



UNDERSTANDING 'SHAKESPEARE IN INDIA' IN MULTICULTURAL CONTEXTS: CRITICISM AND PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare has been widely read and performed in India in terms of its own culture and poetics. He was introduced to the Indian readers in 1775, during the age of Johnson. Evidently, he proved to be the most valuable and cherished British investment in India, since even after independence he continues to be the most popular English author. There has been a wide range of adaptations and translations in almost all the Indian regional languages. The Indian response owes no doubt to a large extent to western criticism but there is a presence of independent perspectives too, which emerge with the application of Sanskrit poetics in Shakespeare's plays and their comparison with classical Sanskrit plays. Interestingly enough, the plays as performed in India, manifests itself into an Indian flavour, colourful, change of dialect, alteration of the names of the characters and even the motives, looking after its application to Indian audience. This paper attempts to bring out two vital aspects, firstly, early Shakespeare Criticism in India, and secondly, the multiculturalism with which Shakespeare was performed in India.

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INTRODUCTION

"He was not of an age, but for all time!"- Ben Johnson.

The 'myriad-minded' Shakespeare never visited India himself, although during his time, India was gloriously recognised in many parts of the globe for its art, culture and opulence. That India did reside in Shakespeare's consciousness is indisputable from more than twenty references to India in his works. It is exciting to mention that most of the stating to India are not spiteful but complimentary. The glory and greatness of every empire dematerializes, but the grandeur of Shakespeare's kingdom is perennial. With the beginning of the colonial rule in India, Universities devised with English education were chartered in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Education policy led by Lord Macaulay made Shakespeare acquainted to the Indian intellectuals. The then curriculum of various Board's of examinations and Universities, Shakespeare turned out to be a compulsory author for learning and analysis. Thus, Shakespeare was taught to every student who studied English during the pre-Independent India.

The instantaneous antiphon of Indians to Shakespeare was its manifestation in the publication of the first vernacular adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* as *Bhanumatti Chittavilas* in 1853.

The Indian scholars, since the initial phase consigned Shakespeare and his works to a tight-fisted analytical scrutiny. During the initial days of Shakespeare-studies in India, the dramatist appeared in translations in almost all the vernaculars of the country very soon. In the pre-Independent India such adaptations transcended the number of more than two-hundred. Besides, a constant scrutiny of his works concluded in an investigation into his plays influencing in its wake a standpoint.

The Early Critics

Writers and scholars, during the later half of the 19th and the beginning of 20th century, who studied Shakespeare and preferred cultivating English literature were decidedly enamoured by the works of Shakespeare and cultivated an idolatry demeanour towards the bard. This demeanour became discernable in many pieces of articles where they penned either directly on Shakespeare or referred to him in connection with other writers of India and the west. To glorify the list, we have early critics like, R.V. Subbarau, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, Rabindra Nath Tagore, P.C. Ray, Nanilal Bandopadhyaya, Pundit Muktarama Vidyavagis, L.Sitaram, R. Saupin, Ananda Coomarswamy, Aurobindo Ghose, Mohd Iqbal, Man Mohan Ghosh, Justice Ranade etc. Assuredly, on the basis of records obtainable, the esteem of being the first Indian to critic Shakespeare, goes to Pundit Muktarama Vidyavagis, who translated Charles Lamb's *Tales from*

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Shakespeare with a preface, was published in 1853. To quote few lines:

“...a mere acquaintance with the stories which form the theme of these great poems fills the mind with the highest delight, and leading to an increase of thinking power, it produces the unspeakable but very tangible result of creating a sense of duty, inspiration of virtuous deeds, inclination towards such qualities of character as humility, generosity, fortitude, and aversion to selfishness and other forms of immortal conduct.” (Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb, IX)

How Bengal responded to the Renaissance dramatist?

One of Bengal's most celebrated authors, Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya, was widely acquainted with reading both Sanskrit and European literature. Chattopadhyaya was the first to take the substantial attempt of making a comparative study of the characters of Kalidas's Shakuntla with Shakespeare's Desdemona and Miranda in his much applauded essay 'Shakuntala, Miranda and Desdemona' carried out in 1873. Chattopadhyaya tried to look onto the adversities faced while attempting a comparative study of a Shakespearean drama to that of an Indian play in this article. Even though being a staunch nationalist, Chattopadhyaya in his decisive opinions was so impartial that, he appraised Shakespeare superior to Kalidas. He penned another similar article, where he compared Bhavabhuti with Shakespeare, in regards to their art of characterization.

Manmohan Ghosh, one of the chosen Indians, whose poems have been included by W.B. Yeats in Oxford Book of Modern Verse, also underlines the universality of Shakespeare in the following words: “Rest in Peace in the grave, O mighty lord, Immortal shall thou remain through ages and ages.” p.67. Ghosh points out that so long as the dramatic art will last on earth Shakespeare's genius will shine in full splendour. Naital Bandopadhyaya, another eminent critic from Bengal, points in his preface while translating Othello, hails the play a world poem, pens 'not for a particular nation or time'. Simultaneously, he points out that, the piecemeal unwrapping of character, the fetid currents of human lives bred by clashing occasion, the affectionate presentment of the lights and shadows of our survival in the works are true, not for one country but for all.

'Biswa Kavi' or 'The World Poet' as we honour him, the Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, too, possessed an immense sense of idolatry towards Shakespeare. To quote Tagore from 'The Book of Homage', where he presents his tribute to Shakespeare:

“When by the far-way sea your fiery disk
appeared from behind the Unseen, O Poet, O sun,
England's horizon felt you near her breast, and took
you to be her own.

She kissed you forehead, caught you in the arms of
her forest branches,
Hid you behind the mist- mantle and watched you in
the greensward where the fairies love to play among
the meadow flowers.

A Few early birds sang your hymn of praise while
the rest of the woodland choir were asleep.
Then at the silent breaking of the Eternal you rose
higher and higher till you reached the mid-sky,
making all quarters of heaven your own.
Therefore at this moment, after the end of

centuries, the pain- groves by the Indian sea raise
their tremulous branches to the sky murmuring
your praise”. p.76-77

Tagore surveys thoroughly through these lines, the augmentation of Shakespeare's mind and poetic art, and adds to the chorus of admiration for Shakespeare. Tagore takes his flight on the wings of imagination to the distant England and unites with the Europeans warbling songs in the memory of the bard. Tagore stimulated by Shakespeare, appreciates being spiritually one with the English Bard.

What South India felt while reading Shakespeare?

Ananda Coomarswamy, in his article 'Intellectual Fraternity' extols Shakespeare: “For no one has been more distinguished than William Shakespeare in his profound appreciation of the common humanity of an infinite variety of men. In honouring the genius of Shakespeare then, we do not merely offer homage to the memory of an individual, but are witnesses to the intellectual fraternity of mankind and it is that fraternity which assures us of the possibility of cooperation in a common task, the creation of a social order founded upon union.” p.45

R.V. Subbarau takes over a vital status among the early Indian Shakespearean critics. R.V. Subbarau's voluminous *Othello Unveiled* (Chennai, 1906) and *Hamlet Unveiled* (Chennai, 1909) was brought out. His profound studies of Othello and Hamlet manifest his phenomenal energy, patience and learning. He has given encyclopedic critique on the texts of the plays. His critique on the texts is first and till date the only of its type, ever written in India. Subbarau, before an assessment of Hamlet, similar to the writer of an epic, invokes the spirit of his muse, here Shakespeare, for an inspiration to condone his literary methods and ways to the world. While doing this, he successfully creates an ambience of intellectual sympathy by harmonizing himself to the work and catalogues himself extensively with the spirit of Shakespeare. Subbarau frees his mind of all prejudices and analyses Hamlet's character. He finds the character of Hamlet, unfathomable and that it transcends any final evaluation. He finds that Hamlet acts imprudently and reaches an array of circumstances.

Subbarau is of the opinion, that Hamlet would have acted differently, if he was placed under a different array of circumstances. He commences as if he would dig out a solution to the mystery and problems of Hamlet. But unfortunately, it never happens. His attitude towards Shakespeare is idolatry, and is evident from the following remark made about Othello:

“It requires no small power of perception to discover and no little stretch of imagination to follow and appreciate the subtle lines of a superb psychological portraiture pencilled by an artist of surpassing skill and omniscience.” p.23

Theistic and Ethical Ideas of Shakespeare in Terms with Indian Asceticism

Chandravarkr, Justices Ranade and Telang, represents another school of criticism, trying to discover in Shakespeare the eternal varieties and the ultimate realities of life. They worked on selected works of Shakespeare, chalking out only those passages which dealt with ethical and theistic ideas and lied in proximity to the concept of Indian philosophical subtleties and asceticism, Indian ideals of pantheism and monism. In this context, it is relevant to talk about a different group of scholars

whose Indian fondness are to a such an extent for them to shed off and whatever they studied and admired in the works of Shakespeare is hence coloured by their Indian fancy. Sir Brajendranath Seal and Jay Gopal Banerjee in Bengal were the most important among them.

With the initial nebulous Shakespearean criticism in India, and further extension of it with its extensive introduction into the university syllabus in India, Shakespeare was more closely and passionately examined. Serious scholarly attempts were taken to make a liberal enquiry into the works of Shakespeare. Now it was the turn of the Indian critics to judge Shakespeare from the Indian perspective and standards. Oriental books on Shakespeare started coming into prominence. These studies turned out to be very interesting and were recognized as the eminent contributions of Indians to the study of Shakespeare. This was the beginning for the future of Shakespearean criticism in India. Indian critics in this period thought, that Shakespeare, though quite in terms and inquired among all the English and European playwrights, yet he could not be dissipated. Early during the 20th Century, endeavour was made to estimate Shakespeare through the perspective of theatre and his impact on Indian theatre.

Idolatry Attitude towards Shakespeare

The late Secretary of the Shakespeare Association in India, R.V. Minney, penned one of his articles, published in *Empire Review* (May, 1925), attributed to the Indians idolatry attitude towards Shakespeare. The articles also talks about the mockeries of the Indian adaptations of Shakespeare, while he praised the Shakespeare festivals in India. In these festivals they performed scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* and *A Mid- Summer Night's Dream*, the two most beloved plays with Indians on the stage. Looking at this, R.V. Minney, criticized the free mobility of Shakespeare in India.

Samarjeet Dutt, another Indian critic of this period, criticized *Macbeth* and *Othello* on the axiom of ethics, formal logic and religious faith. Doing this, he rated Kalidas's *Shakuntala* higher than the plays of Shakespeare. Several masterpieces of literary criticism have lectures to begin with. One can think of A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) and *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909), E.M. Forster's *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), J. Middleton Murry's *The Problem of Style* (1922), and T.S. Eliot's *The Use of Poetry and the use of Criticism* (1973). C.D. Narasimhaiah's *The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature* is also a collection of lectures.

Western Education Overlapping Indian Education

Narsimhasiah's book *The Function of Criticism in India: Essays in Indian Response to Literature* is amongst those very few works which make a case for an Indian way of thinking; keeps its Oriental point, very distinct from the Western. He is able to assimilate and reinterpret the West and the entire literary heritage of India. He accomplishes in looking at literature, politics, ethics and philosophy from a framework which is remarkably original. His patriotic, moralistic and cultural concerns coalesce with his asseveration of life, making his approach mirror the manner of F.R. Leavis and Matthew Arnold, both of whom he acknowledges throughout the book, but maintains a mood of balance. He constructs twelve chapters on assorted topics, to tell us what the Indian student's attitude to literary criticism should be. He also tells us what his

own theory of literature is and what his views on certain authors are. He attacks our education system vehemently and without mincing words. Like Tagore, he wonders whether our education has turned us to be beggars at others' doors. p.4

Whereas the Indian intellectual of previous era had his own system of methods and values of appraising literary works, the intellectual of today merely goes by what his Western counterpart lays down for him. Accordingly, Indian literature and literary criticism are becoming increasingly imitative: "What appears to be the English-educated Indian's unique privilege has caused a split in his own personality made him an alien at home." p.8 "Indian criticism should help insiders and outsiders in overcoming the barriers of Indian philosophy, religion, etc., ... barriers which exist in things like the complexities of our culture and our oral tradition." p.25. Narasimhaiah specks out that though several Indian authors have written books on American and British littérateurs, "I should like to ask ourselves one or two questions here: Did we experience an inner compulsion to write? Because something was welling up in our bosom and if we not give vent we would have suffered a biological or psychological break-down or even a sense of frustration in intellectual activity?" p.30.

That criticism is not merely an academic activity, but a complete involvement like any other creative exercise, is believed by Narasimhaiah. The English critic who seems to have made the greatest impact on Narasimhaiah's mind is Matthew Aronld. Arnold's critical method, apparatus and values find their way into his work. Critical concepts such as "disinterestedness", "the touchstone method", commendation of the study of two literatures, criticism and culture being prerequisite for each other, configure in the book with total acceptance.

Leavis and Eliot are among the other critics, who are in the same page with Narasimhaiah. Eliot's sense of 'Tradition' and his idea of the 'Historical Sense' mentors him thoroughly. Leavis, who finds himself in the same tradition as Eliot and Arnold, is fully engrossed and his perceptions are transposed to the Indian milieu. Another chapter which shows Narasimhaiah's acumen into literature and theory is 'Protest Literature'. This is an ample testament of the fact that the critic has intensely felt what he pens. He seems to find the Keatsian 'negative capability' specifically suitable for the successful critic. (p.240). Narasimhaiah points clearly how these plays endorse the ideas and concepts of Purushartha and Rasa.

Shakespeare in Indian Theatres

Talking about the same period, eminent offering was made by Dr. R.K. Yagnik and C.J. Sission. *Shakespeare In India*, authored by Sission, is the pioneer work in the history of Shakespeare criticism in this country. The later critics walked on the lines of Sission. They implied that exhaustive research is fundamental in each province of India as a preparatory to general synthesis. He roughly pointed out that the study of Shakespeare in India is a challenging academic activity, because the material is extremely volatile, and quite speedily becomes fugitive. He figures out that Shakespearean plays have been much more favoured in Bombay than those of Rabindranath Tagore's in Calcutta.

In this context he argues that, Tagore's plays are essentially closet dramas with great literary interest and merit, and have little relevance to the public theatres of their time. Now,

Indian social dramas, farces of current interest, and mythological stories attract the Indian social players more than the plays of Shakespeare. Interestingly enough, Tagore's plays are evidently more loved and performed in Bengal, than that of Shakespeare's in Bombay or even in any part of India.

Sission inquires the theatrical setting in India, while making a crucial remark that perhaps except Germany, no other country pays such appeal to the Shakespearean plays, for the common masses as in India. He points out that benign Shakespeare appears on the Indian stage covering himself in turban and colourfully, gorgeous feudal robes, speaking a language which has a very different dialect and delighting audiences. Sission points out that in the performances of the Shakespearean plays, Indians were the best at taking the all sorts of liberties with the text. Noting few, the adaptation of *Macbeth* showed idiosyncratic changes with the names. 'Lady Macbeth' is named 'Vasundhara', with completely ignoring and leaving out the scenes of the witchcraft and ghost-stories. A very different motive is concluded for Macbeth's ambition, while the mingled Banquo-Macbeth attains a new dimension. Yakoob, a new character, reminding of Hubert in *King John* is supplemented. Frequent songs and dances are interspersed; displaying the Indian flavour, along with a comic sub-plot is brought in to entertain the audience, thereafter completely transforming the original play.

Dr. Yajnik, in his book, on the influence of British Drama on the Indian context, shows the subtle and profound influence of Shakespeare on the minds of the Bengali dramatists. He, in particular, refers to Dwijendra Lal's such plays as *Nurjahan*, *Chandragupta* and *Shahjahan* to set forth the subtle echoes of and indirect borrowing from Shakespeare. Dr. Yajnik encouragingly concludes his book: "Whatever course the stage takes in the future there is absolute certainty about one thing: the Indian theatres will always maintain their reverence and affection for Shakespeare, and will yield to none in their love for the dramatist they consider as belonging to all nations. Thus, although the contact between the East and the West in the field of theatre has already borne remarkable fruit, one believes that it is indeed yet capable of bearing even more and richer." (86-87)

CONCLUSION

It is safe to say that 'myriad-minded Shakespeare' implies many things to many people, since Shakespeare remains the most loved, best performed, vividly translated and widely experimented. As Johnson said, Shakespeare indeed is for all time. Remembering Peter Brook, in reference to his production of *The Mahabharata*, with similar appropriateness, can be said for Shakespeare. According to him, although *The Mahabharata* is an Indian epic, its greatness lies in the fact that it is also the story of mankind. It is so very apt and applicable to the plays of Shakespeare as well.

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