

**Negotiating Text and Film: Comparative Study between
Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's
"Ram Leela" (2013)**

Priya Mandal¹

Abstract:

The name 'Shakespeare' is enough in itself. His plays have given him recognition as the 'world dramatist'. Even to this day his plays are performed in theatres across the whole world, many centuries after his death. His plays have such a universal appeal that not only in Hollywood but in several film industries adaptation and experiments of his plays have been made. India has contributed to its own understanding and kept Shakespeare alive through interpreting his works in various ways. Generation after generation his plays have inspired many filmmakers, writers, theatre artists. The original works being so legendary, adapting Shakespeare is not so easy. In 1968 director Debu Sen with a screenplay by Gulzar made "Do Dooni Char" (1968) which is a Bollywood adaptation of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* (1623). Inspired by Shakespeare's famous tragedy *Macbeth* (1623), Vishal Bhardwaj attempted with "Maqbool" (2003) which won the heart of the audience. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600) was adapted in Bollywood as "10ml Love" (2010) by Sharat Katariya in 2012. "Haider" (2014) adapted from *Hamlet* (1603) was Vishal Bhardwaj's great success. A recent Bollywood adaptation of Shakespeare's 'well-known love story of all times', *Romeo and Juliet* is "Goliyon Ki Raasleela: Ram Leela" by one of the greatest directors of Bollywood film industry Sanjay Leela Bhansali. This paper is about this modern adaptation of Shakespeare's classical tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* and the universal appeal it has.

Keywords: Romeo and Juliet, Bollywood adaptation, Ram Leela, Sanjay Leela Bhansali.

¹ Ex-student, Department of English, Bankura University. Cleared NET. E-mail: priyamandalnote4@gmail.com

This research paper discusses about Sanjay Leela Bhansali's "Ram Leela" (2013), a good attempt recreating that *Romeo And Juliet* (1597) magic which many other Bollywood films like *Ek Duuje Ke Liye* (1981), *Ishaqzade* (2012) have tried to do but with a little success. But this research paper is an endeavor to prove the justification of the classical text's modern adaptation in the true sense of the term. Bhansali stayed true to the original classic without losing his style. He has not copied the story from starting to the end. He has taken his key elements from the classic and adapted to Indian condition and environment.

The main objective of literary study is to explain the unexplainable by looking at life from a deeper aspect. This research paper deals with the theme of violence as a convenient backdrop in both the film and the text and how it impacts the lives of the individual as well as the society, portrays the cultural context in which the Bollywood adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* is placed by Bhansali and briefly discusses whether the movie justifies the text or not.

The 'bard of Avon's very famous tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the greatest love stories ever written in any language in any part of the world. Romeo and Juliet have become the archetype of lovers. Their love story conquered over death and time. The story tells of an intense all-consuming love and teaches how love is powerful enough to exist beyond mortal life. The classic play enters even in the modern world. A love-story which shined in the past and has not lost its appeal even today. Its glory and shine have only increased by time. It was the most frequently enacted play in the Globe theatre among Shakespeare's other plays. Thus, it can be assumed how much craze and popularity it gained among the people. The play was written in the mid-1590s, during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

For this research paper I have studied various Thesis papers, articles and interviews. Some existing literary papers on the text are –

- (i) “Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* – Glorified Love” by Scarlett Chen which sets a critical eye on the love affair of the ‘star crossed lovers’.
- (ii) “Individuals Vs Society” by Matthew Lye highlights the consequences when individuals go against the society.
- (iii) “Defying the Stars: Tragic Love As the Struggle for Freedom in *Romeo and Juliet*” by Paul A. Kottman which depicts the struggle for freedom by individuals and self-realization.
- (iv) “A Study of Shakespeare’s Contribution in Hindi Cinema” by Asma Qureshi compares various Bollywood adaptations that have been made so far on Shakespeare.

The classical love story of *Romeo and Juliet* is so heavy weight that there is very little scope to add something new to this. But Bhansali had given a ‘desi’ flavour to the story by placing it in Gujrat, one of the cultural seats of India. He connected Shakespeare’s craft and Indian culture. This quality allowed Shakespeare to flourish in the screen of this vast country. Bhansali’s credit lies in the fact that “Ram Leela” (2013) has not failed to create the same magic, essence and power of love, irresistible by anyone, anything or any means, as we see in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597).

“Ram Leela” (2013) is an out and out love story set against the background of violence, hatred, bloodshed and enmity. The screenplay is so beautiful that viewers get engrossed and involved with it right from the start till the end. Audiences keep asking for more. This film is a visual treat. Just like *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) where the story begins with the feud of ‘Capulets’ and ‘Montagues’, enmity between two rival clans ‘Senera’ and ‘Rajadi’ in the village of Ranjhar shows how much and to what extend hatred and enmity can lead people for power. With the

progress of the story the intensity increases and the viewers realize this is not an ordinary love story but has a lot of drama which forces us to be more attentive to the on goings that are unfolding on the screen. There are lot of twists and turns. The presentation is so larger than life, so beautiful that predictability fails to come to the forefront and people are lost in the sets, in the colours, in the way the drama is unfolding itself. Like the play, the dialogues are literary gems which directly connect to our heart.

Methodology for this research comprises a detail critical reading of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to understand its theme, characters, their socio-emotional crisis, setting and plot along with minute observation and understanding of *Ram Leela*. For this study I have used comparative method; comparing the representation of the 'star crossed lovers' with their different time zone and socio-cultural background. I have also searched some related websites, articles and interviews for the sake of this paper.

Violence: A Convenient and Consistent Backdrop

The story unfolds the important aspect of society such as violence. The sub-title, 'Goliyon Ki Raasleela' means 'A Love Story of Bullets'. The movie is steeped in violence. Violence is an integral part of *Romeo and Juliet* (1597). Bhansali himself acknowledges "Ram Leela is my most violent film" (Bhansali, 2013). The film begins with bulletfires which set the atmosphere of violence in the film from the very start. Fragile ego between the two clans allows the violence to emerge to its extreme. Guns are firing in every moment. Every character holds gun and is ready to shoot. Even children are not spared. The sky is over weighted with the sound of frequent gun and bullet firing. The dialogues and lyrics of songs are somehow connected to violence "The bullet of heart is shot by the guns in our eyes". Even Ram and Leela after falling

in love with each other cannot escape the violence between their families. While Shakespeare used violence in *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) to reflect the society of his time, Bhansali chooses Gujrat as the backdrop of his film to present the violence of society. Power and position act as catalysts in the development of the film. Guns, rifles play the protagonists of violence. It can be said that probably Shakespeare through all his cruel murders wants to warn his audience of the subversion caused by violence and his purpose is clearly portrayed by Bhansali in his “Ram Leela”. To quote Drakakis:

“..... a selective revitalization of the past may be shown to represent an affirmation of values which in cultural terms are either dominant or desirable” (Drakakis, 2002)

Relevance to Indian Culture:

We must say Bhansali deserves a distinction mark for making such a grand film on such a lavish scale, such a colourful movie on such a big canvas. His sense of detailing is evident in every single frame of the film. Indian culture is presented through the setting of the film. Festivals enhance the impact of the story. They add visual appeal to the play. The whole presentation is like a beautiful painting on a canvas with thousands of colours. The vast array of handcrafted products including jewellery, embroidered garments, leatherwork, metalwork, clay articles present Indian culture. The traditional art form plays a significant role in the movie. Some other cultural sides such as the folk music of Gujrat is richly portrayed in the movie. The major dance forms such as ‘Garba’ and ‘Padhar’ are performed by both men and women with movements of bamboo sticks known as ‘dandiyas’. Padhar is mainly performed by rural people. The festivals of Gujrat with their real vibrancy and colours of its diverse culture add to the grandeur of the film. The film witnesses the festivals of ‘Holi’, ‘Navratri Mahotsav’,

‘Deepawali’ —an exquisite carnival of music, dance and natural beauty. In fact the name ‘Ram Leela’ is associated with Dussera. The word has Indian religious roots. Ramleela means a play which depicts the life of Lord Rama. Women are seen in *ghagra cholis* and men wear a unique dress known as ‘Kediya’. The silver *pachchikam* jewellery is a Gujrati trend which shows their rich traditions and deep connection to their origin. Tradition along with modernization sums up the culture of Gujrat in “Ram Leela” (2013) by Bhansali.

Compare and Contrast between Text & Film:

Taking his key element from *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) Bhansali has adapted and presented the story with a little bit difference. He has willingly changed many plots of the drama. But beside all changes the dominating themes of ‘love’ and ‘death’ pervade upon the whole story. The common factor between the drama and the movie which helps the story to move further is the ‘misunderstanding between the two star crossed lovers’. In the film the first meeting of Ram and Leela during the festival of Holi when Ram boldly enters in the enemy clan with his friends immediately shifts our mind to the ball dance party of the Capulet family where Romeo enters and sees Juliet first time. In both cases the couples fall in love with each other in the first sight and kisses passionately. The scene reminds us of Phoebe’s remarkable speech in *As You Like It*: “Who ever loved that loved not at first sight” (Shakespeare, 2006). And then of course who can forget the very significant ‘balcony scene’ in both the play and the movie which is probably the most romantic scene of the story. But to escape suffering the lovers elope and marry secretly. Meanwhile murders take place between the two clans and the feud gets bitter. So, the lovers fail to get united. But though they are physically separated by the bloody gang war of their families but their soul unite completely ‘in death’.

Bhansali has changed the plot in many cases like —

1. In the play the murder of Tybalt, Juliet's brother by Romeo happened after his secret marriage with Juliet. But in the film we see Ram and Leela marry after the death of Kanji, Leela's brother in the hands of Ram. But in both cases the situation only gets worsened by the deaths.

2. After the lovers' separation in their first wedding day, Bhansali has changed the plot of his film from the classic drama. While Romeo is banished from the country and Juliet is being forced to marry Paris, in the film Ram and Leela are separated forcefully and they take the chair of power of their two rival clans 'Rajadi' and 'Senera' respectively.

3. In the play *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) Romeo fails to get the news of the messenger and thinks Juliet to be dead. He drinks poison beside her senseless body. And when Juliet awakens from the effect of the herbs, she being unable to bear the death of her husband also kills herself by stabbing. The film ends quite differently. Here the lovers losing all hopes of their reconciliation decide to kill each other by themselves. Thus both the play and the film end with the lovers' suicide for the sake of true love.

Though to Catholics suicide is a mortal sin, the play *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) has an interesting comment on suicide. Their suicides do not make their love less important. Rather the play glorifies the suicides of Romeo and Juliet as noble sacrifice and they have become the 'archetype of lovers'. By courting death they prove that true love never dies. All obstacles even death fail to make them separate. Rather it makes their love 'immortal:' "The course of true love never did run smooth" (Shakespeare, 2013)

In spite of their family's long continued war, hatred and enmity, nothing can separate them from falling in love with each other: "... love is not love / Which alters when it alteration finds, / Or bends with the remover to remove" (Shakespeare, 2004). They are unstoppable. When Leela is reminded by her sister-in-law that 'fire and water can never meet'; she boldly remarks "Jan Ram naam ka raag lage ... toh pani mein bhi aag lage" (Goliyon ki Rasleela : Ram Leela). This proves once more that 'love is blind'.

Shakespeare conveys a cryptic portrayal of romance and he proves how blind love can act impulsively. Romeo and Juliet's decision to love each other despite knowing that there may be waiting for them fatal consequences, shows how two young desperate Shakespearean lovers are willing to cross the boundaries of the society for the sake of true love. If anywhere love reaches at its highest peak in Shakespeare, it is undoubtedly *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) which is superbly justified in "Ram Leela" (2013). Beauty, power, social status are still important consideration but what is more important is their feelings and emotions. The lovers defy all other stereotypes and steal our hearts with their sacrifice. Love makes them forget about everything else. Both *Romeo and Juliet* (1597) and "Ram Leela" (2013) depict the 'triumph of love'. To conclude, we must say;

"..... Badla aur gurur agar samundar ko banjar rann bana sakte hai.....toh aashiq is banjar mitti me bhi fool khila sakte hai....." (Bhansali, 2013)

If hatred and revenge can convert a sea into a sterile land, they are lovers who can grow flowers even on the barren land.

References:

Bhansali, S. (2013). *Goliyoon ki Raasleela: Ram Leela* [Film]. Bollywood; Eros International.

Bhansali, S. (2013). *Hindustan Times*. Hindustan Times. Retrieved 7 February 2021, from <https://m.hindustantimes.com>

.Drakakis, J. (2002). *Alternative Shakespeares* (2nd ed., p. 12). Routledge.

Shakespeare, W. (2004). *Shakespeare's Sonnets* (4th ed., p. 304). Students Store.

Shakespeare, W. (2006). *As You Like It*. The Arden Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, W. (2013). *A Mid summer night's dream* (p. 5). Bloomsbury India.