

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Reinterpreting the 'Bard': Shakespearean Performances in India and (East) GermanyMr. Dhurjjati Sarma[†]**Abstract**

This essay attempts to undertake a comparative study of the Shakespearean appropriations in late 19th century India under colonial rule on one hand, and in mid-20th century (East) Germany on the other. While 19th century Indian responses to Shakespeare carried a covert nationalist agenda against the British rulers who had made him complicit in the colonial project, the mid-20th century German adaptations found in him, a potent site for voicing their opposition against the governments, which had imposed censorship regulations upon newspapers, books and television. Within this framework and making use of the textual, performative and audience sensibility components, the paper would endeavor to: a) explore the nuances in the performance strategies of selected playwrights from both the countries, and understand the extent of divergences and departures from the English text; and b) scrutinise the location of these performances respectively within the overlapping currents of colonial modernity, nationality and regional identity in the 19th and 20th century India, and the post-war communist regimes operating in (East) Germany.

Key words: Theatre in India and Germany, Shakespearean adaptations, Comparative Analysis, Indian Response to Shakespeare

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Introduction

I begin this essay with a question. What has 'Shakespeare' got to do with something which is not English? Rather, how should one negotiate with the supposed 'Englishness' of his plays when they are performed before an audience whose native tongue is not English? From the 18th century onwards, Shakespeare has been increasingly identified within the national culture of England as the 'poet of the nation' (Joughin, 1997), and that somewhat explains his posthumous role in the proliferation of 'English studies' as part of the subsequent colonial mission in Asia and elsewhere. This essay deals primarily with the two counter-structures erected against the 'Englishness' and the 'nationalisation' of the Bard within the Anglophone academia.

The first counter-structure against the 'Englishness' of Shakespeare was posited in Germany in the 18th century. It was in Germany where the first concerted efforts towards producing approximate translations of Shakespearean plays were carried out. It was as early as 1775 that one of the first translators of Shakespeare in German, Eschenburg coined the expression '*der deutsche Shakespeare*' [the German Shakespeare], which testifies to the enthusiasm with which the insulated chamber of 'Englishness' within which the playwright had so far been housed, was dismantled (Rendtorff, 1916, quoted in Kennedy, 1993). It is worth noting that the German love for Shakespeare was not dictated by any feeling of animosity or rivalry against the English. The counter-structure was mainly oriented towards utilising his foreignness as a model for a future Germany, as another coinage namely, "*unser Shakespeare*" [our Shakespeare] would suggest (Kennedy, 1993). This 'innocent' counter-structure served as a foil to the second counter-structure which was erected as and when Shakespeare was taken outside the European and American world and subsequently got enmeshed within the 'civilising mission' which became the euphemism for the colonial project of imperialism and domination (Singh, 1996).

'Shakespeare' had first travelled to India years before the British established their colonial empire in the subcontinent. The East India Company, in its third sponsored voyage in 1607 sent three ships, the *Dragon*, the *Hector* and the *Consent* to the East Indies, under the command of William Keeling. Of these three, the *Hector*, commanded by William Hawkins was embarking on a visit to the court of the then Mughal emperor, but owing to stormy weather in the sea, had to be anchored at Sierra Leone (a country in West Africa) for almost six weeks. While the ship was stranded on the shore, two performances of Shakespeare were enacted by the sailors aboard the ship (Loomba, 1997). This crisp information leads one to ponder upon the complicity between Shakespeare and the expansionist enterprise. If on one hand, the continued presence of 'Shakespeare' aboard a ship which was on its way for 'profit and empire' anticipated the eventual construction of Shakespeare as a 'key signifier within the colonial discourse' (Singh, 1996), then on the other hand, the encouragement of Shakespearean performances among rude sailors as a veritable means to keep the crew away from 'quarrels, mutinies and seditions' was a stratagem which later formed the base of the institutionalisation of English education in India (Loomba, 1997).

Based on these two historical backgrounds pertaining respectively to the two 'counter-structures', I would attempt to document the 19th and 20th century adaptations of Shakespearean plays in India and East Germany respectively, within the contemporary socio-political events, thereby defining the reconstructions and redefinitions to which the 'original' plays were subjected.

Shakespeare in (East) Germany: From a playwright to a social historian

After the initial spurt of Shakespearean translations and adaptations at the hands of Schiller and co. in the 18th and 19th century, the tradition of appropriation was re-invigorated after the Second World War in East Germany, with Gustav von Wangenheim's

production of *Hamlet* at the Deutsches Theater in December 1945. In this period, a decisive attempt was made to redefine the German Shakespeare from a socialist perspective through Bertolt Brecht's ideas about an epic theatre¹ and the alienation effect.² Brecht's attempt at the production of *Coriolanus* was based more on fable and theme rather than character, on social issues rather than individual anguish. He found striking coincidences between the political situation in Rome during the formative years of the Roman Republic and the contemporary situation in post-war East Germany (Ewbank, 1996).

Under the Nazis, *Coriolanus* had been a popular play, the performances of which depicted the masses as confused, timid, fickle, and in need of a strong leader. Brecht's adaptation of

Coriolanus however, was centred more on the role of the masses in defending the Roman Republic rather than on the protagonist himself. His idea was to reconstruct the play not as the tragedy of a *unersetzlich* – 'indispensable' or 'irreplaceable' – individual, but as a play, which espouses the centrality of the masses. Playing against the Shakespearean formula of ending a tragedy with the death of the protagonist, Brecht adds a final scene to the play, in which the Roman Senate learns of Coriolanus' death but after a brief silence, carries on with its normal work. The play ends on the one ruthless word, 'Abgeschlagen' ('Rejected') and the stage direction 'The Senate continues its normal business' (Ewbank 1996, p. 8).

For Brecht, the masses become the idealised instrument for social development. The Roman society reaches a state of development where it no longer requires the service of a military hero who cannot bend in order to adjust himself to a new social situation. In Brecht, the tragedy of *Coriolanus* is concomitant with the inevitable historical development from the Renaissance to the culture of Socialism, and therefore the protagonist has had to submit his will to that of the masses, failing which he becomes redundant and dispensable. Shakespeare in this context could be seen not merely as a playwright, but increasingly as a social historian.

"Shakespeare in performance as a representation of past history was often understood by the spectators to be a critical commentary on their own present, and Shakespeare came to enjoy a political relevance that he may not have had since the days of Elizabethan England." (Guntner 1993, pp. 109-110)

Post Brecht, dramatists and theatre directors like Muller, B.K. Tragelehn, Adolf Dresen, Christoph Schroth and Alexander Lang utilised the Shakespearean plays as the platform to criticise and question the official versions of history, which ignored the obvious conflicts in the contemporary East German society.

¹ A form of drama and a method of presentation developed in Germany in the 1920s. The term was first used in the early plays of Arnolt Bronnen and Alfons Paquet. Piscator was the founder and director of this influential movement. Since then the term 'epic theatre' has been most closely associated with Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956). Epic theatre was a break with established dramatic styles. In Brecht's words, the 'essential point of epic theatre is that it appeals less to the spectator's feelings than to his reason'. It denotes a form of narrative/chronicle play which is didactic, which is not restricted by the unity of time and which presents a series of episodes in a simple and direct way: a kind of linear narration ('each scene for itself'). Notable features are the use of a chorus, a narrator, slide projection, film, placards and music (Cuddon, 2013). Epic drama was devoted to the expression of political ideas and ideals, though not overtly propagandist (Bertolt Brecht: An Overview, available at: <http://academic.evergreen.edu/curricular/ppandp/PDFs/Brecht-a%20brief%20overview.pdf>, accessed November 12, 2013).

² It is an idea central to the dramatic theory of the German dramatist-director Bertolt Brecht. It involves the use of techniques designed to distance the audience from emotional involvement in the play through jolting reminders of the artificiality of the theatrical performance. Examples of such techniques include explanatory captions or illustrations projected on a screen; actors stepping out of character to lecture, summarise, or sing songs; and stage designs that do not represent any locality but that, by exposing the lights and ropes, keep the spectators aware of being in a theatre (Encyclopedia Britannica, available at: <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/15423/alienation-effect>, accessed November 11, 2013).

The history of German Shakespeare, therefore, delineates the changing responses towards the playwright across a period of 200-250 years. If the initial response in the 18th century was propelled by a more romanticised notion of awe and admiration, the 20th century and the ravages of two World Wars changed this perception altogether. Even in the face of increasing animosity between Great Britain and Germany in the intervening years between the wars, the German love for Shakespeare stood the test of time. After Schiller in the 18th century, Brecht and his epic theatre rejuvenated the German Shakespeare in the 20th century. In the hands of Brecht and his associates, chosen Shakespearean plays were reinterpreted in conformity with the contemporary political atmosphere in East Germany. In a somewhat similar manner, the narrative of Shakespearean transformation in India was also crafted in sync with the ongoing political developments in India in the 19th century. In this context, the regional appropriation of Shakespeare in India or elsewhere was significant not only from the literary point of view, but also more importantly, from the fact that the (re)enactment of Shakespeare at the hands of the colonised natives was a gesture at demystifying the supposed 'Englishness' of the Bard. It was also an attempt towards the subversion of the authenticity upon which the juxtaposition of 'Shakespeare' and 'Englishness' was effected.

Shakespeare in India: Politics of Ambivalence

Sukanta Chaudhuri, in his essay titled 'Shakespeare in India', attempts to understand the process of Indian response to Shakespeare on two concurrent levels: one is called the 'reader's translation' which would mean sort of a literal transposition of the text into the format of classical Sanskrit dramatic composition, and the other, the performance-oriented versions, interspersed with tools of popular entertainment like songs, colloquial dialogues etc. entirely catering to the sensibilities of the audience. He considers them as twin nodes between whom, is an interface

zone wherein he locates much of what happens to Shakespeare in India. He further identifies three 'paths' upon which the Indian response to Shakespeare was based. They are namely, academic study, translation/adaptation and performance. He rightly points out that these three were overlapping paths, with one converging with the other thereby hinting at their mutual inter-dependence upon one another.

Jyotsna Singh (1996) has rightly remarked that Shakespeare became a key signifier within the colonial discourse. This statement is aptly illustrated in the fact that Shakespeare was made complicit in the colonial agenda of disseminating English education to mould the native masses in order to serve the interests of the British Empire. Following the Battle of Plassey¹ in 1757 and possibly earlier, a number of playhouses were built in and around Calcutta where the British officials stationed in India entertained themselves through plays performed by traveling companies from abroad. Among the plays performed, the ones by Shakespeare were the most prominent. After the establishment of the Hindu College in Calcutta in 1817 and the subsequent imposition of Macaulay's Minute on Education² in 1835,

¹ The Battle of Plassey was an important landmark in the establishment of British rule in India. It took place in 1757 between the armies of East India Company, under the command of Robert Clive and Siraj-ud-Daula, the *Nawab* of Bengal. For more information on this battle, readers may refer to Cavendish Richard (2007). The Battle of Plassey, *History Today*, 57 (6), available at <http://www.historytoday.com/richard-cavendish/battle-plassey> (accessed November 02, 2013).

² Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859) was a British historian, essayist and parliamentarian. His 'Minute on Indian Education, dated the 2nd February 1835' laid the foundation of English education in India. His 'Minute' contained certain debatable statement like: "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect" and "...a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". For accessing the text of 'Minute on Indian Education', please refer to Minute by the Hon'ble T. B. Macaulay, dated the 2nd February 1835, available at: <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/meaac/pritchett/00gener>

the involvement of the natives with the Shakespearean texts and performances began with the right earnest. Simultaneous with these academic involvements were popular renderings of Shakespearean plays by the Parsi theatre companies beginning in the 1850s, which adapted the plots and characters to suit the taste of the contemporary audiences.

Thus, Shakespeare did not remain confined to European playhouses after being introduced in India. Translated into several Indian languages, including Hindi, Sanskrit, Bengali, Punjabi, Gujarati, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, Telugu, Oriya, Malayalam, Sindhi and Assamese, the last century and half has seen at least two hundred translated and adapted versions of the plays of Shakespeare in vernacular languages. It is a fact worth mentioning that there had appeared at least one translation of Shakespeare even before the Hindu College was established. In fact, an Englishman named Monkton did the first translation of a Shakespearean play into an Indian language. He had carried out a translation of *The Tempest* into Bengali. He was educated in Fort William College of Calcutta, and later on gained employment in the East India Company.¹ His translation was published in 1809 but no remnants of his text can be found at this date (Das, 2005). The first Shakespearean play adapted in an Indian language was *The Taming of the Shrew* adapted in Gujarati as *Nathari Firangiz Thekani Avi* [A Bad Firangi (European) Woman Brought to Sense] and staged in Surat in November 1852. One of the early translations of Shakespeare into an Indian language was done in Bengali in 1853 by

Harachandra Ghosh, who translated *The Merchant of Venice* as *Bhanumati Chittabilas*.

Ania Loomba (1998) has listed the variety of ways, in which the intellectuals and artists from the colonised world responded to such a Shakespeare: sometimes they mimicked their colonial masters and echoed their praise of Shakespeare; at other times they challenged the cultural authority of both Shakespeare and colonial regimes by turning to their own bards as sources of alternative wisdom and beauty. In yet other instances, they appropriated Shakespeare as their comrade in anti-colonial arms by offering new interpretations and adaptations of his work. Thus, Shakespeare entered into a complex relationship with the native intelligentsia that was shaped by colonial politics and served as an icon of British cultural superiority.

The first generation of English educated natives, particularly those from Hindu College expressed its overt reverence to Shakespeare through faithful renderings of his plays by elocution as well as enactments. This reverence towards Shakespeare was mitigated in the following generations when he was taken out of the hallowed space of the academia into the popular stage. Moreover, it was here that the process of vernacular transformation of Shakespeare began. This process coincided somewhat with the growth of anti-colonial feelings, which led to the Sepoy Mutiny² in

allinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html (accessed November 05, 2013).

¹ The English East India Company was founded in 1600, as *The Company of Merchants of London Trading into the East Indies*. It gained a foothold in India in 1612 after the Mughal emperor Jahangir granted it the rights to establish a trading post, in the port of Surat on the western coast of India. Interested readers may refer to 'East India Company', Encyclopædia Britannica, available at:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/176643/East-India-Company> (accessed November 13, 2013).

² The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 (also known as the First War of Indian Independence) was a rebellion of soldiers or Sepoys of British East India Company. It started on the 10th of May 1857, in the town of Meerut, and soon ignited into other mutinies and civilian uprisings, mostly in the upper Gangetic Plain and central India, with the major aggressions restrained to present-day Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, northern Madhya Pradesh, and the Delhi region. The insurgents of Sepoy Mutiny speedily captured large portions of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, including Delhi, where they set up the Mughal ruler, Bahadur Shah Zafar, as Emperor of Hindustan. The mutiny, though, was a widespread movement, but was ultimately unsuccessful and ended its course in 1858. Readers may be redirected to Encyclopædia Britannica, available at:

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/285821/Indian-Mutiny> (accessed November 10, 2013) for further reading on this monumental event in Indian history.

1857. Therefore, it can be speculated that a subtle process of vernacularisation was in its nascent stage whereby the colonial construction of Shakespeare was to be supplanted by an alternative counter-construction. By such a speculation, it is by no means suggested that Shakespeare became overtly anti-colonial. In fact, Shakespeare was, and he is still, in the postcolonial context, a covert mouthpiece for the colonial (or neo-colonial) agenda. However, what is important is to understand the hermeneutics of the process whereby Shakespeare was indigenised not merely as a literary metaphor but also somewhat ambivalently, as a political subterfuge.

The Indian response to Shakespeare is tinged with attitudes of both reverence and resistance towards the 'universalising' tendencies of his plays. At the root of such ambivalence lies the ethos of modernism. Modernism in Indian literature in the 19th century produced a hybrid class of new writers who by dint of their English education, adhered to the value system perpetuated by the colonial establishment. Coupled with this adherence was a growing sense of belongingness to a nation, and by extension, the consciousness of being under the rule of a foreign power. In this way, the theater itself became a site of staging the nation (Chatterjee, 2007). Shakespeare became the most potent ingredient of such 'stagings'.

The second half of the 19th century also witnessed the movement of Indian Theatre (especially, in Bengal) out of the 'exclusive' patronage of the 'babus' and into the public sphere, where it gained a professional touch at the hands of theatre stalwarts like Girish Chandra Ghosh and Amrit Lal Basu. For Girish Chandra, it was a courageous attempt to have created a new Bengali dramatic idiom whereby he tried to fuse the local folk traditions of musical performances like the *jatra* with the Western dramatic styles popularised by Michael Madhusudan Dutt and Dinabandhu Mitra. This caused him to renounce literally the classical Sanskrit methodology of dramaturgy, and instead he chose to delve deep into the

recesses of Bengali folk-culture for his dramatic materials on one hand and simultaneously remaining receptive to the Western modes of dramatic practices on the other (Chatterjee, 2007). Even though his repertoire of plays include only one Shakespearean adaptation, that one being *Macbeth*, yet like his Assamese contemporary Lakshminath Bezbarua (who in fact, had twice attempted to translate Shakespeare, but his efforts remained incomplete in both), Girish Chandra decided finally to emulate Shakespeare in terms of characterisation and certain other aspects, rather than attempting to do any further adaptations. One reason for this was the box-office failure of his *Macbeth*, which might have discouraged him from making a second attempt to translate Shakespeare. However still, his translation is considered the best attempt made by any Bengali at 'indigenising' Shakespeare. One important aspect of Girish's translation is its emphasis on the performance of the play, literally 'custom-made' for the Bengali commercial stage. The fact that the production failed in the box-office however, would not mean that it could be dismissed as a poor and ineffective attempt. Secondly, Girish's decision not to stage Shakespeare again was not a momentary one born out of experiencing mental pain or incurring financial loss. For Ghosh, his *Macbeth* failed because the audience was not trained enough to appreciate Shakespeare. He felt that the contemporary audience sensibility was yet to understand the kind of dramatic presentation which contained no song and dance (Chatterjee, 2007).

The play however, did contain five songs, four assigned to the witches and one to Malcolm's army. Sudipto Chatterjee, speaking about contemporary audience sensibilities, observed that "Shakespeare was too 'foreign' for the Bengali audience and, as a result, failed to touch them. However, when the principles of Shakespearean drama were applied unannounced to indigenous dramas, the plays were well received" (159). While I would choose to differ with Chatterjee as far as his remark on the foreignness of Shakespeare is concerned, yet I would certainly agree with the

observation regarding the audience sensibility. Girish Chandra's *Macbeth* was performed in the last decade of the 19th century, and by that time, Shakespeare had been sufficiently 'indianised' upon the Bengali stage and he was not anymore 'foreign'. What possibly was the reason for audience disapproval was a sense of 'incongruity' that had crept into the translation of the play. The audience component of the late 19th century Bengal was adept enough to be aware of the nuances implicated within a dramatic production, Shakespearean or otherwise. A contemporary English newspaper *The Englishman* in a review of the play, expressed that:

"A Bengali Thane of Cawdor is a lively suggestion of incongruity, but the reality is an admirable reproduction of all conventions of the English stage."
(Chatterjee, 2007: p.159)

From the perspective of the British, in spite of the 'incongruity', the play is successful in terms of its stagecraft. However, for an Indian audience, this ingenuity in managing the stage-space is not enough. They required something more which Girish Chandra apparently could not deliver, not because of his lack of expertise but more due to his own standpoint on the matter of translation. Ghosh was certainly aware of the contemporary audience mindset and he wrote the play by keeping in mind, its stageability. His translation of *Macbeth* was also dictated by his desire to create a Bengali counterpart to Shakespeare's original. This brought in a certain degree of ambiguity as Girish Chandra was somehow not at ease with maintaining a balance between what to retain and what to indigenise. In an in-depth textual analysis of the play, Abhishek Sarkar (2010) deftly delineates how Girish Chandra variously attempts to retain some allusions at some places while supplying corresponding cultural references at other places, towards even finding a middle ground where the associative horizons of both the cultures may successfully converge. His overall attempt at the composition of the play stands forth as a practical example of a 19th century intellectual

who tried to rise above the 'pedagogic' processes of 'acclimatising' Shakespeare in order to strengthen the new modernist ethic of one's regional language-literature. But then, he was equally aware of maintaining the 'sanctity' of the original text in translation. Possibly that is why, he did not indigenise the title of the play and its characters but chose to retain them as they were in the original. Therefore, the play might have been unsuccessful as a commercial enterprise, but as a literary-cultural artifact, the play would remain as the most appropriate representative of the predicament confronted by the late 19th century Indian playwrights at translating/adapting the Shakespearean plays for the Indian readership/audience, and finding themselves caught at the juncture of colonial modernity and nationalist identity to be further problematised by their respective regional identities.

If the period preceding the India's independence in 1947 was marked by a growing consciousness of nationhood, the following period revealed the shortcomings of such a utopian imagination, which attempted to construct a unified vision of 'India' thereby, bypassing the then emergent voices of sub-nationalistic dissidence. It was in this period that Utpal Dutt emerged as a phenomenon in the contemporary Bengali theatre. During the 1940s, he was particularly disturbed by the political turbulence of post-independence India. He and his Little Theatre group had realised the futility of performing exclusively for the elite audiences in Calcutta. One notable production of the Little Theatre group towards dismantling this barrier was that of Jyotindranath Sengupta's translation of *Macbeth*. Dutt took this production on tours of several villages in the remote countryside of Bengal. These productions in the outskirts of Bengal were revelatory for Dutt. As an actor performing *Macbeth* for rural audiences in Bengal, he was stuck by their immediate and instinctive understanding of the 'original' play performed for the first time way back in early 17th century England. The prime cause of its success was Dutt's transformation of the play in

the ritual world of *jatra*¹ and the rendition of dialogues through a bold and declamatory form of incantation. Dutt attributed the success of the play to the fact that the rural audiences responded to the play on the level of myth (Singh, 2009). In other words, the play had done away with all that was 'Shakespearean' except retaining the underlying fable.

Implications

Therefore, whether in Brecht, in Ghosh or in Dutt, what remains essentially 'Shakespearean' is the *mythos*, which forms the basis of all the reconstitutions of Shakespeare. In this way, Shakespeare becomes much more than the written word. His text should be seen as an 'open-ended intertextual discourse' (Chaudhuri and Lim, 2006). It is in this context that the question posited at the start of my article should be answered. It is time that the Shakespeare should be relieved of the imposed baggage of 'Englishness' which he has been carrying on for the last 200-250 years. An analysis of his place in world literature and culture would be the starting point of research into the 'global reinvention' of Shakespeare. This is not to reiterate the orthodox notion of Shakespeare epitomising universal values. Instead, the process of globalisation should be intercultural, i.e. the *praxis* or the substance of the plot or action should be assessed on its variable adaptability to new contexts and situations. The validity of Shakespeare studies in the 21st century lies not merely in the assessment of the extent to which a Shakespearean translation or an adaptation departs from the 'original' text, but also to re-examine the new meanings which are generated in the process and which go on continuously to enrich and diversify the *mythos* or the fable underlying what remains

¹ *Jatra* is a popular folk-theatre form of Bengali theatre, spread throughout most of Bengali-speaking areas of the Indian subcontinent, including Bangladesh and Indian states of West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and Tripura. References to *jatra* theatre can be located in Varadpande, Manohar Laxman (1992). *History of Indian Theatre*, 2, 193-199 and Richmond, Farley, P., Darius L. Swann and Phillip B. Zarrilli (1993, ed.) *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, 242-243.

'Shakespearean' even after the texts and the contexts are removed.

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Acknowledgements

I must express my thanks to the anonymous reviewers for the valuable suggestions. They have gone a long way in sensitising me towards the finer points of an academic article.