

More than an Indian teen shrew: Postcolonialism and feminism in *Isi Life Mein**



Más que una fierecilla india adolescente: poscolonialismo y feminismo en *Isi Life Mein*

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores a Bollywood movie entitled *Isi Life Mein* (dir. Vidhi Kasliwal, 2010), which exploits *The Taming of the Shrew* as a play-within-the-film for the first time in Bollywood, and even as an intertext on some occasions. Although apparently a mere teen movie, this article sheds light on the importance of the Indian location, which invites postcolonial readings of the text. From a postcolonial perspective, it is the aim of this essay to rethink how *The Taming of the Shrew* is caught up and shaped in another culture. The film experiments with, and offers a parody of Shakespeare and his text, to the extent that they are both “reborn.” The movie also reflects on Indian modernity characterized by endless migration and diaspora. This essay equally explores the significance of using *The Taming of the Shrew*, since cultural debates concerning gender relations are involved. The movie adds to the multiple cultural products that rewrite the play’s ending. One of *Isi Life Mein*’s main attractions lies in its ability to challenge patriarchy explicitly. Interestingly, postcolonialism and feminism are intertwined in *Isi Life Mein*, providing new understandings of the Shrew and, ultimately, the Bard.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; adaptation; *The Taming of the Shrew*; India; Bollywood cinema.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora una película bollywoodiense llamada *Isi Life Mein* (dir. Vidhi Kasliwal, 2010), que utiliza *La Fierecilla Domada* como obra teatral dentro de la película por primera vez en Bollywood e incluso como intertexto en algunas ocasiones. Aunque parezca aparentemente una simple película de adolescentes, este artículo enfatiza la importancia del lugar en que transcurre la acción, India, pues invita a lecturas postcoloniales del texto. Siguiendo un marco postcolonial, el objetivo primordial de este artículo es volver a pensar sobre cómo *La Fierecilla Domada* se puede adaptar a otra cultura. La película experimenta con Shakespeare e incluso parodia al escritor y al texto, hasta el punto que ambos se reescriben. *Isi Life Mein* también reflexiona sobre la modernidad en la India caracterizada por la migración y la diáspora. Pero este artículo sobre todo explora la importancia de utilizar *La Fierecilla Domada* en este contexto, ya que los debates sobre género son inevitables. Es necesario añadir este derivado a los productos culturales existentes que reescriben el final de la obra. Una de las características de *Isi Life Mein* es su capacidad de desafiar explícitamente la sociedad patriarcal. Lo curioso es que el postcolonialismo y el feminismo van de la mano en esta película para proporcionar una nueva forma de entender la obra y, en última instancia, Shakespeare.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Shakespeare; adaptación; *La Fierecilla Domada*; India; cine de Bollywood.

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Of Shakespeare's comedies, *The Taming of the Shrew* is the most problematic because its interpretation is—to say the least—ambiguous. Although there are critics that highlight Katherine and Petruchio's marriage as a companionate one, the play most often tends to be read as a "misogynist reinforcement of patriarchal ideology" (Vanita 2007, 84). Considered "archaic and benighted in its social assumptions" (Henderson 2006, 155) by many scholars and audience members, the number of times it continues being performed on stage and on screen cannot but strike us. It is probably the frisson of uncertainty that accounts for the popularity of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

The Taming the Shrew has always been extremely appealing to Indian audiences. According to Rajiva Verma, the popularity of the theme should not be surprising "considering the fact that there are several Indian analogues to the story of the play (which is possibly of Indian origin as well), as also the markedly patriarchal nature of Indian society" (Verma 2006, 253). The first encounter the Indian elite had with the play was not via the Shakespearean source text, but through Garrick's adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* entitled *Catherine and Petruchio*. *The Taming of the Shrew* was also staged into several Indian vernacular languages, such as Kannada and Gujarati. If *The Taming of the Shrew* theme started with British companies, it gained considerable importance in Parsi theatrical companies, a hybrid theatre during the Indian colonial period. Appropriating the Western canon, they "Indianised" the plays by inserting song and dance sequences and by staging them in Indian vernacular languages. With the entrance of the Bombay talkies in the 30s and 40s, some of the flourishing plays of the Parsi theatre were re-adapted for the screen. Such is the case of the stage Urdu play *Hathili Dulhan* (*The Taming of the Shrew*, 1932), which became a box-office success. The popularity and influence of the play was already evident in the early stages of commercial Hindi cinema, and the play increased its reputation in the subsequent period of Bollywood cinema. It is a favourite topic in Bollywood cinema of the 70s and 80s, in the context of a patriarchal society where women were supposed to abide by their fathers' and husbands' rules, and had to be submissive and well-behaved.¹ *The Taming of the Shrew* boom

¹ I do not use the term Bollywood cinema to refer to Indian cinema, but to allude to commercial and popular movies made in Hindi in Mumbai. My use differs from

included works such as Raja Nawathe's *Manchali* (1973), Rahul Prayag Raj's *Ponga Pandit* (1975), Manoj Kumar's *Purab Aur Pachhim* (1979), Rahul Rawail's *Betaab* (1983), Rajkumar Kohli's *Naukar Biwi Ka* (1983), and Manmohan Desai's *Mard* (1985). In Kannada language, there are also adaptations of *The Taming of the Shrew*, such as *Bahaddur Gandu* (A.V. Sheshagiri Rao, 1976) and *Nanjundi Kalyana* (dir. M.S. Rajashekar, 1989) (Trivedi 2007, 151).²

Given the importance the Shakespearean play has always had in India, it is the aim of this essay to focus on the postcolonial and feminist issues raised by a Bollywood offshoot of the *Shrew* entitled *Isi Life Mein* (dir. Vidhi Kasliwal, 2010), a film that includes a performance of the play for the first time in Bollywood cinema. Although the movie can be initially regarded as another teen adaptation, the gender and power dynamics of *Isi Life Mein* suggest that the film is far from naïve. The postcolonial location seems to facilitate the parody and experimentation with Shakespeare. It is also a film that depicts the endless migration undergone by diasporic Indians. Ultimately, *Isi Life Mein* also embraces a treatment of gender and identity that differs from misogynist and conservative readings of the play. Thus, *Isi Life Mein* does not reinforce patriarchy, but constructs a new and alternative Katherine, a different play, and promotes a re-birth and appropriation of the Bard in India. Not surprisingly, *Isi Life Mein* —apart from re-interpreting the Shakespearean play— inevitably alludes to and validates aspects of the socio-political environment of 1990s and 2000s India in light of globalization. Consequently, Kasliwal's movie explores Shakespeare as much as present-day India.

Dwyer and Pinto's usage of the term, since for them the term "Bollywood" refers to post 1990s Hindi movies targeted at diasporic audiences (2011, xiii).

² See Burnett on *Nanjundi Kalyana* (2013, 84). Burnett claims that the film did not travel much outside India. *Nanjundi Kalyana* is perhaps the most faithful adaptation of the Shakespearean play in India. With a localised Indian background, the plot retains the presence of a shrew who is not interested in marriage, but is finally obliged to marry the Petruchio Indian counterpart. Instead of there being only two sisters (Bianca and Katherine), *Nanjundi Kalyana* adds one more.

Postcolonial Shakespeare

Isi Life Mein is a Bollywood movie that incorporates the Shakespearean teen movie with the play-within-the-film. Set in a high school that the main female character called Rajnandani Khandelwal (“RJ”) attends —without her father’s awareness— *Isi Life Mein* follows in the footsteps of the “late 1990s films” that “offered teen-based versions” (Davis 2006, 52) of Shakespeare’s plays, such as *Never Been Kissed* (1999) —based on *As You Like It*— *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) —a rewriting of *The Taming of the Shrew*— and a basketball-based *Othello* entitled simply *O* (2001). The film also emerges as the first Bollywood film that introduces *The Taming of the Shrew* as a play within the film, rather than as a mere intertext. In spite of the fact that in the 1970s and 1980s the formula of the *Shrew* played a crucial role in Bollywood cinema in movies like Rahul Prayag Raj’s *Ponga Pandit* (1975), Manoj Kumar’s *Purab Aur Pacchim* (1979), or Rahul Rawail’s *Betaab* (1983), the plot was never acknowledged. The use of the play-within-the-film genre allows an understanding of *Isi Life Mein* in postcolonial terms. Kasliwal’s film takes part in the popular tradition of including this genre in Indian Shakespearean adaptations (Burt 2011, 73). Instances include *Shakespeare Wallah* (dir. James Ivory, 1965), *In Othello* (dir. Roysten Abel, 2003), which include renditions of *Othello*, and *1942: A Love Story* (dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 1996), which inserts a performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Common to all of them is the lack of success or even the impossibility of performing the Shakespearean plays, as if Shakespeare was still the epitome of colonialism and, thus, incapable of succeeding among the audience.

Isi Life Mein grounds its particular negotiation with the colonial period via education. RJ has to move from her village to Mumbai, where she must register for extracurricular lessons and decides to enrol in a drama company, directed by the male protagonist Vivaan. Apart from being studied as part of the curriculum, Shakespeare is even embraced by the theatrical group when having to choose a playwright and a play for an Intercollege national competition. During colonization, English literature in general —and Shakespeare in particular— became a very useful tool —and even an ally— of colonial administrators to control the colonized subjects. Indian colleges were “devoted to the study of the Western humanities” (Kapadia 2001, 107), and Shakespeare was the long-time favourite

author. His plays were suited to privilege the colonizers' culture "among the English expatriates as well as the elite Indians" (Singh 1989, 449), since the aim was to produce citizens who were "Indian in blood and colour but English in tastes, in opinion, in morals and intellect" (Macaulay qtd. in Cutts 1953, 839). Despite this colonial background, the Indian members of the drama company know that they have to move away from colonial readings of the play and put their stamp on a new interpretation of Shakespeare. They are aware of the fact that they have to negotiate—or rather, renegotiate—with the Bard to challenge the British Empire.

The scene of the choice of play reveals the web of discourses regarding Shakespeare in postcolonial India. Vivaan's desire to perform a Shakespearean play emerges as the best solution from the beginning, which hints at his knowledge of the Bard. Several Shakespearean plays are contemplated, among them *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *A Comedy of Errors* or *As You Like It*. Curiously enough, Vivaan alludes to *The Taming of the Shrew*, which makes the audience wonder about the necessity to go back to a play that seems to reinforce and reiterate patriarchy. The reaction of the members of the drama school company when Vivaan mentions the play manifests the status of Shakespeare in Bollywood cinema, for nobody seems to have encountered *The Taming of the Shrew* before. Although the Shakespearean influence had been consistent and ongoing, it was not frequently acknowledged. As Poonam Trivedi claims, the bond between Shakespeare and Bollywood is characterized by "an unnoticed and unacknowledged presence—a unique appropriation, intertextuality and absorption of Shakespeare in the Indian film" (2007, 48). In spite of the fact that the drama students may have watched films inspired by Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, such as *Betaab* (dir. Rahul Rawail, 1983), they certainly did not know the original source text, as their reactions suggest.

Isi Life Mein highlights the need to rework a play with such a troublesome content, and offer a parody of Shakespeare. In the making of the film documentary, apart from suggesting the necessary erasure of the misogynistic ending of the play, Vivaan equally utters a very interesting sentence: "No offence, Mr.

Shakespeare, but we will do it our own way.”³ Such an assertion involves complicated strands which veer towards a postcolonial project. In spite of performing a play of the Western canon, Vivan highlights experimentation, reinterpretation and, obviously, postcolonial mimicry. For Homi K. Bhabha, the colonised being imitates and emulates the colonizer and becomes similar, but still preserves his “otherness” (1994, 122). Articulated as both “resemblance and menace,” (Bhabha 1994, 122) mimicry is frequently political. In the case of the drama company, they do not activate colonial mimicry, but postcolonial camouflage. Although they use a Western play, they reinterpret it in the postcolonial period. It is the first time that *The Taming of the Shrew* is acknowledged and performed in Bollywood cinema, and the play appears as the ideal focus for experimentation. In fact, the Shakespearean play is entitled *The Taming of the Shrew (Reborn)* in *Isi Life Mein*. The title evidences a desire for change, and also proclaims a new conception of the Shakespearean play, and even of Shakespeare in general in Bollywood cinema and present-day India.

The use of language for the performance of the play-within-the-film equally becomes an issue to discuss among the members of the drama company. Interestingly, they all agree that English should not be the language to employ, but Hinglish—a combination of English and Hindi. Given that Shakespearean plays were performed in English during the colonial period for the Indian *bhadralok*—elite Indians—and the English diaspora, Shakespeare needs to be completely deprived of “its English habitus” (Appadurai 1996, 113) in *Isi Life Mein* to resist and circumvent the former colonial and imperial oppressions. The decision to embrace *The Taming of the Shrew* in Hinglish is in tune with the desire to experiment with the Shakespearean text. The hybridity of the language alludes to the hybridity of the play-within-the-film in which the Western canon needs to be “Indianised,” and even to the hybridity of the members of the drama company, who easily intermingle Western and Eastern traits. But performing *The Taming of the Shrew* in Hinglish also has to be understood in the context of the globalization of Bollywood

³ The close-up of Vivaan winking at the audience while uttering this sentence immediately reminds us of *Angoor* (dir. Gulzar, 1982)—based on *The Comedy of Errors*—in which an image of Shakespeare also winks at the audience as if approving of the parody the film makes of the Shakespearean play.

cinema. In the words of Daya Kishan Thussu, “chasing crossover audiences has led to the advent of a new kind of cinema, a hybrid cultural product that fuses the language of Hollywood with the accent, slang, and emotions of India” (Thussu 2008, 107). Consequently, current Bollywood movies mix the two languages to target diasporic audiences, Non-Resident Indians.

The engagements with *The Taming of the Shrew* in *Isi Life Mein* manifest instances of hybridity; the film fuses Indian and Western rewritings of the play. Close-ups of different editions of the Shakespearean play abound. The camera zooms into the famous film adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew* with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1967), suggesting the possibility that this adaptation may become one of the source texts the drama company is going to use to prepare for the rehearsals. But there are more engagements with the *Shrew* apart from the Burton and Taylor version. Some of these screen versions are the Hindi movies *Aan* (dir. Mehboob Khan, 1953) and *Betaab* (dir. Rahul Rawail, 1983) —loosely based on the Shakespearean text— and Western adaptations, namely *10 Things I Hate about You* (dir. Gil Junger, 1999). In tracing the interaction with diasporic clienteles, *Isi Life Mein* reveals itself as part of a “mediascape” (Appadurai 1996, 18) that provides a complex and hybrid repertoire of images for “imagined communities.”

This rewriting of *The Taming of the Shrew* is consciously “shaped by a concern with diaspora” (Appadurai 1996, 18) and deterritorialization. The film prioritizes migration, which is one of the concerns in present-day postcolonial India. In this sense, the movie takes part in the *genre* of diasporic Indian films started by *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995) or *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (dir. Karan Johar, 1995). In the 1990s, there was a clear reorientation of government policy towards a diasporic market. “The increasing media presence of South Asians in the West” and “Indian’s growing significance as a global economic power” (Dwyer 2014, 409) shifted the focus and themes in Indian films, to the extent that the NRI —Non-Resident Indian— was either implicitly or explicitly present on the Indian screen, or even in Western movies made by diasporic filmmakers, such as Mira Nair, Gurinder Chadha or Deepa Mehta. This change of paradigm affected the representation and portrait of the West, which no longer appeared as

a material and corrupt place, but was depicted as a place where local and global traits were fused, and where the local still played a crucial role. In *Isi Life Mein*, when the rehearsals have finished and the performance of the play is soon to come, RJ has to endure a forced mobility to her hometown. There is a quadruple mobility in *Isi Life Mein*, from Ajmer, in the state of Rajasthan, to Mumbai, from Mumbai to Ajmer, back again to Mumbai and, then, to New York. The day on which RJ is transformed and “Westernised” —she wears a short red dress, fashionable hairdo and glittering earrings— she goes to her aunt’s house with her friends and encounters her father, who did not even know that his daughter was studying in Mumbai, and thought she was taking cooking lessons to prepare for her imminent arranged marriage. RJ has no choice but to obey her father and return to her hometown. The rural setting provides a wide range of traditions and customs, which localize the Bollywood movie; the village is the location where “Indianisation” plays a pivotal role. For RJ, her hometown entails lack of independence since she has to face an arranged marriage there. The village simultaneously suggests the clash between Indian and Western values and clothes, and argues for the necessity to transcend the classical negative stereotype about the West as a sinful place. It is in the village that RJ’s father is helped by the members of the drama company, and changes his view of “Westernisation.” They all return to Mumbai to perform the play and RJ will finally leave for New York, becoming a diasporic being herself. Migration is then one of the thematic conventions of *Isi Life Mein*. Consequently, this rewriting of *The Taming of the Shrew* not only talks about Shakespeare, but is also concerned with the demands and issues of postcolonial India.

The performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* takes place at the end of the movie, and has to be understood as a hybrid product. It manages to establish bonds between RJ and Vivaan’s families, and between the Western and Eastern interpretation of Shakespeare. At the beginning, the performance uses a very clear Elizabethan *décor* and wardrobe, but the play is performed in Hinglish. The camera constantly mixes medium shots of the audience with close ups of the central couple to highlight the funny and comic tone of *The Taming of the Shrew*. The Indian Petruchio and Kate intermingle text with music, following in the footsteps of the film *Kiss Me Kate* (dir. George Sidney, 1953), based on Cole Porter’s musical. Just like in *Kiss Me Kate* the protagonists are lovers, so are RJ and Vivaan. In fact, when

Kate asks Petruchio why he tells her such beautiful words like sweet and lovely wife, he then says that he loves her. In saying so, the re-birth of Kate commences. The onscreen couple fuses with the onstage characters, and *The Taming of the Shrew* is transformed into a love story, which was certainly the subtext of *Isi Life Mein* before. The film departs from the Shakespearean play considerably. The unequal and misogynistic ending of *The Taming of the Shrew* gives way to a companionate marriage based on equality. But the play-within-the-film does not simply show a progressive interpretation of the *Shrew*; it also reinterprets the play in a new genre, blending the Western flavour with a Bollywood touch. In a classical Bollywood love song with lip sync, glamorous and shifting outfits, lavish production and endless close-ups, the couple declares their love. As in typical Bollywood movies, they do not kiss on the lips when the song ends. The song has the purpose of providing an additional commentary on the story, and gives the audience the information that Kate is reborn because she is in love. Kate and Petruchio depart and give way to the typical love story with a happy ending à la Bollywood. But the re-birth of Kate and RJ cannot simply be understood in connection with her requited love for Petruchio/Vivaan, as the song suggests. RJ is equally reborn as an independent woman, no longer obedient, but with self-esteem, and a new identity, and showing her love for Vivaan in front of the whole audience. The Shakespearean play is also reborn in a different country with a different aesthetics, in which the song and dance interlude is more prominent. Thus, the method of appropriating Shakespeare in India is dominated by parody, experimentation and, above all, “Bollywoodisation.”

The performance of the Shakespearean play also paves the way for more mobility. The song and dance interludes inserted in *The Taming of the Shrew (Reborn)* establish RJ’s skills and talent for choreography, and she is finally sent to New York in order to continue developing her natural talent. *Isi Life Mein* closes with an interesting scene at the airport in which RJ is seen off by her relatives and husband to be Vivaan. The film then constantly foregrounds migration and displacement. The “foreignness” of Shakespeare in India has to be associated with the “foreignness” and displacement of RJ in Mumbai and, then, in the West. The Shakespearean text provides a means of exploring the characters’ interaction with the

West, but also offers a frame for a re-interpretation and “Bollywoodisation.”

Feminism

The Taming of the Shrew presents a problematic gender politics. According to Ann Thompson, it is a problem play for the majority of today’s Western societies (2003, 41). The infamous speech at the end of the play in which “the supposedly tamed shrew, Katherine, announces her subservience to her husband, Petruchio” (McLennan 2014, 2) can be considered an enforcement of patriarchy, since Kate ends up as a silent, obedient woman endorsing an abusive husband. But the ambiguous ending is capable of multiple interpretations. Margaret Jane Kidnie (2006) has distinguished three main readings posed by Katherine’s final speech. The first strand emphasizes the irony of the speech. Kate’s notorious final speech celebrating female submissiveness would then be read as Kate’s flamboyant act of out-witting Petruchio. The second line highlights how Kate is beaten down by Petruchio’s terrible methods. The third line is more positive and sheds light upon Katherine’s desire for a mutually fulfilling marriage in which theatricality should be taken into account (Burns 1986; Daniell 2002). Whether Kate is understood to be tamed or not, the dynamics of female conformity and circumscription of woman’s place in the play may account for the endless reinterpretation.

Curiously enough, contrary to what might be expected, the trajectory of *The Taming of the Shrew* on screen is not so promising as far as gender dynamics are concerned.⁴ Although it is certainly true that the transformation across media brings new perspectives to the play, the critical interpretations are still highly conservative. Barbara Hodgdon for instance cannot be more pessimistic concerning the rewritings of the Shrew, which constantly “make and remake new patriarchies and new cultural myths with which to negotiate her use” (1992, 543). The first Shakespeare talkie with Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks “exploits the fame of the central couple” and “self-consciously juxtaposes the visual with the verbal, the silent film with the talkie” (Cartmell 2010, 137). The movie undermined

⁴ *The Taming of the Shrew* has recently been studied in other cinematic cultures such as the Egyptian one which does not deny, but promotes and reinstates male supremacy and patriarchy. See for instance Khoury (2010).

Pickford's confidence on and off screen to the extent of turning her into a spitting little kitten instead of a forceful tiger-cat.⁵ For Barbara Hodgdon and Diana Henderson, the cruel treatment on the part of Fairbanks towards his wife —known as America's sweetheart at the time— ruined Pickford's confidence and turned Fairbanks into an onscreen and off-screen Petruchio. Franco Zeffirelli's 1966 *Shrew* equally functions as a vehicle for the star couple Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. As Hodgdon claims, Burton overpowers Taylor, just as Fairbanks overpowered Pickford. The 1966 *Shrew* finishes with Taylor uttering the well-known misogynistic speech confirming her wifely duty and fidelity to her husband. The endless problems Taylor had had in her marriage to Burton as well as their impossibility of having children have been regarded as the main causes for her to make such a pledge at the end. Like Taylor's movie, Zeffirelli's *Shrew* also highlights male dominance and superiority, instead of challenging this view. Equally troubling for Hodgdon would be the *Moonlighting* episode based on *The Taming of the Shrew* entitled "The Big Finale." In spite of the apparently feminist ideas, the episode is also problematic reinserting the text into a patriarchal society. Most of the criticism on *10 Things I Hate about You* revolves around the conservatism promoted by the movie, very much attuned to the play. According to Pittman, the movie does not renovate "Shakespeare's play with updated and enlightened notions of self and gender," but "silences questions on both topics and assigns agency in the most traditional of ways" (2004, 148). Only Rachel McLennan (2014) regards *10 Things I Hate about You* as a progressive derivative in which Kate does not relinquish her identity and does not conform to a patriarchal society. The well-known poem at the end of the film, which stands for the famous speech of the play, is interpreted by McLennan as a challenge on the part of Kate. Interestingly, *Isi Life Mein* explicitly challenges the typical interpretations of the play.

The film potentially offers a window onto the Shakespearean play and Indian society. At first sight, comparisons between Kate and RJ seem to be out of place. RJ is obedient, calm, and naïve whereas Kate is impulsive, and not at all vulnerable. However, the analysis of RJ in

⁵ In contrast, Russell Jackson (1994) argued that Mary Pickford's wink to Bianca at the final speech became a powerful gesture that empowered Katherine while Petruchio was the one duped.

depth reveals several nuances in her character/personality that may be overlooked at first. The first sequence of the film confirms RJ is far from submissive. After school, she has fun with a friend and does not do what she is supposed to do. Besides, instead of remaining at home to prepare her dowry and get ready for her subsequent marriage, she decides to go to college to continue with her studies. As may be imagined, this information has to be hidden from her father, who thinks RJ is going to Mumbai to receive cooking lessons. Nonetheless, it is Mumbai that becomes a vehicle for the “Westernization” and liberation of the heroine. In Bollywood cinema, “bad” equates to “individualism and hedonism, concepts often conveyed symbolically by association with Western decadence: smoking, drinking, dancing in nightclubs and falling in and out of love quickly” (Sharma and Savery 2014, 154). The character of the vamp—the unruly woman on the Indian screen—was associated with frivolousness, Westernization and disobedience to the parents.⁶ However, the growing of the middle class, consumerism and diaspora as the main target audience changed the view of the West as a sinful place, and blurred the boundaries between the heroine and the vamp. The first encounter between father and daughter in Mumbai takes place when RJ is wearing a glamorous, Westernized and revealing outfit, to her father’s surprise and disgust. Therefore, RJ’s father relates Westernization to the shift in his daughter’s behaviour and disobedience, and obliges her to go back to the village where she grew up in order to adopt the traditional customs again. The father aims to “tame” his daughter into the long-held values of the village to marry her to a wealthy suitor, and prosper economically.

Once in Ajmer, RJ’s father embodies a perfect Baptista whose only obsession is to marry RJ to the chosen suitor, who resembles Shakespeare’s Petruchio to the letter.⁷ The anxiety of RJ’s father is due to the pressure fathers have in India to fulfil the duty to marry their daughters well, and satisfy all the demands of the marriage market. Thus, the patriarchal society is highlighted in this context,

⁶ This is precisely the case of Preeti in *Purab Aur Pacchim*.

⁷ Interestingly, *Isi Life Mein* eliminates completely Bianca’s subplot. The filmmaker probably preferred a shrew who was an only child because it would make much more sense in present-day India, where suitors would go for women without siblings to inherit all the property. See for instance Vanita (2007).

especially through the preparations for the arranged marriage. The Shakespearean play is really well transposed to the Indian setting, and better understood there since dowries and arranged marriages still remain normative. As Ruth Vanita claims, “with the virtual disappearance of dowry and family arranged marriage from the modern West, most Euro-Americans do not have first-hand experience of marriage as a nakedly monetary transaction” (2007, 86). The Ajmer Petruchio asserts his “supremacy” by asking for more money for the dowry. The behaviour of RJ’s suitor makes the audience think of Petruchio, since he humiliates RJ and her kin on the wedding day criticizing the wedding arrangements. Given that the amount of money for the dowry is impossible to reach for RJ’s family, they are helped by RJ’s Mumbai friends, who had gone to Ajmer to take RJ back to Mumbai to perform *The Taming of the Shrew (Reborn)* in the Intercollege Drama contest. In this context, RJ’s identity is totally destroyed since she has to abide by her father’s rules and commands. The would-be husband and father are trying to tame the Westernized RJ to reinsert her into this patriarchal culture.

But this *Shrew* actually challenges Shakespeare’s comedy to validate aspects of the changing socio-political environment of 1990s and 2000s India, extremely different from the Nehruvian era in which class battles dominated the screen. *Isi Life Mein* follows in the footsteps of the 1990s’ romance films that asserted “the individual’s rights against feudal strictures associated with vested familial interests: the authority of the father, the state, and the unwritten rules of endogamy operating within class and community” (Virdi 2003, 181). The “shrew” in *Isi Life Mein* is a complex and sophisticated character, who “tames” other characters. Curiously enough, it is finally RJ’s father—the onscreen Baptista—who is finally “tamed.” At the moment of giving away his daughter, RJ’s father changes his feelings and ideas, and gives preference to his daughter rather than the marriage market. A tiny detail usually overlooked has to do with the presence of a father for the onscreen Petruchio/Vivaan. This is a significant departure from Shakespeare’s play, in which the father is not even mentioned. Of course, the film’s premise—apart from women’s agency and power—is also the restoration of family values. Given the considerable changes in Bollywood cinema promoted by the liberalization of the economy and the growing number of Non-Resident Indians, the figure of the heroine could be Westernized since the West was no longer regarded

as a sinful place, and the parents had to modify their attitude and behaviour. In this sense, *Isi Life Mein* follows in the footsteps of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* or *Kabhi Kushi Kabhi Gham*, clearly targeted at diasporic audiences. Like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, *Isi Life Mein* negotiates with romantic love and family values and manages to preserve both.

Interestingly, *Isi Life Mein* aims to even out the balance of power between men and women. The play-within-the-play in *Isi Life Mein* pares down considerably Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, reducing it to the story that revolves around the main couple Katherine and Petruchio. The tone of the play is comic, and spotlights the moments in which Kate shows her hatred towards men. If *The Taming of the Shrew* is actually known for its lack of dialogue for women, RJ steals the show with her performance shouting, exaggerating her role as Katherine so that the audience cannot stop laughing. Vivaan as the on screen Petruchio also retains the comic aspect of the play combined with another intertext for them, *Kiss Me Kate*. The final wedding-banquet sequence is removed entirely, dismantling the misogynistic reading of the play. The last scene performed by Vivaan and RJ from the play depicts the couple at Petruchio's house in the process of "taming." Curiously enough, there is no taming as such, but a promotion of Katherine's self-esteem on the part of Petruchio. Kasliwal's *Shrew* simply gives the text a gender spin by turning the actors into real life lovers, internalizing the play and rewriting it via their love story. Trying to understand Petruchio, Kate asks him why he uses so many lovely words to address her. He then claims he worries about Katherine's confidence and equally says he loves her. For this *Shrew's* narrative solution does not come through the endurance of patriarchy but through equality between men and women achieved through love. Vivaan/Petruchio looks forward to making RJ/Katherine see her power. It is worth noting that after the Bollywood song, Vivaan asks RJ to kiss him, and she does not do it; it is as if she did not want to do what she was ordered. The last scene at the airport sheds light on mobility and gender equality. The last shot of the movie is a close-up that zooms into the onscreen Katherine and Petruchio —RJ and Vivaan. Vivaan commands RJ to kiss him uttering the sentence "Kiss me Kate" and then, Kate/RJ holds Petruchio/Vivaan by the shirt and kisses him, as if implying that she is only going to kiss him when and how she desires. Thus, the film attempts a levelling

between Vivaan and RJ. RJ's vulnerability paves the way for self-esteem and confidence.

Conclusion

The Taming of the Shrew becomes a key site of contestation and negotiation in *Isi Life Mein*. On the one hand, this Indian Shrew alludes to the colonial period via the importance of the Bard in the Indian curriculum, but intrinsically thematises a parodic process regarding Shakespeare. The members of the drama company articulate the need to reinterpret *The Taming of the Shrew* in postcolonial India via the use of parody, Hinglish and the "Bollywoodisation" of the play. On the other hand, any tinges of misogyny or gender inequity have been removed in the face of the romance between RJ and Vivaan. This onscreen Katherine becomes more visible and empowered, and the marriage favoured is a "fifty-fifty" one. Simultaneously, *Isi Life Mein* singles out the sociocultural aspects of India, such as transnationalism or diaspora.

It is actually striking that Indian cinema is responsible for probably the first progressive and challenging *Shrew* on screen. The movie attempts to deconstruct images of women on and off screen in Indian society. Indian women are inherently seen as oppressed by their cultural traditions. However, this adaptation emphasizes bourgeois feminism or transnational feminism favoured by movies dealing with diasporic beings or targeted at this audience. The young female Indian filmmaker has the freedom to experiment via Shakespeare and makes radical comments on the profound complexities of the nature of being female in contemporary India. But the film is more than that. If according to Sunaina Maira, the "youth are the locus of deep anxieties about the local, national, and global processes and their impact on the nation" (2013, 39), *Isi Life Mein* deals with diaspora and mobility. The movie becomes a powerful means of reflecting and commenting on current social and political conditions. The film is more than a mere teen movie, for *Isi Life Mein*—via the adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*—promotes interesting debates about gender and political issues. Kasliwal's film allows the audience to learn as much about Shakespeare as about India.

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