

# English Shakespeares in Indian Cinema:

## *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear*

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### Abstract

The two Indian films under review in this article — Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) and Rituparno Ghosh's *The Last Lear* (2007) — absorb Shakespeare differently from Bollywood movies: he is recited and performed in English instead of Hindi; the films are set in Kolkata instead of Mumbai; and Shakespeare also helps to construct the main characters' identities. Via an analysis of the protagonists' displaced identities — one is an Anglo-Indian and the other an Anglophile theater actor — and the nostalgia for their past, this essay aims to explore the movies' endless similarities in the interpretation of Shakespeare, despite the significant span of time between them. Although the performance of Shakespeare in English and the inevitable connection with a nostalgic past in the movies may sometimes hint at a neo-colonial perspective, the protagonists' hybridity challenges that interpretation. These two films pursue the problematic manifestations of Shakespeare in English and investigate the difficulties and complexities derived from linguistic choices and intertextual references. They are characterized by an ambivalence that is certainly characteristic of post-colonial India.

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James Ivory and Ismail Merchant's film *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), based on their performing experiences with their Shakespeareana Company, is the first movie that foregrounds the decline of Shakespeare in the aftermath of Independence in India.<sup>1</sup> It highlights the "cultural anxieties between a colonial power and its onetime colonial possession" (Kapadia 2014, 45) and puts the blame for the loss and disappearance of Shakespeare in India on Bollywood cinema.<sup>2</sup> Given its elegiac tone and its setting, the movie *Shakespeare Wallah* provokes debates that range from considering it a neo-colonial movie to a film that promotes interculturality and hybridity.<sup>3</sup> The two movies considered in this article — *36 Chowringhee Lane* (dir. Aparna Sen, 1981) and *The Last Lear* (Rituparno Ghosh, 2007) — equally bring back memories of the colonial past via Shakespeare. For that reason, the two films may be regarded as neo-colonial or imperial instances that favor a re-canonization of Shakespeare, as performed in colonial India. However, the discourse is far from simplistic. Set in

post-colonial India, these two movies not only demonstrate the enduring legacies of colonialism, but also favor discourses around displacement, and, especially, hybridity, which make them good examples of postcolonial cinema.<sup>4</sup>

This paper concentrates on these two adaptations to examine the complex place of Shakespeare in English in post-colonial India. Neither of them is categorized as a Bollywood film, since they do not register the definite and specific conventions and formulas of Bollywood, such as the inclusion of song and dance sequences, are set not in Mumbai, but in Kolkata, and are not in Hindi, but English. This essay will focus on these often overlooked English Shakespeare productions in India to examine the parallels between them, despite the span of time. The main characters' displaced identities, which Shakespeare helped to create, as well as their nostalgia for an ideal past, are elements shared between the movies. If *36 Chowringhee Lane* has always been considered a response to James Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* — via the active presence of Shakespeare in Indian schools — *The Last Lear* is clearly indebted to Sen's movie. The intertextual references between the films highlight an evolving, different oeuvre. The last section of this article aims to show how the films not only sustain a nascent neo-colonialism, but also display an ambivalence characteristic of hybrid or postcolonial products. *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* tacitly support a different way of interpreting Shakespeare in India, providing a "cultural negotiation that is necessary in the wake of colonialism" (Kapadia 2001, 114). Before launching into a discussion of the two movies, however, I want to locate them first within the terrain of Indian adaptations of Shakespearean works to explore how they move beyond "Bollywood Shakespeares."

### Beyond Bollywood Shakespeares

The epithet Bollywood attempts to group together all Indian cinematic productions. Yet this description represents a simplistic view that does not consider the density of filmmaking in the subcontinent, which is home to endless regional film centers, such as the Telegu Cinema and Malayalam Cinema. The Hollywood-derived term, coined in the 1970s, should only be used to refer to the "box-office oriented Hindi language film industry located in Bombay" (Ganti 2005, 2).<sup>5</sup> According to Mishra (2002), Rajadhyashka (2003), Mehta and Pandharipande (2011), and Dwyer and Pinto (2011), the nomenclature Bollywood suggests globalization because these products are being consumed not only in a local context, but also in the diaspora by NRIs (Non-Resident Indians). Places such as the Middle East, Africa, Russia, Western Europe, North America, and Latin America are consumers of these cinematic productions. Moreover, these films tend to follow specific formulas and articulate an exceptionally rich set of aesthetic meanings, such as the over-abundance of songs and dances, extreme melodrama and "masala" — the combination of

different genres, namely action, comedy, and romance. The movies are infused with "Hindu epic plots, Orientalist exoticism, and the visual and aural overload of Indian culture to create a new aesthetic style" (Sharpe 2005, 58). Another essential component of popular Hindi cinema is "crass commercialism" (Burnett 2013, 55), as opposed to *auteurism*.

The mixture of Bollywood and Shakespeare in the term "Bollywood Shakespeares" foregrounds the transnational and global component of both entities, as Dionne and Kapadia (2014, 12) have indicated. The term Bollywood Shakespeares alludes to the cinematic appropriations of post-Independence India, especially to those "export-oriented Bombay films" (Dwyer and Pinto 2011, xiii). The history of Shakespeare in Bollywood cinema has undergone different and distinguishable stages. According to Trivedi, the basis of the appropriation of Shakespeare in popular Hindi cinema has been characterized by an "unnoticed and unacknowledged presence" (Trivedi 2007, 148). Films like *Betaab* (dir. Rahul Rawail, 1983), *Ek Duuye Ke Liye* (dir. K. Balachander, 1981) or *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (dir. Mansoor Khan, 1988) reproduce parts of the Shakespearean plots of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Romeo and Juliet*, respectively. The presence of Shakespeare in Bollywood Cinema has gained more importance thanks to Vishal Bhardwaj's adaptations — *Maqbool* (2003), *Omkara* (2006), and *Haider* (2014) — which reinterpret *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Hamlet* and acknowledge a Shakespearean presence. Shakespeare lives in the Bollywood genre through songs and dances, all the while articulated in the Hindi language, often with striking success. Since Bharadwaj's movies, the Bollywood idiom has improved its connection with Shakespeare, and more films are interesting adaptations of Shakespearean plays, such as *Issaq* (dir. Manish Tiwary, 2013) or *Ram-Leela* (dir. Sanjay Leela Bhansali, 2014), all adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*.

But the movies under review in this essay — *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* — are not included within the category of Bollywood Shakespeares. They are not set in Mumbai, but in Calcutta, and they do not follow the formulas of Bollywood movies, such as the inclusion of songs and dances, masala, and extreme melodrama, plus the ever-present marriages and traditional festivals. Furthermore, instead of being mass-oriented, they belong instead to the independent niche of Indian cinema and, more interestingly, they are filmed not in Hindi, but in English. The oeuvre evolving in these two films through their intertextual references to each other and to a larger tradition of Shakespeare in India shows that they belong to a tradition that is very different from "Bhardwaj's confident indigenizations of Shakespearean plots, which celebrate the film medium and the Bollywood medium" (Chakravarti 2014, 134).

### Building Identities in *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear*

"No self-respecting Bollywood matriarch would quote Shakespeare; no ma'am, she would draw her darts from the quiver of Indian scriptures," claims the producer of Deepa Mehta's *Bollywood/Hollywood* (2002) about the Shakespearean spouting grandmother in the movie. *Bollywood/Hollywood* — conceived as a crossover film that mixes Bollywood and Hollywood traditions — creates and explores an easily recognizable character whose identity is strongly influenced by Shakespeare, even though she never cites him. The identity of the first generation NRI grandmother depends on Shakespeare. This character parodies Bollywood's interpretation of Shakespeare, for the movie depicts a character outside the scholarly world who embraces Shakespeare in English, and her identity bears upon him. When the grandmother claims that "I am here not to bury Caesar but to praise him" instead of "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," the audience realizes that she is misquoting Shakespeare. Yet, her misquotations remind the audience of her status as a formerly colonized citizen and the complicated place Shakespeare occupies in post-colonial India. In *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear*, the question of identity is also mediated and filtered through Shakespeare. The subjectivity and existence of the two main characters is organized via Shakespearean quotations and citations. Shakespeare belongs to their world and is a very active presence that helps them reconfigure their troubling and difficult present.

*36 Chowringhee Lane* revolves around an unmarried Anglo-Indian woman called Miss Violet Stoneham, who decided to remain in post-colonial Calcutta instead of returning to Britain. She is "unhomed" in post-colonial Calcutta and appears as a true relic of the British Raj. The narrative focuses particularly on her meetings with a young Indian couple, her necessity to belong to their group — and, by extension, to the Indian nation — yet the "film ends by showing her exclusion from their home and social world" (Blunt 2005, 185). Her hybrid identity as neither an Indian nor a British individual makes Miss Violet Stoneham feel alienated, not knowing where her real homeland exists. Shakespeare dominates and settles comfortably in Miss Violet's life, and he remains a constant inspiration by helping her construct a more stable identity. The spectators first engage with Shakespeare at the school where Miss Stoneham teaches. A close-up shot of her with a copy of *Twelfth Night, or What You Will* in her hand and a blackboard full of difficult terms at her back immediately suggests that she is in fact a Shakespeare teacher. Quite interestingly, the Shakespearean passage Miss Violet Stoneham reads from *Twelfth Night* ends with the line "Tis not so sweet now as it was before" (1.1.8), which suggests that Miss Stoneham's fondest memories remain buried in the past.<sup>6</sup>

Her arid readings of Shakespeare do not obviously encourage the young Indian girls' commitment to Shakespeare; in fact quite the opposite occurs. In shot-reverse-shots, the camera

cleverly focuses first on Miss Stoneham while she is reading from the book in order to examine later the group of inattentive Indian female students. Nobody is listening to Violet (fig. 1). Instead, the girls are chatting in class and reading romances. But this is not the only reference to *Twelfth Night*; the film includes several allusions in the first half. Miss Stoneham dwells in a dingy and stuck-in-the-past apartment with only the company of a cat called Sir Toby (named after Sir Toby Belch).

In her second encounter with her former student Nandita — and the first with Nandita's boyfriend Samaresh — Nandita explains to Samaresh that Miss Stoneham used to teach her Shakespeare, apparently at Miss Stoneham's home, which has not changed in fifteen years. In an attempt to gain the aging woman's confidence and access to her apartment, Nandita begins reciting Malvolio's lines, but she forgets them and has to be helped by Miss Stoneham. During this encounter, Nandita and Samaresh persuade Miss Stoneham to let Samaresh use her apartment in order to write a novel. Their real intention, however, is to use Miss Stoneham's apartment for sexual intercourse. Noticing the importance of Shakespeare in Miss Stoneham's life, Samaresh thanks her using bombastic language, as if he were a character out of a Shakespearean play. Curiously enough, when Miss Stoneham starts her friendship with Nandita and Samaresh, she is told at school that she will no longer teach Shakespeare, but English Grammar. She is replaced by an Indian woman clad in saris with a degree in English literature, who will continue instructing the girls in Shakespeare. If the English book was first introduced to "form a body of well instructed laborers, competent in their proficiency in English to act as Teachers, Translators, and Compilers of useful works for the masses of the people" (Macaulay, in Cutts 1953, 839), the English book is no longer interpreted for them, and they participate in their own process of instruction. The transformation of an Anglo-Indian into a "proper" and "true" Indian is very revealing, for it basically summarizes the situation in India, where Anglo-Indians are displaced and left behind, as if they were the living "ghosts" of a forgettable past. What was once used as a colonizing text reemerges as an act of authority on the part of post-colonial Indians.

In addition to *Twelfth Night*, *King Lear* is also part of the discourse in Aparna Sen's film; in fact, the character of Miss Stoneham seems to be inspired more by Lear than any character in the lighter comedy. Like King Lear, Miss Stoneham is quite old, and it is her loneliness which motivates her to seek the company of Nandita and Samaresh. While Miss Stoneham is at school teaching English Grammar, the young Indian couple makes love in her apartment. When she arrives at home, however, Nandita and Samaresh always have tea ready for the old woman, go out with her to the cinema, or accompany her out into the street to have ice cream; in short, they entertain her and try to compensate somehow for the use of her apartment. On a stormy and windy night, however, Miss Stoneham discovers the couple in bed and immediately realizes the truth about the couple's

friendship and care for her, and about Samaresh's real motive at her apartment. The meticulous mise-en-scène, with doors opening and closing due to the strong wind — a result of the monsoon — and the shot-reverse-shots mixing the poorly lit young Indian couple in the background with closeups of Miss Stoneham's devastated and disillusioned face reflect the degree of sadness and nostalgia involved (figs. 2 and 3). This betrayal scene mirrors the storm scene in *King Lear* (3.2.) and the betrayal on the part of Lear's daughters.

Despite Miss Stoneham's discovery, the real transformation in her relationship with Nandita and Samaresh occurs when they get married, buy an enormous house, and no longer need her or her apartment. In an attempt to revive her friendship with the Indian couple, she pays them a visit in their new place and is completely ignored. The last and decisive exclusion happens when Miss Stoneham phones the couple at Christmas to meet them and is told they are not going to be at home. She makes a special Christmas pudding for them, takes it to their home, and discovers that they had organized a party and lied in order not to invite her. As Baradwaj Rangan points out, "Like Lear, Miss Stoneham trusts the wrong people, and like Lear, her faith in them is betrayed, and like Lear, she is enfeebled by sorrow and self-pity" (2011). The explicit connection with *King Lear* is precisely reinforced at the very end of the movie through Miss Stoneham's quotations from act 4, scene 7 ("Pray do not mock: / I am a very foolish fond old man" [69-70]) and from act 5, scene 3 ("Come, let's away to prison. / We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage" [[9-10])). In a circular movement, the film finishes with a lonely Miss Stoneham, completely excluded from Nandita and Samaresh's group and from post-colonial India, accompanied now only by the stray dog she finds in the middle of the street and her long-time companion, Shakespeare.

Rituparno Ghosh's *The Last Lear* is indebted not only to Shakespeare, as the title indicates, but also to *36 Chowringhee Lane*. As Rachel Dwyer explains, "the decaying old world of Harry Mishra, shot exquisitely by Abhik Mukhopadhyay, and the Anglo-Indian accent of the nurse, Ivy, reminds us of Aparna Sen's *36 Chowringhee Lane*" (2007). But Rituparno Ghosh's *The Last Lear* owes even more to *36 Chowringhee Lane* than these two specific issues suggest. Just as Miss Stoneham was an Anglo-Indian Shakespearean teacher, Harish — Harry — Mishra is a theater performer who specializes in Shakespeare and whose whole existence was influenced by Shakespeare and his plays. Other Shakespearean parallels also exist. *The Last Lear*, like its namesake *King Lear*, has a double plot. Employing constant flashbacks, the narrative focuses on this Anglophile's development and evolution from a stuck-in-time theater performer to an actor in a movie-within-the movie entitled *The Mask*; it also focuses on his friendship with the director of the film, Siddharth, and the costar, as well as on the terrible consequences of filming. The movie is a journey from the inner world of Harry Mishra to the outer world of filming. The subplot concerns

the three main women of the film — the female co-star Shabnam, Harry's partner Vandana, and the Anglo-Indian nurse Ivy — who clearly parallel Lear's daughters (fig. 4).

The audience first meets Harry Mishra — played by the well-known Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan — through a journalist who goes to his decaying and old-fashioned apartment to interview him. *The Last Lear's* opening features the difficult and dominating personality of Mishra, as well as his obsession with Shakespeare. When Mishra is immediately praised by the journalist for his brilliant performance of Prospero, he asks the journalist who Oberon, Titania, and Hermia are. After the writer does not reply, Mishra immediately throws him out of his house. Ghosh portrays Mishra's perceptions about people as being based on their knowledge or lack of knowledge of Shakespeare. Interestingly, the narrative sets up later an opposition between Mishra and the journalist and between Mishra and Siddharth. After this initial confrontation between the journalist and the actor, Ghosh explores the early stages of Harry Mishra and Siddharth's relationship. Unlike the journalist, Siddharth, the director of the film-within-the-film, wins Mishra through his intelligence and cleverness, but, above all, through his knowledge of Shakespeare. When Harry Mishra meets Siddharth, the former starts reciting from *The Tempest* (act 1, scene 2), and Siddharth immediately identifies the fragment. At this moment, the audience quickly realizes that Siddharth's ambition — to employ Harry Mishra for the role of the main character in his film — will be achieved. Almost half of the movie concentrates on Siddharth's and Mishra's encounters, which revolve around childish jokes, Shakespeare, and the ongoing opposition between theater and cinema. In a flamboyant scene, Mishra performs the role of Prospero in front of Siddharth as an audition for Siddharth's film; Mishra's fever for Shakespeare always fills the screen.

The second half of Ghosh's *The Last Lear* follows the experience of filming *The Mask*, and the movie becomes extremely meta-filmic. In tracking the connection with Shakespeare in the second part of *The Last Lear*, it becomes immediately clear that Mishra is connected to acting and rehearsing. When one of Mishra's soliloquies is removed from the script, he tells the filmmaker to re-insert it, which the director opposes, claiming that "soliloquy may work in Shakespeare, but not in film." "Don't you dare say something against Shakespeare" answers the angry theater performer. Harry can be calmed only by the soothing words of another actor, who refers to *Hamlet*. In another grandiloquent moment from the final scene, Bachchan recites from *King Lear* in order to help the actress — played by Preity Zinta — with the script, and strongly recommends using Shakespeare for her rehearsals. *The Last Lear* makes a consistent connection between Shakespeare and performance.

As in Violet Stoneham's situation, Shakespeare exercises a clear authority over Mishra. At the end of *The Last Lear*, Shakespeare's *King Lear* becomes crucial in the form of recitation, allusion,

early performance, book, a character, and an intertext (fig. 5). Mishra's dotage and loneliness certainly echo the Shakespearean character of Lear, as well as that of Miss Stoneham. Although the film moves continually backward and forward, the audience only learns at the end the reason for Mishra's downfall and subsequent prostration in bed. In a very realistic take that will make Bachchan fans tremble in their seats, since they will be reminded of Amitabh Bachchan's real-life accident while he was shooting *Coolie* (dir. Manmohan Desai, 1982), the narrative discourse explains the mystery.<sup>7</sup> In the course of filming a second unnecessary take of a very dangerous shot on the Himalayan foothills of Mussoorie, Harry Mishra falls and goes into a deep coma. Paromita Chakravarti realizes the resemblance between Harry Mishra and Gloucester, since his "action of jumping off the precipice echoes the Dover Cliff scene in *King Lear*" (Chakravarti 2014, 135). Viewers learn how Vandana fell head over heels in love with Mishra when he was performing the role of Othello, and the spectators picture Mishra as the famous Shakespearean Moor. Was he an Indian Othello, or an Indian turned black Othello — through makeup?

This instance is the filmmaker's treat and gift for a Western audience eager to look for colonial and post-colonial interconnections. Shakespeare's *Othello*, which, together with *The Tempest*, has been the object of most postcolonial Shakespeare studies, is here mentioned hastily, leaving the audience uneasy about its use. But Vandana's most interesting revelation consists of explaining that the harsh rumor about her was the main reason why Mishra quit the theater just when he was about to play his once-in-a-lifetime role — King Lear — for which he had prepared and had done research; his retirement from the theater and distance from Shakespeare influenced his solitude. The film encourages the viewers to take delight in the active display of King Lear. Through Mishra's performance of *King Lear* to Shabnam on the Himalayan hills, Mishra fulfills his dream and becomes the Lear he always longed to perform, or so we are meant to think. However, Harry Mishra's once-in-a-lifetime performance actually happens at the movie's dénouement, when he turns into a real-life Lear. In a very intertextual moment with *In Othello* (dir. Roysten Abel, 2003) in which the characters on-screen resemble their Shakespearean counterparts in reality, the film character Mishra emerges as his theatrical counterpart Lear, just as Shabnam embraces an improvised Cordelia.<sup>8</sup> In a very moving finale, Mishra, unable to remember anything, surprisingly remembers his Shakespeare perfectly. Like Lear, Mishra has lost his mind, but "his Shakespeare" is still part of his existence.<sup>9</sup>

Shabnam and Mishra enact 4.7.49-64 from *King Lear*, with slight omissions. Ending with "Pray, do not mock me / I am a very foolish old man," *The Last Lear* shares a meta-theatrical moment with *36 Chowringhee Lane*. Miss Violet Stoneham and Harry Mishra evoke Shakespeare's



Lear's meta-dramatically; they end up alone, lost in their decaying worlds, with an uneasy mind and on the verge of madness, with only the only company of their respective Cordelias — a dog, in Miss Violet Stoneham's case, and Shabnam, in Mishra's case — and, of course, their Shakespeare, which has always accompanied them in the course of their lives.

### Nostalgic Past and Present Displacement in *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear*

It is noteworthy that questions about Shakespeare's association with displacement remain in play in most Indian Shakespearean film adaptations and off-shoots. Yet there are considerable differences between Bollywood adaptations or cinematic off-shoots and those movies that transcend the particularities of the Bollywood medium. A Bollywood film like *Dil Chahta Hai* (dir. Farhan Akhtar, 2001) — with allusions to *Much Ado* and *Troilus and Cressida* — situates Shakespeare correctly in the diaspora (Burt 2003), as Bollywood Shakespearean adaptations usually target displaced diasporic Indian audiences. Yet, these adaptations — *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* — explore another conception of displacement, focusing on the relics of the British Raj: an Anglo-Indian woman and an Anglophile. The two characters are bound up with various forms of nostalgia that link them with their past and disable them from moving forward in their present-day lives.

The connection between *36 Chowringhee Lane* and the genre of nostalgic or heritage films is evident from the beginning. Although the movie was directed by Aparna Sen, it was produced by James Ivory and Ismail Merchant, who had directed and produced *Shakespeare Wallah*. The main actress, Jennifer Kendal, was the daughter of Geoffrey Kendal and Laura Liddell, who ran the travelling company Shakespeareana, on which the film *Shakespeare Wallah* was based. As was documented in *Shakespeare Wallah*, the travelling company toured with Shakespearean plays and saw the decline of their art in the aftermath of Independence in India. While in the colonial period the company had been extremely successful, they lost their appeal in post-colonial India. Despite the fact that Jennifer Kendal was born in England, she had lived in India most of her life. Thus, she was an Anglo-Indian like Violet Stoneham. Aparna Sen, in other words, chose an actress for her first film who could identify with the protagonist, since they shared the same feelings and attitude towards life and their complex situation in India.

*36 Chowringhee Lane*'s opening exploits the remains of colonialism in post-colonial Calcutta. Graves of people who used to work for the East India Company, numerous buildings now in ruins scattered throughout the streets, and even the choice of Calcutta as the setting encourage viewers to make the association (Fig. 6). According to Alison Blunt, Calcutta was the capital of British

India until 1911, "the largest and most permanent site of residence for the domiciled community, which numbered 20,022 in the 1911 Census" (2005, 32). Although New Delhi was appointed the new capital of British India in 1911, Calcutta remained the headquarters of the All-India-Anglo India Association, and was the "location of the head office of the Colonization Society of India" (Blunt 2005, 32). Curiously enough, Chowringhee Road — the street where Miss Violet Stoneham's apartment is located — was one of the favorite places of residence for the English diaspora, strongly suggesting the selection of the title was far from random. Apart from placing an emphasis on the site for the majority of dwellings of the British Empire, the name "Chowringhee" itself also gestures towards the Shakespearean presence in British India. Performed Shakespeare in British India was first played in private residences and was staged by amateurs. Moreover, there was a theater, run by a woman named Mrs. Bristow, which was located at Chowringhee Lane. The main characteristic of this theater was the presence of women to perform both female and male roles, and their performance of *Julius Caesar* in this locale is most famous for staging the tragedy using an all-female cast, with Mrs. Emma Bristow performing the role of Lucius, Brutus's servant. A later, more famous theater, known even more widely for its Shakespearean productions, was called the Chowringhee Theatre (1813-39) (fig. 7). It was here that Shakespearean performance reached its peak with the staging of, among others, *Macbeth* (1814), *Henry IV* (1814), *Catherine and Petruchio* (1815) — Garrick's adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* — *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1818), *Coriolanus* (1824), and *Richard III* (1828). In short, from the opening shots forward, the film evokes nostalgia for a colonial past in the life of the film's protagonist.

36 *Chowringhee Lane*'s association with the Indian colonial past can also be seen in its use of English literature curricula through the main character, Violet Stoneham. In colonial India, "Indian education mandated an English-only medium of instruction," and colleges in Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta were "devoted to the study of the Western humanities" (Kapadia 2001, 107). Colonial administrators found an ally in English literature to help them control the colonized subjects, as it became "a vital instrument for the insertion of individuals into the perceptual and symbolic form of the dominant ideological formation" (Kabir 2001, 130). Shakespeare's plays were frequently used as vehicles to promote and privilege the colonizers' culture "among the English expatriates as well as the elite Indians" (Singh 1989, 449). As Thomas Babington Macaulay claimed in his well-known speech on education, the aim and purpose of the colonizers was to produce citizens who were "Indian in blood and color but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and intellect" (Macaulay, in Cutts 1953, 839). Given this colonial background, the Anglo-Indian teacher — a relic of the British Raj — needs to be removed from her task of teaching English literature in order to erase colonial authority. Quite interestingly, however, the film does not completely eliminate Shakespeare from

the curriculum. Instead, the English writer will be taught by Indians who have appropriated and interpreted him as a symbol of Britishness. In other words, Shakespeare must be negotiated in terms of a postcolonial position writing back against the British empire.

Both films open with images anchored in the past. Their respective apartments seem to be stuck in the past, as if they were antique shops displaying the opulence of a past time. Harry Mishra's flat seems to be designed according to the same dictates and conventions previously used in Stoneham's dwelling. Overly abundant, English-style sofas, china, and fabrics dominate the setting. During Miss Violet Stoneham's first meeting with the Indian couple, the audience learns that the house has not changed in fifteen years. The camera focuses on decorative artifacts, such as the old phonograph, but also on old photographs. They are not only part of a dusty photograph album, but prominently displayed on her desk as living memories of her past. Among all of the photos, one which particularly catches the viewer's eye is a Shakespeare portrait. Interestingly, the same photograph is hung on Mishra's walls to remind the audience of how Mishra worships Shakespeare in his life. Through this very specific and minimal detail shared by both movies, the parallels between *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* are reinforced once more.

There are also many references to a nostalgic past in Ghosh's *The Last Lear*. As in *36 Chowringhee Lane*, the film is set in Kolkata, with unavoidable colonial references. The movie begins placing us in the Shakespearean world through the main actor, Amitabh Bachchan, who is the son of a renowned Shakespearean translator, Harivansh Rai Bachchan. Although Amitabh Bachchan's father was a successful scholar in his own time, his son's fame overshadowed his, emphasizing how Harivansh Rai Bachchan's scholarship was becoming less important. *The Last Lear* makes an inevitable connection with theater. First of all, Amitabh Bachchan performs the part of an aging Shakespearean actor. Secondly, the movie is based on *Aajker Shahjahan* (1984), a play by Utpal Dutt, who was well-known for being a member of the Shakespereana Company — funded by Geoffrey and Laura Kendall — and for contributing to the revival of Shakespeare in India.<sup>10</sup> With the Shakespereana Company, he toured India and Pakistan in 1947-1948 and 1953-1954, performing Shakespeare's plays until their art was considered "irrelevant," as shown in *Shakespeare Wallah* (dir. James Ivory, 1965); their Shakespearean performances, and even theater as a whole, were being replaced by Bollywood cinema.<sup>11</sup>

During *Shakespeare Wallah*, there is a very interesting, content-loaded, and symbolic scene. In the middle of a road, when the Shakespereana Company cannot move their car due to a breakdown, a monkey trainer complains about the fact that "people no longer care for his art," to which Bobby — an actor of the company — responds, "Our case exactly" (Guneratne 2008, 70).

Harry Mishra's situation follows in the footsteps of the members of the Shakespeareana Company, for theater has given way to cinema, it seems. In spite of the fact that Mishra decided to quit the theater for personal reasons, the audience cannot help but wonder if his fifteen-year leave is in fact his personal decision or is motivated by the out-datedness of his art.

Mishra's story certainly reminds viewers of Kunja, the protagonist of *Aajker Shahjahan*, the play on which it is based. Kunja is a retired stage actor who dwells in a theatrical wasteland and constantly reenacts old Bengali plays. He is approached by a film director to take part in a film in which he establishes a friendship with the female star named Kumkum, whom he teaches to act. Borrowing from *Aajker Shahjahan*, *The Last Lear* "tries to preserve the heritage of the theater and to pay a tribute to Dutt, an emblem of Bengal's stage history and of Shakespearean theater in Calcutta" (Chakravarti 2014, 137).

*The Last Lear* also engages in the controversy over theater versus cinema. After reciting from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Harry criticizes cinematic shots, such as close-ups. In Mishra's words, "If you see the face, you cannot see the hands and, if you see the hands, you cannot see the face." While shooting the film-within-the-film in the mountains, Mishra condemns movies again, due to the dialogues and the impossibility of introducing a monologue. The film's nostalgic strain is strengthened via the connection between Mishra and his on-screen persona in the film-within-the-film. If Mishra is a theater actor whose fame is long gone, Maqbool — the character he plays in *The Mask* — the movie-within-the-movie — is depicted as a circus performer whose skill is also dying. Maqbool's story is very moving, since he decides to set fire to the local cinema after one of his colleagues' suicide; later, he would remember only the scars. In an extremely meta-filmic moment, Maqbool's recollection of the scars reminds the audience of Mishra's only memory of Shakespeare after his accident. When the narrator, in voice-over, is summarizing the plot of *The Mask*, he mentions how "people flock to the local cinemas, while the clowns find themselves out of the world" (fig. 8). Thus, the theater and the circus have been overshadowed by the cinema in India. The two arts are becoming increasingly irrelevant in Ghosh's film, and are depicted as part of a glorious, but dying, past. Like *36 Chowringhee Lane*, *The Last Lear* is profoundly nostalgic in tone, not only in theme and setting, but also in characterization.

Miss Violet Stoneham and Harry Mishra are displaced subjects in present-day India. Miss Stoneham's dislocation from postcolonial India is strongly linked with her hybridity. Her in-between nature, for she neither belongs to India nor to England, makes her an easy target for scorn, and her displacement is emphasized in the movie via cinematic shots, such as the use of light and shadow to highlight Miss Stoneham's complex situation. She is frequently filmed in shadows and in silhouette, so that on occasion the audience cannot even see her face: "Violet eats alone in

the darkness, bakes by candlelight, attends the dimly lit Catholic church alone on holidays, and visits the gravesides of deceased loved ones in overcast weather" (Cassidy 2001). She symbolically lives in shadows and in the past. On numerous occasions throughout the film, Miss Stoneham, in close-up shots, frequently tells in voice-over her inability to leave India because she regards it as her homeland. Unlike most of her relatives who decided to go abroad when the British Raj was over, she and her brother Eddie chose to remain in their beloved India. Only once in the movie does she actually think about joining her niece and her family abroad. Her loneliness points out Stoneham's displacement. She lives on her own with only the company of a cat, and visits her brother, another relic of the British Raj, on Wednesdays. Her meeting and subsequent friendship with Nandita and her boyfriend have to be interpreted as Miss Stoneham's first — and only — inclusion and interaction with post-colonial India. She once notes that "If you are nice to Indians, they behave extremely well with us," referring to Anglo-Indians. Her "illusion" of belonging to post-colonial India, however, is broken when her friendship with her ex-student and her boyfriend dissolves. Mishra's dislocation from present-day India is related to the slow death of theater in favor of contemporary cinema. Although he is married, he appears to the audience as solitary as Miss Stoneham. As in Miss Stoneham's case, his loneliness is momentarily broken by his encounter and friendship with the film director, but equally ends in deception. Like Lear, both are fooled, and both suffer tragic fates. In their cultural displacement, Shakespeare becomes not only an ally, but also a personal anchor.

### Ambivalence

In *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear*, the depiction of Shakespeare in English instead of in vernacular languages, as well as the endless allusions to a pre-Independence nostalgic past, hint at the neo-colonial perspective promoted by the films. Shakespeare works loosely as a "relic of the Raj," and the audience is meant to witness how the new postcolonial world leaves little room for these antiquated characters who come to symbolize a bygone era of colonial literacy. Both movies, however, can equally be read as challenging such a simplistic view, since they are structured around ambivalence and ambiguity.<sup>12</sup>

First, the use of English inevitably includes political statements. In *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear*, the presence of English can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, using English in Shakespearean stage productions, cinematic adaptations, or offshoots is "sometimes dismissed as a reification of imperialism" (Kapadia 2001, 105), since Shakespearean plays were performed in English in the colonial era for the Indian intelligentsia and the English diaspora.<sup>13</sup> The English quotes from Shakespeare in *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* could

be seen as slavish imitations, a mere mimicry of the colonizers' language. It also has the halo of elitism, which both movies intend to explore. Yet, as Bhabha claims (1994), the use of English equally implies menace. It also functions as "the so-called 'link language' between linguistically separated provinces" (Kapadia 2001, 108), providing cultural negotiation. For Ghosh, English was the natural choice because he considered it their language as well and because the actors in the movie spoke English in their everyday life. Interestingly, the use of English as the film's language also provides resistance to the overuse of Hindi in Indian cinema, so that it can be interpreted as a protection against Hindi domination in Indian cinema. Aware of the Hindi domination, these films consciously use English to be able to compete with Bollywood movies. English neither denotes mimicry nor resistance exclusively, but a combination of both.

*36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* challenge clear-cut binary oppositions. The two movies seem to be instead a complex allegorical reading of the situation of Shakespeare in India. In *36 Chowringhee Lane*, for example, the lovers rent a taxi to spend time together physically, which suggests that Stoneham's liberalism is more inviting for their romance. There is a residue of liberalism afforded in the colonial that allows for the young lovers' freedom. Nevertheless, they are merely taking advantage of her good will, which shows how colonial literacy allows for a kind of play or even playful neglect. One could say that using Shakespeare to think allegorically about Indian politics is similar to the lively interaction of the young lovers. Similarly, Harry Mishra is equally betrayed by the filmmaker called Siddharth Kumar. Although the first half of the film shows Siddharth helping Harry Mishra to solve his problems and manias, Siddharth does it out of interest. His real aim is to hire Harry to perform the leading role in his film because Harry's story resembles that of the protagonist in the movie-within-the-movie. When the film ends and Harry Mishra tragically falls, Siddharth forgets Harry, and does not even visit him in the hospital. This situation indicates another playful neglect, which even affects Shakespeare. Curiously enough, Siddharth also takes advantage of Shakespeare to achieve the aim of hiring Harry Mishra for his movie. While he is trying to convince Harry of appearing in his movie, he quotes and recites Shakespeare constantly. Nonetheless, the situation changes radically in the second part of the film. Once Siddharth has achieved his objective, Shakespeare is no longer needed. It seems then that when Indian directors are done with the allegory, they walk away and do not invite Shakespeare to the party, as happens in most Indian films based on Shakespeare.<sup>14</sup>

Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh are two successful Bengali filmmakers who take part in the tradition of using English instead of Bengali, convinced of the difficulty in competing against Hindi movies if they employ their mother tongue. Aparna Sen and Rituparno Ghosh had

a long-lasting friendship, and they were equally influenced by Satyajit Ray, the most famous Calcutta-born Bengali filmmaker. The two artists both present the image of colonial India as lost in a kind of mad solitude or superfluous aesthetic out of touch with the real India. At first sight, *36 Chowringhee Lane* takes a problematic stance on cultural imperialism owing to the sympathetic focus on Miss Stoneham and the shallow portrait of Nandita and Shamresh as extremely selfish individuals. Instead of depicting the disappearance of Shakespeare in post-colonial India announced in *Shakespeare Wallah*, however, the film shows how Shakespeare has to be appropriated and interpreted by younger Indians rather than by living vestiges of the colonial era. The replacement of Miss Stoneham teaching Shakespeare by an Indian literature teacher becomes necessary in this new India. At the same time, the compassionate focus on Miss Stoneham should not be regarded simplistically, as an element of colonialism, for she is the perfect example of a hybrid individual. According to Homi Bhabha, hybridity "is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures" (1994, 162). Miss Violet Stoneham is an alienated subject in post-colonial India, split into two: her outer self, which inevitably betrays her origins and her inner self, which is still part of India. Harry Mishra equally encodes hybridity, although of a different kind. Like its main intertext *Ajker Shajahan*, *The Last Lear* is "a story of man's alienation, of man becoming alienated into a terrible solitude under pressure from an industrial civilization" (Bandhyopadhyay 1989, 20). Mishra's fascination with Shakespeare, which is elevated to the level of quasi-religious veneration, suggests his role as a true Anglophile. He is then a hybrid in post-colonial India, since Mishra is perpetually polarized between his devotion for Shakespeare and his inability to make him — and theater, it seems — survive in post-colonial India.

As a native Indian, one would think that Mishra's Shakespearean roles would have been restricted to the post-colonial ones, Caliban and Othello. Throughout the movie, however, this suggestion proves incorrect, for Mishra performed roles as varied as Prospero, Puck, King Lear, and Othello during his theatrical career. Mishra's best role is thought to be that of Prospero, which is rather ironic in that the role of the colonizer par excellence is played by an Indian in an attempt to move beyond the boundaries of colonial legacy. But Mishra equally gives voice to Othello, inevitably establishing a link with the long tradition in Indian theater of natives starring as Othello. Baishnav Charan Adhya was the first Indian who performed Shakespeare's Othello in Calcutta on 17 August 1848. Just as "the Indian actor revealed the ambivalence of its cultural authority through a native strategy," Mishra also encodes this ambivalence and ambiguity in post-colonial India (Singh 1989, 446). Pathos works to make the viewer see these two figures as "sympathetic," or, at the very least underappreciated, if not inhumanely treated.

Even if *The Last Lear* is determined to refer nostalgically to the Indian empire, it is also characterized by hybridity. Based on Dutt's *Ajker Shajahan* — written three years after *36 Chowringhee Lane* was produced — *The Last Lear* emphasizes how theater is jeopardized by cinema. Furthermore, the role of Harry Mishra is performed by the greatest Bollywood actor, Amitabh Bachchan. By this inclusion, the film aims to nod toward the Bollywood medium in order to mix it with its own cult status. It equally shows how Shakespeare is being obliterated. And yet, quite ironically, *The Last Lear* is a movie that revives Shakespeare through Dutt's own tribute to the Bard. Furthermore, even though Harry Mishra dies, Shakespeare will not die with him, since the Shakespearean legacy will continue, thanks to people like Shabnam. If *36 Chowringhee Lane* hinted at the Shakespearean performance by Indians in independent India, *The Last Lear* develops how this performance can be encoded in the film medium. Ambiguity and ambivalence are part and parcel of the movies, and cannot be labeled as either neo-colonial or promoting interculturality between Indian and English cultures.

### Conclusion

This analysis has shown the deep ambivalence of Shakespearean adaptations made in India in English. Both movies reflect the complex habitation of Shakespeare in English in post-colonial India, since it offers conflicting and paradoxical responses, and is inevitably linked with politics. *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* appear as confusing hybrids because "they evoke contradictory responses" (Kapadia 2001, 114). English in *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* is more than a mere "channel for bringing in the moral aesthetic of the colonial masters" (Bagchi 1994, 158), and more than neo-colonial assimilation. The use of English also offers cultural negotiation, and even resistance to the overuse of Hindi in Indian cinema. Via their nostalgia for the past, the movies seem to be anchored in colonial imperialism, and seem to prompt re-canonization. According to Chakravarti, they seek to "reestablish the central, classic status of Shakespeare" (2012), associated with a colonial past.

Yet, the hybridity, displacement and pathos of the leading characters reflect how the movies also break away from colonial superiority. This ambiguity equally affects the future of Shakespeare in the movies. Although the films are imbued with Shakespeare, *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* end with the idea that Shakespeare is condemned to disappear with the death of the protagonists. They also emphasize, however, that although Shakespeare at the hands of Anglophiles and Anglo-Indians does not find a niche in postcolonial India, he will be present in India via Indian teachers (*36 Chowringhee Lane*) or Indian people like Shabnam (*The Last Lear*). The movies are also allegorical readings of the situation of Shakespeare in India. If the leading characters



are betrayed by someone in the movies, so is Shakespeare in India, where filmmakers influenced by the playwright either do not acknowledge Shakespearean sources or "bollywoodize" them. *36 Chowringhee Lane* and *The Last Lear* toy with opposites, such as art versus commercial cinema, theater or cinema, east or west, English or Bengali but, above all, colonialism and post-colonialism. But they ultimately replace such binarisms with a nuanced spectrum of differentiations. They depict another form of Shakespeare in Indian cinema, another tradition that breaks away from the typical Bollywood fare, is characterized by ambivalence and ambiguity and, for that reason, is never free of political implications.

### Notes

1. The research of this article was done under the auspices of the research project FFI2011-24347, "Shakespeare and the Cultures of Commemoration: Remembering Shakespeare."
2. This prediction, as depicted in *Shakespeare Wallah*, is far from true. The films *Maqbool*, *Omkaara*, *Issaq*, *Ram-Leela*, and *Haider* show the connections between Shakespeare and the Bollywood genre. Moreover, at the beginning, Bollywood was extremely influenced by the Parsi theater, in which Shakespearean adaptations proliferated.
3. Scholars such as Wayne 1997 or Venning 2011 read the film as including instances of hybridity and interculturality. Wayne identifies a very clear instance of hybridity in the performance of *Othello*, whereas Venning considers the most intercultural moment to be the ridiculous portrait of the Maharajah performed by Utpal Dutt, the Indian actor and director who began the Indianization of Shakespeare.
4. For more information about postcolonial cinema, see Sandra Ponzanesi (2014).
5. See Ravi Vasudevan, "The Meanings of Bollywood" (2008), for more about the limitations and problems of the term.
6. All references to Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works*, edited by Stanley Wells et al. (1986).
7. The elderly protagonist of the movie *Umberto D.* (dir. Vittorio de Sica, 1952) also seems to be modeled on *King Lear*. As in *36 Chowringhee Lane*, the political situation depicted in *Umberto D.* — the aftermath of WWII — plays an important role in the understanding of the main character.
8. *In Othello* is another parallel Shakespearean adaptation on the Indian screen filmed in English; it reproduces a play-within-the-film and is based on the theatrical performance by Abel.

9. This is, in fact, one of the main differences between Utpal Dutt's play and *The Last Lear*. While Harry Mishra remembers his Shakespeare until the end, the protagonist in Dutt's play forgets even the titles of the plays.
10. To read more about the role of Utpal Dutt in the revival of Shakespeare in India, see García-Periago 2012.
11. For more on the Shakespeareana Company, see Kendal 1986.
12. This ambiguity and ambivalence seems to be another similarity with Shakespeare's *Lear*, since he himself is double-sided. He is both strict and authoritarian at the beginning and someone to be pitied at the end.
13. Shakespearean plays were also performed in different Indian languages, such as Marathi, Hindi, or Bengali when they were targeted at a local audience.
14. William Shakespeare began to be acknowledged in Bollywood cinema thanks to Vishal Bhardwaj. Since then, there has been a change in the interpretation of Shakespeare in Indian cinema.

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