
ADAPTATION AND DISCOURSE: A CROSS-CULTURAL STUDY OF HINDI THEATRE AND ITS MASS MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Theatre has historically served as a powerful medium for articulating social truths, contesting power, and fostering dialogue. In India, Hindi theatre has long embodied cultural, political, and philosophical engagements. Yet, in the global media landscape, the messages conveyed on stage often undergo complex transformations when adapted for different media formats or audiences. This paper explores the intersection of Hindi theatre, media adaptation, and crosscultural discourse, focusing on how key works are mediated and reinterpreted when presented to international audiences. Using case studies such as Girish Karnad's Tughlaq and Bhisham Sahni's Hanoosh, the study reveals how themes of power, identity, and resistance evolve in meaning as they travel from stage to screen and from India to other cultural contexts. In doing so, the paper highlights both the opportunities and challenges posed by cultural translation through media.

Keywords: Hindi theatre, cross-cultural adaptation, mass media, Girish Karnad, Bhisham Sahni, performance theory, public discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Hindi theatre, as a form of cultural expression, has reflected and shaped societal changes, contestations, and collective memory. From its roots in folk forms like Nautanki and Tamasha to the modern political dramas of Habib Tanvir and Safdar Hashmi, Hindi theatre has continually evolved to voice social critique. In the 20th century, playwrights like Mohan Rakesh, Bhisham Sahni, and Girish Karnad emerged as leading figures, using the stage to interrogate historical narratives, challenge authority, and foreground marginalized voices.

However, as theatrical performances began to be adapted into mass media formats—especially television, film, and digital platforms—their meanings were often restructured by the visual grammar, audience expectations, and socio-cultural context of the new medium. Furthermore, when such adaptations crossed national boundaries and were presented to international or diasporic audiences, additional layers of interpretation and reframing influenced how these works contributed to public discourse.

This paper investigates these complex dynamics through two detailed case studies, illustrating how theatrical themes are negotiated, diluted, or amplified during the process of cross-cultural adaptation.

RESEARCH RATIONALE

In the contemporary digital era, the boundaries between stage, screen, and society have become porous. Plays are no longer restricted to live theatre halls; they are increasingly available on YouTube, reimaged as films, or referenced in online discourse. Hindi theatre, with its strong emphasis on moral ambiguity, identity politics, and historical allegory, is particularly ripe for adaptation.

Nevertheless, adaptation across cultures and media is not merely a matter of translation. It involves a process of transformation where the original intent, tone, and semiotics of the play are subject to alteration based on the target audience's cultural expectations and the conventions of the medium. This paper seeks to examine how Hindi theatre is reshaped in such transitions and what these shifts mean for its socio-political relevance in a global context.

METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative, exploratory study that employs comparative textual and discourse analysis. Two iconic plays—Girish Karnad's Tughlaq and Bhisham Sahni's Hanoosh—were selected due to their strong socio-political themes and availability of media adaptations in both Indian and international contexts.

Primary data sources:

- Original play scripts and published editions
- Recordings of live performances (e.g., National School of Drama archives, Doordarshan telecasts)
- International stage adaptations and subtitled filmic versions
- Academic critiques and journal articles
- Newspaper and magazine reviews from Indian and Western media

- Interviews with directors, critics, and theatre scholars

Analysis focused on identifying shifts in thematic representation, media framing, and audience interpretation.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK Three key theoretical lenses informed this study:

1. Performance Theory (Schechner, 2006): Views performance as a liminal space where identity, ideology, and power are enacted. Theatre is seen not just as text, but as an embodied, socially situated act.
2. Public Sphere Theory (Habermas, 1991): Positions theatre as a contributor to rational/critical public discourse, especially in its role as social commentary.
3. Adaptation Theory (Hutcheon, 2012): Frames adaptation as both repetition and transformation. Emphasizes that adaptations are interpretive acts shaped by the receiving culture.

CASE STUDY I: Tughlaq by Girish Karnad

Tughlaq (1964) is a historical play dramatizing the rule of Muhammad bin Tughlaq, a 14th-century Sultan of Delhi. The play is a scathing critique of idealistic but tyrannical governance, echoing disillusionment with post-independence Indian leadership.

Indian Performance and Adaptations: The original productions in Kannada and Hindi gained critical acclaim for their allegorical references to Nehru. The televised Doordarshan version, aired in the 1980s, retained the play's political undercurrents while employing minimalist sets and dialogues to maintain fidelity to the stage version.

International Adaptations: UK-based productions (e.g., Tara Arts) highlighted the psychological and existential aspects of Tughlaq's character, often comparing him with Shakespearean tragic heroes. Such framing made the play more accessible to non-Indian audiences but diluted its direct political message.

Media Reframing: Indian reviewers focused on the play's commentary on corruption and authoritarianism, while international reviews described it as "timeless" and "philosophical," avoiding its rootedness in Indian political discourse.

CASE STUDY II: Hanoosh by Bhisham Sahni

Hanoosh is based on a European folktale about a Jewish clockmaker. Though set in medieval Prague, the play explores themes of scapegoating, persecution, and artistic freedom—issues that resonated with Sahni's post-Partition experiences in India.

Indian Reception: Indian audiences interpreted Hanoosh through the lens of caste oppression and communal tensions. It was staged by progressive theatre groups like IPTA and was seen as a metaphor for contemporary intolerance and cultural censorship.

International Co-Productions: A notable 2017 Indo-German production staged in Berlin and Mumbai used multimedia and multilingual dialogues to globalize the play's message.

However, reviews in Western outlets focused almost exclusively on its Holocaust motifs, bypassing the caste analogies.

Comparative Discourse: While Indian critics drew parallels with mob lynching and censorship of dissent, international media highlighted the universality of resilience and human suffering. Thus, the political sharpness of the play was blunted in cross-cultural interpretation.

ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION

Loss and Gain in Adaptation: Cross-cultural adaptations broaden the audience but risk losing context-specific critique. For example, Tughlaq's critique of Indian bureaucracy is often reframed as a study in universal leadership failure (Hutcheon, 2012).

Medium's Role: Film and digital adaptations shift control from performer to editor. This reduces the immediacy and co-presence central to theatre (Schechner, 2006), affecting emotional resonance and viewer agency.

Cultural Filters: Audiences interpret texts through cultural schemas. Indian viewers are more attuned to caste, religion, and political nuance, while international audiences may universalize the themes, stripping away indigenous context (Hall, 1973).

Implications for Public Discourse: Theatre adapted to mass media enters the public sphere through different gates—TV slots, streaming platforms, festival circuits. These mediums have their own gatekeeping norms, which shape what is highlighted or muted. Hence, media framing becomes instrumental in determining what discourse the play ultimately participates in.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that while Hindi theatre serves as a powerful tool for cultural critique, its transition into cross-cultural media spaces involves a negotiation of meaning. Adaptations provide visibility and longevity to important narratives but often at the cost of political specificity.

To ensure fidelity of discourse, artists and curators must adopt adaptive strategies that retain contextual depth while engaging global audiences. Subtitling choices, program notes, and framing devices must be thoughtfully designed to convey original intents.

Future research can explore how platforms like Netflix or YouTube influence the distribution and reception of adapted theatre, or how AI and machine translation affect cross-cultural theatrical storytelling. Ultimately, responsible adaptation practices are essential for sustaining the radical potential of Hindi theatre in a globalized world.

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