transaction, linguistic transformation and colonial hybridisation. Along with focusing on these factors in films like *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*¹ (Salil Dutta, 1981), *Man Pasand*² (Basu Chatterjee, 1980) and *Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye*³ (Lekh Tandon, 1977) which seem to be functioning as the Indian brides of the English groom, *Pygmalion*⁴ by George Bernard Shaw, this paper tries to look at how the western myth of Pygmalion and Galatea is applied in the Indian context. In order to delve deep into the cross-cultural relationship between Shaw's play and the Indian films, I would like to depict the three Indian filmmakers functioning as the relationship managers trying to establish

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a marital cord between the two. The connecting thread that links all the three films to the play *Pygmalion* is the project of transformation of a lower class uncouth woman into a highly polished and refined gentlewoman fit to be presented in high class society. There are various levels of ramifications found in the visual adaptations/appropriations of the play. For example, *Ogo Bodhu Shundari* presents a critique of the colonial rule in a very comprehensive way which hints at the idea of mimicry presented in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*⁵. One of the alterations made in *Man Pasand* gives prominence to the cultural heritage of India. Phonetician Henry Higgins becomes musicologist Pratap. *Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye* takes on a slightly different route as its theme revolves around finding a suitable bride for a groom. Nonetheless these films represent cultural tools which are devised for drawing a wide spectrum of viewers.

The Orient has always been perceived as something exotic, vulnerable, conquerable and explorable by the Occident. The uncontrollable thirst for power to rule over the eastern world enabled the West to conjure up the idea that people of the Orient are synonymous with the tribal folk who are far away from the light of civilization. This marked the advent of the British rule in India. Well the period of domination was characterized by mixed influences. The idea of nationalistic fervour sprung up protests against foreign rule in the form of boycotting of foreign goods, burning of foreign clothes and propagating the use of indigenous products. This campaign along with other revolts finally compelled the British to quit India. But though the colonial rule is physically over, the minds of the Indians have become "like a patient etherized upon a table"⁶ being inert to disown the cultural influences that the British people left behind. It seems that they are still colonized though there is no coloniser thereby creating a space of pseudo—colonisation or mythical colonisation. While talking about the range of cultural influences that the British have passed on to the Indians one would definitely be at a loss to describe such a vast list. If we consider language as one of the major influences, incorporation of the English studies in the curriculum of Indian education system marks the beginning of access that the Indians will have of the whole range of English literature books. Bill Ashcroft in the introduction of his book *Caliban's Voice* comments that the book is about what colonized people do with the colonial language and refers to a moment from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

When Caliban says to Miranda and Prospero:

you taught me language, and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language.

he gives voice to an issue that lies at the centre of post-colonial studies: is that language good for nothing but cursing, or can Caliban use that language to change the world?⁷ Taking cue from this, I replace 'language' with 'literature' and thus frame my sentence

as what people do with the literature of their past colonizer in a post-colonial setting: is that literature good for nothing but cursing in the form of colonial mimicry, or can they use that literature to serve their own popular interests? For instance, we can gauge the level of popularity of Shakespeare which ranges from theatrical performances to cinematic productions of his texts all catering to the popular taste of the Indian audience. Nonetheless Shakespeare becomes a cultural tool as his themes projected in his works cross geographical boundaries and historical time periods and provides a sense of the universality of man's condition. However, this paper deals with the successor of Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw whose play *Pygmalion* has been adapted and made into commercial films like *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*, *Man Pasand*, *Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye* by Indian directors. These cross-cultural adaptations weave the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea and mould it to suit the cultural context of India. This paper uses post-colonial theory that explores the cultural spaces inhabited by the characters and how these evoke the sense of hybrid identities.

The Myth of Pygmalion and Galatea:

The story of Pygmalion and Galatea is an example of a tale which is “pure entertainment, the sort of thing people would tell each other on a long winter's evening.”⁸ Edith Hamilton comments: “This story is told only by Ovid and the Goddess of Love is therefore Venus. It is an excellent example of Ovid's way of dressing up a myth...”⁹.

The story of Pygmalion runs as follows:

A gifted young sculptor of Cyprus, named Pygmalion, was a woman-hater.

Detesting the faults beyond measure

which nature has given to women,

he resolved never to marry. His art, he told himself, was enough for him. Nevertheless, the statue he made and devoted all his genius to was that of a woman. He kept on working at it and daily under his skilful fingers it grew more beautiful. He had fallen in love, deeply, passionately in love, with the thing he had made.¹⁰

The story goes on that Venus, the Goddess of Love, intervened and instils life into the statue and a beautiful maiden appears before Pygmalion.

Ogo Bodhu Shundari: Colonial Hybridisation and Linguistic Transformation

Unlike Shaw's *Pygmalion* which deals with the case of English language, *Ogo Bodhu Shundari* somehow showcases nationalistic instincts in the form of developing and promoting the Bengali language through the character Gagan Sen. *Ogo Bodhu Shundari* begins with a programme at *Bharatiya Bhasa Parishad*; linguist and professor Gagan Sen is being felicitated for his immense contribution in the development of Bengali language and its pronunciation. It essentially gets comic when Gagan Sen and his friend and professor Abalakanto Dutta note the malapropism in the speech of the announcer when he introduces Gagan Sen as someone who:

*Bangla Bhasa O Tar Uccharoner Ritiniti Samporke Notun Tathya Abishkarer Jonyo Jibondan Korechen na Mane Jibon Utsyargo Korechen... Na Mane Atyaniyog Korechen.*¹¹

After hearing that the announcer says ‘Petteker’ instead of ‘Protyeker’, Gagan Sen enthusiastically embarks on to teach his friend Abalakanto the correct pronunciation of words like ‘haspatal’, ‘hasi’, ‘kach’ and also the variations of pronunciations of words found in different regions of Kolkata. Next a patriotic fervour arises in him. The song that follows goes on to describe the worldwide praise that Bengali language achieved by the contributions of figures like Rammohan Roy, Vidyasagar, and Rabindranath Tagore. It also serves as a colonial critique as Gagan Sen criticizes Bengali people by saying: “*Emon garba dhore, porer nokol kore amra chara r dekha jabena*”.¹² The linguistic transformation can be seen in the vocabulary of the people when they are caught between binaries of *Ginni-Memsaab*, *Ma Baba-Daddy Mummy*, *Bandhu Bandhobi*-Boyfriend Girlfriend, *Premika*-Lover et cetera. Gagan Sen through this song actually brings forth the tendency of the majority of Bengali people to mimic western culture and practice and discard indigenous habits. This is reminiscent of Fanon’s idea of mimicry when even after decolonization, the people’s minds seem to be colonized as they try to emulate their erstwhile master’s culture and behaviour and incorporate it in their lifestyle. I call this as a space of pseudo or mythical colonisation. Ania Loomba in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* refers to Fanon and comments: In Fanon’s view, the colonized subject is hybridized most powerfully by his attempt to mimic dominant culture. For Fanon (1967), this is a fatal mimicry which leads to a terrible schism, between black skin and white masks, to the black subject’s disavowal of his roots and to his tragic attempt to fashion a European self.¹³

Gagan Sen perhaps represents the cause of one of those who “despite their schooling in the western fashion, and despite their Anglicisation, Bengali intellectuals also fervently tried to create, through theatre, novels and art, an aesthetic sphere that would be distinctively Indian.”¹⁴

Unlike Professor Higgins in *Pygmalion*, Professor Sen has a wife who likes to socialise and attending parties. There is a condemnation of western party- culture too. Being one of the hosts at a party, Lola Di better known as Mrs. Lulu, admits that Bengali is a tough language and she has forgotten it after going to London. She cannot pronounce ‘*sharaniyo*’ and instead uses ‘memorable’. The juxtaposition of the English party song with the Bengali song ‘*Dekho Babu Khela Dekho Re*’ at the book fair is an important trope that the director uses in order to denote the confluence of western and Indian cultural traits. Mrs. Lulu’s partner is another example of a westernized modern Bengali man who exclaims with pride: “*British Period Theke Maal Khacchi Aar Eta Swadhin Period...Amar Sathe Maaler Competition!*”¹⁵ Nevertheless he wins the alcohol competition, becomes the ‘Man of the Night’ at the party and also shares a relationship with a married woman Mrs Lulu. This

makes Gagan sarcastically comment that without a scandal one cannot become a man. In fact Lulu and her partner represent post-colonial hybrid identities. Further, this is followed by another song '*Ei To Jibon*' which sort of summarises another common trait of the decolonized people:

*Saheb Ra Sob Chole Geche... Amra Oder Charini Toh Dhore Achi Tobu Lej Take. Mod Khachi, Party Dichhi Suit Boot Pore Ghure Berachhi... Oder Moto Sajie Nichhi Gota Samaj.*¹⁶

Professor Gagan Sen like Professor Higgins takes on the task of transforming a slum girl called Sabitri who performs with a monkey into a polished and educated high society lady. In support of the venture he refers to linguist Chomsky's comment that any person's habit can be changed if he/she gets the right environment. Sabitri through proper training lessons gets literate, learns manners, etiquette thereby fulfilling Gagan Sen's mission of presenting her in the high society in the form of the fashion show. He differentiates her from his wife Chitra on the basis of the former lacking a 'Lola complex'.

Colonial Hybridisation in *Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye*

Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye like *Ogo Bodhu* also presents an anti-colonial trend in choosing the perfect bride for Prem, the heir and grandson of Seth Harikrishan, the industrialist. Kammo, the poor flower seller girl (reminiscent of flower girl Eliza Doolittle in *Pygmalion*) posing as a 'sati-savitri' type of woman in front of the grandfather pleases him very much and he prefers her to the modern Rita to become the wife of his grandson. She caters to the grandfather when he becomes ill and nurses him to good health. Kammo represents the upholder of indigenous and traditional value system while Rita, dressed in modern revealing outfits stands in the in-between phase of western and Indian modernity. For Rita and her mother money is all important than relationships and family values. The Kammo-Rita, Savitri-Lola binaries perhaps symbolise the eastern-western conflict which in turn reinforces the issue of post-colonial hybridity. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin in the 'Introduction' of *Post-Colonial Shakespeares* say that:

Colonial masters imposed their value system through Shakespeare, and in response colonized peoples often answered back in Shakespearean accents. The study of Shakespeare made them 'hybrid' subjects, to use a term that has become central to post-colonial criticism and which is increasingly used to characterize the range of psychological mixings generated by colonial encounters.¹⁷

Rita and her mother represent these 'hybrid' subjects posited in the 'third space' or 'in-between space' of Bhabha. For Bhabha proclaims:

...hybridity to me is the "third space" which enables other positions to emerge... The process of cultural hybridity gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognisable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.¹⁸

Cultural Negotiation in *Man Pasand*

Man Pasand is dedicated to Bernard Shaw. In this Bollywood adaptation, phonetician Henry Higgins becomes musicologist Pratap and he is a confirmed bachelor like Higgins. His friend Dr. Kashinath is a doctorate in music from American University and is considered an exponent in Indian and western music. So here the theme of language and voice training turns into music lessons. Incidentally they meet a loud-mouthed poor girl named Kamli selling neem branches in a local train. Pratap after hearing Kamli's voice makes a bet with his friend that within six months he will transform Kamli into a singer and a polished woman by his method of scientific voice culture and in return Kashinath has to marry the girl. In due time, Kamli becomes a talented singer. The trope of music acts as a cultural negotiator conveniently used by the director keeping in mind the Indian viewers' fascination with music. Bill Ashcroft in the 'Introduction' states that:

Colonial languages, can, and have, been taken and used in ways that privileged the local culture...colonial languages have been not only instruments of oppression but also instruments of radical resistance and transformation.¹⁹

The film owns its dedication to Shaw's *Pygmalion* yet it attempts a radical transformation of Shaw's play by incorporating the trope of music relevant to the Indian cultural background. Very much unlike Higgins- Eliza relationship, Pratap-Kamli relationship hints at a romantic angle at the end of the film which is also an aspect of drawing the attention of the Indian audience.

Instances of direct borrowing

So what are discussed above were the appropriations made by the Indian directors in order to suit the popular culture of the nation. Yet there are instances in the films which portray a direct borrowing from Shaw's play. Frantz Fanon comments that:

Every colonized people– in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality– finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is with the culture of the mother country.²⁰

For example, like *Pygmalion*, all the three films talk about the notion of marriage and somewhat portray a misogynistic trend. For Higgins, women are jealous, exacting, and suspicious and a damned nuisance as he proclaims:

Women upset everything. When you let them into your life, you find that the woman is driving at one thing and you are driving at another.²¹

Higgins, a confirmed bachelor, sees Eliza only as an experimental tool devoid of emotions. Gagan Sen expresses similar views when he does not give a thought to what will happen to Savitri after the experiment gets over. He asks his old friend Abalakanto to marry

her which she denies. The two songs “*Ami Ekjon Shantoshisto/ Potni Nishto Bhodrolok... Tomra Preme Porte Paro/ Oder Cholon Bolon Dekhe/ Aka Bhurur Baka Dhonu/ Pare Tomar Mundu Khete*” and “*Nari Choritra Bejai Jotil*” reeks of misogyny. In *Man Pasand*, Dr. Kashinath believes that marriage is a compromise and like Colonel Pickering, he considers Kamli to be a human being and not a machine which contrasts Pratap’s indifference towards her. The song “*Kabhi Shaadi Na Karo*” also showcases anti-feminist ideals. The title of “*Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye*” itself evokes a sense of inferiority that is being attached to the image of woman who has to be liked by a man in the first place in order to be a bride.

Conclusion

After analysing each of the films above the following inference can be drawn. It is to be noted that the mythical transaction happens at two levels. On the literal level, the films represent the reworking of the western myth of Pygmalion and Galatea and Shaw’s play *Pygmalion*. While on the metaphorical level, the transaction happens between the past colonizer and the present decolonized nation creating a space of mythical colonisation as there is no physical presence of the colonizer. Therefore, each of the films’ directors acts as careful relationship managers in appropriating the play of Shaw and transforming it to attract Indian viewers. The cross-cultural matchmaking that has taken place perhaps gives way to new avenues where more such unions can be made possible.

End Notes

1. *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*. Dir. Salil Dutta. Prod. R.D. Bansal. 1981. Film.
2. *Man Pasand*. Dir. Basu Chatterjee. Prod. Amit Khanna. 1980. Film.
3. *Dulhan Wohi Jo Piya Man Bhaye*. Dir. Lekh Tandon. Prod. Tarachand Barjatya. 1977. Film.
4. Shaw, Bernard. *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, [1954]2012. Print.
5. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, [1952]2008. Print.
6. From the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* by T S Eliot.
7. Ashcroft, Bill. Introduction. *Caliban’s Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures*. By Ashcroft. London: Routledge, 2009. 2. Print.
8. Hamilton, Edith. Introduction to Classical Mythology. *Mythology*. By Hamilton. New York: Mentor, 1940. 19. Print.
9. Hamilton, Edith. *Mythology*. New York: Mentor, 1940. 108. Print
10. Ibid.
11. This is the speech of the announcer during the felicitation programme of Gagan Sen in the opening scene of *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*.
12. This is the lyrics of a song that is part of the film *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*.

13. Loomba, Ania. "Local-manufacture made in India Othello fellows': Issues of race, hybridity and location in post-colonial Shakespeares". *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. Ed. Ania Loomba, Martin Orkin. London: Routledge, 1998. 143-163. Print.
14. Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge. 1998. 191-192. Print.
15. *Ogo Bodhu Shundari*. Dir. Salil Dutta. Prod. R.D. Bansal. 1981. Film.
16. Ibid.
17. Loomba, Ania, Martin Orkin. "Shakespeare and the Post-colonial Question." Introduction. *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*. Ed. Ania Loomba, Martin Orkin. London: Routledge, 1998. 7. Print.
18. Bhabha, Homi. "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha". Ed. Jonathan Rutherford. *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*. London: Lawrence & Wishart Limited, 1990. 207-221. Print.
19. Ashcroft, Bill. Introduction. *Caliban's Voice: The Transformation of English in Post-Colonial Literatures*. By Ashcroft. London: Routledge, 2009. 3. Print.
20. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin White Masks*. Trans. Charles Lam Markmann. London: Pluto Press, [1952]2008. 9. Print.
21. Shaw, Bernard. *Pygmalion: A Romance in Five Acts*. New Delhi: Orient Blackswan Private Limited, [1954]2012. 31. Print.

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