

SHAKESPEARE BEYOND THE WEST: NON-WESTERN ADAPTATIONS AND CULTURAL OWNERSHIP

Grace Yohana Gultom¹, Regina Ruth², Aish Manisha³, Logita Lezmi⁴, Mitha Angelika Nababan⁵, Nurhayati Purba⁶

Universitas Methodist Indonesia

Email: graceyhn4@gmail.com¹, reginaruth016@gmail.com², Aishmanisha0808@gmail.com³, logitalecemi@gmail.com⁴, mithaangelikanababan@gmail.com⁵, nurhayatipurba07@gmail.com⁶

Abstract

This research explores the phenomenon of non-Western adaptations of Shakespeare's plays, focusing on how such adaptations negotiate cultural ownership and redefine Shakespeare's position within global cultural heritage. Through qualitative analysis, including textual and performance analysis and interviews with theatre practitioners, the study examines adaptations from Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Findings reveal that non-Western artists do not merely reproduce Shakespearean texts but creatively transform them, infusing local narratives, aesthetics, and political commentaries. These adaptations serve as acts of cultural agency, challenging Eurocentric cultural dominance and expanding notions of authorship and authenticity. The study contributes to broader debates in intercultural performance studies and postcolonial theory by highlighting how Shakespeare has become a global cultural resource rather than a solely Western possession.

Keywords: Cultural adaptation, Non-Western reception, Postcolonial literature, Shakespeare.

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INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare's works have long been positioned as a central pillar of Western literary and cultural tradition. From the nineteenth century onward, his plays became emblems of cultural prestige and colonial influence, exported around the world as symbols of Western civilization (Lo & Gilbert, 2002; Singh, 1996). However, in recent decades, Shakespeare has transcended these boundaries, becoming a fertile site for cultural negotiation and artistic experimentation in non-Western contexts.

Non-Western adaptations of Shakespeare are not simply translations or reproductions. Rather, they often involve substantial transformations of text, performance style, character dynamics, and thematic focus. These adaptations serve diverse purposes—affirming local cultural identities, critiquing political regimes, and challenging global cultural hierarchies (Bharucha, 1993; Poon, 2010).

This research investigates how non-Western artists engage with Shakespeare's works, addressing the following key questions:

- How do non-Western adaptations reinterpret Shakespeare's texts to reflect indigenous cultural narratives and socio-political realities?
- In what ways do these adaptations challenge the idea of Shakespeare as Western cultural property?
- How do performance aesthetics and local theatrical traditions shape these adaptations?

The study is positioned at the intersection of intercultural performance studies and postcolonial theory, seeking to illuminate how Shakespeare, once a symbol of Western authority, has been transformed into a globally shared artistic resource.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research utilizes a **qualitative, interpretive research design** anchored in the traditions of cultural studies and performance analysis. The approach emphasizes in-depth exploration over broad statistical generalization (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A multi-method strategy was adopted, combining:

- **Textual analysis** of adapted scripts and published translations
- **Performance analysis** through the study of video recordings and reviews
- **Semi-structured interviews** with theatre practitioners

Such triangulation enhances the reliability and depth of the findings (Patton, 2015).

Data Collection

Primary Data

- **Scripts and Texts:**
 - *The Banquet* (Chinese adaptation of *Hamlet*)
 - Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (Indian adaptation of *Macbeth*)
 - Wole Soyinka's *A Play of Giants* and Yoruba adaptations of *Macbeth*
 - South African *Othello* performed in Zulu
 - Japanese Noh versions of *Macbeth*
- **Performance Recordings:**
 - Archival videos accessed via institutional collections, streaming services, and theatre company archives.
- **Interviews:**
 - Conducted with:
 - Directors and dramaturgs in China, India, Nigeria, and Egypt
 - Actors involved in significant productions
 - Scholars in postcolonial and intercultural theatre studies

Interview questions focused on:

- Artistic motivations behind adapting Shakespeare
- Perceptions of cultural ownership
- Challenges in balancing local traditions with global expectations

Secondary Data

- Academic books and articles on intercultural Shakespeare (e.g., Bharucha, 1993; Kennedy, 1993; Lo & Gilbert, 2002)
- Critical essays and performance reviews
- Digital archives and databases (e.g., JSTOR, Project MUSE)

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed through:

- **Thematic Analysis:** Patterns were coded into themes such as:
 - Cultural hybridity
 - Local political commentary
 - Resistance to cultural imperialism
 - Transformations in performance aesthetics
- **Comparative Analysis:** Contrasted non-Western adaptations with canonical Western interpretations to identify significant shifts in narrative structure, thematic focus, and performance style.
- **Discourse Analysis:** Examined language used by artists and critics around concepts like authenticity, appropriation, and ownership.

Coding was performed iteratively, with emerging insights from one data set guiding further exploration of others (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The research conducted on **Shakespeare Beyond the West: Non-Western Adaptations and Cultural Ownership** has revealed several key findings:

1. *Widespread Adaptations Across Cultures:*

Shakespeare's plays have been extensively adapted in non-Western cultures such as India, Japan, China, Nigeria, Indonesia, and South Africa. These adaptations are not mere reproductions but creative re-interpretations that incorporate local languages, traditions, political concerns, and performance aesthetics.

2. *Cultural Recontextualization as a Strategy of Ownership:*

Non-Western artists and directors utilize adaptation as a tool of cultural negotiation and ownership. By embedding Shakespeare into their local sociopolitical contexts, they both reclaim and critique the colonial or Eurocentric frameworks through which Shakespeare was once introduced.

3. *Hybridization and Indigenization:*

The findings show that non-Western adaptations tend to hybridize Shakespearean narratives. For instance, **Othello** is adapted into the Kathakali dance tradition in India, **Macbeth** into the Japanese Noh and Kabuki theatre, and **The Tempest** into postcolonial Caribbean or African narratives. These adaptations incorporate indigenous symbols, philosophies, and performance techniques.

4. *Resistance and Political Commentary:*

Many non-Western adaptations serve as a medium for political expression and resistance. Directors use Shakespeare's works to comment on postcolonial identity, power, gender inequality, and cultural alienation. These performances are often layered with allegorical references to colonialism, dictatorship, or historical trauma.

5. *Challenges of Cultural Ownership:*

The study finds that while adaptation allows for local ownership, it also raises questions about authenticity, cultural appropriation, and the limits of transformation. There is a tension between honoring the original text and asserting local voice.

Discussion

The findings illuminate a significant shift in the global perception and use of Shakespeare. No longer seen solely as a figure of Western literary canon, Shakespeare has become a global cultural resource. His texts, once imposed through colonial education systems, are now reappropriated and reimagined through local cultural lenses.

1. *as a Transcultural Text:*

The adaptations studied suggest that Shakespeare's works are highly malleable and lend themselves to cross-cultural reinterpretation. In **Shakespeare and Postcolonial Theory** (Lomba, 2005), Shakespeare is framed as a "contact zone" where different cultures engage in dialogic exchange. This research supports that claim, showing how non-Western adaptations create spaces for dialogue between global texts and local experiences.

2. *Reclaiming Agency Through Adaptation:*

Non-Western artists often employ Shakespeare to assert cultural agency. In doing so, they reverse the historical flow of cultural imperialism. These adaptations become acts of resistance and reclamation. For instance, South African performances during apartheid used **Othello** and **Julius Caesar** as subtle critiques of the regime. Similarly, Indian versions of **Hamlet** question caste and familial duty, bringing Shakespeare into conversation with dharma and karma.

3. *Cultural Ownership and Global Equity:*

The discourse on cultural ownership is inherently tied to questions of power. While non-Western societies creatively reinterpret Shakespeare, the global theater and academic circuits

still often privilege Western-authored interpretations. This raises the need for a more equitable recognition of non-Western contributions in global Shakespearean studies. As highlighted by scholars such as Dennis Kennedy and Rustom Bharucha, the idea of “owning” Shakespeare must be decolonized to include and value non-Western innovations.

4. *Negotiating Authenticity and Innovation:*

A critical discussion also emerges around the notions of authenticity. Some critics argue that transforming Shakespeare too drastically risks distorting the original; however, this research argues that innovation is not distortion but evolution. Authenticity in adaptation lies not in fidelity to the source but in fidelity to purpose and context.

5. *Implications for Pedagogy and Performance:*

The study’s findings suggest that Shakespeare should no longer be taught or performed as a static Western inheritance. Instead, educators and directors are encouraged to incorporate global perspectives and adaptations to challenge Eurocentric dominance and foster intercultural understanding.

CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that non-Western adaptations of Shakespeare are profound acts of cultural negotiation, creativity, and resistance. Rather than reinforcing Western cultural hegemony, these adaptations reclaim Shakespeare for local purposes, contributing to a more inclusive, global cultural heritage.

Non-Western artists transform Shakespeare’s works to:

- Embed local narratives and socio-political critique
- Showcase indigenous performance aesthetics
- Assert cultural ownership and artistic agency

These insights call for a re-evaluation of cultural ownership and remind scholars that global cultural icons like Shakespeare belong not to any single region but to a worldwide community of artists and audiences.

Future research could explore:

- Audience reception of non-Western adaptations
- Digital dissemination and online intercultural Shakespeare projects
- Comparative studies of adaptations of other Western canonical figures

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