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From *Hamlet* To *Hemlat*: Rewriting Shakespeare In Bengal

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Abstract: Production of Shakespeare's plays in India, particularly Bengal, has an extensive history which dates back to the mid 18th century. Theatre was a tool employed by the British to expose the elites of the Indian society to Western culture and values. Shakespeare was one of the most popular dramatists to be produced in colonial India for concrete reasons. During the latter half of the nineteenth century the productions of Shakespearean plays were marked by a tendency for indigenization thus adding colour colours to them. The latest adaptations of Shakespeare into Bangla are instances of real bold steps taken by the playwrights since these adaptations implant the master text in a completely different politico-cultural milieu, thus subverting the source text in the process. This paper would try to analyse such a process of rewriting Shakespeare in Bangla with special emphasis on Bratya Basu's *Hemlat*, *The Prince of Garanhata* which is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

Key Words: Theatre, Performance, Adaptation, Indigenization, Cross-Culture.

Production of Shakespeare's plays in India, particularly Bengal, has an extensive and rich history which dates back to the mid 18th century. Initially the target audience of these plays was British officials settled here during the colonial days. Gradually the number of theatres increased and performances became regular. The Calcutta Theatre was the first modern theatre to be set up in India in 1775 (Trivedi, Bartholomeusz 13). However, researchers like Sushil Kumar Mukherjee differ from the earlier fact and point out that The Playhouse was the first theatre which was established in 1753 (2). Unfortunately it had to be shut down within three years due to the attack of Siraj-ud-aula on Calcutta in 1756. After a long span of nineteen years The Calcutta Theatre was built in 1775 and continued to run for



the next thirty-three years. Different other theatre houses were also established during this period some of which are Mrs. Bristow's Private Theatre (1789-90), Wheeler Place Theatre (1797-98), The Chowringhee Theatre (1813-39) and Sans Souci Theatre (1839-49).

The emergence of so many theatres clearly focuses on the interest of the British regarding the theatre performances. Shakespeare was one of the most popular dramatists to be produced in colonial India, primarily in Calcutta and Bombay. The reason for the import of Shakespeare to India has been poignantly analysed by Singh: "... the Victorian colonists in India, while apishly promoting Shakespeare's works in colonial Calcutta, were, in effect, reproducing the metropolitan culture as a part of the "civilizing mission" of the British Raj (122). Though initially the theatrical productions were only meant for British viewers, coverages, reviews and notices of the performances at the Chowringhee Theatre were published in dailies like *Calcutta Gazette*, *Bengal Hurkara*, *Bengal Courier* and *Asiatic Journal*. These provided an indirect access to the Indian elites to the British theatres of the times. Gradually the Indian elites became a part of the audience of these British theatres. This inclusion was largely prompted by the dawning of the realization by the British that segregation is not the successful strategy for exercising control. Rather the 'natives' should be provided with an exposure to Western culture so that Macaulay's objective of creating "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, in morals, and in intellect" could be actualized (Clive and Macaulay 249).

Thus theatre was a tool employed by the British to expose the elites of the Indian society to Western culture and values. The influence was so strong that gradually there was an urge on the part of the educated Indian class to set up their own theatre. This urge was largely prompted by the motive to "set them on a par with their European overlords" (Chatterjee 20). Moreover, exuberant theatrical preoccupations on the part of the British were crucial and motivating factors for the establishment of modern Indian theatre. A committee comprising Krishna Chandra Dutt, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Tarakchand Chakravorty, Ganganarayan Sen, Srikrishna Sinha, Madhab Chandra Mullick and Hara Chandra Ghosh



was formed to set up a theatre which would be based on the English model. Consequently Hindu Theatre was established in 1831. Though this was meant to cater to the Bengali audience, the plays that were selected for performance were mostly in English while some were the English translations of Sanskrit plays. For instance, the inaugural performances were based on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (Act V) and English translation of Bhavbhuti's *Uttaramcharit* (Act I). Thus all the early theatrical productions during the 1850s were stupendously influenced by Western theatre tradition, particularly Shakespeare.

Macaulay's emphasis on the need of English education to "form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern" (Clive and Macaulay 249) was a major reason to promote Shakespeare among the Indians. Literature was a means to inculcate British culture and values amongst the 'natives'. Thus there was no better choice than Shakespeare to accomplish this mission as he was the master dramatist and his plays were universal. The Great Bard was utilized to realize the civilizing mission of the British. The travelling companies which made visits to India also preferred to perform Shakespeare's works. Another crucial reason for his popularity was teachers like Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, the oracle of Young Bengal, who would teach Shakespeare to his young enthusiastic students. Derozio being so popular amongst the Indian youth, his teaching of Shakespeare had a huge influence upon the student population.

However, a change occurred after the 1850s when there was a desperate craving for Bengali plays. As a result there was a flood of Bengali social drama in the next twenty years. A few examples are Ram Narayan Tarkaratna's *Kulin Kulasarvasa* in 1867, Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Sarmistha* in 1859 and Dinabandhu Mitra's *Nildarpan* in 1860. The ushering in of so many Bengali plays led to a steady decline in Shakespearean productions. It was only during the latter half of the nineteenth century that the plays of Shakespeare were again brought back to the theatre. However, these productions were marked by a palpable difference as there was a tendency for indigenization of the plays of the Bard. The need for this indigenization has been quite lucidly explained by one of the adaptors: "I have tried to



present the story of the play of Shakespeare and the essential features of the characters in a native mould to suit the taste of the readers of my country. I cannot say how successful I have been. But I believe that without adopting such a method no foreign play will ever find a place in Bengali literature, which will be denied nourishment and advancement.” (Das 58). This indigenization is in progress even today and results in several interesting adaptations of Shakespeare. Some examples of this process are Asit Basu’s *Kolkatar Hamlet* (1989), Bratya Basu’s *Hemlat, The Prince of Garanhata* (2006) and Suman Mukhopadhyay’s *Raja Lear* (2011), the first two being adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and the last being that of *King Lear*.

It is adaptation which infuses local colour in a literary work and thus familiarizes it to the target language audience. The latest adaptations of Shakespeare into Bangla are instances of real bold steps taken by the playwrights since these adaptations uproot, as it were, the master text from its socio-cultural context and implants it in a completely different politico-cultural milieu, thus subverting the source text in the process. The adaptor/ translator has his or her own intentions in pursuing this activity. Sometimes it is a mark of protest against his or her contemporary society or at times it is to voice own principles and ideologies. A brilliant example of this is Utpal Dutt’s Bangla translation of *Macbeth* in 1975 which was a protest against the emergency thrust upon India during the tenure of 1975 and 1977. A similar case in point is Ingmar Bergman’s adaptation of the same play which he employed as his protest against the Fascist regime during the 1940s.

Thus adaptation is a cross-cultural exercise through which one culture tries to understand and accommodate another culture. It is a process through which a fresh lease of life is invested into a work of art through assimilations, rejections and modifications during cross-cultural interactions. “... every culture consciously or unconsciously regards translation (and, thus, adaptation) as an agent which brings home both power and knowledge... that would benefit the receiving culture” (Shankar 15-16).



Shakespeare being the most oft-adapted playwright in Bangla, his plays have been relocated and reinterpreted into contemporary Bangla socio-politico-cultural dynamics. *Hemlat, The Prince of Garanhata* is a play written in Bangla and first published in 2006. It is written and directed by one of the eminent contemporary Bangla playwrights, Bratya Basu. As it can be easily made out from the title the play is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, relocated in a completely different time frame and locale. One of the most important instruments employed by Basu to adapt the master-text in contemporary socio-cultural context is to tone down the grandeur of Shakespeare's work. This toning down is quite strategically done by changing the setting and names of the dramatis personae of the original text. The employment of this method becomes stark in the change of setting of the adaptation. The political and public conflict between two rival powers as represented by Hamlet and Claudius struggling over the future of Denmark boils down here to the dirty fight of the promoters over the crumbling old parental house of Hemlat and their frantic eagerness to raise a high-rise in its place. Thus the grandeur of the Danish state and Elsinore are narrowed down in Basu's play for which the nasty rivalry regarding possession of the house is a means to showcase the corruption rampant in the contemporary society. The filth of the Red-light area of Kolkata, the squalor and greed prevalent at every quarter of the society are captured by Basu in his play. Garanhata, teeming with illegal immigrants and trespassers inhabiting the slums, the opportunist politicians, the dishonest businessmen, the frustrated unemployed youth, the pimps and prostitutes, the alcoholic and drug-addict population- all are ironic commentary on the hapless picture of Bengal in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While Shakespeare writes that "Something's rotten in the state of Denmark" (Shakespeare Act I Sc iv), it is the same rottenness that is portrayed by Basu in his own way through the projection of a decadent Garanhata.

The Bangla names have an impact of downscaling which is an effective tool of the dramatist here. Hamlet being turned into Hemlat is a complete subversion, the latter having no association with the royalty of Shakespeare's Prince. He is not "The courtier's, soldier's



eye, tongue, sword,/ The glass of fashion and the mould of form,/ The observed of all observers” (Shakespeare Act III Sc i). Rather he is a struggling, unemployed young man in his thirties who hails from a decadent middle class Bengali family. He intends to divulge the reality about the death of his father Sadhan whom he considers to be the “original King of Garnahata” (Basu Scene 5). He is desperate to avenge his father’s death and save his ancestral home which is almost in a state of ruin from the clutches of the promoter appointed by his mean and mercenary uncle Kodu. But all his intentions and endeavours to fight against these personal odds and corruptions around him are futile and feeble. Thus Hemlat is far diminished in stature in comparison to the aura of the prince of Denmark. However, he shares the experiences of Shakespeare’s hero in that his father has also been murdered by his uncle who enjoys an illicit relationship with his mother. Thus he considers himself as an incarnation of Denmark’s Prince and calls himself the “Prince of Garanhata” (Basu Scene 5). The moral degeneration in the character of Kodu is brilliantly pointed out by his transformation from the wicked King Claudius to Hemlat’s corrupt uncle Kodukaka. The word ‘Kodu’ has essential similarities with ‘kada’ as has been pointed out by the translators of the book. ‘Kada’ refers to mud, filth and squalor and subtly hints at the mental filth of Kodukaka. The diminishment in the nomenclature continues as Polonius turns into an intoxicated over-talkative ‘Polda’ who is too protective about his daughters. Laertes gets the name of ‘Lacchhu’ who is hand-in-glove with Kodu but somehow possesses an attitude of indulgence towards Hemlat. Horatio gets the name of ‘Harish’, an employee in a Travel and Tour Operator’s Office and a dear friend cum confidante of Hemlat. Ophelia receives an interesting handling by the creative impulse of Basu. The timid, tortured and submissive Ophelia is split into two characters in the Bangla adaptation- namely, Shefali and Mantali. Basu’s Shefali is far away from the passive and suppressed Ophelia. She has all the positivity and courage in her to confront her father’s tyranny with confidence. Thus the other characters refer to Shefali: “Just wait and see how Shefali gives it to Paulda. He’s all swagger on the outside, but before his daughters just a mouse” (Basu Scene 4). Shefali is strong enough to play the roles of Hemlat’s childhood buddy, beloved, wife and surrogate mother. At the end



of the play she raises Hemlat's children (not only his own but also the future generation) and decides to be the mid-wife to the revolution that will promise brighter days ahead. The name Shefali "emits resonances of immorality as Miss Shefali was a night-club stripper who danced on the Bengali stage in Calcutta during the 1960s-1980s" (Basu 30). The association invariably draws a parallelism with Ophelia's flower dance in a fit of insanity, having unmistakable sexual intonations in Act IV of *Hamlet* after the murder of Polonius. Gertrude is presented as 'Monorama' who despite her caring nature for her eccentric husband Sahan fails to resist the charm of her lustful brother-in-law Kodu. However, her motherly love and concern for her son are genuine and get reflected in her worry and desperation to know about Hemlat's illness from the doctor: "Is he going mad, Doctor-Babu? But he speaks a few words to me occasionally. Normal words. Doesn't appear insane then... what will happen, Doctor Babu?" (Basu Scene 10). Thus all the dramatis personae present in the master text have their counterparts in the Bangla play, but obviously they are scaled down and differentiated both through their nomenclatures and their actions.

However, though there is diminishment at multiple layers certain basic similarities remain there between the two protagonists, the Danish Prince and his Bangla counterpart. Though Hamlet has apathy for bloodshed and the instrument related to it, that is, gun, he gets entangled in murder and killing during the action of the play, particularly in the last scene. He has to put in loads of efforts to come to terms with his murdered father's command to avenge his death. But he is both happy and contented with the aesthetic revenge when Claudius' punishment is revealed in the Murder of Gonzago play-within-the-play scene of the "Mousetrap". He exhorts: "The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king" (Shakespeare Act II Sc ii). Basu's Hemlat also plans the play-within-the-play sequence by resorting to Bidhubhushan Vidya Vinode's *Hamlet* translation. Hemlat employs this performance for a neighbourhood theatre group for its production during the time of Holi. The effect of this scene is much the same as of that of the master text. But when Kodu regretting his wrong deeds implores: "Forgive me... Just for some money... just for a few



pieces of silver... oh, forgive me” (Basu Scene 9), Hemlat knows no stopping. Giving vent to all his anguish he continues: “Bring me to the test and see. I am not mad. What I’ve said before and what I am saying now, I’ll knit and weave them together into one harmony. Only confess everything to God. Repent all your sins committed in the past...” (Basu Scene 9). At the end of his speech he even refers to the source of his speech stating that it is taken from “Hamlet. Third Act. Fourth Scene” (Basu Scene 9). This reference intertwines both the texts integrally though the Bangla speech is marked by its own variations. Hemlat does not possess the spirit of revenge of Hamlet and thus takes recourse to sleeping pills and chooses to commit suicide. At the final scene he comes back to speak to the audience and confess his failure to act: “I could not do it. My sword is broken. You cannot kill Time with it... But this I know, that our failure will not be seen as important on another day. Those failures will be superseded and transcended by many, many successes. The successes of my children” (Basu Scene 11). The play comes to an end with three generations frozen together, Sadhan blessing Hemlat keeping his hand on his head and Hemlat, on his turn, blessing his son in the same posture. Thus the play ends in an optimistic note where there is a promise and assurance of the birth of another Hamlet to eradicate all sorts of corruption from the surface of the earth, to purge the world of all its sins and malice and to purify it. Though for Shakespeare’s Hamlet “the rest is silence” (Shakespeare Act V Sc ii), Basu’s Hemlat provides a ray of hope that the future generation will be potent enough to carry on the unfinished task of cleansing the society of all dirt, filth and mire.

Thus Bratya Basu’s *Hemlat* is a rewriting of Shakespeare’s play, like many other contemporary adaptations which are marked by the process of indigenization, thus making the plays socially relevant and turning them much more appealing and meaningful in the present socio-cultural context. It is a novel way of paying homage to the master dramatist retaining the local colour and showcasing the talent and calibre of contemporary writers.



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