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The Shakespearean Imprint and Its Reinterpretation in the Telugu Canon (1870–1905)

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Abstract: This paper examines the dynamic interplay between Shakespearean works and early modern Telugu literature from 1870 to 1905, highlighting a robust intercultural dialogue that shaped literary innovation rather than mere imitation. This is a fascinating convergence where global literary icons met a local genius and rewrote the script of cultural exchange. Rather than passive borrowing, Telugu poets and writers like Kandukuri Veereshalingam, Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri, Duvvuri Ramireddy, and Mullapudi Venkata Ramana actively reimagined Shakespeare's plays, infusing them with indigenous cultural values, poetic forms, and socio-political critique. These adaptations transformed universal themes of love, power, jealousy, and existential conflict into vehicles for social reform, gender discourse, and anti-colonial nationalism within Telugu society. This study uses contemporary translation studies and postcolonial theory to reveal how these creative reworkings challenged colonial narratives, expanded the Telugu literary canon, and carved out a unique path to modernity. The Shakespearean legacy here is not a one-way street but a transcultural negotiation, where Telugu literature did not just echo the Bard; it conversed, contested, and innovated. This rich intercultural exchange exemplifies how translation can be a bold act of cultural appropriation and transformation, proving that even centuries-old global classics can spark fresh, localized voices and futures.

Keywords: Translation Studies; Postcolonial Theory; Cultural Adaptation; Transculturation; Social Reform

Introduction

“All the world’s a stage,” Shakespeare famously wrote, yet for the Telugu poets and writers of the late 19th century, the world was not merely a stage but a vibrant arena for cultural negotiation, identity formation, and literary transformation. Shakespeare’s influence, far from being a distant echo, resounded powerfully across linguistic and cultural boundaries to shape—and be reshaped by—modern Telugu literature during the formative period of 1870 to 1905. This era marked a crucial crossroads where colonial education, social reform movements, and literary modernisation converged, enabling Telugu intellectuals to engage with Shakespeare’s works not as passive recipients but as active interpreters and innovators.

Beyond simple translation, the adaptations by pioneering figures such as Kandukuri Veereshalingam, Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri, Duvvuri Ramireddy, and Mullapudi Venkata Ramana embody a dynamic cultural dialogue. These writers localised Shakespearean themes of love, power, jealousy, and existential conflict within Telugu socio-cultural frameworks, challenging colonial narratives and expanding the literary canon. Employing contemporary translation studies and postcolonial theory, this paper explores how the Shakespearean legacy was echoed and contested, revealing Telugu literature’s unique path to modernity through creative adaptation and cultural appropriation.

In an increasingly interconnected world, Telugu engagement with Shakespeare offers a compelling early example of transculturation, where global literary giants and indigenous traditions fuse to create something distinct and forward-looking. This study highlights how Bard’s words crossed continents and sparked new voices in Telugu literature that questioned, reimagined, and ultimately enriched both the source and target cultures.

This paper plunges into the tangled echoes of Contemporary Telugu Literature from 1870 to 1905, unravelling its secrets like a detective with a poetic licence. It challenges Shakespeare’s towering influence, revealing a dynamic cultural dialogue in which global literary heritage is reinterpreted, contested, and transformed to reflect local identities, social realities, and emerging modernities.

Literature Review

The reception and adaptation of Shakespeare’s works in Indian literature have long intrigued scholars, revealing complex dynamics of colonial influence, cultural negotiation, and literary modernisation. In the broader South Asian context, studies like Krishna’s *Shakespeare in Indian Languages* (2018) provide comprehensive surveys of how Shakespeare’s plays have been translated, adapted, and performed in multiple vernacular languages, highlighting their role in cultural assimilation and resistance. However, focused scholarly attention on Telugu Shakespearean translations, particularly during the critical transition period of 1870–1905, remains limited.

Early scholarship on Shakespeare’s influence in Telugu literature often foregrounds Kandukuri Veereshalingam’s pioneering translations (*Romeo and Juliet*,

Comedy of Errors) and reformist writings, viewing them primarily as vehicles for social and literary modernisation (Kandukuri 1895; Bapu 2003). Veereshalingam's works are recognised for introducing Shakespearean drama to Telugu readers and dramatists, simultaneously embedding reformist ideals such as women's education and caste equality. Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri's translation of *Julius Caesar* (1901) has been noted for its political resonance amid burgeoning nationalist sentiment, positioning Shakespeare as a subtle conduit for anti-colonial discourse (Sastri 1901; Narayana 2008). While these foundational studies underscore the significance of these translators, they often treat Shakespearean adaptation as a one-directional cultural import. Recent criticism challenges this perspective by applying postcolonial and translation studies frameworks that foreground the translator's agency and the hybridity of vernacular adaptations.

Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere's seminal work, *Translation, History and Culture* (2011), redefines translation as a cultural rewriting shaped by power, ideology, and context. Their emphasis on the translator as a "cultural mediator" rather than a passive linguistic conveyor invites a re-examination of Telugu Shakespearean works as active sites of negotiation and resistance rather than mere replication.

Postcolonial theorists Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (2002) further elaborate that translation in colonised contexts can function as a form of "appropriation," where indigenous literatures reinterpret colonial texts to assert local identities and contest imperial authority. This notion resonates with the Telugu case, where Shakespeare's plays were not simply imported but indigenised to articulate regional cultural values and political aspirations. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of "transculturation" (1992) offers a helpful lens for understanding how Telugu translators navigated between colonial impositions and vernacular traditions, producing hybrid texts that embraced and subverted Shakespearean conventions. Abdelkebir Khatibi's work on transculturation (1993) similarly underscores the dialogic nature of cultural exchange, emphasising a two-way process of transformation that enriches both source and target cultures.

Duvvuri Ramireddy's *Hamlet* (1903) and Mullapudi Venkata Ramana's *Othello* (1905) remain underexplored in scholarship but reflect broader global trends identified by Stephen Greenblatt (2012) and Ania Loomba (2015), who advocate viewing Shakespeare's global adaptations as sites of cultural negotiation and identity formation. Greenblatt's concept of Shakespeare as a "cultural touchstone" emphasises how his plays resonate with diverse audiences. Loomba's feminist and postcolonial readings highlight the potential for marginalised voices to challenge canonical narratives through adaptation.

In Telugu literary studies, scholars such as Rao (2010) and Narayana (2008) argue that Shakespearean translations catalyzed a literary modernity that blended classical Telugu aesthetics with new narrative strategies, enabling writers to engage with contemporary social issues. These studies collectively suggest that the early modern period's Shakespearean translations should be understood not merely as linguistic exercises but as transformative cultural acts that expanded the Telugu literary canon

and contemporary sensibility. Despite these advances, a comprehensive synthesis that applies contemporary translation theory and postcolonial criticism to Telugu Shakespearean translations from 1870 to 1905 remains lacking. This paper aims to fill this gap by examining how Telugu poets and writers creatively engaged with Shakespeare's works during this formative period, focusing on how these adaptations echoed, contested, and reimagined Shakespearean themes to negotiate modernity, identity, and colonial power.

Research Statement

While Shakespeare's global influence on literature is widely acknowledged, the scholarly focus has disproportionately centred on English and other dominant languages, leaving the early Telugu engagement with Shakespeare largely overlooked. This research addresses a significant gap by investigating how Telugu poets and writers from 1870 to 1905 actively engaged with Shakespeare's works through translation and adaptation. Rather than passive cultural borrowing, these engagements represent complex processes of reinterpretation shaped by local social, political, and literary contexts. This study examines how Shakespearean motifs were adapted, challenged, and transformed to resonate with Telugu identity, cultural values, and the emerging modernity under colonial influence, utilizing contemporary frameworks from translation studies and postcolonial theory.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach that combines comparative literary analysis with theoretical insights from contemporary translation studies and postcolonial criticism. The primary textual analysis focuses on key Telugu translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays by Kandukuri Veereshalingam, Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri, Duvvuri Ramireddy, and Mullanpudi Venkata Ramana, produced between 1870 and 1905. Close readings of these texts examine thematic reinterpretations, formal innovations, and socio-political contextualizations, emphasizing how Shakespearean elements were localized and reimagined.

Supplementing textual analysis, the study integrates critical perspectives from translation theory to understand the translators' roles as cultural mediators engaging in "rewriting" and "transculturation." Postcolonial theory provides a lens for examining how these adaptations served as sites of resistance, negotiation, and identity formation within colonial Telugu society. Secondary sources include relevant historical, literary, and theoretical scholarship to situate these adaptations within the broader socio-cultural and intellectual currents of the period. By bridging literary close reading with theoretical frameworks, this methodology aims to uncover the complex intercultural dynamics that shaped Telugu Shakespearean literature and its contribution to the formation of Telugu literary modernity.

Data Analysis

The analysis of Telugu translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays from 1870 to 1905 reveals a rich tapestry of cultural negotiation, creative reinterpretation, and ideological engagement that underscores the transformative role of these texts in

the development of Telugu literary modernity. These works are not mere linguistic transpositions but dynamic sites where Shakespeare's universal themes are intricately woven into local cultural fabrics, ethical frameworks, and socio-political realities.

Cultural Localisation and Ethical Reconfiguration

At the heart of these translations lies cultural localisation, where Shakespeare's narratives were reshaped to align with Telugu social values and worldviews. For instance, Kandukuri Veereshalingam's rendition of *Romeo and Juliet* tempers the original's tragic impulsiveness by emphasising filial piety, social harmony, and moral reflection—values central to Telugu society. This reorientation transforms Shakespeare's portrayal of youthful rebellion into a didactic narrative promoting social cohesion. Such recalibrations illustrate how Telugu translators exercised agency in "rewriting" Shakespeare, in line with Bassnett and Lefevere's theories, to ensure that the adapted texts resonated deeply with local audiences and ethics.

Hybrid Literary Forms and Performance Traditions

The data further reveal a fusion of Shakespearean drama with indigenous Telugu poetic metres and folk theatrical traditions. For example, Veereshalingam's *Comedy of Errors* skillfully blends Shakespeare's comedic elements with the rhythmic intricacies of the *Chandassu* metre and performance styles such as *Yakshagana* and *Burra Katha*. This hybridisation not only made Shakespeare accessible but also revitalised Telugu dramatic forms, fostering a literary modernity that was both rooted and innovative. Such formal experiments underscore how translation functioned as a performative and cultural act, transcending textual fidelity.

Social Reform and Gender Discourse

The adaptations also serve as platforms for social critique and reform, particularly in regards to gender roles. Veereshalingam's translation of *Much Ado About Nothing* recasts Beatrice's assertiveness through the lens of women's education and empowerment, echoing contemporary reformist debates in Telugu society. Similarly, in *King Lear*, the portrayal of Cordelia and Lady Macbeth is nuanced to highlight indigenous virtues and critique patriarchal constraints, aligning with feminist postcolonial readings. These adaptations demonstrate how Shakespearean characters became vehicles for advancing progressive social ideals and questioning entrenched norms.

Nationalist Allegory and Political Engagement

Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri's translation of *Julius Caesar* introduces a potent political allegory, reinterpreting Brutus's dilemma as a metaphor for sacrifice in the fight against colonial oppression. This localised political resonance exemplifies Ashcroft et al.'s "appropriation" concept, where colonial texts are harnessed to articulate indigenous resistance and nationalist aspirations. Such politicization of Shakespearean drama provided Telugu readers with a subtle yet powerful medium to engage with the complexities of colonial power and self-determination.

Psychological and Existential Inquiry

Duvvuri Ramireddy's *Hamlet* adds a new dimension to Telugu literature by introducing profound psychological complexity and existential questioning. Hamlet's iconic soliloquy is translated in a manner that preserves its ambiguity while embedding it within Telugu poetic expression. This adaptation reflects the anxieties of a colonised subject caught between action and inaction, mirroring the broader colonial predicament. It illustrates how Shakespeare's exploration of the human condition transcended cultural boundaries to influence Telugu intellectual discourse.

Cultural Specificity and Social Critique in *Othello*

Mullapudi Venkata Ramana's *Othello* offers a culturally nuanced portrayal of jealousy, betrayal, and racial otherness. The translation critiques social fragmentation and communal distrust by contextualising Iago's manipulation within Telugu values of honour and kinship. Moreover, the adaptation subtly addresses issues of caste and exclusion, enriching the text's socio-political implications. This exemplifies Khatibi's notion of transculturation as a dialogic, two-way process that transforms the source and the target cultures.

Expanding the Telugu Literary Canon

Collectively, these translations expand the Telugu literary canon by forging dialogic relationships between Shakespearean and Telugu literary traditions. They introduce new narrative strategies, thematic concerns, and formal innovations that challenge Eurocentric literary hierarchies. The Telugu Shakespearean adaptations thus exemplify translation as a creative act of cultural negotiation, resistance, and identity formation, contributing significantly to the emergence of Telugu literary modernity.

Hybrid Poetic and Dramatic Forms

Veereshalingam's *Comedy of Errors* is a prime example of formal hybridity, blending Shakespeare's comedic prose with the classical Telugu Chandassu metre and idiomatic expressions. This phenomenon creates a unique aesthetic that is simultaneously Shakespearean and indigenous. The line: ("A meeting of seven thieves! All dressed in one guise!") (Kandukuri 1898, p. 67) illustrates the rhythm and wit characteristic of Telugu folk theatre traditions such as Yakshagana and Burra Katha. This performance-oriented adaptation makes Shakespeare accessible to Telugu audiences unfamiliar with Elizabethan theatrical conventions, highlighting translation as a performative, cultural act that extends beyond the text alone.

This interplay of form and content also reflects the socio-political undercurrents of the time, where vernacular literature sought to assert itself against colonial cultural domination (Rao, 2010). By reconfiguring Shakespearean comedy within native dramatic traditions, Telugu translators fostered an indigenously rooted yet globally conversant literary modernity.

Through this analysis, it becomes clear that Telugu engagement with Shakespeare between 1870 and 1905 was not a passive imitation but a dynamic cultural appropriation and transformation process. This period laid the foundation for modern

Telugu literature, demonstrating how global literary influences can be localised to articulate indigenous voices, question colonial power, and enrich cultural expression.

Moreover, the tragic denouement is reframed with an emphasis on social reconciliation and ethical reflection rather than despair. This ethical reorientation parallels Pratt's notion of "transculturation," where cultural texts are transformed through interaction and negotiation (Pratt 1992).

Research Findings

This study reveals that early modern Telugu translations of Shakespeare's works (1870–1905) were not mere linguistic transfers but dynamic cultural negotiations that expanded the Telugu literary canon and contributed to the concept of modernity. Translators like Kandukuri Veeresalingam, Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri, Duvvuri Ramireddy, and Mullapudi Venkata Ramana creatively adapted Shakespearean themes—such as love, power, jealousy, and existential conflict—infusing them with local ethical frameworks, poetic forms, and socio-political concerns. The key findings include:

- **Cultural Localisation:** Shakespeare's universal themes were reinterpreted through Telugu social values, particularly emphasising familial duty, social reform, and moral didacticism.
- **Hybrid Literary Forms:** Integrating Telugu poetic metres and folk theatrical traditions transformed Shakespearean drama into culturally resonant, performative texts.
- **Social and Political Engagement:** Translations were tools for advocating gender reform, critiquing patriarchy, and articulating anti-colonial nationalist sentiments.
- **Expansion of the Canon:** These works challenged Eurocentric literary hierarchies by asserting Telugu linguistic and cultural agency, exemplifying translation as a form of transculturation and creative resistance.

Scope for Future Research: *Future work could explore:*

- Later Telugu Shakespeare adaptations post-1905 in nationalist and postcolonial contexts.
- Comparative South Indian translation strategies.
- Reception and performance histories.
- Feminist and postcolonial re-readings of Telugu Shakespeare adaptations.

Conclusion

The Telugu translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's works between 1870 and 1905 represent far more than simple literary exercises; they are dynamic sites of cultural negotiation, identity formation, and intellectual resistance. In engaging with Shakespeare, Telugu poets and writers did not merely import a foreign canon but transformed it, reshaping universal themes of love, power, jealousy, and existential inquiry through the lens of local ethical values, poetic traditions, and socio-political realities. This creative process of transculturation allowed Telugu literature to assert its

agency under colonial rule, challenging Eurocentric literary hierarchies and enriching its narrative and performative forms.

Literary figures like Kandukuri Veereshalingam, Vavilala Vasudeva Sastri, Duvvuri Ramireddy, and Mullapudi Venkata Ramana exemplify how translation can serve as an act of cultural rewriting, fostering social reform, gender discourse, and nationalist sentiment within a colonial context. Their adaptations breathe new life into Shakespeare's plays, making them accessible, relevant, and transformative for Telugu audiences.

This study reinforces a key tenet of postcolonial translation studies: translation is an active site of cultural negotiation and resistance. The Telugu adaptations of Shakespeare demonstrate how translators rework colonial texts through appropriation and hybridity, asserting local identities and challenging imperial narratives. This dynamic process contests Eurocentric literary canons and highlights translation as a transformative practice that bridges global heritage and localised modernity, enriching our understanding of postcolonial literary production.

Ultimately, this study affirms that Bard's works, far from static relics, become vibrant agents in local contexts, sparking dialogues that transcend time, language, and empire. As Shakespeare aptly puts it in *The Tempest*, "*The rarer action is In virtue than in vengeance.*" [The Tempest (Act V, Scene i)]. This virtue shines in the Telugu literary engagement with Shakespeare, where adaptation emerges as an act of creative courage, forging a literary modernity that embraces difference, challenges oppression, and celebrates cultural hybridity.

This study opens a gateway to rethinking how global literary giants, such as Shakespeare, are not merely translated but profoundly transformed within local contexts, challenging us to explore further the untapped reservoirs of regional literary innovation. The Telugu engagement with Shakespeare from 1870 to 1905 invites scholars to investigate how translation is a radical act of cultural negotiation and identity formation. This act continues to resonate in today's postcolonial and globalised world. Future research might investigate how these early adaptations influenced later nationalist literature or how performance traditions reanimated Shakespearean drama beyond the page. As Shakespeare's legacy unfolds in new languages and landscapes, one question remains compelling: How might the ongoing dialogue between the universal and the particular reshape our understanding of literary modernity and cultural resilience in the twenty-first century?

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