Chapter III

Appropriating Shakespeare in Parsi Theatre

There is but one country in the world, to the best of my knowledge, except possibly Germany, where the plays of Shakespeare have of recent times formed the safest and surest attraction to the indiscriminate masses who attend popular theatres, where the proprietor of a theatre could count on a profit on a Shakespeare production. That country is India, and the theatres in question are a group of theatres in the city of Bombay, clustered together in the heart of a poor Indian population (Sisson 7).

This chapter looks at the way Shakespeare’s plays were appropriated by Parsi theatre, one of the major theatre movements in the history of modern Indian theatre. The chapter is divided into five sections. Section I, “Some Research-Related Problems” discuss various problems involved in dealing with Shakespeare in Parsi theatre. Section II, “Parsis and the Public Sphere”, discusses the emergence of public sphere in Bombay and the role played by the Parsis. Parsi theatre too emerged as a part of Parsi philanthropy that regarded theatre as a civic and cultured activity. The failure to locate Parsi theatre in this context has led many theatre scholars to argue that Parsi theatre from its very inception was ‘commercial’ with profit as its sole motive. I argue that this aspect holds true for the later Parsi theatre and not in the beginning. Only in the 1870s Parsi theatre became thoroughly professional and ‘commercial’. Section III, “Locating Parsi Theatre” defines Parsi theatre and provides a short history of its emergence and development. Section IV, “Parsi Theatre and Shakespeare Productions” deals with
various productions of Shakespeare in Parsi theatre which were largely free adaptations. In adapting Shakespeare’s plays, plots, characters, locales, situations were ‘Indiannised’ sometimes to such an extent that the productions hardly resembled the originals. Section V, “Parsi Theatre and the (Post-)Colonial ‘Hybridity’”, discusses the problems involved in locating Parsi theatre within the discourse of postcolonial “hybridity”. The eclectic nature of Parsi theatre and its free borrowings from various sources might make it seem “hybrid” in the sense of Bhabha’s notion of “hybridity”. However, a close study of Parsi theatre reveals that there was no desire to ‘mimic’ European theatre in order to “become like that” which is so central to Bhabha.

Parsi theatre has played an important role among various factors that assisted the birth of modern Indian theatre. Although Parsi theatre like its predecessors looked towards the Western theatre, especially Shakespeare for its inspiration and development yet it appropriated both the Western theatre and Shakespeare. The young English-educated Parsis were already familiar with Shakespeare and led by their British teachers had been performing his plays during their school and college days as amateur activity. Hence, once Parsi theatre began its activities it was no surprise that Shakespeare would be one of the major sources in its repertoire. Probably the most important factor in popularizing Shakespeare in India was Parsi theatre. Shakespeare and Parsi theatre worked well for each other. While Shakespeare helped Parsi theatre to establish itself as an important theatre movement Parsi theatre helped popularise Shakespeare in India by taking theatre beyond the educated elite circuit of the metropolis to the masses of the mofussil. Shakespeare provided the necessary material to cater to the needs of the audience — action, spectacle, rhetoric, declamation and thrill. In short, Shakespearean melodrama helped Parsi theatre find a potential and secure industry.
Parsi theatre, however, was quite a complex phenomenon which requires an understanding of the socio-economic and cultural developments that were taking place in the 19th century Bombay. The beginnings of Parsi theatre lie in the emerging discourses on public sphere, civic activities, cultural philanthropy and social reform that the 19th century Bombay was witnessing. The failure to locate Parsi theatre in this context has led many theatre scholars to argue that from its inception Parsi theatre was ‘commercial’ with profit as its sole motive. I argue that this aspect holds true for the later Parsi theatre. Early Parsi theatre was promoted by the Parsis as a civic and cultured activity. Only in the 1870s Parsi theatre became thoroughly professional and commercial. Therefore, it is important to locate Parsi theatre in these emerging discourses of the 19th century. However, before going into the study of Parsi theatre and Shakespeare, let me list some research-related problems that are involved in dealing with Parsi theatre.

I. Some Research-Related Problems

1. To trace the beginnings of Parsi theatre one needs to rely on newspaper advertisements and reviews, play-scripts, memoirs, song-books, biographies and letters. This is troublesome as the reliability of some such documents is doubtful. Relying on a newspaper review is problematic as it is quite probable that the reviewer’s own prejudice depending upon the ideology that newspaper may have influenced his comments. For example, the ‘colonial’ agenda of the Anglo-Indian newspaper Bombay Telegraph and Courier or the reformist agenda of Parsi-Gujarati weekly Rast Goftar determined the nature of the review of a particular production in the mid-19th century Bombay theatre.
2. Many of the extant play-scripts may not be the ‘original’ plays written by the Parsi playwrights but afterthoughts.

3. Another problem arises due to the fact that plagiarism was a common practice. A popular play was quite often published by another playwright with some alterations. One such example is the extant play-script of *Khudadad* in Urdu which is a translation of Shakespeare’s *Pericles, the Prince of Tyre*. Javed Malick notes that although the play was originally written by a playwright called Karimuddin Murad, the extant version bears the name of Mahmood Mian Zarif (2009, 170). In all probability, the extant play is a pirated version of Murad’s *Khudad*. Also, *Dil Farosh* (1900) is an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* by Agha Hashra Kashmiri. But there is another play by this name which is attributed to Munshi Mehdi Hasan ‘Ahsan’ by Ganga Prasad Arora who re-presented the play in Devnagari script. J. P. Mishra argues that perhaps due to the similarities of Kashmiri and Urdu scripts it is very probable that it was the same play and Arora had mistakenly named ‘Ahsan’ as its adapter (41).

4. Yet another problem is that the source material on Parsi theatre is spread across a number of regional languages like Gujarati, Urdu and Marathi in addition to English and Hindi, limiting the access to the non-speaker of the regional languages.

**II. Parsis and the Public Sphere**

The early history of Bombay shows it to be a cluster of seven separate islands ruled by different rulers. \(^1\) In the 16\(^{th}\) century the Portuguese arrived in Bombay and controlled it till the mid 17\(^{th}\) century. In 1661, Bombay ceded to the British consequent to the marriage treaty between Charles II and the Infanta Catherine of Portugal (Shroff 3). In the year 1668, the British Crown transferred the control of Bombay to the East
India Company (Shroff 3). After the Portuguese pullout, the British started developing Bombay as a commercial centre. Thus began the history of Bombay’s ‘capitalisation’ and ‘imperialisation’. It was at this point of time that many Parsis migrated from Surat to Bombay. By the end of the 17th century there were several Parsi families in Bombay as it appears from the following account by Sir Streynsham Master:

Here is also some Parsees, but they are lately come since the English had the Island, and most of them are weavers, and have not yet any place to doe their Devotion in or to Bury their Dead (cited in Yule 2001, 9).

As the result of the British imperial project, Bombay underwent significant number of social, economic and cultural changes. Parsis in Bombay played a major role in ushering these changes. From the beginning the British relied on the Parsis for trade and commerce. An important reason for this may be their recognition of the enterprising nature of the Parsis and their readiness to accept English language and culture. Parsi merchants worked in close conjunction with the British which led to this mutual prosperity. The material prosperity of the Parsis can be estimated from the information published in the *Gazetteer of Bombay (1900-1910)* that by 1805, ‘Bombay had 16 leading Parsi firms and 2 Parsi China agencies, as against 3 Portuguese, 4 Armenian, 15 Hindu and 4 Bohra firms’ (cited in Shroff 12). The commercial partnership with the British also helped the wealthy Parsi merchants to forge socio-political links with the latter that helped them to create a cultural and public space for themselves in the colonial society of Bombay. Jesse S. Palsetia explains that under the colonial regime the wealthy Indians in proximity to the British “drew upon a set of new words and phrases … the public good, good governance, humanitarianism and loyalty” (82). However, the meanings of these words and models were appropriated that created “a colonial civic
culture receptive and sensitive to Indian requirements” (82). I contend that Parsi theatre too was an outcome of this civic culture as discussed in the chapter. In order to create a public space for themselves, the wealthy Parsi merchants engaged in public welfare. Such civic activities undertaken by various Parsi merchants like Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy, Dadabhai Naoroji and others have been documented at length. An important reason for the Parsis to gain power in the public sphere of Bombay was the cosmopolitan nature of the city itself. In other words, the absence of any dominating tradition encouraged a minority group like the Parsi community to gain an important position at the centre of the social, economic, cultural and public life of Bombay. David Willmer notes:

Unlike older Indian cities, such as Delhi with its Mughal culture or Benares with its Sanskritic tradition, or other imperial cities, such as Calcutta and Madras, which were distinctly Bengali or Tamil in character, Bombay was characterized by an ecumene that was markedly more cosmopolitan or ‘ethnically diverse’ in nature. Although Bombay was situated in the province of Maharashtra, the Marathi tradition was by no means the only influence on the city’s public formation. Gujarati (Hindu, Muslim and Jain as well as Parsi) traditions were at the very least equally as prominent at all stages in Bombay’s history. Furthermore, this absence of a single dominant cultural tradition meant that other, numerically smaller communities (such as Goan Christians and Baghdadi Jews) had greater access to public space (48).

Thus the role of Parsis in developing a public space in Bombay is an immensely significant one. An appropriate example here would be that of Sir Jamsetji Jeejeebhoy who besides being a wealthy merchant played a crucial role in the development of
public culture in early colonial society of Bombay. He was also one of the earliest patrons of modern theatre in Bombay. Having made fortune in various business ventures in collaboration with the British, Jeejeebhoy was able to carve out a space for himself in the British society of Bombay. His proximity to the British allowed him to use British contacts to “shape his image as a great philanthropist and eminent citizen and to enhance the potentialities of Indians in the public culture of colonial urban Bombay” (Palsetia 83). He engaged in welfare activities and collaborated with the colonial government on various public projects like establishing western India’s first civil hospital, educational institutions for the native students, and various public charities. Recognising his role in the public welfare of India, the British government conferred upon him for the first time on an Indian the title of baronet in 1842.

Theatre, too, was a part of this public discourse as it was seen “as the public manifestation of the respectable, ‘gentlemanly’ civic culture of the mercantile and administrative elite in that city, and not merely as a source of popular entertainment for the masses” (Willmer 104). This is evident from the fact that the English and Gujarati newspapers of Bombay supported the cause of Parsi theatre and played an important role in its establishment and consolidation. There was extensive coverage of Parsi performances in the form of advertisements, reviews and previews. Kathryn Hansen maintains, “[T]his coverage established a bourgeois, public space for theatre, linking it to adjacent discourses of respectability, civic order and moral reform” (2008, 63). There is ample evidence of equating theatre with civic-mindedness. For instance, Rast Goftar of 15 December 1867 informs its readers about a performance of Shakespeare’s *Comedy of Errors* emphasising that the proceeds would go a public gymnasium. Another notice of a play called *The Tale of Padshah Faredun* by the Parsi Theatrical
Company published in *Rast Goftar*, 25 February 1855 informs the readers that the earnings would contribute to the patriotic fund:

**PARSI THEATRE**

For the benefit of the Patriotic Fund

The Parsi Theatrical Company

wishes to inform the public that its twelfth show

will take place

on February 27th in the Grant Road Theatre

during which the following plays will be performed:

*The Tale of Padshah Faredun*

and an amusing farce entitled Uthaugir Surti.

Ticket prices: Rs 2.50, 1.50, 1.25, pit Re 1.

It is clear that the rich Parsi merchants promoted theatre as cultural philanthropy. Due to the efforts of Jeejeebhoy and a fellow Parsi Framji Cowasji the Grant Road Theatre was opened in 1846, the first public theatre of Bombay, with the help of one Shankarseth. It was due to such acts that “Indian financial and civic leaders embraced theatre as an object of cultural philanthropy and demonstrated their status and taste, laying the foundation for much broader participation by the Bombay populace in years to come” (Hansen 2008, 65).

The contribution of wealthy merchants like Jeejeebhoy also presents an example of colonial ‘agency’. The question of colonial ‘agency’ has perplexed many contemporary theorists. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin define ‘agency’ as

the ability to act or perform an action. In contemporary theory, it hinges on the question of whether individuals can freely and
autonomously initiate an action, or whether the things they do are in some sense determined by the ways their identity has been constructed. Agency is particular important in post-colonial theory because it refers to the ability of post-colonial subjects to initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power (8; italics mine).

If one takes ‘agency’ to be the ability of (post)colonial subjects to ‘initiate action in engaging or resisting imperial power’, then colonial subjects like Jeejeebhoy were able to create a space within the colonial society where they could ‘choose’ to act as agents of social, economic and cultural change, if not (at least initially) political. Moreover, their ‘resistance’ to imperial power can be located not in the outright rejection of colonialism but in the appropriation of Western beliefs, values and models to suit their own requirements. An example of this appropriation as resistance is the way Parsi theatre appropriated western theatre and drama, especially Shakespeare, to suit the audience sensibility. It was this appropriation of the western theatre conventions that inverted the (post)colonial ‘hybridisation’ of Parsi theatre which many post-colonial critics would not agree with. For such scholars, Parsi theatre was essentially ‘hybrid’, in the sense of Bhabha’s notion of ‘hybridity’, which I refute in the later section of this chapter. It is in recognition of the ‘agency’ created by the Parsis that Eckehard Kulke in the title of his work refers to the Parsis as ‘a minority as agent of social change’.

III. Locating Parsi Theatre

Parsi theatre came into being in the 1850s in Bombay. However, this does not mean that there was no theatre prior to that in Bombay. The earliest institution established around 1776 was the Bombay Theatre located on the Bombay Green. It was the first colonial theatre of Bombay. In 1835 the theatre was sold to Jamshedji
Jeejeebhoy due to the increasing debts. After paying off the debts the balance was deposited in the government account. The theatre remained closed for the next 10 years. However, the increasing pressure of the public to open a playhouse led the government to allocate the money generated by the sale of the old theatre for constructing a new theatre. A new theatre named the Grant Road Theatre was built with a generous contribution by Jeejeebhoy on the land donated by Shankarseth in 1846. This theatre has been variously referred to as the Grant Road Theatre, the Royal Theatre and Shankarseth’s Old Playhouse. For the sake of convenience I refer to it as the Grant Road Theatre throughout the chapter. It was during this time that Parsi theatre was born.

The relocation of the Bombay Theatre from the Green to Grant Road proved a blessing for Parsi theatre. The Green had been the centre of cultural and social life of the Europeans as it was easily accessible from the ‘Fort’ where most of the Europeans resided. The new theatre at Grant Road was farther away. It became increasingly difficult for the Europeans to travel that far. Consequently the volume of the European audience gradually declined. On the other hand, the wealthy Indian merchants who inhabited the ‘Native Town’ comprised the ‘new’ spectatorship. The neighbourhood had become an important commercial centre for Indians which provided impetus to the growth of population in this area. The Grant Road neighbourhoods like Kamthipura had already been populous with the working classes. The inconvenience thus caused due to the long distance that the English had to travel and the increase in the native population in the area worked well for the Indian theatre-going public. As Kathryn Hansen writes:

Grant Road was shortly populated by a number of other theatre houses including the Elphinstone, the Victoria Theatre, the Hindi Natyashala, the Grand Theatre, the Ripon and others. This district, separate from the better neighbourhoods of South Bombay, suited theatre managers
intent on attracting a larger, more heterogeneous audience. Proximity to Khetwadi, Mazagaon and Girgaum ensured that the Hindu middle class would have ready access, just as the location of Market, Umarmhadi and Mandvi nearby invited Muslims. As textile mills mushroomed in Tardeo adjoining Grant Road to the west, workers availed of the chance to amuse themselves after long hours of employment (2002, 43).


The Grant Road Theatre succeeded in thus broadening the audience base by including working classes. It is here in the Grant Road Theatre that Parsi theatre’s origins lie.

Although Parsi theatre emerged in the 1850s, the wealthy Bombay merchants, many of whom were Parsis, had been watching English theatre at the Bombay Green. Kathryn Hansen comments that these wealthy merchants might have been invited by the
English “in return for hosting their colleagues at entertainments such as nautch parties” (46). The role of the wealthy Bombay merchants as is evident from the fact that they contributed to the renovation of this theatre in 1830. These Parsi merchants submitted the following petition in 1840 to the Governor Sir James Carnac for a new playhouse:

The Humble Memorial of the undersigned Inhabitants of Bombay and others — Sheweth That your Memorialists are of opinion that the General public feeling in Bombay is Favourable to the erection of a Theatre for the purpose of Dramatic entertainment. There being no place of public amusement in the Island and that such a measure would promote good humour and tend to induce a desirable tone of feeling in Society at large, Your Memorialists regret deeply that the former Bombay Theatre which was identified with so many pleasant recollections should have been destroyed, and fallen a sacrifice to debt and want of efficient patronage (cited in Hansen 2002, 40).

It was due to the efforts of these merchants that the Grant Road Theatre was constructed and later paved the way for Parsi theatre. The above account is also indicative of the growing civic leadership, the need for public sphere and cultural philanthropy.

Somnath Gupt argues that the growth of Hindu theatre in the neighbouring areas had an important role to play in the development of Parsi theatre (27). The Khetvadi Theatre established in 1846, for example, had started performing Sanskrit plays translated into Marathi. Unlike the Grant Road Theatre, this theatre, in all probability, was “an open-air theatre, with the stage constructed after the traditional folk style and folk traditions followed for audience seating, entrance of characters, etc.” (28). The Bombay Times and Journal of Commerce of 1846 reported about this theatre in the following words:
Our readers are not generally aware that an attempt which has hitherto proved eminently successful, has lately been made to revive the legitimate Hindoo Drama in Bombay. The theatre in Khetwaddy, where this has been attempted, is as yet without moveable scenes and ... what is usually reckoned the pit serves the purpose of the stage, benches all round rise tier about tier, and are occupied rightly by hundreds of respectable, well-conducted, and most attentive natives of all classes and creeds (cited in Gupt 27).

This theatre, asserts Gupt, must have given impetus to Parsi theatre.

It is a challenging proposition to define Parsi theatre because the process of which Parsi theatre was the result is itself quite complex. There are two main problems in defining Parsi theatre. Firstly, there are scholars who do not focus on the Parsi origins of the Parsi theatre. Such scholars, whether in Urdu literature or in Gujarati and Hindi literatures, either neglect Parsi playwrights or subsume them under their respective literary traditions. For instance, R. K. Yajnik equates Parsi theatre with Urdu theatre. Somnath Gupt finds fault with Abdul Ali Nami who includes Parsi theatre under ‘Urdu theatre’ in his volume on Urdu Theatre (7). David Willmer calls this tendency to define Parsi theatre without even acknowledging the Parsi origins as “dehistoricizing the whole context of the term, ignoring as it does the actuality of an originative moment for the concept of ‘Parsi theatre’” (1). Secondly, some scholars define Parsi theatre etymologically as belonging solely to the Parsi community even though Parsi theatre flourished with Gujarati, Urdu and Hindi playwrights and actors. Thus any attempt at defining Parsi theatre must take these considerations into account. Willmer argues, “to comprehend properly the meaning of the term ‘Parsi theatre’ it is necessary to seek out its origins within the specific social and historical context which produced it. Without
necessarily adopting an ‘ethnographic’ approach to the subject, we must nevertheless
recover those particular factors that were internal to the social context of the original
Parsi theatre and which led to its transcending its originative moment” (1-2). Somnath
Gupt’s attempt at defining Parsi theatre is probably the most comprehensive one. He
defines Parsi theatre as follows:

The phrase ‘Parsi theatre’ signifies the playhouses built and operated
by the Parsi community, along with Parsi playwrights, Parsi dramas,
Parsi stages, Parsi theatrical companies, Parsi actors, Parsi directors,
and so on. Also included are those playwrights and actors who were
not Parsis, but who worked on a salaried basis for the Parsi theatrical
companies. Further, those companies, owners, and actors are counted
who, while not being from the Parsi community and not being
residents of Bombay, added the words ‘of Bombay’ to their theatre
companies in order to show their connections to the Parsi theatre (24).
Thus Gupt takes the definition of Parsi theatre away from its narrow confines and
expands its domain acknowledging the factors that helped to establish it. In this sense
then Parsi theatre should be understood as a genre rather than an etymologically-
defined community-specific affair.

In the 1850s, some Parsi students of Elphinstone College were holding theatre
performances on Saturday nights. Since these performances proved profitable, many
others were encouraged to follow suit. The recognition of theatre as a viable
commercial enterprise led to the development of several Parsi theatrical companies.
Gupta corroborates Dhanjibhai Patel’s view that the Parsi Theatrical Company was the
first company to be established by the Parsis in 1853 (cited in Gupt 24). There were
newspaper advertisements that referred to this company by many names such as Parsi
Dramatic Corps, Parsi Theatrical Committee and Parsi Theatre (Gupt 26). Within one season, six plays were performed by the company which comprised young Parsi actors (Gupt 25). This is generally regarded as the beginning of Parsi theatre. However, S. K. Das opines that ‘Parsi theatre’ as it came to be known later came into existence in the 1870s as a commercial venture with Pestanji Framji’s company (183-4). Although Das does not mention the name of the company, Gupta refers to this company as Persian Zoroastrian Club (129). Das ignores the contribution of companies like Parsi Theatrical Company (established 1853) and Zoroastrian Theatrical Club (established 1866). Moreover, his reference to Framji’s company as the first commercial Parsi company is equally untrue. The two companies mentioned above were professional and commercial ventures. Another misinformation found in Das is about Victoria Theatrical Company being founded by Ballivala in the year 1877 (183-4). Gupt records that the Victoria Theatrical Company was founded in 1868 and had four owners: Dadabhai Ratanji Thunthi (Dadi Christ), Framji Gustadji Dalal (Phalughus), Kavasji Nasharvanji Kohidaru (Kavasji Gurgin), and Hormasji Dhanjibhai Modi (Kakaval) (12). The company underwent many changes of owners and directors. Ballivala became the director in 1877. Das has overlooked a decade in the company’s history.

(Patel cited in Gupt 29). The companies were different, yet all of them shared some characteristics in their choice of subject and production style like melodramatic and sensational plots, song and dance sequences, spectacle, display of technology. Most of them followed the repertory system and painted curtain. Professional rivalry was common and there are many instances where a successful play by a company was copied with minor alterations by another company and staged. The managers would lure the good actors of other companies. On some occasions, a company manager would hire a band of claque to applaud his play to gain publicity. At other times, these claque were used to jeer the performance of another company in order to create the impression of the production as a failure (Yajnik 116). Such fierce competition among these companies led their owners to spend huge amounts of money on making their productions attractive.

Parsi theatre survived on melodramatic plots and their emotional appeal, expansive sets and costumes, songs and dances, and wonderful stage effects. Somnath Gupt observes,

If the taste of the Bombay audiences can be guessed from the dramas performed, then it seems they preferred melodramas and farces. This was the influence of the contemporary English theatre. In London in the mid-nineteenth century, these were the kinds of drama that were most frequently performed. […] This influence had come to England from Germany. The plays of Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller were influential throughout the European world. Their dramas contained an excess of sentiment in lieu of logic and thought (19). Shakespeare seemed to provide the necessary material to cater to the needs of this audience in terms of action, spectacle, rhetoric, declamation and thrill. However, a
Production cannot survive on indiscriminate borrowing of material from another culture. Theatre scholars like Patrice Pavis, Dennis Kennedy and Hannah Scolnicov have all emphasised the need to look for appropriate cultural and gestural parallels in addition to linguistic parallels while translating a play into another culture. Here lies the success of Parsi theatre in making Shakespeare relevant and popular among the Indian masses. Unlike the English performances of the Bard’s plays staged by educated Indians, Parsi theatre indigenised them. Although the Parsi theatre playwrights borrowed a great deal from Shakespeare but they aimed not only at linguistic translation or adaptation but also cultural adaptation. The characters, locales, stories, costumes and form were all indigenised. Even while performing in the proscenium, folk forms like bhavai or lavani were used. This is well acknowledged by C. J. Sisson in his 1926 lecture at King’s College, London when he says, “Shakespeare is here [in India], not translated formally, not imitated, but transplanted as a living organism” (8).

![Scene from Romeo and Juliet. Source: C. J. Sisson, Shakespeare in India (1926) (Illustrated in Gupt 178).](image-url)
Parsi theatre used English, Gujarati, Urdu/Hindustani and Hindi in its productions. English was largely confined to the Shakespeare productions by college students. The Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Club, for instance, which was a Parsi student club founded by Kunvarji Sohrabji Nazir in 1858, performed English plays in the college as well as in the Grant Road Theatre on Saturday nights (Mehta 178-85). These students were trained by European professionals and performed Shakespeare and other English playwrights. David Willmer quotes a review published in *Rast Goftar*, 25 Feb. 1866 of a production of Twelfth Night by the Elphinstone Club “in the presence of a ‘private’ audience (the college governor and other ladies and gentlemen)” to praise the students’ efforts in trying to put up the original English version of the play (204). Another student group called the Shakespeare Society also performed Shakespeare plays annually in their college (Mehta 188-92). Willmer sees “[T]he initial adoption by the Parsi middle class of the public ritual of the English amateur theatre … as a desire to assimilate the cultural values of the colonialists with whom they were economically interdependent” (84-5).

However, Parsi theatre, being a public theatre, had to cater to the demands of the audience which largely comprised the working classes from the neighbouring areas of the Grant Road Theatre and who did not know English. Thus, the earlier vogue for English productions gradually gave way to Gujarati and Urdu/Hindustani productions. Kathryn Hansen provides the following account that reflects upon the shift from English to Urdu/Hindustani productions:

Although a contest might have developed between English and the Indian languages, English was quickly sidelined. The central rivalry that emerged was between Gujarati and Urdu, and this is well documented by the body of play texts published between 1865 and
1890. Out of a total of 80 printed plays identified in The British Library and newspaper notices, 35 are in Gujarati and 45 are in Urdu/Hindustani. However, the ‘Urdu’ category includes 17 plays published in Urdu language written in the Gujarati script. This sample undoubtedly under-represents the number of published plays. Nonetheless, of the 80 play texts, 44% were published in Gujarati, 21% in Urdu printed in Gujarati script and 35% in Urdu in Arabic script (2008, 64).

Even the Parsi Elphinstone Dramatic Club was later transformed into a commercial company called the Elphinstone Theatrical Company and started performing plays in Gujarati and later on in Urdu. Their most favoured playwright Shakespeare too was adapted into Gujarati and Urdu/Hindustani in the 1870s. David Willmer refers to the early Gujarati-Parsi theatre as “Janus-faced, looking back to the semi-mythological Persian history of the Parsi community and, at the same time, looking forward to the Parsis’ role as mediators of the process of modernization in the new India” (178-9). It is noteworthy that the Parsi-Gujarati playwrights wanted to present Parsi culture to its audience and also ‘recover’ the lost Parsi past. This pursuit of recovering the past is evident in the prefaces to the plays written during this period. Gupt cites the preface written by Kaikhushro Navrojji Kabra, the well-known journalist, for his play *Faredun* where he stresses his objective for writing the play:

My main objective is only now, when Parsis have begun to forget their land, their power, their glory, and their feelings towards their people, to freshen the memory of previous glory by presenting before them a picture of that previous rule mingled with amusement and knowledge. And if my feeble efforts are of any help in increasing an enthusiasm
for these matters among Parsis, I will consider myself amply repaid
(cited in Gupt 48).

Similarly, other early Parsi playwrights like Edalji Jamshedji Khor, Nanabhai Rustamji Ranina, Nasharvanji Mehrvanji Khansahab Aram, Bahmanji Navrojji Kabra, Khursheedji Mehrvanji Balivala, Dadabhai Edalji Ponchkhanevala Bandekhuda, Jahangir Khambata and Khursheedji Bahmanji Framroz drew inspiration from Parsi history, culture and works like *Shahnama*. Some of the Parsi playwrights not familiar with the Persian language turned to the English translations. Kathryn Hansen mentions Edalji Khor who drew upon Mathew Arnold’s and Atkinson’s translations of *Rustom ane Sohrab* (2008, 69). Shakespeare was also an important influence and his plays were quite popular from the inception of Parsi theatre. They were translated and published in Gujarati. Willmer mentions Gujarati translations of *Comedy of Errors* as *Jedia Bhai — Adhle Beheru Kutavu* (‘The Twins — The Blind and the Deaf) and *Othello* as *Kasrivaj na Karstan* (‘Scheming Kasrivaj’) by Nahanabhai Rustamji Ranina published in Dec. 1865 in *Rast Goftar* describing the translator as “the foremost Gujarati translator of *mahaguru* Shakespeare’s plays” (cited in Willmer 206). Plays like *Taming of the Shrew, The Merchant of Venice, Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Timon of Athens* were produced in the early years of Parsi theatre, between 1857 and 1859, in Gujarati (Hansen 2008, 66). A playbill published in *Rast Goftar* dated 15 Dec. 1867 for *Comedy of Errors* in Gujarati is given below (Cited in Willmer ix):
The trend started changing after the 1860s when Parsi theatre adopted Urdu/Hindustani instead of Gujarati for playwriting and production. The first Urdu adaptation of a Shakespeare play was Edalji Khori’s *Sone ke Mul ki Khurshed* in 1871,
directed by Dadi Patel for the Victoria Theatrical Company at the Victoria Theatre. The play was initially translated into Gujarati by Khor as *Sunana Mulni Khurshe* and then into Urdu by Behramji Firdunji Merzban. There were two major reasons for the shift from Gujarati to Urdu/Hindustani. The first being the economic compulsion of the Parsi theatre. Urdu/Hindustani, unlike Gujarati, had wider appeal. Plays in Urdu could be taken to other parts of India which meant more business. In fact, Parsi theatre earned much of its reputation by touring with its productions. This was possible because of the use of Urdu. The influence of Parsi theatre was so strong that soon various companies mushroomed throughout India. The second reason was related to the reformist discourse that colonial modernity had introduced. It is well-known that songs formed an integral part of the Parsi plays which utilized folk forms like *khayal*, *bhavai*, *garba* and *lavani*. These songs were immensely popular yet these folk form inclusions posited a problem. Hansen comments that the association of the traditional folk performers seemed a 'threat' to respectable and civic activity of the emerging middle-class (2008, 72). This concern is evident on part of some of the Parsi playwrights who addressed this issue in the prefaces of their plays. Delta wrote in his preface for *Romeyo ane Julyat*, “rather than the black stamp of immorality that is slapped on the mind of the viewer by the dance of prostitutes, the shows of Mahlaris, and the Bhavai of the folk-players, the blameless amusement of theatre enlarges the mind, gladdens the heart, cools the eyes, and speeds morality” (cited in Hansen 2008, 72). Urdu seemed to provide the solution to this problem as it had a rich tradition of poetry and lyric. Adopting Urdu would therefore impart respectability to Parsi theatre. Parsi theatre, thus, adopted Urdu/Hindustani as its language of production from the 1870s onwards. In fact, the most productive and well-known period of Parsi theatre was when Urdu playwrights like Raunaq, Betab, Agha Hashr Kashmiri and Ahsan Mehdi wrote for it. The use of
Indian languages, then, right from the beginning challenged the theatrical modernity brought by the West by appropriating the western plays in Indian languages.

IV. Parsi Theatre and Shakespeare Productions

In India, prior to Parsi theatre, theatre production was a private affair of the rich and the educated. Parsi theatre created a rupture in this kind of theatre practice expanded its domain as a public activity. The various sources that Parsi theatre drew upon were Persian and Sanskrit mythology, medieval legends, histories, English plays. However, the greatest influence on Parsi theatre was Shakespeare. As mentioned before, Shakespeare and Parsi theatre worked well for each other. Shakespeare provided the Parsi theatre playwrights with the raw material to build the dramatic plots and Parsi theatre popularized Shakespeare among the masses. The vogue of translating, adapting and appropriating Shakespeare, especially by the Urdu playwrights of Parsi theatre, can be judged by the fact that almost every major playwright of Parsi theatre drew upon Shakespeare for their plays. Because of his successful adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays Agha Hashr Kashmiri, one of the most prominent Urdu playwrights of all times, earned for himself the title of Shakespeare-e-Hind. So overwhelmed was Kashmiri by Shakespeare that he launched his own company called the “Indian Shakespeare Theatrical Company”. Ramu Ramanthan informs that Narain Prasad ‘Betab’ ran a magazine titled Shakespeare to publish his adaptations of the Bard’s plays (Website 1). Although there is no record of the number of Shakespearean productions by Parsi companies, one can guess by their growing number of plays performed and the translations and adaptations made for the Parsi theatre. Javed Mallick lists at least 75 extant play-scripts (2005, 82). Also, R. K. Yajnik lists over 200 Shakespeare
adaptations in various Indian languages by 1934. There may have been many more Shakespearean adaptations since most Parsi play-scripts are lost.

Parsi theatre adaptations of Shakespeare, especially in Urdu/Hindustani, followed generally a set pattern. Javed Malick identifies the following as the main strategies in adapting Shakespeare (2009, 160).

1. interpolation of songs and later dances into the original text
2. rewriting and/or rearranging scenes of the original by jettisoning sequences and interweaving motifs derived from other Shakespearean texts into the chosen play with a view to simplify and streamline the bard’s highly diversified and complex narrative patterns besides pandering to indigenous tastes and values
3. changing the Elizabethan blank verse into standard Urdu forms of rhymed ‘shers’ and ghazals or into rhythmic, ornate and stylized (often stilted) prose known as nasr-e-muquaffa and musajja
4. in the case of tragedies, refashioning the final sequences into happy ending.

Some more may be added to the list like indegenising the mise en scene and the use of dazzling sets and costumes to augment the spectacle.

As mentioned earlier, songs were integral to Parsi theatre. Somnath Gupt notes that even fighting heroes and dying heroines would sing on the Urdu stage (115). Parsi theatre has also been referred to as opera because of this musical character that. Parsi theatre scholars like Gupt credits Dadi Patel for introducing music on the Parsi stage. Gupt notes, “the addiction to songs grew to such an extent that occasions of joy, deaths, wars, and dialogues were all accompanied by singing” (182). Lyrics printed on the ‘opera book’ or programmes were given to the audience and one could find audience singing their favourite songs from the ‘opera book’. Gupt informs us that Parsi theatre ghazals used classical Indian music like thumri, dadra, jhinjhoti and kalingara besides
ghazals (181). One could also find pieces of Western music. Love scenes were often depicted through songs. Ania Loomba observes that a production of Sher-Dil (an Urdu adaptation of Othello by Najar Dehlvi) staged by the Parsi Alfred Company in 1918, opens with “Brabantio entertaining Othello with dance and music. The Desdemona-Othello’s courtship was often depicted through songs. Roderigo and Iago sing in duet to awaken Brabantio and his kinsmen with the news that the ‘peacock is in the house of the thief’ or that Desdemona and Othello have eloped” (1997, 119). Khun-e-nahaq, an Urdu adaptation of Hamlet by Munshi Mehdi Hasan for Parsi Alfred Company (1898) was transformed into a musical. The play opens in the court of Claudius “celebrating the nuptials of Claudius and Gertrude with dance and music” (Yajnik 161). The audience response to the songs sung on stage is described by Gupt in the following words:

The audience, when pleased with the actors’ songs, would shout ‘Once more!’ Sometimes, ‘once more’ was demanded even after the drop scene had fallen. If ‘once more’ was declared two or three times, the manager would satisfy the audience’s desire by having the scene repeated. Sometimes this created the ridiculous effect of slain characters, recently killed in combat, rising from the floor and beginning to fight all over again (174).

This fad for music increased the demand for trained classical singers. Gohar Jan and Munnibai, for example, who were trained semi-classical singers became the most popular singers and actors of Parsi theatre.

Most of the Parsi productions of Shakespeare were free adaptations with extreme liberties taken. New scenes were introduced and those which did not fit into the design were dropped. An example of the later case can be found in Karimuddin Murad’s adaptation of Pericles as Khudadad in which the father-daughter incest motif was
dropped for its incompatibility with the ‘Indian’ sensibility. Instead, the king is poisoned against his son Khudadad by the minister Azlam which makes Khudadad flee from his kingdom (Malick 2009, 165). Thrill, intrigue and murder were added to the plots. Yajnik argues that a play like The Taming of the Shrew was probably not adapted by the Urdu stage due to the absence of bloodshed and sentimental pathos (135). On the other hand, a play like Titus Andronicus, which no other theatre approached because of blood and gore in the play, was adapted in Urdu by A. B. Latif ‘Sad’ as Junune Vafa (Mad Fidelity, 1910) and staged by the Shakespearean Theatrical Company in 1910. Although a whopping sum of 1000 pounds was spent by the manager V. K. Nayak on the production for the elaborate Roman costumes and scenery yet the production was a failure, as Yajnik notes, possibly because: “(a) the high-sounding Roman names did not appeal to the people; and (b) scholastic touches given by many Arabic words fell flat on the ears of the illiterate playgoers” (156). Scenes of pathos were exploited to the fullest. Often new pathetic scenes were interpolated showing the characters facing “even greater misfortunes than are to be met with in the originals in order that their virtue might shine the more” (Yajnik 233). Also, in some cases, scenes from various Shakespeare plays were incorporated within a single production. For example, Agha Hashr Kashmiri’s adaptation of Richard III as Saide-havas for Parsi Theatrical Company incorporated scenes from the last two acts of King John. Similarly, scenes from two plays are mixed in Dil Farosh, an adaptation of The Merchant of Venice by Kashmiri. J. P. Mishra notes, “After a conventional song, Bassanio (Kasim) in the position of Orlando is presented praying to God to protect him from the evil designs of his elder brother Mahmud, who not merely seeks to deprive him of his rightful share in property but also rivals him in his love for Portia” (41).
Some of the Bard’s plays were adapted or appropriated by different playwrights for different companies. *King Lear*, for example, was adapted by Munshi Murad Ali for Victoria Theatrical Company (1905) as *Hara-Jita* and by Agha Hashr Kashmiri for Parsi Company as *Safed Khun* (1906). Similarly, *Othello* was adapted by Munshi Mehdi Hasan for The Empress Victoria Company as *Shaheede Vafa* (1898) and by Najar Dehlvi for Parsi Alfred Company as *Sher-Dil* (1918).

Most of the Shakespearean tragedies were transformed into happy endings probably because of the absence of tragedy as a genre in the classical Indian theatre and in folk theatre(s). Thus, although both the versions of *King Lear* as *Hara-Jita* by Munshi Murad Alli for Victoria Theatrical Company (1905) and *Safed-Khun* by Agha Hashra Kashmiri for Parsi Company (1906) follow the original text but end happily by uniting Lear and Cordelia and the latter being crowned (Yajnik 171). Similarly, *Romeo and Juliet’s* adaptation by Mehar Hasan as *Bazme Fani* (*The Fatal Banquet*, 1897) is transformed into a tragic-comedy in three acts. Also, *Kali Nagin* (1906), an adaptation of *Antony and Cleopatra* produced by one Joseph David for New Parsi Victoria Company, ends happily with Antony regaining his throne and uniting with his family.

Parsi theatre in its early phase used few props or furniture on stage like the early colonial theatre of Bombay probably due to financial constraints. Instead, as in English theatre painted curtains were employed to make the stage seem ‘real’. Later, when Parsi theatre became commercial, professional rivalry among the theatre managers led them to spend huge amounts of money on creating stage spectacle. Company managers would spend thousands of rupees for scenic effects and dazzling costumes in a single production. Painted curtains retained their importance and painters were commissioned from Europe to paint them. Later, Indian artists were employed and names of celebrated painters like Hussain Buksh were advertised in the playbills. In order to attract the
audience playbills advertised spectacles like ‘Transformation Scenes’ that the audience could see. Stage effects of storms, seas or rivers in commotion, sieges, steamers, aerial movements and the like were generally employed and enjoyed by the audience (Yajnik 113). The following playbill for *Nala and Damyanti* by Pandit Shaida is advertised as “A Spectacle of Super-Extravagant Splendour in Three Acts” (cited in Yajnik 114):

NEW PLAY! NEW PLAY!

AT THE
CORINTHIAN THEATRE
ETC.

THE LOVE STORY OF THE AGES
NALA AND DAMAYANTI
A Spectacle of Super-Extravagant Splendour
in Three Acts
etc.

With an All-Star Cast Featuring India’s
Popular Stage-Star
MASTER MOHAN
in the principal role of ‘Bidushak’

The play is replete with gorgeous dresses, wonderful transformation scenes and weird and enchanting effects. …

The entire gorgeous scenery designed and painted by
India’s Greatest Living Artist
Mr. K. HUSSAIN BUKSH, of Lahore

See?  See?  See?

The sleepy Lotuses transform themselves into Fairy visions.

The Vision of Princess Damayanti.

The bursting of a lotus and the appearance of Goddess ‘Saraswati’ therefrom.

The flight of the Swan.

The ‘Swayambara’ of Damayanti.
Narad’s descent from the clouds.
The miraculous appearance of Kali with the Flaming Sword.
The transformation of five Nalas.
The transformation of ‘Karkota’ in a forest fire.
The Durbar-Hall of King Nala.
The transformation of seven Fairies, etc.

The vogue for the spectacle was such that some companies even ordered machinery from England. This fashion for ‘spectacle’ interestingly gave birth to a new genre called ‘mythological’ drama. As Anuradha Kapur suggests, stories of gods and miracles that contained supernatural elements could now be presented easily on stage with the help of machinery (86).

Costumes were another elaborate affair with the Parsis that added to the spectacle. The early Parsi theatre used dazzling costumes regardless of the specificity to the periodical or cultural contexts in which the plays were set. Sometimes costumes were indigenised to suit the setting though this was not always the case. For instance, the playbill for *Ek Bevapha Mitr (A False Friend)*, an adaptation of *Othello* staged by The Parsi Stage Players, advertised in *Rast Goftar*, 10 Oct. 1865 mentioned that the play would be staged in Gujarati language and Spanish costume (cited in Willmer 200). Another playbill for a production of *As You Like It* by Gentleman Amateurs Club published in *Rast Goftar* (2 April 1865) advertised the play to be staged in ‘Gujarati language and Italian costume’ (Cited in Willmer, vii):
Due to such mixture in costumes Ania Loomba describes the ‘result’ as “a strangely hybrid dress, sometimes more Indian than Victorian, sometimes the other way around, and a theatrical look that was common in early Indian cinema as well” (1997, 121).

Typical costumes used in Shakespeare adaptations. Source: C. J. Sisson (Illustrated in Gupt 182).

However, more attention was given to the appropriateness of costumes in the later period. For Khune-Nahaq an adaptation of Hamlet, Kavasji Khatau followed “Henry Irving’s model for dress and scenery” (Yajnik 161). Later, in order to preserve the ‘original’ flavour of Venice and Cyprus, his son spent huge sums of money on painted curtains and costumes for Sher-Dil, an adaptation of Othello (Yajnik 167). The production of Hara-Jita, an adaptation of King Lear by Munshi Murad, uses elaborate and spectacular Egyptian costumes and scenery. Sometimes scenes were added into the scripts for the sake of spectacle and costume. One such case was the opening scene in Bhul-bhulaiyan, an adaptation of Twelfth Night, by The New Alfred Theatrical Company. The scene opens in the Court of Safdarajang, the King of Bokhara, which
provides an opportunity to flaunt the grand and spectacular set and also dance and song. Yajnik informs us that the scene was dropped in the later production (140). Many Shakespeare plays in Parsi theatre opened with such grand court scenes which provided the theatre-managers an opportunity to display their technological superiority over the other companies. The Alfred Theatrical Company (1871) of Framji Joshi was specially known for its spectacular productions. Within its short life span, the company staged several spectacles. Gupt informs us that in its play Jahanbakhsh ane Gulrukhsar “mechanical scenes were employed for the first time. The eruption of a volcano, the emergence of a giant from the earth, and the descent onto the stage of flying fairies and other scenes were shown to good effect” (128).

C. J. Sisson mentions this fact in his 1926 lecture to the Shakespeare Association at King’s College, London:

The orthodox Shakespearian would experience many a shock if he ventured into this strange temple of his idol. He might accustom himself to the Oriental costume and mise-en-scene, to the disturbing medley of the audience, even, with some study, to the foreign language. But he would be amazed to find that he was being provided with an opera, and a ballet as well as a play, […], and horrified when he realized the extreme liberties that were being taken with the text and plot (8).

He quickly adds that “A wise Shakespearian … would rejoice that Shakespeare is here, not translated formally, not imitated, but transplanted as a living organism” (8). Although Sisson acknowledges the achievement of the Parsi adaptations, his agenda is
to reinforce the colonial myth of ‘universal’ Shakespeare that could fit anywhere and everywhere. Javed Malick argues that these appropriations gain significance in the context of the dominant cultural politics of the period—particularly in the light of the colonial constructions and propagation of the “iconicity” and the “universality” of “the Bard”. In contrast to the culturally monolithic icon that was taught in schools and colleges, the Parsi theater’s Shakespeare was often a deviant, multilayered, and, sometimes, fractured text. This deviation from the canonical model seems to have characterized the attitude of the founders of Parsi theatre companies from the very beginning (2005, 93).

These adaptations, then, did not uphold the ‘universality’ of Shakespeare, as Sisson would like to believe, but in fact located a rupture in the discourse of ‘universal’ Shakespeare.

V. Parsi Theatre and the (Post-)Colonial ‘Hybridity’

Dennis Kennedy in *Foreign Shakespeare* observes,

Whereas in Europe the Shakespeare project embraced the translation and outright appropriation of the texts, in Asia the imperial mode tended to bring them in the original language as a demonstration of the linguistic and the cultural superiority of the conqueror. This was most notable in India, of course, where the insertion of the Shakespearean text into native life paralleled the insertion of the power of the master race (291).

This is but partially true. There is no denying the fact that Shakespeare, as part of English literary studies, was a forced assimilation imposed upon the ‘natives’ to
demonstrate the British cultural and moral superiority. Not only the academic Shakespeare as he was taught in schools and colleges, but also the earlier Shakespeare productions attempted to be ‘faithful’ to both the text and the conventions of English theatre. An example of this attitude gets reflected in the students productions in educational institutions who staged plays like *The Merchant of Venice*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and *Henry IV* “in English in a proper European style, the most notable English actors in Calcutta being occasionally invited for training and advice in production” (Yajnik 86; italics mine). But Shakespeare was gradually assimilated into indigenous theatrical activity. The plays were translated and performed in regional languages. Poonam Trivedi observes that the earliest local adaptation of a Shakespeare play in India was *Nathari Firangiz Thekani Avi* (A Bad Firangi Woman Brought to Sense), a critical adaptation of *Taming of the Shrew*, “for it distanced and labeled the shrew as non-Indian, a *firangi*, performed in 1852 in Gujarati (153). As discussed in the previous section, Parsi playwrights like Agha Hashr Kasmiri, Munshi Mehdi Hasan and Narain Prasad Betaab appropriated Shakespeare’s plays freely and took liberties with plots, characters and structure. Dances and songs based on Indian classical music and occasionally on western music were added, scenes were interpolated or discarded, new characters and plots of murders and intrigues were introduced. In fact, Parsi theatre made every effort to fit Shakespeare’s plays into an ‘Indian’ context. Such ‘illegitimate’ Shakespeare, as some may call it, was the hallmark of Parsi theatre. This might appear as ‘hybrid’. However, one should be cautious in locating Parsi theatre in general and Parsi adaptations of Shakespeare’s plays in particular in the discourse of (post)colonial ‘hybridity’ for the reasons elaborated below.

‘Hybridity’ is one of the most contested and widely (mis)used concepts in postcolonial theory. In recent years, the concept has been linked with Homi Bhabha
who was inspired by Franz Fanon’s view to develop his theory of ‘hybridity’, ‘mimicry’ and ‘ambivalence’. Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* theorizes that the colonized subject is necessarily hybrid as (s)he attempts to mimic the colonizer but fails in the attempt and in the process becomes hybrid (44-5). For Fanon, ‘hybrid’ means rootless. In his view, this psychic schism leads to the erasure of the identity of the colonized subject as (s)he disowns his/her roots and attempts to become white. For Fanon the colonial world is “a world divided into compartments ... a world cut into two” where the colonizer and the colonized are two clear-cut binaries (30-1). Unlike Fanon, Bhabha argues that the relationship between the colonized and the colonizer is ‘ambivalent’, a constantly fluctuating love/hate or attraction/repulsion relationship. He elaborates that it is because of this ‘ambivalence’ in the colonized subject that (s)he ‘mimics’ the colonizer by adopting the colonizer’s tastes, opinions, assumptions values and culture. The result is, however, not an exact copy of the colonizer but a colonized subject who is “almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 1994, 86). For Bhabha, mimicry is not a tragic failure as viewed by Fanon. On the other hand, mimicry enables agency in the colonized subject. This is so because according to Bhabha, mimicry is not far from mockery, a kind of parody, thus, making mockery “at once resemblance and menace” (86). According to him the effect of mimicry on the authority of colonial discourse is “profound and disturbing. For in ‘normalizing’ the colonial state or subject, the dream of post-Enlightenment civility alienates its own language of liberty and produces another knowledge of its norms. ... The menace of mimicry is its double vision which in dislocating the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority” (86).

If one considers the early English productions, notably the Shakespearean productions, by the Parsi students of Elphinstone College, one may argue that there was an attempt to ‘mimic’ the Western theatrical conventions. There was an element of
‘subtle intimacy’ which is so central to postcolonial theory. The actors of these performances were English educated students performing under the tutelage of their English teachers. But these productions were confined to the exclusive domains of the colleges. Even when these performances were staged at Grant Road Theatre, the audience comprised educated Indians and the European gentry. Later, the commercial imperatives forced the Elphinstone Dramatic Club to perform in Gujarati and Urdu by the 1870s.

Bhabha, unlike Fanon, acknowledges the colonizer-colonized relationship as ‘ambivalent’ and ‘unfixed’. He generalizes this state as common to the colonial subject anywhere in the world. According to Bhabha every colonial subject is ‘hybrid’ and every cultural identity is negotiated and formed in the “third space of enunciation” (37). He does not take into account various factors like gender, nation or class/caste that could nuance the colonizer-colonized relationship and make it different. Ania Loomba raises this important question and argues that

The colonialist presence was felt differently by various subjects of the empire some never even saw Europeans in all their live, and for them authority still wore a native face. For others, but even for some of the elites … the foreign presence was daily visible, but physical as well as cultural space was still divided into ‘their’ sphere and ‘ours’. In other parts of the world colonialism had penetrated much deeper into the everyday existence of natives of all classes. These patterns also shifted over time. Thus the resonances of both ‘hybridity’ and mimicry are enormously variable and we need to peg the psychic splits engendered by colonial rule to specific histories and locations (1998, 147-8).
Both Bhabha and Fanon argue that the colonial subject undergoes the split in identity in
the colonial world. Such an argument is based on the assumption that there is an
intimate and interdependent relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. It
may be true for the educated elite subject who might have shared an ‘element of
intimacy’ which is central to the postcolonial view of hybridity. However, this argument
may not be applied to every colonial subject anywhere. Not every colonial subject
shared an ‘intimate’ relationship with the colonized. The post-1970s Parsi theatre
explains this refusal of ‘hybridity’ on behalf of the colonised subject. Moreover, there is
no deliberate effort to subvert the Shakespearean authority by appropriating it. There is
no doubt that Parsi theatre took a great deal from the western theatre including
Shakespeare. However, Parsi theatre thoroughly appropriated the European theatre for
the native mass consumption. As Rusto Bharucha observes,

> [t]hese derivations [i.e. Western theatrical conventions] had been
thoroughly ‘Indianized’ through music, song, colour, pathos, melodrama
and the histrionic delivery of lines that are intrinsically a part of the
popular theatrical tradition in India (193).

It does not seem that there was a desire to ‘mimic’ European theatre in order to become
like that. Thus, there was no reverence towards either European theatre or Shakespeare
on behalf of Parsi theatre. As Rajiva Verma has argued about the early Bollywood films
based on Parsi theatre productions that they were not reverential adaptations of a master
text but “a matter of taking over a worldview or moral vision and more of one
professional playwright borrowing plots and situations and other tricks of the trade from
another” (243). Thus, Parsi theatre, driven by the commercial compulsions, took only
those elements from European theatre that it deemed commercially helpful and mixed
them freely with indigenous theatre. Although Parsi productions were staged in
proscenium with box sets, painted curtains and transformation scenes, they incorporated folk forms like bhavai, yaksgana, or lavani and Urdu, Gujarati or Persian ghazals, and thumris. As Willmer has argued,

the whole style of performance suggests an established idiom that owes little or nothing to colonial influences. The customary appearance of Ganapati and Saraswati (the latter riding a peacock), usually accompanied by the angelic child gods Bal and Gopal, that opened each performance immediately located the performance within a different tradition, and the incorporation of the songs, acrobatics and jests of the clowns point to another (secular or popular) aspect of this different tradition (127).

Parsi Theatre enjoyed its hey-day till the 1920s after which it started declining. An important reason for its decline was the advent of cinema in Bombay. Many of the actors and playwrights of Parsi theatre joined cinema. Another reason that contributed to Parsi theatre’s fall was the growing national consciousness that encouraged social dramas instead of the Parsi entertainers. The manifestation of national consciousness was seen later in the nineteen forties with the emergence of the IPTA. Although, Parsi theatre had gone into slumber by the 30s, its manifestations can still be seen in Indian cinema with its legacy of dance and song. Parsi theatre, without any doubt, succeeded in popularizing Shakespeare in India to the extent that no other theatre has been able to do since then.
Notes

1 Colaba, Old Woman’s Island, Bombay, Mazagaon, Worli, Parel and Mahim.

2 I use the two terms ‘imperialisation’ and ‘capitalistaion’ as used by David Willmer to grant agency to the colonial subject. According to Willmer, “The narrative of imperialisation is one that, rather than the more limited and prescriptive subject-object relationship of colonization by itself, suggests the possibility of a greater degree of participation on the part of the subject/s in question. The latter may be able to participate in the greater project of empire building in an active way, ‘collaborative’ way, even if they might, arguably, take part objectively in their own repression, whereas the experience of being merely colonized must always be seen as an essentially passive one. Likewise, with the narrative of capitalization, which often comes hand-in-hand with that if imperialisation, but is not necessarily marked by all the same defining characteristics (such as the civilizing mission), the colonized subjects can also be willing and instrumental participants in its unfolding. The narrative of capital in general has an added dimension in that the colonized subject’s participation in it can both precede and continue independently of the intervention of empire” (12-13).

3 It is not to say that there were no Parsis in Bombay prior to that. As B. B. Patel informs us that the first Parsi resident of Bombay was Dorabji Nanabhai who migrated to Bombay from Surat in 1640 to transact business on bahlf of the Portuguese. B. B. Patel, Parsee Prakash: Being a Record of Important Events in the Growth of Parsee Community in Western India, Chronologically Arranged, Vol. I (Upto 1860), (Mumbai: The “Duftur Ashkara” Press, 1888), 13-14, as quoted in Zenobia E. Shroff, The Contribution of Parsis to Education in Bombay City (1820-1920), (Mumbai: Himalaya Publishing House, 2001), 9.
It is interesting to juxtapose the fad for song and dance in Parsi theatre in India with the nineteenth century Dutch theatre where the theatre audience would come only after the interval to watch ballet divertissements. See Robert-Henri Leek, *Shakespeare in the Netherlands: A study of Dutch translations and Dutch Performances of William Shakespeare’s Plays* (unpublished thesis), 70.
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