

Women and Indian Shakespeares

Eds. Thea Buckley, Mark Thornton Burnett, Sangeeta Datta,
and Rosa García-Periago

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What does it mean for Shakespeare—a playwright so deeply entwined with the legacy of British colonialism—to be claimed, reimaged, and performed by women in postcolonial India? Can the act of adaptation become a form of resistance, allowing artists to challenge both imperial and patriarchal canons? Can these adaptations, rooted in indigenous languages, traditions, and feminist critique, truly unsettle the Eurocentrism that still shapes global perceptions of Shakespeare? And how can the same texts used to enforce colonial hierarchies become, in the hands of Dalit performers, rural women's troupes, and feminist directors, a language of resistance against caste, gender, and neocolonial oppression?

These are the urgent questions at the heart of *Women and Indian Shakespeares*, a volume that brings together a compelling collection of essays to explore how Indian women, as translators, directors, performers, and critics, have transformed the Bard's legacy into a site of decolonizing feminist agency. In a field where both Shakespeare and Indian theater have often been narrated through male-dominated, anglophone perspectives, this collection insists on plurality, complexity, and the power of performance to rewrite cultural memory from a distinctly non-Eurocentric vantage point.

As the essays in the volume convincingly suggest, Indian women's adaptations are not merely acts of cultural translation but powerful interventions in decolonization and feminist resistance. The volume uses an interdisciplinary approach, spanning theater studies, literary criticism, cultural studies, and performance theory, which enables a rich exploration of how Shakespeare's plays become sites for negotiating identity, power, and agency in postcolonial India.

The editors organized the collection into four sections: Histories, Translations, Representations, and Critics/creative, each illuminating the importance of women's voices and experiences in shaping these performances and in challenging patriarchal attitudes within Indian society. This structure allows the volume to foreground what the editors identify as a critical direction in Indian Shakespeares: "a greater recognition of the specifics of expression, place and diversity" (p. 3). The essays take up this challenge by emphasizing oral traditions, regional languages, and embodied performance. In doing so, the collection offers a vital corrective to dominant Shakespearean scholarship that often marginalizes non-Western voices. The chapters

demonstrate how Indian women artists negotiate a space that is both locally grounded and globally resonant, situating their adaptations within broader decolonial efforts to dismantle colonial epistemologies that have historically silenced or erased Indian women's experiences—a point that echoes foundational postcolonial critiques by scholars like Ania Loomba and Jyotsna Singh.

Crucially, the essays do not treat Indian women as a monolithic category. Instead, the collection foregrounds gender in tandem with caste, class, religion, and region. As the editors note, “issues around gender have not as yet received sustained treatment ... despite the multiple ways in which women, and those identifying as women, are, and have been, engaged with Shakespeare in India” (p. 4). By drawing on concepts of intersectionality (Collins and Bilge 2016, cited p. 4), the volume enriches the decolonial conversation and highlights the plurality of Indian feminist subjectivities.

The volume's feminist perspective is a standout feature. Several essays explore how Indian women artists reimagine Shakespeare's patriarchal and Eurocentric gender roles to challenge social norms and patriarchal violence. As Jennifer T. Birkett shows in her chapter on Vishal Bhardwaj's tragedies, the reworking of Ophelia's analogue Arshia in *Haider* transforms her from a passive victim into a figure of resistance (pp. 167-186). More broadly, contributors such as Annette Leday (Ch. 12) reflect on how performance traditions like Kathakali reinvent Shakespeare's women on stage, while feminist practitioners in the roundtable highlight the political urgency of such reimaginings. As Birkett further observes, Bhardwaj endows his heroines with “violent determination and hennaed hands,” making female agency crucial to restoring justice and resolving domestic tragedy (p. 178). In this way, Ophelia's analogue Arshia is reframed not as a symbol of passivity, but as an agentive figure within a politics of resistance (pp. 179-181).

Moreover, the volume addresses queer and LGBTQ+ perspectives, notably in chapters by Priyanka Basu and Arani Ilankuberan (pp. 66-85), which analyze Bengali adaptations of *Twelfth Night* that critique heteronormativity and rigid gender binaries. This inclusion is crucial in expanding the feminist scope beyond cisnormative frameworks and situating Indian Shakespeare adaptations within global queer feminist discourses.

The volume devotes sustained attention to cinema, showing how Indian filmmakers reinterpret Shakespeare through feminist and postcolonial lenses. In their analysis of *Veeram*, Mark Thornton Burnett and Jyotsna Singh argue that the film “offers a radical appropriation rather than a reverential adaptation,” pulling apart *Macbeth* through “spectacles of sensuality and ritualized violence” (p. 114). Elsewhere, Burnett's reading of the Hindi film *Noblemen* shows how it “finds in its engagement with Shakespeare an opportunity to analogise interconnections between colonial legacies, sexuality and contemporary political conservatism” (p. 210). Nishi Pulugurtha's analysis of the Marathi film *Sairat* highlights how its heroine Archana Patil is “in her agency, a character less often encountered in Indian cinemas,” while the film “in a wonderfully nuanced way ... explores

issues of caste and class conflict” (p. 150). In a different register, Rosa García-Periago emphasizes that “a particular feature of *Arshinagar* is a female-centred perspective” and that the film “favours a discourse of female bodies and the nation that breaks with traditional imaginings of women as one-dimensional national symbols” (p. 188). Together, these chapters demonstrate how Indian cinema provides a vital arena for interrogating Shakespeare’s plays in relation to gender, caste, politics, and embodied resistance.

Alongside these cinematic reworkings, perhaps the most innovative aspect of the volume is its attention to performance as a mode of postcolonial feminist resistance. The editors and contributors emphasize that Shakespeare’s plays are not only texts to be read but also lived and embodied through diverse Indian performance traditions. As filmmaker, Bornila Chatterjee reflects on adapting *Titus Andronicus*, she “moved pretty far away from the words on the page but, hopefully, [...] managed to capture the essence of what Shakespeare is trying to say in the play” (p. 244). In a complementary vein, Annette Leday, discussing her *Kathakali–King Lear*, notes: “There is the text which is sung by two singers; there is the text that is illustrated by facial expression, movements and hand gestures; and there is the improvisational text” (p. 251). These practitioner perspectives highlight how embodied performance traditions can destabilize textual hierarchies and open Shakespeare to feminist reinterpretation.

The volume also explores digital performance spaces, highlighting feminist rewrites of *The Taming of the Shrew* on platforms like YouTube and TikTok. These grassroots digital adaptations democratize Shakespeare and offer new pedagogical tools for feminist education and activism. Thea Buckley’s chapter, “Staging Female Shakespeare in Kerala” (pp. 271-289), is particularly noteworthy for its analysis of how such festivals confront urban-rural divides and theatrical elitism, thereby broadening access to feminist Shakespearean performance.

Women and Indian Shakespeares’ interdisciplinary and intersectional approach enriches our understanding of how Shakespeare functions as a global cultural text that is continuously reinterpreted in local contexts. The collection’s careful balance of theoretical rigor and attention to lived experience, its inclusion of diverse voices from rural performers to urban scholars, and its commitment to decolonizing methodologies create a coherent yet multifaceted narrative that challenges monolithic conceptions of Indian Shakespeare and feminist engagement.

This volume will be of great interest to scholars and students in Shakespeare studies, postcolonial literature, feminist criticism, and South Asian cultural studies. It also offers valuable insights for theater practitioners, activists, and educators seeking to engage with Shakespeare in socially transformative ways. Its nuanced exploration of gender, caste, and performance makes it a crucial resource for anyone interested in the politics of adaptation and the global afterlives of Shakespeare. However, while the volume excels in many feminist

dimensions, it could further deepen its engagement with trans-inclusive feminisms and non-Hindu religious perspectives, which remain somewhat underexplored. This gap points to future avenues for scholarship in Indian feminist Shakespeare studies, particularly as the field continues to diversify and become more globalized. Moreover, the book's academic tone and price point may limit accessibility for some audiences, particularly grassroots performers and students in resource-constrained settings. Future editions might consider more affordable formats or companion digital resources to widen reach.

Ultimately, this volume is a significant anthology that redefines what it means to study Shakespeare in a postcolonial, feminist context. It refuses to treat Indian women's Shakespeare as a marginal curiosity and instead positions it as a vibrant, critical site of resistance and creativity. The book's pluralistic approach in acknowledging the diversity of Indian women's experiences and artistic expressions challenges reductive narratives and opens new pathways for dialogue across disciplines and geographies. For scholars, students, and practitioners eager to rethink Shakespeare beyond the Western canon, this volume is an indispensable and inspiring resource.

Works Cited

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