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Intercultural Adaptations of Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* in Kerala: Assimilation and Juxtapositioning of *Lady Macbeth* in Jayaraj's *Veeram* and Ettumanoor Kannan's *Macbeth Chollyattam*

Shefin. S

Research Scholar,
Department of English and OELs,
Dr. Harisingh Gour Central University,
Sagar. (M.P.) India.

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's plays have undergone diverse and even unexpected adaptations or rewrites since the 17th century. The experimental adaptations of William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, which have transcended temporal and spatial bounds, exemplify its enduring relevance. Shakespeare's works have been widely performed in diverse ways, reflecting the rich tapestry of Indian traditions. Shakespeare's plays have been modified, transformed, altered, restructured, and successfully presented in various forms of entertainment, including traditional presentations, contemporary theatre, and cinema, throughout the past two centuries. This paper aims to analyse two distinct adaptations and performances of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in India, examining them from diverse angles. This paper aims to analyse the creative and innovative adaptation of a classical literary text set in Scotland to two distinct Indian settings, both aesthetically and culturally. Specifically, it examines the transformation of the play *Macbeth*, originally from 16th century Scotland, United Kingdom, into two different Indian productions: *Macbeth Chollyattam* (2009) by Ettumanoor Parameswaran Kannan, and *Veeram* (directed by Jayaraj, 2016), which seeks to connect the play with 13th century Kerala, India. Various contemporary ideas rooted in the field of translation studies will be employed to analyse these adaptations or appropriations. The objective is to investigate the manner in which Shakespeare's literary creations are analysed and transformed within many cultural frameworks. The objective is to comprehend how these interpretations mirror the distinct perspectives and values of every culture.

Keywords: Intercultural theatre, Kathakali, Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Translation Studies.

Introduction

Shakespeare Adaptations in Regional Indian Cinema

In India, cinema holds a significance akin to that of a religious cult for the people. Indian filmmakers have extensively adapted William Shakespeare's plays. The term Bollywood is used to categorise all film productions from India. However, this definition oversimplifies the situation by failing to acknowledge the extensive presence of filmmaking in the subcontinent, which encompasses other regional cinema hubs like Telugu Cinema and Malayalam Cinema. The breadth of diversity within India's film industry is too extensive to be included in one word, such as Bollywood (Kishore et al. 2-4). The term "Bollywood" has varying interpretations among individuals. Academic conferences employ a broad interpretation of the term to encompass Indian cinema, although European television programmes showcasing Indian films may limit its definition to the mainstream genre, specifically focusing on very successful movies. Just like Hollywood, Bollywood embraces all aspects of the film industry in Bombay. Scholars who are interested in understanding the various ways that Indian culture has interacted with Shakespeare can study the distinctive collection of films offered by Malayalam cinema. It then specifically examines the film adaptation of filmmaker Jayaraj's *Veeram/HHamlet* [2017]. This paper explores the efficacy of incorporating regional folklore, mythology, and ritualistic traditions to construct narratives and conflicts.

Shakespeare Productions in Kerala Traditional Dance Dramas

Shakespeare adaptations in both Western and non-Western cultures typically cater to local viewers by incorporating Shakespeare into the cultural norms of the country or region. An example of a cross-cultural adaptation that aims to be inter-cultural is one that tells a story familiar to Western audiences but uses artistic techniques that Western audiences may not be familiar with or may not have encountered before. These adaptations, despite their apparent divergence from Western performance traditions, are frequently intended for Western audiences rather than native ones. While the method may have little success, like with the Kathakali *Lear*, it may be remarkably effective in generating Western interest in other cultures when executed at its highest level. The distinction between cross-cultural and intercultural adaptations can be unclear. However, what is important to note is that adaptations of Shakespeare, which originate from culturally marginalised groups, are able to reach global

audiences that would not otherwise be accessible. The cross-cultural adaptations of Shakespeare have two effects: they create a worldwide space for cultures that are peripheral to the Western centre, and they also strengthen the idea of Shakespeare's "universalism" simultaneously (Trivedi and Chakravarti, sec. Introduction 3-4). The incorporation of Shakespearean texts into the vocabulary of Kathakali provides intriguing observations on how the works of Shakespeare have been blended and presented on the Indian stage. Multiple adaptations of Shakespearean plays were performed in Kathakali. The most esteemed and accomplished among them are: *King Lear*: This adaptation was a joint endeavour by choreographer Annette Leday and author David McRuvie. The theatrical production, titled "Kathakali King Lear," has been engaged in a touring circuit since 1989. Arjun Raina, working together with his mentor Sadanam Balakrishnan, combined Kathakali with *Othello* throughout the 1990s. The play titled 'The Bard and the Beautiful' by Prabhal Gupta features Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra as characters. Prabal Gupta, a Kathakali exponent, performs two sequences: one from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and another from *Antony and Cleopatra*. 'Cholliyattom' is the technical term used to describe the act of performing the vocal rendition of songs in Kathakali. It is the simpler rehearsal form of cholliyattam in Kathakali.

Veeram as an Intercultural Appropriation in Vadakkanpattukal Setting

Veeram is an adaptation of traditional tales known as Vadakkanpattukal (Northern Ballads) which are an integral component of the oral heritage in North Kerala. The texts revolve around the lives and courageous achievements of individuals belonging to the warrior classes in the area. These individuals were highly skilled in martial arts (*kalari*) and engaged in duels as hired soldiers to resolve conflicts between local landlords and chieftains (*Trans-locating Macbeth to the valiant milieu of vadakkan pattu*).

In the film *Veeram* (Valour, 2016), Jayaraj revisits Shakespeare by selecting a highly renowned narrative from the 'Northern Ballads' (traditional ballads from North Kerala that depict the lives and heroic deeds of warriors) (*Veeram movie review: rediscovering Chandu, the cheat*). The narrative revolves around Chanthu, a Chekavan who engaged in combat to resolve conflicts among the regional chieftains. Aromal Chekavar, a member of the illustrious Putthooram family, chooses him to be the head of the martial arts schools because of his exceptional bravery. Unniyarcha, who is the sister of Aromal, the person Chanthu loved, previously rejected him. Chanthu is requested to accompany Aromal in combat against their arch nemesis, Aringodar. Chanthu agrees to tamper with the sword for the upcoming duel by

replacing its iron rivets with wooden ones because the enemy camp has attracted him. Despite the sword breaking, Aromal emerges victorious in the duel by fatally striking Aringodar with his fractured weapon. Upon concluding the duel, Chanthu proceeds to lethally assault Aromal while he is in a state of slumber. Unniyarcha makes a solemn promise to seek retribution in response to Chanthu's treachery, which she eventually keeps by using Aromal's son, Aromalunni, to challenge Chanthu to a fight and successfully defeat him.

The character known as the 'betrayer Chanthu' is a well-known and frequently depicted figure in Malayalam films. He has appeared in previous movies like Unniyarcha (1961) and Aromalunni (1972), where he plays the antagonist to C.S. Venkiteswaran Aromal's portrayal of the hero in the traditional narrative. M.T. Vasudevan Nair wrote the screenplay for the 1989 movie *Oru Vadakkan Veeraghadha*, and Hariharan was in charge of directing. The film tells the narrative of Chanthu, who is consistently misunderstood and labelled as a betrayer, leading to a lifetime of disgrace.

Veeram adheres to the conventional plotline and is unquestionably the most visually impressive film in the "Northern Ballads genre" in Malayalam cinema. Jayaraj has made minor deviations from the original and has introduced only a handful of situations and characters to enhance the story and maintain its alignment with the Shakespeare play. Similar to the play, the movie's plot begins when Putthooram House appoints Chanthu, who has just won a local conflict, as the Kalaris' leader. The film concludes with Chanthu's death in a fight against Aromalunni, the son of Aromal, whom Chanthu kills.

The Ellora Caves, serving as the primary setting, provide the picture with a timeless quality and create an epic atmosphere that magnifies the protagonists' larger-than-life presence. Due to the stylized and exaggerated nature of the characters, the subtle details of their expressions are not as significant as the visually striking and action-packed events presented in a tableau like manner.

The film features three significant duels: an introductory duel at the beginning that introduces Chanthu, followed by a duel between Aromal and Aringodar when Chanthu serves as the former's assistant, and finally a duel between Chanthu and Aromalunni. Aromal's murder occurs when he is in a state of slumber, while the killings of Kelu and others take place in dimly lit locations, which is starkly different from the duels that happen on elevated platforms in well-lit outside areas, where there are mocking crowds, waving banners, and kings sitting above.

Another notable element in the film is the inclusion of erotic scenes. One such scene occurs at the beginning, where Unniyarcha visits Chanthu in his bedroom after his promotion. She reignites his previous desire for her and implores him to safeguard her brother's life and reputation. The second encounter takes place between Chanthu and Kuttimani in their home, just before Chanthu is about to participate in a fight as Aromal's assistant. During this encounter, Kuttimani intensifies Chanthu's desires, both of a sexual and royal nature. The two ladies, one dressed and the other naked, who practise black magic, serve as contrasting elements to these two women. They also make two appearances in the film, first at the beginning and later when Chanthu seeks their assistance in a state of desperation.

In line with the repeating theme in his other 'Shakespeare' films, the protagonist in this film also experiences repeated nightmares. One of these nightmares is a scene from the play where he is startled by the appearance of Kelu, whom he had previously killed. Another incident takes place as he is returning from the black magicians and a group of oracles suddenly approach him while they are all wearing red and trance-like. They rush towards him, striking their heads with their own swords and causing themselves to bleed. Among them, he sees the bloodied faces of the individuals who killed Kelu.

The vast scale of the settings, the stunning portrayal of the battles, the intense sensual sequences, and the haunting nightmares all contribute to the visual magnificence of Veeram (Mohan 5-7). Macbeth is widely regarded as the most terrifying of Shakespeare's plays, as it immerses us in terror and allows us to experience it viscerally, affecting our senses and thoughts. According to Jayaraj, the primary focus of the film is 'valour', which is also a component of his series on Navarasas. Veeram attempts to amalgamate these two elements under the character of Chanthu, who exhibits both bravery and sensuality yet also displays naivety and apprehension. The overarching narrative ambiance and the traditional tales surrounding Chanthu are a perfect match for the figure of Macbeth, particularly concerning the political milieu of internal conflicts and the futile bravery of the warrior class, who are ensnared in the broader political spectacle of power struggles and competition.

***Macbeth Chollyattam* by Ettumanoor Kannan**

Macbeth Chollyattam by Kannan differs significantly from his later solo performances, with variations in structure and genre. The play is presented as a love relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, a construction not uncommon in Kathakali

plays. Kannan's US-based production showcased Shakespearean elements over Kathakali drama, while his later solo work focused on the psychological aspect of Lady Macbeth's destruction. The latter emphasised a more equal cultural collaboration, while Kannan's earlier production focused on the rasa of fear.

Juxtaposing Lady Macbeth and Kuttumani in the social pedestal of Vadakkan Pattukal and Elizabethan Era

The Elizabethan era had a linear progression of female roles: maid, wife, and widow. Lady Macbeth disrupts this progression by oscillating between these roles, ultimately leading to her downfall. The era was marked by Queen Elizabeth I's reign, which presented the paradox of a powerful female ruler in a male-dominated society. Women in Elizabethan society were subject to a patriarchal structure where men were considered the leaders and women their inferiors. Women were often seen as "the weaker sex," not only physically but also emotionally, and were expected to be under the care of a male guardian, whether it was a husband, father, or another male relative. Despite these limitations, some women were highly educated and could inherit property, though they faced restrictions in professions and voting rights (Hill 174-178)

Vadakkanpattukal is a significant part of Kerala's oral literature, reflecting the culture and society of mediaeval Malabar. These ballads narrate the tales of heroes and heroines from the northern parts of Kerala, particularly from the Puthooram and Thacholi households. Women in these ballads are depicted in various roles, such as goddesses, beloveds, and householders. The study aims to analyse the actual position of women beyond these idealised roles. The ballads use specific terms like "Uzhamporukkal" and "Uzhamvazhangal" to indicate temporary sexual relationships rather than permanent marital bonds. "Thalikettukalyanam" is a custom mentioned where girls undergo a symbolic marriage ceremony before the age of 10, highlighting the societal expectation of women being prepared for family life and marriage.

The role of the mother is highly revered, with mothers being equated to goddesses in spiritual life. The ballads emphasise the importance of motherhood and the respect accorded to mothers. The ballads critique the naduvazhi system (local chieftain system) and its impact on women, portraying them as subalterns within a male-dominated society. Resistance against the naduvazhi's authority and the caste system is a recurring theme, with women challenging

social norms and injustices. The ballads also address the exploitation and subordination of lower-class women, highlighting the deep-rooted caste inequalities in society (Reena 302-05).

Lady Macbeth is portrayed as a complex character who embodies both traditional femininity and a thirst for power. She manipulates gender norms to her advantage, invoking the supernatural to “unsex” her, thereby seeking the strength to commit regicide. The argument here is that gender is performative, citing Judith Butler’s theory that gender is a set of repeated acts within a societal framework. Lady Macbeth’s character challenges these performances, especially in her famous plea to be “unsexed” and her role in Macbeth’s rise to power.

The character of Kuttumani in the film "*Veeram*" represents a complex interplay between traditional Indian values and the evolving perceptions of female sexuality and agency. She is portrayed as a sexually assertive and ambitious woman, which is a significant departure from traditional Indian portrayals of married women as virtuous and docile. The film links Kuttumani's sexual agency with evil, drawing parallels to the vamp archetype, where sexually driven characters are often depicted as morally ambiguous and ultimately face tragic fates. By not being married to Macbeth (Chandu Chekavar) at the start, the narrative suggests that an Indian married woman would be incapable of the atrocities Kuttumani commits, reflecting societal discomfort with the idea of a married woman as a source of evil.

Kuttumani's pre-murder statement, before killing Aromal Chekavar, bears a striking resemblance to Lady Macbeth's monologue in Act 1, Scene 5, lines 36–52 of Shakespeare's play: "Oh Goddess! I invite malevolent and homicidal spirits to possess my being and eradicate any traces of benevolence and empathy within me. May I lack any trace of human empathy that might hinder me from achieving my malevolent scheme? May my breasts be filled with venom instead of lactation. Similar to the original Shakespearean text, the phrase employed implies that her femininity hinders her ability to engage in aggressive and brutal actions. Kuttumani relies on her uncle Aringodar, and if he were to die in the combat, she would be left without any support. The portrayal of domestic turmoil and mental health, together with the desire for greatness inspired by Shakespeare, converge in the depiction of the conflicts that lead to murder.

In contrast to Macbeth, where ambition takes centre stage as the main theme, *Veeram* places greater emphasis on sexuality and allure. The film effectively utilises cinematography and vocabulary to consistently reinforce this theme. Specifically, Kuttumani manipulates

Chanthu by making sexual overtures in order to obtain her desired outcome. Kuttumani's destiny is more dreadful than that of Lady Macbeth. She tragically takes her own life, portrayed as a result of her sexually provocative and immoral behaviour, in line with the notion that sexually driven protagonists in Indian cinema are destined for death. In the movie *Veeram*, Kuttumani's demise is not due to natural causes, but rather he tragically takes his own life by wielding a sword. Kuttumani's suicide is depicted in a visually striking manner, as the camera focuses on her as she takes her own life using one of the swords from the previous combat. *Veeram* effectively and explicitly resolves the uncertainty surrounding Lady Macbeth's death, as portrayed in the original Shakespearean source.

Lady Macbeth in Kathakali framework in *Macbeth Cholliyattam*

Lady Macbeth is depicted with a demonic ruthlessness, especially in her manipulation of Macbeth and her notorious consideration of infanticide to prove her determination. Her influence profoundly impacts Macbeth psychologically, driving him towards the regicidal deed that precipitates his ruin. The adaptation delves into the intercultural strains between the Shakespearean script and Kathakali's performance conventions, with Lady Macbeth's role being a central element of this artistic exchange.

The contemplated infanticide in Shakespeare's narrative is a stark portrayal of Lady Macbeth's mercilessness, serving as a powerful narrative device. Kannan interprets this as a symbol of maternal authority and societal trepidations regarding women's impact on patrilineal succession. His analysis further investigates the wider cultural milieu, examining the connections between maternal influence, nursing, and infanticide with patrilineage and the governing structure. Contextual references to historical figures such as Anne Boleyn and legal discussions like the 1624 Infanticide Act elucidate these concerns.

To demonstrate his approach, Kannan cites Lady Macbeth's metaphor in 1.7.54-55: "Reflecting on Lady Macbeth's words about the infant... 'I have given suck, and I know how tender it is to love the babe that milks me.' The audience grasped the concept; subsequently, I portrayed its significance." By prefacing with the English text, Kannan uses Shakespeare as a linguistic bridge, inviting his diverse audience to connect with his multifaceted performance languages.

After performing various movements and expressions to convey the meaning of the verse, Kannan then continued to narrate Lady Macbeth's reaction by adopting her character through *pakarnattam*, which involves imaginatively shifting perspectives. Kannan depicted Lady Macbeth as a malevolent entity, skillfully imitating her tears, displaying shock at her own proposition to assassinate the king, and expressing anger in response to his rejection. Following the performance of mimicking Lady Macbeth's dialogue, including the line "had I so sworn" (1.7.58), the actor forcefully threw an imaginary nursing baby to the ground in a disturbing manner. Initially, he performed a *kalasam* in the *lasya*, which is a more delicate and feminine style. He skillfully imitated the act of gazing at a baby that was resting on the ground, as per the customary practice in Kerala. Lady Macbeth, displaying curiosity and fondness, raised her eyebrows and picked up the kid. She lovingly touched and entertained the youngster by making playful expressions while gesturing to indicate, "Do not cry!"

Conclusion

The intercultural adaptations of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" in Kerala, as explored through Jayaraj's "Veeram" and Ettumanoor Parameswaran Kannan's "Macbeth Cholliyattam," illustrate the dynamic and transformative power of Shakespeare's work across diverse cultural landscapes. These adaptations do more than simply transpose the narrative to a new setting; they imbue the story with regional aesthetics, values, and historical contexts, creating a rich tapestry of cultural dialogue.

"Veeram" seamlessly integrates the narrative of Macbeth with the traditional "Vadakkanpattukal" ballads, effectively blending Shakespearean themes with local folklore and martial traditions. The portrayal of Chanthu as a figure mirroring Macbeth highlights the universal themes of ambition, betrayal, and valor, while also emphasizing the distinct cultural and historical backdrop of 13th century Kerala. The film's emphasis on visual grandeur, ritualistic elements, and the nuanced depiction of sexuality further enhance its intercultural narrative.

On the other hand, "Macbeth Cholliyattam" by Kannan utilizes the classical dance-drama form of Kathakali to reinterpret Lady Macbeth's character. By incorporating Kathakali's expressive techniques and performance conventions, the adaptation not only pays homage to Shakespeare's original text but also explores deeper psychological and emotional facets of the characters within an Indian cultural framework. The juxtaposition of Elizabethan and medieval

Malabar societal norms, especially regarding gender roles and power dynamics, offers profound insights into the performative nature of gender and the societal expectations placed upon women.

These adaptations underscore the dynamic interplay between global literary traditions and local cultural practices. They highlight how Shakespeare's works can be continually reinterpreted and revitalized through intercultural engagement, fostering a deeper appreciation for both the universality of Shakespearean themes and the richness of regional artistic expressions. The study of "Veeram" and "Macbeth Chollyattam" thus not only enriches our understanding of Shakespeare's enduring impact but also celebrates the creative possibilities that arise from the fusion of different cultural narratives and performance traditions.

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