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Anglicising the Indigenous, Indianising the Bard: Teaching Shakespeare in a Rural Indian Classroom.

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ABSTRACT: More than four hundred years after his death, and two hundred years after his inclusion in the English literature curriculum of Indian universities, William Shakespeare continues to occupy a central position in English literary studies in India. Even now, Shakespeare's works are performed, taught, debated, read and written about more than any other English language writer. More importantly, an acquaintance with Shakespeare's works remains a prerequisite to cultural sophistication. However, as he was famously imported to India to edify and illuminate the native Indian population with the moral force of British character that was supposedly endemic in his plays, or in other words, to consolidate the British imperialist hegemony, it is worthwhile to examine the trajectory not only of the colonial context of his continued prevalence in Indian academia but also of the myriad ways in which the Bard has been appropriated and indigenized, thus bringing about in the same rubric, a dialogue between colonial and postcolonial perspectives.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare in India, Shakespeare pedagogy, Adaptation, Drama

More than four hundred years after his death, and two hundred years after his inclusion in the English literature curriculum of Indian universities, William Shakespeare continues to occupy a central position in English literary studies in India. Even now, Shakespeare's works are performed, taught, debated, read and written about more than any other English language writer. More importantly, an acquaintance with Shakespeare's works remains a prerequisite to cultural sophistication. However, as he was famously imported to India to edify and illuminate the native Indian population with the moral force of British character that was supposedly endemic in his plays, or in other words, to consolidate the British imperialist hegemony, it is worthwhile to examine the trajectory not only of the colonial context of his continued prevalence in Indian academia but also of the myriad ways in which the Bard has been appropriated and indigenized, thus bringing about in the same rubric, a dialogue between colonial and postcolonial perspectives. My personal interest in this particular aspect was raised when I began teaching Shakespeare in my present institution, an undergraduate college located in a remote village of West Bengal. The difficulties faced by my students, not only in understanding Shakespeare's language, which is only to be expected, but also in deciphering his metaphors, pointed at the inevitable exegetical breach for a culturally differentiated reader approaching Shakespeare. It is this fissure in the reading and teaching of Shakespeare that interested me and this paper is my way of trying to understand how and how much the Bard of Avon has been Indianised, assimilated and appropriated by a series of negotiations and subversions, in the hope that I will be able to locate the pedagogical issues commonly encountered by subcontinental teachers and students of Shakespeare.

This paper is divided into two parts. In the first part, I would like to share a few examples of the interpretive difficulties faced in my classroom while reading Shakespeare. In the second part, I attempt to briefly trace a history of Shakespeare's advent and reception on the Indian stage and in the Indian classroom in an attempt to understand how it is inflected by issues of race, hegemony as well as transculturation, so as to provide some kind of a historical grounding to the immediate classroom issues discussed here. It may also be noted here that while Shakespeare's myriad afterlives have been intensively and extensively discussed over the years, the same degree of serious attention has not been paid to Shakespeare in the pedagogical context of the classroom.

On a hot and humid August day, while teaching one of the best known and most loved of

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Shakespeare's sonnets, Sonnet – 18, beginning with the lines, "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art ***more lovely*** and ***more temperate***", the irony struck me when I saw the uncomprehending faces of my young students. Sitting in a classroom that often went without electricity for long hours, it was difficult in the boiling heat to imagine summer as a lovely and temperate experience, to be used as a comparison for the loveliness of a beloved. Again, the word "rain" and rainy weather in the sonnets and the plays too connote bad weather. Lear's agony is reflected symbolically in the stormy weather of the heath. Feste in *Twelfth Night* also refers to the rain in the refrain to the concluding song, "For the rain it raineth every day". Here too, rain is treated as one of the harsh elements of nature and stands as a metaphor for trouble and destruction. But for a class full of students in rural Bengal, who come from a predominantly agrarian background, the rain is not only a relief from the scorching summer days, it is also of paramount importance for a good harvest, the most crucial aspect of the rural economy. While a native English reader or even an urban Indian reader automatically accepts and understands the associations of such metaphors, for a rural Indian student, without the necessary acculturation of an English medium school education, the subject of a summer's day is shorn of its automatic predicates of being *lovely* and *temperate*, and the welcome rain cannot be understood as negative.

However, on other occasions, their own experiences sometimes also leads to novel and accurate associations that help them draw parallels with the text being read in class. In *The Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is of course the group of craftsmen, who perform after the wedding ceremony a hilarious version of the tragic story of the doomed lovers, Pyramus and Thisbe. There is nothing comic in the story, but the inept and clumsy manner in which the craftsmen perform makes it one of the most hilarious subplots of the play. Almost all of my students were able to recall the commonalities between the performance of the craftsmen and the 'jatra' and 'gaajan' performances that are popular modes of folk theatre in rural Bengal, characterized by stylized delivery and exaggerated gestures and oration, and are a favourite with the masses.

Tapati Gupta alludes to Utpal Dutt's performance of Shakespearean plays in the Jatra format and suggests that this leads to a "synthesis of theatrical norms, through indigenizing of a Western canonical text". She goes on to say, "On the discursive level, it was a postcolonial empowerment of the local culture by means of mutual interactions between the source culture and the target culture. At the grassroots level, it was a means of stretching the affective sensibilities of the common man across cultural borders and boundaries and re-establishing the time-tested flexibility of Shakespeare." (Gupta,11) Thus inflected by race, class, history and the environment, the students of the Sunderban delta negotiate with the works of Shakespeare, localizing and enriching a cultural discourse that is at least two hundred years old.

Shakespeare's introduction to India may be categorized in terms of performance on stage, literal as well as transcreated adaptations, and as a classroom text. While Macaulay's infamous Minutes of 1835 certainly consolidated the colonial project to create a breed of Indians who are English in culture and manners, and Shakespearean texts were considered to be an important means to achieve such a goal, yet critics have noted that Shakespeare was begun to be taught much earlier. With the establishment of the Hindu College (later Presidency College, and later still, Presidency University) in 1817, the teaching of Shakespeare began under such illustrious teachers as H.L.V. Derozio and D.L. Richardson. HemaDahiya discusses the role of these teachers and their contribution to the field of Shakespeare studies. However, as a classroom text, Shakespeare had a miniscule reach that did not go beyond a certain educated and affluent elite. Modhumita Roy has pointed out how the monthly fees of Hindu College used to be Rs. 12 a month, much more than the average monthly income of a lower middle class family in mid nineteenth century. It is therefore through stage productions that Shakespeare was not only introduced but also indigenized over a period of more than two hundred years. However, the history of Shakespeare pedagogy remains an important aspect of research on Shakespeare and important archival research work is already in progress in the *Shakespeare in Bengal* project undertaken by Jadavpur University.

The history of the performance of Shakespearean plays in Bengal goes back to the middle of the eighteenth century with the first theatre built in Calcutta called **The Playhouse** staging Shakespeare productions for the pleasure and entertainment of British officers. Later in 1775, the **Calcutta Theatre** or the **New Playhouse** also became a popular haunt for a predominantly British audience. Jyotsna Singh recounts an entertaining anecdote of the first time a "native gentleman" named BaishnavCharanAdhya performed the role of Othello at the Sans Souci theatre in 1848, an incident that was reported to have set "the whole world of Calcutta agog", as it was the first time that

a "real unpainted nigger Othello" had infiltrated the exclusively European Calcutta stage.

As it is not within the scope of this paper to go into the long history of Shakespeare productions in India, we may briefly note an important distinction Gauri Viswanathan makes and one that is alluded to by Suddhasheel Sen in his study of Shakespeare: "the distinction between the use of Shakespeare by British colonialists and the agentic transculturation of Shakespeare by Indians themselves, through translations, commentaries, and adaptations." (Sen, 86) It is this latter mode of appropriation of Shakespeare that resonated more with the Indian audiences and it was something that was practiced both in the Calcutta stage as also by the Parsi theatres in Bombay. Of these performances, Sisir Kumar Das writes, "A tradition of literal translation existed in India… yet what predominated was a free translation, transcreation. The Indians kept their ancient texts alive by this mechanism, without disputing the sanctity of an original or urtext. A large number of adaptations of Shakespeare in the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries are part of this tradition. Its aim was to transmit Shakespeare across cultures. In the same way the Sanskrit epics or Persian tales found a place in every Indian home." (Das, 123)

Between maintaining a literal translation and transcreating a Shakespearean play, Utpal Dutt's re-creations of Shakespeare may be said to be maintaining a fine balance. Tapati Gupta notes that Dutt "had the boldness to follow the original text and kept to the original atmosphere. Though it was a shortened version meant for the stage, it is recognizably Shakespeare and valid even in a different cultural milieu. So a very local Indian flavour frills the European framework." (Gupta,16) Dutt kept the original characters and dialogues but rejected the proscenium stage and the realist tradition. Physically removing his plays from the Calcutta stage and taking it to the open air stages of the villages of Bengal, Dutt may be said to have comprehensively decolonized Shakespeare. The last twenty years or so have also seen a resurgence of Shakespeare adaptations in Indian cinema where the film makers have re-contextualised the plays in a different space and time.

Keeping this brief history in mind, I would like to argue that there have been broadly two Shakespeare discourses at play – one is that of the Bard as a timeless, universal poet "who transcends all ages, nations and cultures" and who is characterized by his rich humanity (Singh) and another of a poet situated in a material, colonial legacy, who has been appropriated in diverse ways in keeping with the changing cultural dynamics of the transcreators. Ania Loomba suggests that the universal Shakespeare "continued to be useful in containing the tensions of a society that was not rendered homogenous by expelling its colonial masters." (Loomba, 29) However it is the latter postcolonial framework that may be more discursively relevant to pursue and may disrupt the hegemonic discourse of the Bard as a universal ideal existing in a vacuum devoid of the socio cultural and political context of its production.

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