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'Botox-ing' the Bard - Rearrangement of the depiction of the Centre-Margin equation of Shakespearean dramas in some recent cinematic Adaptations

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Abstract: Even after 400 years of being in circulation, Shakespeare manages to have a book, journal or article published on him in some part of the world, every half-hour. The reinterpretation of the Shakespearean dramas in modern cinema has also opened up new vistas. The main themes of the dramas like *Macbeth, Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello* have been applied to different concepts with different background. The recent movies like Tim Blake Nelson's '*O*' (2001), Tom Gustafson's '*Were the World mine*' (2008) or '*Macbeth-Shakespeare Retold*' though based on Shakespearean dramas but they just a far cry from the actual royal families. Thus the princes/kings of Shakespeare's quartos and folios are completely de-classed. In the Indian adaptations like Vishal Bharadwaj's '*Maqbool*' and '*Omkara*', the reconfiguration of the hero's class is even more pronounced. The chief protagonists are gangsters and *Dalit sardars,* respectively—in every way the 'underbelly' of society. Their struggle to gain prominence, better to say, to hold a position in society (to come to the centre) has resulted in the centre - margin conflict. The application of a text of Shakespearean canon (centre) to such story of a lower class or lower strata (margin) in a way brings out the modern cultural struggle. In a sense the archetypal power struggle has changed into struggle of the marginalized to reach the centre. This paper attempts to follow this phenomenon through a study of some movie adaptations of Shakespeare, chiefly the ones mentioned above. Further, in the paper we would like to explore centre-margin dialectic - this time of gender. Moving on from the men; the women characters, mostly passive in Shakespeare's tragedies undergo sea changes in these modern cinematic interpretations - whether it is Nimmi in '*Maqbool*' or Indu in '*Omkara*'. We would also like to focus on recent popular flicks like Gil Junger's '*10 Things I Hate About You*' (1999), Andy

Fickman's '*She's the Man*' (2006) and Jocelyn Moorhouse's feminist take on King Lear, '*AThousand Acres*' (1997) based on Jane Smiley's novel, to explore how the agency of the women has changed from the Bard's time to ours, how marginality as a concept has changed.

Key Words: movie, adaptation, society, centre, margin, power, cultural struggle, feminism, cross-dressing.

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Shakespeare has seeped into our modern culture in various, and at the same time, in unexpected ways. It is just unnecessary to mention that the reinterpretation of the Shakespearean dramas in modern cinema has opened up new vistas. The main themes of the dramas like *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello* have been applied to different concepts with different backgrounds. The recent movies like Vishal Bharadwaj's 'Maqbool', Tim Blake Nelson's 'O' (2001), Tom Gustafson's 'Were the World mine' (2008) or 'Macbeth-Shakespeare Retold' etc have focused on the people who belong not to any royal family, rather sprawl on the margins of society. The chief protagonists are gangsters, coloured sportsmen who are also recovering drug addicts, geeky high school students who are social disasters and also openly gay, or chefs in a hotel. Their struggle to gain prominence, better to say, to hold a position in society (to come to the centre) has resulted in the centre - margin conflict. The application of a text of Shakespearean canon (centre) to such story of a gangster or drug abuser or mere student (margin) in a way brings out the modern cultural struggle. While the Shakespearean texts deals with power struggles of the royal families, these new movies are focusing on the struggle of those who belong to the periphery of the society. In a sense the archetypal power struggle has changed into struggle of the marginalized to reach the centre. This paper attempts to follow this phenomenon through a study of some movie adaptations of Shakespeare, chiefly the ones mentioned above.

The recent (2005) BBC adaptation of *Macbeth*, for instance, shows Duncan as the owner of a chain of restaurants and Macbeth (renamed Joe), as the chef. A far cry from the 'Bellona's bridegroom' Shakespeare gave us. In the 2001 Othello adaptation, *'O'*, odin is not a mighty moor. Rather, he is a warrior in the modern day battlefield—Sports. The only Afro-American student in his school, he is a star basketball player, but what pushes him more towards the margin is his problem of substance abuse. When this recovering cocaine addict, not totally in control of his faculties, roughs up Desi (his Desdemona) and then kills her in a drug induced haze of jealousy, the powerful centre and the weak, and hence often delinquent, margin begin to blur.

Moving on from the men; the women characters, undergo sea changes in these modern cinematic interpretations.

Quite interesting from this point are movies like Jocelyn Moorhouse's *A Thousand Acres* (1997) (the feminist take on *King Lear,* based on a novel by Jane Smiley) and *Romeo and Juliet X*(the 2007 Japanese animation series aired by Chubu-Nippon broadcasting, catching eyeballs in the English speaking world since 2009, courtesy Funimation). In *Acres*, Lear is Larry Cook, a prosperous farmer. Very affluent undoubtedly, though of course without a drop of royalty in the veins. However, what is of more interest to the premise of our paper is that as the sordid saga unfolds; he emerges as a paedophile who seriously scarred his two elder daughters. Whatever be the artistic merit or box office fate of this film, what we want to focus on is how in the hands of a woman director, the *Lear* figure gets pushed to the margin, and this increasingly becomes a tale of the three daughters, 'traditionally' the marginalized ones. Carolyn (Cordelia) refuses to stay back on the farm. And she is banished not because she refuses to say how much she loves her father; but because she decides in favour of a career in law and not the life of a farmer larry has in mind for her, immediately resetting the centre-margin equation. Even more, *Acres* is the story of the vilified two elder daughters, 'the pelican daughters' as Shakespeare's Lear put it. From the doubly marginalized position of being women and villains—they push way their way to the centre and make themselves heard and seen. We are told of their tie to the land, their complicated relationship with their abusive father, their passion for the same man—even while one of them battles infertility and the other breast cancer. And the narration is in Ginny's (Goneril's) voice, who is here a quiet, responsible woman—one who threatens to take away her father's car keys *only because* he has an accident driving around drunk, and that too after being goaded to do so by Carolyn, with whom she remains in touch. Larry, of course, reacts as theatrically as his Elizabethan counterpart with a wounded "I've nothing" but curses using slightly more unparliamentary language. How the thoughtful Ginny and the fiery, outspoken but warm hearted Rose bond and derive strength from each other, as family skeletons (including Larry's incestuous relations with his daughters) tumble out of the closet, is definitely not what the 16th century *King Lear* was about.

It creates a feminine version of the Lear, providing a voice to the maligned heroines, Goneril and Regan. According to the author Smiley of the novel on which the movie is based, "I'd always felt the way *Lear* was presented to me was wrong. Without being able to articulate why i thought Goneril and Regan got the short end of the stick. There had to be some reason his daughters were so angry. Shakespeare would attribute their anger to their evil natures, but i don't think people in the 20th century think evil exists without a cause. I knew where the anger came from..." (Anderson, 3). She elaborates how this leads to think her of the contemporary issues like gender roles and abused girlhood. She is not the first one to retake on the story of King Lear. Rather she reframed the story from the angle of Goneril and Regan not following the path of

Nahum Tate, Edward Bond and Akira Kurosawa. Both, in the movie and in the novel, the stereotype central (patriarchy) margin (women) equation has been changed to give way to a new perspective. Here not only it is shown how patriarchy controls and preserves its position in society but at the same time the women (the subjugated) given chance to prove their own identities in their own way. Definitely 'incest' cannot be considered as 'love' rather it is just a shameful way to control and overpower the women and abolish their identity. Both Ginny and Rose ultimately rise up from the tussles of paternal (better say 'male') abuse with their strength of mind and gusto, making their own (even very much feminine) language heard clearly among the roar of patriarchal voices.

Romeo X Juliet questions the patriarchal centre- margin dichotomy even more sharply. Here Romeo is the namby-pamby heir of the Montague family who have exterminated the real rulers of the city, the Capulets, to usurp control. The only one who manages to escape, thanks to the help of some dedicated followers, is the child Juliet. 16 years later, she is told her story by her saviours, as the time has come for her to fulfil her life's mission—win back from the usurpers what rightfully belonged to the Capulet clan. Meanwhile, of course, she has met and unwittingly fallen in love with Romeo. But, here's the twist, she has also become the 'crimson whirlwind', a masked super hero character who goes around in her 'superman' style cape, saving people from the tyranny of the cruel Montagues. In the end, Romeo and Juliet do die, true to the original tale. But this Juliet dies while fighting to restore her floating land's stability. She is a woman-in-love, but not a maudlin, powerless, marginal woman who ends her life without even confirming whether her paramour is *really* dead. She is a warrior with agency of her own and a fixed goal. One may argue that cross-dressing has provided her the scope and chance to fight among the males, but even without the disguising attire of 'Red Whirlwind' she is a true '*hero*' in every sense of the term. Far from the love-lorn Juliet she fights not only for her rights but also for her clan. Here she is one step ahead of other Shakespearean heroines like Viola, Portia, Rosalind (all of them cross-dressed to face the challenges of the over-towering male outer world). Here she can be a perfect example of the Queer theory that actually attempts to break through the binary thinking and constantly carries its crusade against the gender stereotypes through the negation of its labels and presentation of the social identities. It destabilises the idea of 'gender' and destabilizes it.

In this line one must mention Julie Taymor's version of *The Tempest*. It goes one step further in gender sensitizing the Bard. Prospero is so relegated to the margin that he becomes Prospera, an all-powerful sorceress. Helen Mireen's gain is another nail in the coffin of the 'man—centre, woman—margin' notion that the Shakespeare original gave.

If his tragedies were for the heroes, Shakespeare's comedies have always been said to belong to his women. Rosalind, Viola, Portia are all resourceful, witty, smart and beautiful women. However, true to his times, these heroines mostly expend their smartness in devising of ways to gain the man they love. And yet, the way Viola plays the role of Duke Orsino's

messenger to Olivia, with all honesty, is the stuff of which fantasies are made! Never once do her own emotions cloud her entreaties to her rival on behalf of the man she wants for herself. In the very popular (2006) take on *Twelfth Night*; Andy Fickman's *She's the Man*, Viola is a gutsy woman who remoulds the comment that Shakespeare's comedies belong to his women, closer to the heart's desire. This Viola is not a hapless victim of circumstances, tossed by the sea. She disguises herself as her own brother, Sebastian and lands up in his high school, Illyria because she wants to play football. On her way, she breaks up with her chauvinist boyfriend who does not want her to play. So, this Viola is out to save her skin as much as the Viola of 400 years before—only her intention is to avoid being a debutante strutting around in high heels, when she could be kicking a ball on the greens. True to what the Bard had ordained for her character, when she does fall for her roommate, Duke Orsino, she promises to cultivate his crush Olivia (on his behalf) and yet we see her doing what she can to convince Orsino that 'his sister' Viola would be a more appropriate partner for him, in some hilarious sequences. *She's the Man* actually showcases gender equality and challenges the traditional views on gender-specific roles. The movie shows soccer as a symbol of male dominated society where a woman has no place to try her feet. Viola's extreme hardwork (including cross-dressing) to prove that she is better than the male soccer team (if given a chance) does not make her forget that she is a woman with emotions too. Viola here literally surpasses her Shakespearean counterpart maintaining an exquisite balance between the two roles - blurring the stereotypical ideas of centre-margin – gliding, shifting and at the same time maintaining a taut balance. The movie upholds the sole of feminism that if given a chance a woman can cross any hurdle (soccer is merely a game).

The Taming of the Shrew is perhaps one of those of his plays which feminists most love to hate, because of its open sexism (albeit in the guise of humour). Gil Junger's '*10 Things I Hate About You'* (1999), shows a shrewish Kat all right, but then provides a refreshing new story. Cameron James, a new student at Padua (Stadium High School in Tacoma, Washington), is given a tour of the school by Michael Eckman, who is an AV geek. During the tour, Cameron spots the beautiful and popular Bianca Stratford and is immediately smitten with her. Michael warns that Bianca is shallow, conceited, and worst of all, not allowed to date. Michael does, however, inform Cameron that Bianca is looking for a French tutor.

At the Stratford residence, Bianca's outcast older sister Kat is in conflict with their protective father, who wants Kat to attend college nearby, despite her acceptance to Sarah Lawrence College. Bianca is also fighting with her father regarding his strict no-dating rule. However, Kat's aversion to dating prompts the father to come up with a new rule: Bianca can only date if Kat is also dating.Cameron starts tutoring Bianca, and she informs him of her father's rule after Cameron makes many failed attempts to ask her out. This news motivates Cameron and Michael to set out to find a boy who is willing to date Kat. Cameron suggests Patrick Verona, an outcast who is just as ill-tempered as Kat. Cameron tries asking Patrick for

his assistance, but Patrick scares him off. Michael then poses the idea to Joey, also attempting to date Bianca, to pay Patrick to take Kat out. Patrick agrees, but Kat, however, wants nothing to do with Patrick. He eventually wins her over and the two become a couple, while Kat remains unaware of the money Patrick received to originally date her. Meanwhile, Cameron continues to pursue Bianca who remains interested in Joey, unaware of his intentions to use her for sex.

Bianca tries to convince her father to let her go to the prom with Joey, but he refuses because Kat isn't going. When Bianca confronts Kat, it is revealed that Kat previously dated Joey and he had used her for sex. She tells Bianca that her feelings of isolation from her peers ultimately stemmed from the incident with Joey. Bianca and Kat end up going to the prom with Cameron and Patrick, respectively. Joey is furious to learn that Bianca has gone to the prom with Cameron, and confronts Patrick about the "arrangement" in front of Kat. Kat blows up at Patrick and leaves. Joey subsequently confronts Cameron about manipulating the 'deal' for himself, but after he punches Cameron, Bianca hits Joey three times, leaving him curled up in pain on the floor.

The next morning, the sisters make up and Kat's father allows her to go to Sarah Lawrence. At school, Kat reads a poem which she wrote for English class, titled "*10 Things I Hate About You*" (although it contains 14 things she hates about Patrick). While reading the poem, she reveals (in front of the entire class) how hurt she was by what Patrick did and how much she really cares about him. Patrick is shown to be touched by her revelation. In the parking lot, Kat finds a guitar that Patrick bought her with the money Joey paid him, and he admits that he messed up their deal by falling for her. Kat forgives Patrick and the two kiss and make up. Thus while the movie is still a soppy teeny-bopper romance, the women here are far more in charge of their own lives than in Shakespeare's text and as we see with Bianca, they don't hesitate to 'sock up' the boys if the need arises.

Now, we want to focus on the other side of the picture. If the central characters are becoming more marginalised, what is the fate of the original 'marginal-s' in Shakespeare's works? I have spoken of women as a separate category because their marginality is of a more subtle nature in Shakespeare. But they do lead up to the 'submerged' voices in the Elizabethan texts and their representation in some recent films. In the television series *Macbeth*, mentioned at the beginning, we see that the 'witches' are now men. Yes, they are poor garbage-cleaners, still at the periphery of society, it's true. But nonetheless, they are men, *not* women; or rather the even more marginalized 'weird' women, any longer. In passing I can't resist referring to Vishal Bharadwaj's gem *Maqbool*, where the blurring of the centre-margin is even more poignant. Not only are the 'witches' here men, but they are powerful men, representatives of the law—hardly 'peripheral' from any vantage point.

In the 2008 musical comedy, *Were the World Mine*, a take on *Midsummer Night's Dream*, this re-alignment of the margin-centre equation continues. The setting is again, not a

royal court, but a high school, and the central protagonist Timothy is an out-of-the-closet gay and hence the butt of most jokes on the campus. He is cast as puck in his school-play and in trying to get under the skin of his character; he manages to actually make the love-potion that the original Puck had used on the Hermia and Lysander of the 16th century text. Tim uses the potion on the guy he has a crush on, and then on the entire town, turning almost everyone's sexual orientation on its head, leading understandably to rip-roaring results. The song '*O Timothy*' is his gay fantasy (so openly expressed) and if this does not merit a re-think on the centre-margin equation in Shakespeare, not much else will. Definitely a queer Shakespeare adaptation this movie incorporate present day issues like homophobia and toleration. Here Puck's love juice is just a weapon that rubs off the sexual stereotypes and makes the people show their own colours resulting in the breakage of the fine line existing between centre and margin. When the periphery and the core has been topsy-turvy, one is shocked to face the bold question regarding his or her identity before entering the world.

No discussion of Shakespeare's marginalised characters can be complete without reference the sinister old man of Venice—Shylock. Recent criticism has much sympathy to offer to this 'old cur' and that is reflected in the 2004 Michael Radford adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*. The movie begins, quite unlike the written text, with snippets of Christian atrocities on the Jews of the time, immediately giving a 'visible' context to Shylock's later animosity to Antonio and his ilk. This is in contrast to Shakespeare's modus operandi, since keeping the sensitivity of the issue, he had chosen to work chiefly through hints and suggestions.

That these interpretations and reworkings are coming up definitely shows the changing sensibilities of the world we live in. But in my opinion, (and I will stick my neck out on this, braving the danger of appearing essentialist), that the Bard can be 'botox-ed' and made new in this way, only goes to show how timeless and universal Willy Shakespeare and his works still are (whatever he himself might say).

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