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Shadows of the Bard: Shakespearean Echoes in Vetrimaaran's Cinematic Universe

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Abstract:

The Shakespearean undertones in the films of celebrated Tamil director Vetrimaaran are examined in this article. His films exhibit timeless literary motifs reminiscent of William Shakespeare's dramatic universe, even though they are firmly rooted in the sociopolitical realities of South India. Using an intertextual reading, this study contends that, despite their non-adaptive form, Vetrimaaran's stories reflect the Bard's thematic concerns, particularly in their depictions of tragic heroes, moral ambiguity, systemic injustice, and the human condition. The article compares the protagonists of Vetrimaaran to Shakespeare's tragic characters, including Othello, Macbeth, and Hamlet, with a focus on classic films like Aadukalam, Visaranai, Asuran, and Vada Chennai. Karuppu's demise in Aadukalam, for example, is reminiscent of Othello's path, which is characterized by deceit, internal strife, and tragic decisions. Similarly, Visaranai criticizes justice and state power in a way reminiscent of Measure for Measure, while Asuran depicts a descent into violence akin to Macbeth's. The inclusion of small but perceptive characters in Vetrimaaran's films also echoes Shakespeare's use of common people and idiots as social commentators. The analysis places Vetrimaaran not just as a local storyteller but also as a filmmaker whose work speaks to universal dramatic structures and moral quandaries.

Keywords: Postcolonial Adaptation, Shakespeare in India, Vetrimaaran, Tamil Cinema, Shakespearean Influence.

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INTRODUCTION:

Exploring how timeless narratives continue to find resonance across various cultural

landscapes is made possible by the intersection of regional cinema and classical literature.

William Shakespeare is one of the most enduring authors whose influence cuts across time and space. Generations of authors, dramatists, and filmmakers worldwide have been influenced by The Bard of Avon because of its examination of human frailty, moral conflict, power dynamics, and tragic downfall. From Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* to Vishal Bhardwaj's *Maqbool*, *Omkara*, and *Haider*, his themes have frequently been given new life in motion pictures. However, such overt adaptations are uncommon in Tamil cinema. Instead, the works of some auteurs are subtly informed by thematic undercurrents that are Shakespearean in spirit, if not in form. Shakespearean drama's structural and thematic issues are echoed in Vetrimaaran's intensely political and emotionally charged stories.

As a filmmaker of conscience and craft, Vetrimaaran has established a distinctive niche for himself in Tamil cinema over the past ten years. His writings, including *Aadukalam* (2011), *Visaranai* (2015), *Vada Chennai* (2018), *Asuran* (2019), *Viduthalai* (2023), and *Polladhavan* (2007), resonate with realism, anger, and a rootedness that defies simple moral classification. Characters entangled in webs of social injustice, internal conflict, and irrevocable decisions are the focus of these movies. Despite his minimalist and narratively restrained style, the tragic universality of

Shakespearean drama is frequently reflected in the dramatic architecture of his stories, the psychological complexity of his characters, and the inevitable demise of his characters.

Despite not being a direct adaptation of Shakespeare, this article suggests that Vetrimaaran's film has strong Shakespearean undertones, especially in its character development, thematic concerns, and storylines. His main characters are frequently tragic heroes—men with promise who are ruined by both internal and external forces. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and *Lear*'s journeys are strikingly like their moral quandaries, troubled pasts, and sociopolitical entanglements. His supporting cast, which includes criminals, clowns, traitors, and idiots, also resembles Shakespeare's cast of morally dubious but crucial characters who occasionally guide the action. The dynamics of justice and power, particularly the abuse of authority and the performance of legality, are themes that run throughout many of Shakespeare's history and problem plays and are also reflected in Vetrimaaran's films.

The concept of "echoes," as opposed to "influences," is essential to this research. The movies directed by Vetrimaaran don't advertise themselves as literary adaptations. However, through intertextual reading, one can see how

his plots connect with Shakespeare's themes of fate, ambition, betrayal, and existential despair, and how his characters exhibit characteristics of tragic figures. For example, the psychological manipulation and jealousy that ultimately lead to the protagonist's demise in *Aadukalam* are similar to Othello's dramatic arc. Like *Measure for Measure*, *Visaranai* examines how the law is employed as an instrument of oppression by dramatizing the theater of justice. The transformation of Sivasamy, a peasant who becomes a warrior in *Asuran*, is akin to that of Macbeth and is characterized by bloodshed, retaliation, and the weight of legacy. Vast and structurally intricate, *Vada Chennai* offers a Shakespearean world of shifting allegiances, moral lapses, and street-level power politics, evoking the *Henriad* or *Hamlet*.

This study also looks at how Vetrimaaran and Shakespeare both use marginal characters to challenge authority. Throughout Shakespeare's plays, idiots frequently serve as moral observers who cut through the façade. Minor characters in Vetrimaaran's films, such as car drivers, inmates, and peripheral friends, critique caste, class, and state violence. They act as the conscience of a society that has been rendered insensitive by structural injustice.

This article's alignment of Vetrimaaran with Shakespeare does not seek to impose a Eurocentric framework or westernize Tamil cinema. Instead, it looks for a universal grammar of tragedy and resistance that cuts across cultural divides. Shakespeare was born in Elizabethan England, but his plays deal with universal human problems. Based in Tamil Nadu, Vetrimaaran's films address the same existential issues via the prisms of class conflict, caste hierarchy, and regional politics.

This article makes the case that, in a postcolonial, subaltern setting, Vetrimaaran's cinematic universe embodies the spirit of Shakespearean tragedy through a close examination of a few chosen films and their Shakespearean parallels. It adds to a continuing conversation that sees regional film as a place of serious literary, ethical, and artistic investigation rather than just as entertainment.

1. *Aadukalam* and *Othello*: The Tragic Hero and the Fatal Flaw

Set in the seemingly remote world of Madurai's rooster-fighting rings, Vetrimaaran's *Aadukalam* (2011) provides a rich retelling of Shakespearean tragedy. Dhanush portrays Karuppu, the main character, who possesses the classic tragic traits of great skill, unwavering loyalty, and a fatal carbon flaw: hubris. Ironically, Karuppu's rise to

prominence serves as the catalyst for his downfall as his mentor Pettaikaaran (Jayapalan) mentors him to achieve greatness. The story is similar to *Othello* by Shakespeare in that a renowned hero is caught up in a web of deceit, jealousy, and moral decay.

1.1 The Rise of Karuppu and the Tragedy's Seeds

Personal, cultural, and professional pride define Karuppu's character. His quick ascent is emphasized by film critics: "The rustic cock-fight story scores full marks ... The focus lies in the conviction ... to prove that he can win a rooster fight and ... it comes with detail and precision" (Brags.WordPress, 2011). Othello's nobility and distinguished status are reflected in this emphasis on pride, accuracy, and detail. In a similar vein, Othello's integrity and reputation in Venetian society are emphasized in dramatic analyses (Shakespeare, ca. 1604; Bradley, 2020), which set the stage for his tragic demise. Like Othello, Karuppu's rise is based on competence, respect, and self-belief, which also serves as the lens through which his demise is viewed.

Karuppu is prone to emotional injuries because of his pride. According to an honest review, "Aadukalam is a simple story of Pride, Jealousy, & Ego woven brilliantly together ..." (tamizhaninthalaivan, 2011). This is

reminiscent of classical tragedy, in which the descent is initiated by the hero's hamartia, or his moral and psychological weakness. Later criticism highlights how jealousy, once rooted in self-doubt, becomes irreversible (Mambrol, 2020). Shakespeare places Othello's stature at the center of his eventual downfall in *Othello*. This structure is also present in Karuppu: admirable but erratic, loyal but flawed.

1.2 The Betrayal of the Mentor: Iago and Pettaikaaran

The betrayal by Karuppu's mentor, Pettaikaaran, marks the beginning of his unraveling. Pettaikaaran, who at first serves as Karuppu's mentor and surrogate father, grows jealous of his success. Reviews that describe how he gives in to manipulation best describe this jealousy: "Pettaikaaran ... succumbs to his envy and ego ... To put it in a word— 'Silent Assassin'" (flawlesswritings, 2011). This reminds us of Iago's role in *Othello*, as the dependable ensign who conceals malice behind words and hints. According to Shakespeare scholars, Iago is one of the most terrifying insiders because he is "evil by nature" and can undermine Othello's trust without resorting to overt violence (IOSR, 2018).

Both stories are driven by jealousy, which starts in the background and intensifies psychologically. The central theme of *Othello*,

according to scholars, is "sexual jealousy," which turns innocence into violence (Bell, 1997; Orkin, 1986). In Aadukalam, Pettaikaaran's jealousy shows up as silent sabotage—stealing Karuppu's money, spreading false information about Irene, and undermining his reputation—rather than passionate speeches (IndiaGlitz, 2011). These subtle but deadly deeds demonstrate how Othello's faith in Iago sets the stage for his demise.

1.3 A Structural Analysis of Psychological Disintegration

Karuppu's mental state is reinforced by Vetrimaaran's storytelling style. The hero's internal collapse is mirrored by the director's use of non-linear flashbacks and monochrome interludes to break up the story: "Flashes of black-and-white ... externalize emotional rupture and foreshadow downfall" (ScreenAnarchy, 2012; tamizhaninthalaivan, 2011). Shakespeare uses soliloquies and increasing ambiguity to accomplish similar goals, with characters tearing themselves apart with their thoughts (Bradley, 2020). Similar to Shakespeare's close examination of Othello's internal conflict, Vetrimaaran's filmmaking allows audiences to see Karuppu's mind as it unravels.

The final cockfight serves as Karuppu's crucible and more than just a show. Reviews highlight how this scene encapsulates tragedy and conflict: "Detailing ... comes with lot of detail and precision" (Braggs.WordPress, 2011); "The rooster fight at interval point has been amazingly shot" (NowRunning, 2011). This fight externalizes Kauppu's inner turmoil in a public, ritualized setting, much like Shakespeare's climactic duel between Othello and his conscience-fueled jealousy over Desdemona. It signifies his moral collapse in the same brutal way that Othello's killing of Desdemona signifies his.

2. Oppression, Power, and the Law— *Visaranai* and *Measure for Measure*

The 2015 film *Visaranai* by Vetrimaaran is a ruthless critique of governmental violence and structural injustice. Fundamentally, it initiates a conversation with Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, shedding light on similarities in the representation of morality, hypocrisy, and legal authority. One examines authoritarian governance in Vienna in the 17th century, while the other depicts corrupt policing in contemporary Tamil Nadu. Both, however, challenge the ways in which institutions abuse their authority, practice dishonest morality, and diminish human worth.

2.1 Theater Power Deployment

Shakespeare's Vienna illustrates the theatricality of authority through spectacle. Angelo is given authority by Duke Vincentio, who then watches in disguise as he imposes harsh rules. Angelo "functions as a Machiavellian instrument of governance," according to Planinc (2010), imposing authoritarian law to expose Vienna's vulnerability under rigid order (The Machiavellian Spectacle..., 2020). When Angelo's brutality becomes too obvious, the duke puts on a lavish show to reinforce his power without taking accountability. Power is portrayed as both a spectacle and a moral lesson in this political theater production.

In a similar vein, Visaranai dramatizes authority by staging scenes of torture and obfuscation. In one gruesome scene, corrupt police frame and torture migrant laborers Pandi, Murugan, Afzal, and Kumar to profit from their labor (Reviewer, 2018). Like a play with predefined roles and scripted violence, they are forced into false confessions in order to appease political machinations. To appease political masters and hide systemic guilt, the police turn the law into a performance by manipulating appearances (Mouth Shut audience review, 2016). Shakespeare's use of theatrical construction to establish authority as performative power is mirrored in Vetrimaaran's dramatization of a series of

interrogations, each of which is planned for political purposes. When Isabella begs for her brother's life in *Measure for Measure*, Angelo secretly gives in to his own vice while maintaining Vienna's moral principles (Reddit discussion, 2023). Shakespeare criticizes authoritarian hypocrisy by contrasting public morality with covert transgression and exposing corruption behind his ostentatious virtue.

Inspector Muthuvel, an apparently honourable officer who complicitly frames and stages an encounter killing under political pressure, is used by Visaranai to dramatize this hypocrisy (Reviewer, 2018). He finds himself in a moral bind after first rescuing the accused and then turning on them. The film's epilogue, which includes Muthuvel's planned demise, emphasizes how justice and cruelty are intertwined (Film Companion readers, 2020). Both Muthuvel and Angelo are prime examples of how institutional ugliness flourishes under moral pretense, and their moral ascent is illusory.

2.2 The Destructive Mechanism of the Law

Angelo is in control of Vienna's antiquated laws, but Vincentio exposes their weakness by posing as a friar and enacting justice "off-stage," using mercy to get around oppression. Shakespeare's main criticism is that when the

letter of the law is followed blindly, it can be harmful.

A similar dynamic is examined by *Visaranai*: political immunity and legal loopholes are the root causes of custodial violence. The movie was framed by Amnesty India as a "existential wail" against a system that uses torture as a routine bureaucratic practice (Film Companion, 2021). The authorities stage suicides, coerce confessions, and influence court decisions: Pandi's death, which was staged as a police officer's execution while performing their duty, highlights how corrupt the law is as a spectacle (Gulf News, 2018). Both pieces demonstrate how, when accountability is separated from the law, expediency takes precedence.

In *Measure for Measure*, Isabella is a moral center entangled in a power struggle of coercion; her brother Claudio, a victim of the inflexibility of the law, is given a death sentence despite reprieve. In the end, the Duke manipulates events to reveal Angelo, but Isabella's moral character is still up for debate. Similarly, *Visaranai* portrays the workers as a byproduct of political maneuvers. They become scapegoats despite their best efforts to support one another. In order to evoke empathy and illustrate the human cost of systemic oppression, readers of the Film Companion

refer to them as "prey in the hands of a predator" (Film Companion, 2021). Similar to Claudio and Isabella, but without Shakespeare's final redemption, these characters are part of bigger schemes. Their naivete highlights the animosity of systems created to support authority.

2.3 Deferred, Not Redeemed Justice

Shakespeare's resolution of *Measure for Measure* is ambiguous; moral tensions persist despite the restoration of the law. The harm done is not undone by Angelo's public exposure. Isabella's silence indicates that scarring caused by power cannot be quickly healed, despite the duke's proposal of marriage (Reddit discussion, 2023). It gets even worse at the end of *Visaranai*. There are no deaths, reconciliations, or cover-ups. "There isn't a drop of hope in our hearts when the end credits roll... yet the film is considered one of the best works," say readers of Film Companion, expressing the emotional void. Shakespeare's critique of power is echoed by the lack of redemption: justice may be restored, but dignity and trust are destroyed. Both texts examine power through structural revelation. Midway through, *Measure for Measure* changes course—Duke's return reinterprets everything that has come before it. The scope of cruelty is increased in *Visaranai* as it moves

from portraying common migrant workers to revealing police involvement in political plots (Only Kollywood, 2016). Shakespeare's lingering focus on Angelo's moral struggle is paralleled by the camera's refusal to cut long takes of torture, which resonate with the lingering pressure of institutional violence. Just as Isabella has to face Angelo, the audience is compelled to watch without turning away (Raiot, 2015). Both *Visaranai* and *Measure for Measure* portray institutions as brittle structures that are upheld by violence, hypocrisy, and performance. Shakespeare and Vetrimaaran challenge the way authority is organized as well as how it shows up in people's morally dubious actions. The tragedy of people trapped in systems they did not create and frequently are unable to leave is highlighted by both endings.

3. *Asuran* and *Macbeth*: Blood, Class, and Ambition

The 2019 film *Asuran* by Vetrimaaran is a visceral examination of caste-based oppression and retaliation in rural Tamil Nadu, adapting Poomani's novel *Vekkai* from the 1970s. Similar to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, this movie follows a path toward violence motivated by tragedy, ambition, and moral reflection. Despite their different settings and social classes, *Macbeth* and Sivasamy both represent

the ways in which structural and individual factors combine to create destructive cycles.

3.1 Loyalty within the Family and Violence Premonition

The conflict between legacy and survival is captured in *Asuran*'s opening scene, a silent father-son trek through the woods. The initial serenity is misleading because it foreshadows Sivasamy's violent transformation. An evocative reflection opens the Times of India review: "Asuran opens with a shot of a moon reflection on still water." However, when a foot enters the water, the scene's tranquility is lost (Suganth, 2019, para.1). This imagery alludes to the latent savagery within otherwise moral characters and parallels the false tranquility of Macbeth's reign—serene yet guilty. *Asuran* starts with a land dispute, much like *Macbeth*, where ambition is sparked by both internal desire and external prophecy. For financial gain and social control, wealthy landlord Narasimhan aims to reclaim Sivasamy's modest holdings. "Set between the 1960s and 1980s in Tirunelveli ... begins with Sivasamy and his son Chidambaram running ... after Chidambaram kills Narasimhan ... Vetrimaaran deals with casteism, untouchability, and discrimination," according to critics, describing the land conflict and caste violence (Subramanian, 2019, para.1). This is

similar to how the environment shapes political ambition in *Macbeth*—the patronage and aggression of feudal Scotland are similar to the caste system in Tamil Nadu.

3.2 Change via Bloodshed

Until a personal tragedy occurs, Sivasamy stays a pacifist. He resorts to violent retaliation after his older son Murugan is brutally murdered. The flashback and its emotional impact are described in the News Minute as follows: "... Sivasamy unleashes the asuran in him ... in stylized violence and slow-motion shots ... Vetrimaaran gives Dhanush's fans delayed gratification" (Silverscreen India review by Krupa Ge, 2019, para. 3). In a similar vein, *Macbeth* uses violence to change from a devoted thane to a despotic king. Sivasamy is compelled by protection and retaliation, but Shakespeare's protagonist is motivated by a desire for power rather than retribution. Although both characters transgress moral boundaries, their motivations—Tamil agrarian injustice versus Shakespeare's courtly politics—reflect the environments in which they live. Shakespeare depicts a series of violent events in which each murder leads to another. *Asuran* reflects this through systemic division and generational trauma. Sivasamy retaliates for family honor; the community responds with more violence; and the young

Chidambaram kills in self-defense. "It also draws attention to the oppression caste leads to ... *Asuran* is like *Baasha* ... he spills blood," as Silverscreen India observes (Silverscreen India, 2019, para. 1-2). *Asuran* implies that revenge only serves to uphold the current caste system—it never completely destroys it—just as *Macbeth*'s legacy becomes smeared with blood and destructive.

3.3 Similarities Between Psychology and Film

The protagonists in both tales suffer psychologically. Sivasamy carries a spiritual burden but maintains that violence is not freedom, while *Macbeth*'s guilt fuels paranoia and nightmares. His internal conflict is highlighted by Krupa Ge, who states that "violence is more of a reaction to oppression ... it does not become cathartic for Sivasamy himself" (Silverscreen India, 2019, para. 2). Vetrimaaran uses editing and cinematography to bring this to life. The "bird's eye view of agricultural fields and long walks through barren lands," which represent exile and isolation, is praised by OnlookersMedia (2019, para. 2). This brings to mind *Macbeth*'s existential loneliness, which is frequently depicted through gloomy sets and cramped imagery.

3.4 Footwear Symbolism: Caste as Identity

The power of footwear is one of the film's most powerful themes. "It is a pair of slippers that begin this gory cycle of violence ... Sivasamy's elder son Murugan's death ... leads to retaliation with slippers" (Silverscreen India, 2019, para.3) is how Silverscreen India describes how caste humiliation is performed through shoes, culminating in symbolic retaliation. Thus, shoes are stolen, reclaimed, and used as a weapon, becoming a symbol of caste dignity. This symbolic weaponization, which represents crime as both the cause and the tool of moral collapse, is reminiscent of the daggers and corpses that litter Macbeth's path. Sivasamy provides an alternative form of resolution—a call for education—in contrast to Macbeth, whose hubris only results in death and mayhem. He confronts his son Chidambaram at a crucial point, saying, "If you want to fight, study. They can take our lands, but they can't take education" (Silverscreen India, 2019, para. 6). Here, Sivasamy offers knowledge-based future redemption, breaking the cycle of violence. *Asuran* offers a glimmer of hope, while Shakespeare's tragic ending provides moral assessment rather than rejuvenation.

3.5 Structural Resonance: Political Tragedy Meets Revenge Saga

Asuran and *Macbeth* are both organized as unrelenting spirals; once violence starts, it cannot be stopped. Vetrimaaran emphasizes inevitability through flashbacks, slow-burning reveals, and stylized sounds, while Shakespeare uses dramatic irony and fast pacing. *Asuran's* "raw and realistic thriller" style, which transitions midway to a revenge saga, is discussed by Filmibeat (2019, para. 1). This change in tone is similar to Macbeth's midpoint turn, in which the protagonist kills someone and the rest of the play becomes a tragedy in progress.

3.6 Critical Reception: The Statement of Violence

Vetrimaaran's command of violence as socio-political language is acknowledged by critics. *Asuran* is praised by *The Week* as "a brilliant revenge saga about caste violence" (Subramanian, 2019, para.1). And *The Hindu* comments on its dual simplicity and complexity: "... simplest film yet ... most complicated socio-political film" (Kumar, 2019, para. 3). *Asuran* strikes a balance between thrilling scenes and moral depth and textual nuance, much like Shakespeare's layered darkness.

4. Clowns and Commoners— Shakespearean Knowledge in *Vada Chennai*

A sprawling human epic that weaves broken morals throughout the underbelly of North Chennai, Vetrimaaran's *Vada Chennai* (2018) is much more than a gangster saga. Anbu, the film's protagonist, is a reluctant hero whose journey is illuminated and complicated by a chorus of marginal voices, rather than a tragic figure like *Hamlet* or *Macbeth*. As commoners and Shakespearean idiots, these supporting characters represent social commentary, the breakdown of moral dichotomies, and collective conscience.

4.1 The Ensemble as the Chorus with Multiple Voices

With a sizable ensemble cast, *Vada Chennai* covers two decades of the violent politics and social dynamics of North Chennai. According to Film Companion, the plot is like an epic, with "Anbu... being a more reluctant hero." Like the *Mahabharata*, the story is epic. These characters—Guna, Senthil, Velu, Pazhani, Chandra, and Padma—are not incidental; rather, they form the film's central theme. Fools and common people (such as the gravedigger in *Hamlet* or the Porter in *Macbeth*) are not just comic devices in Shakespearean plays; they serve as a reminder of the complexity of ethics and a reflection of societal realities. Similar to this, *Vada Chennai*'s network of underrepresented voices emphasizes how

Anbu's life is entwined with the fate of the whole, defying easy reduction to a single tragic arc.

Fools in Shakespeare frequently reveal the most pointed truths while posing as innocuous characters. This function is fulfilled by supporting characters in *Vada Chennai*, such as the fishermen in Anbu's hamlet or the prisoners in the carrom. Anbu's character is influenced by these external voices just as much as by his own free will, as the *Times of India* emphasizes in the film's opening line: "A young carrom player ... becomes a reluctant participant in a war between two warring gangsters." For example, politicians shape his motivations, prisoners playing carrom challenge and condemn him, and Chandra's arc reveals loyalty and betrayal—all of which reflect societal norms and individual shortcomings that are essential to Shakespeare's complex moral landscapes.

4.2 The Collective Psyche, Betrayal, and Fate

Vada Chennai's timeline is significantly shaped by the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi (Former Prime minister of India) and the state funeral of MGR (Former chief minister of Tamil Nadu), which was covered by Hindutamil. These actual historical shocks are more than just background; they are profound changes that affect each character's life. Shakespeare's

portrayal of family or national unrest, in which forces at the macro level (war, kingship) reverberate in the minds of individuals, is consistent with this structural use of collective trauma. Common people in Shakespeare's works, like the townspeople of *Julius Caesar* or the *Henriad*'s citizens of Rome, perform and comment on political changes. Similar displacements haunt Anbu's world in *Vada Chennai*, where political upheaval, state-sanctioned violence, and caste hierarchy all influence choices.

Shakespeare's dramatic structure depends on supporting characters, who are frequently the only voices of conscience. These voices come out in a variety of flavors in *Vada Chennai*. A fellow gangster, a prisoner, or a longtime local fisherman all serve as sounding boards for Anbu's morals. His humanity and moral blind spots are evident in these observations. Instead of portraying Anbu as an unrepentant hero, this polyphony reveals him as a man who has been influenced and unsettled by societal norms.

4.3 The Influence of Context and Group Memory

The characters in *Vada Chennai* are positioned within the particularities of North Chennai, including caste divisions, carrom culture, boat-making communities, and local politics. Vetrimaaran turns viewers into locals,

according to Filmibeat: "You enter *Vada Chennai* ... from start to finish ... you don't know what set or real." This immersive setting functions as a Shakespearean city, such as Venice, Verona, or Illyria, where the setting is just as alive as the characters. Shakespearean idiots frequently represent the contradictions and ideals of their city. The marginal characters in *Vada Chennai* also mirror the multi-layered culture of North Chennai, where survival, treachery, and loyalty converge in collective memory.

Moral ambiguity, in which characters alternate between good and evil within a single play, is a potent Shakespearean trope. This is reflected in *Vada Chennai* through the characters' constant betrayal and repentance. The moral whirlpool that surrounds Anbu is highlighted by FilmCrow, which states that "the film revolves around how these characters influence his life, more than what Anbu does." Shakespeare's minor roles, such as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern or the Porter, whose allegiances fluctuate and serve as a reminder of the brittleness of human morality, are reminiscent of this revolving cast.

4.4 Collective Agency, Fate, and Resistance

The supporting cast of *Vada Chennai* resists caste divisions and political unrest through small, everyday actions like staging carrom

matches, disobeying orders, and pursuing dignity while incarcerated. Shakespeare's common people, who experience moments of agency in the face of monarchical oppression, are in line with these gestures. The sailors in *The Tempest* or the onlookers in *Henry V*, for instance, serve as collective voices of resiliency. The moral landscape of *Vada Chennai* is shaped by the minor characters, such as Padma, Chandra, and Guna's men, who represent shards of resistance and compromise.

Vetrimaaran creates a Shakespearean chorus of everyday life by populating *Vada Chennai* with a chorus of common people, including fishermen, carrom players, criminals, and prisoners. These voices defy a straightforward hero's journey by offering moral framing, social commentary, and emotional tension. Their presence guarantees that Anbu's narrative stays collective and is based on sociopolitical reality rather than a mythical archetype.

5. Structural Violence, Free Will, and Fate

The conflict between fate and free will is a common theme in Vetrimaaran's films, which highlight how institutional power, caste, and class limit people's options. Characters in Shakespearean tragedy frequently feel both destined and guilty because of this interaction. Like in Shakespeare's world, freedom is a rare luxury in Vetrimaaran's, and characters deal

with systems just as much as their own shortcomings.

5.1 Shakespeare's Structure: Agency vs. Predestination

Duke Vincentio struggles with mercy, the law, and manipulation in the context of Vienna's collapsing moral order in *Measure for Measure*. Literary scholars point out that the play deals with "problems of conscience" and the conflict between personal ethics and social order, which are characteristics of a "problem play" in which the resolution is ambiguous rather than cathartic (Boas, 1896/2017). The idea of fate is complicated by the duke's covert interventions, which imply both compassion and manipulation: although he influences events, his authority is based on deceit rather than overt sovereignty.

Anbu's journey from carrom-loving kid to mafia lieutenant in *Vada Chennai* appears to have been predetermined by fate. There is little choice in the vast urban ecosystem, which is characterized by political violence, gangster rivalries, and caste lines. According to Film Companion, this world is dynamic and unavoidable: "you enter Vada Chennai... you don't know what's real or set." Anbu's attempts to exercise agency are consistently thwarted, suggesting that fate in Vetrimaaran's world is

structurally encoded into space, community, and history rather than divine.

5.2 *Asuran*: Anger as a Response, Not Fate

Sivasamy is initially passive in violent caste hierarchies in *Asuran*, and his transformation—caused by threats and murder—is reactionary rather than aspirational. His violence is compared by critics to a “visceral reaction” to oppression rather than ambition (HighOnFilms, 2019). This is consistent with Shakespeare’s tragic logic, in which characters act decisively within moral bounds, but their choices reveal deeper constraints: *Macbeth* acts on ambition, Sivasamy defends, and both descend into uncontrollable violence, unable to escape the maze of their choices.

Similarly, Vetrimaaran's protagonists struggle to make “free” choices under social pressure: for Anbu, escape is entangled in violence and revenge; for Sivasamy, the choice is less free and more forced response—reactive, violent, constrained. Shakespearean characters frequently believe they shape their own destinies—only to find themselves bound by prophecy, chance, or error. Although *Measure for Measure* bestows mercy, it's dispensed selectively—through secret manipulation rather than public choice (Suglia, 2019). Caste and capital are equally powerful entities in

Vetrimaaran's universe, while *Asuran* is set against caste-cleansed land grabs, *Vada Chennai* is set amid political machinations, and *Visaranai* redefines law as a mechanism of oppression. These structural powers shape destiny more than individual choices, and Vetrimaaran's characters are conditioned responders rather than autonomous actors. In Shakespeare, authority—kingship, law, and divine right—loom over characters.

Shakespeare's characters go through moral reckoning—Othello admits his guilt; Macbeth laments “Life’s but a walking shadow” (Shakespeare, ca. 1604; RSC, analysis). Vetrimaaran's figures—Karuppu, Sivasamy, and Anbu—go through existential reckoning: withdrawal, preservation, or quiet resistance. In *Asuran*, Sivasamy exhorts his son: “...if you want to fight... study... they can seize our lands... but cannot steal education.” This becomes a form of self-determined resistance—choosing education over structural violence, even if it is influenced by context. While Shakespeare's fate is metaphysical (prophecies, divine right—as in *Macbeth* or *King Lear*), Vetrimaaran's fate is material—castes, laws, and economics. However, both universes exhibit similar patterns: perceived autonomy, moral collapse, system-determined outcomes, and traces of redemption.

Conclusion and Implications

Though grounded in the grim realism of Tamil sociopolitical life, Vetrimaaran's cinema exhibits an uncanny kinship with Shakespearean dramaturgy—particularly in its treatment of power, morality, fate, identity, and resistance. This is examined in *Shadows of the Bard: Shakespearean Echoes in Vetrimaaran's Cinematic Universe*. Vetrimaaran's protagonists, like Shakespeare's tragic heroes, are caught between personal agency and overwhelming systemic forces, according to the analysis. Sivasamy in *Asuran* channels the tragic moral evolution of characters like Macbeth, where one's descent into violence is both reactive and revelatory, while Anbu in *Vada Chennai* mirrors *Hamlet* or Prince Hal—not in language or courtly drama, but in his psychological depth, moral hesitation, and reluctant participation in cycles of violence. However, unlike Shakespeare's kings and courtiers, Vetrimaaran's heroes emerge from the margins—Dalits, laborers, and convicts—demonstrating a radical de-centering of power.

In Vetrimaaran's films, the ensemble characters, especially those on the social periphery, function as Shakespearean commoners and fools—moral mirrors, sources of wisdom, and vessels of collective experience—and their presence reinforces a

chorus-like structure, embedding the protagonist within a communal ethical framework. This polyphonic narrative technique not only democratizes storytelling, echoing Shakespeare's use of multi-voiced dramatic spaces, but also reimagines the Shakespearean conflict between fate and free will through the prism of caste hierarchies, institutional violence, and historical trauma. His characters rarely have the luxury of metaphysical reflection; instead, their existential decisions are filtered through the relentless weight of sociopolitical realities.

This Shakespearean-Vetrimaaranian synthesis has implications for literary and cinematic studies, as it calls for a re-examination of how canonical European texts find resonance in postcolonial cinema—not through imitation, but through recontextualization and resistance. Vetrimaaran does not adapt Shakespeare; instead, he re-echoes his structures to narrate contemporary Tamil realities, especially those of the oppressed. In doing so, Vetrimaaran's cinema becomes a space where the Bard's shadows are not reverent nor accidental—rather, they are productive, dialogic, and politically charged. This convergence enables a deeper understanding of how global classics can talk about local crises, how aesthetic traditions are reshaped in subaltern settings, and how film, like theatre, remains a potent

medium for negotiating power, identity, and justice.

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