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Imitation and Subversion: Indigenization of *Macbeth* in the Early Bengali Plays

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Abstract:

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.

Shakespeare was an integral part of the English curriculum since its inception, even before Macaulay’s Minute, and it is no surprise that The early native emulators of Shakespearean drama were directing their efforts to adapt the bird for the indigenous stage. One reason for Macbeth’s popularity during this early phase is that it is the only one among the “four great tragedies” which metes out adequate retribution for evil deeds. Despite the profound impact of Shakespeare on the contemporary dramatists of the time, the problem of adaption was both linguistic and generic.

Thus, the essay focuses on the adaptation of Macbeth by the Bengali Intelligentsia of the 19th century to investigate how the Bengali playwrights negotiate and subvert the politics and ideology of the source text with the intended audience. As well as it also focuses on the generic problems of negotiating a tragedy in a literary tradition which is dominated and limited by the socio-linguistic culture of sankritised adaptation. To examine the afore-mentioned points the essay takes up the second extant adaptation of Macbeth: Nagendranath Bose’s *Karnabir*; Girish Chandra Ghosh’s *Macbeth* which can be said to be the closest to its source; and Haralal Roy’s *Rudrapal* which remarkably translocates the mythos and ethos of Shakespeare’s original onto a Hindu field of signifiers and tries to associate the gratuitous violence of the play with the fanciful yearning for a martial ideal of nation-building.

Keywords: Macbeth, Karnabir, Rudrapal, Bengali Theatre, nineteenth-century Bengal

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.

Shakespeare was an integral part of the English curriculum since its inception, even before Macaulay's *Minute* (1835). The first generation of English educated indigenous people of Bengal, 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 Mutiny in 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.

The two dividing currents among the Bengali intelligentsia, is aptly traced by Abhishek Sarkar in his essay with the reference to two examples: "In an article of 1895, Purnachandra Basu, disturbed by the rising popularity of Shakespeare in Bengal, complained: 'Loke Shakespearer pratibhasampanna kavitwer swarnamay nal diya vishpan karitechhe'(quoted in Das Gupta, 56). [which can be roughly translated as, people are drinking poison using the golden chalice named Shakespeare.] His message was intended at the likes of Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay who three decades earlier had hailed the Bard as, 'Bharater Kalidas, Jagater tumi'(quoted in Das 1991, 56). Both of these comments stem from a location of culturally defined subordination, and they invoke a body of work whose canonical eminence was clinched under the aegis of the Empire. Shakespeare constituted a key catalyst in the cultural imagination of the nineteenth-century Bengali intelligentsia, and the reactions to him enact several of the tendencies central to colonial modernity. On the one hand, Hemchandra's remark shows a celebratory acceptance of the broader noetic and aesthetic possibilities inaugurated by the colonial encounter. On the other, Purnachandra's comment betrays a suspicion of alien encroachment and an anxiety about the erosion of inherited systems.

When Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was first produced on stage in nineteenth century colonial Bengal, people had a lot of issues with the bloodshed that occurs in the play. In an 1887 article published in the periodical *Navajivan*, the essayist Akshay Chandra Sarkar writes: "We have heard of Lord Rama's unfair killing of Bali, the killing of the boy Abhimanyu...but we do not find such an outrageously sinful murderer [as *Macbeth*]. The morality represented in the play was far removed from the morality that Bengali society was acquainted with. The concept of the

witch is not something most Indians in early colonial India would understand since Hinduism does not traditionally have the concept of a Devil who sends envoys to tempt human beings. Also, Bengali literature and dramaturgy written by Hindus was traditionally adhered to Sanskrit aesthetics which discouraged unhappy endings (and therefore tragedy) on philosophic grounds. The Hindu theory of *karma* and rebirth, premised on the belief that the sufferings of present life are just punishments for misdeeds in previous life, which in turn would be adequately compensated for in afterlife, is incompatible with the tragic vision preoccupied with the “here and now”.

But in this early stage of adapting Shakespeare, *Macbeth* was a particular favorite, primarily for one reason – Among the four great tragedies by the Bard, *Macbeth* the play metes out adequate retribution for all the evil deeds. The morally satisfying ending would be apposite in the depressing aftermath of the Great Uprising (1857). The time of an illegitimate ruler being usurped by the restoration of the legitimate line holds out an optimistic hope for a defeated populace who had recently attempted a similar restitution by resurrecting the Mughal heir, Bahadur Shah of Delhi, as the emperor of “free India.” *Macbeth* also exemplifies the solitary alienation of a frustrated overreacher consumed by his megalomania and the spiritual crisis between desire and conscience, which could be read as a providential indicator of the inevitable self-destruction: a wishful but predictable fantasy of the colonised psyche. Given Bengal’s proclivity towards pro-democratic movements both before and after India’s independence, *Macbeth* proves a fertile ground for experimenting with depictions of a despotic regime and its disastrous consequences.

There are records of six Bengali translations or adaptations of *Macbeth* that were composed in the 19th century: Harinath Ghosh’s literal translation of 1850 which is no longer available; Haralal Ray’s *Rudrapal Natak* (published 1874); Taraknath Mukhopadhyay’s *Macbeth* (published 1875); Nagendranath Basu’s *Karnabir* (published 1885); Girish Chandra Ghose’s *Macbeth* (produced 1893, published 1899); and, Ashutosh Ghosh’s *Macbeth* (published 1894). Out of these, *Karnabir* is the first extant adaptation of *Macbeth* which survived, but there is no evidence of ever being performed. *Rudrapal* was performed at the Great National Theatre, Kolkata and motivated Girish Chandra Ghosh’s own famous translation of *Macbeth* for the commercial stage.

Theatre has a particular advantage as far as adapting from a different culture is concerned. The goal of a play while not necessarily to be followed by everyone, is definitely to be followed by the audience. When the audience do not follow a particular cultural issue, the playwright has to take measures in order to get himself across. Therefore, translocating the text becomes very important in this context.

Three translocations of ‘*Macbeth*’ will be discussed in this paper. These are ‘*Rudrapal*’ and ‘*Karnabir*’ which seek to adapt and relocate the cultural signifiers of the Shakespearean

original to a Hindu milieu, and Girish Ghosh's *Macbeth* which was written by keeping in a commercial performance but remain the most faithful to the original.

Rudrapal and Karnabir: The titles of *Rudrapal* and *Karnabir* suggest that the authors were infused with nationalist sentiment with predominant Hindu orientation. The word *rudra* in Sanskrit denoting "the ferocious/irate one" and is one of the names for Lord Shiva in the Hindu pantheon. The choice of the name "Karnabir" for *Macbeth* is simultaneously apt and problematic and akin to modern readings of the protagonist as a complex antihero. "Bir" meaning "brave" is suffixed to Karna, the name of a famous warrior-king in the Indian epic, *Mahabharata*, who fights alongside the Kauravas against his own brothers, the Pandavas. Karna's history of being disowned because of his illegitimate origin and his subsequent desire to be King, can be juxtaposed with the *Macbeth's* lust for the throne. But the similarities between the two, ends there.

Both the playwrights move away from the original's geographical setting, but do not come home. In *Rudrapal*, Scotland is renamed as *Panchanad* (literally "the land of the five rivers," i.e., the Punjab) and its capital is identified as Lahore (25), whereas Delhi in the Bengali play replaces the England of the original. In *Karnabir*, Scotland is transformed into Jaipur, a powerful Hindu kingdom in Rajasthan, a state south of Delhi. As Dr. Chaudhury and Sengupta observes the entire action of the play being located outside Bengal is an instance of eminently acceptable domestic alienation as the Bengalis are neither traditionally considered warlike nor is their past dotted with glorious battles. The available annals of the Hindu dynasties of Bengal are not overly scarred with evidences of treachery and regicide.

Interestingly both *Rudrapal* and *Karnabir* identify the Norwegian invaders using the Sanskrit appellation *yavana*, a catch-all term which was made popular by the likes of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay to refer to all the impure, non-Hindu people specially the Muslims. *Rudrapal* was written and produced under the influence of the Hindu Mela, which was to remind the Bengali Hindus about their glorious heritage (supposedly obfuscated by centuries of political persecution and cultural marginalization under the Muslims and subsequently the British) and prepare them for a nationalist revival (Raychaudhuri 7). The use of the term *yavana* implicitly but efficiently taps the nostalgic myth, that of a glorious Hindu past corrupted by the inroads of the Muslim and the British colonizers. In *Karnabir*, Norway becomes Nishagarh and the battle between Norway and Scotland is converted into a combat between *Jabanraj* (a Muslim king) and *Jaipurraj* (a Hindu Rajput ruler), which adds a religious angle to the political conflict.

The change of names doesn't stop at the title but goes deeper into the text with meaningful subversions. Haralal Roy follows stance of naming the dramatis personae in a fashion befitting of a medieval Hindu romance. However, he chooses to use the suffix '-pal' while naming his characters, thus leaving room for speculation that he may have intended it to be based on the illustrious 'Pal' lineage of Bengal. Lady *Macbeth* becomes 'chaturika' (in

Sanskrit, meaning the clever woman) hinting at her role as an instigator. Nagendranath Bose notches the game one step higher, and his renaming foregrounds moral signifiers. Thus, Banquo becomes Bijoy Singha (victory), Macduff becomes Sudhi Singha (goodness), Malcolm turns into Kesari Singha (hero) so on and so forth. The epithet Singha is a common appellation in Bengali literature to indicate their brave warrior like orientation. In *Karnabir*, Lady Macbeth is renamed as 'Malina', which means dirty or worn. Lady Macduff is named Padmini, a decision which involves a sly cross cultural referencing of Lady Macduff's fate with that of Rani Padmini (of Chittor) who committed Jauhar to escape from Ala-ud-din Khalji's clutches.

The foreignness of the play is most effectively neutralised by replacing the witches with 'bhairabis', which also completes the total Hindu appropriation of the target text. The source culture acquired an indigenous look through transcreation. The politics of translation as an intercultural exercise paved the way towards decolonization of the bard. Both Rudrapal and *Karnabir* refashioned the witches as rather than being identified with the more predictable appellations of *dakini* (the Sanskrit term for a witch that Girish Chandra Ghosh later opts for in his faithful translation of *Macbeth*) or its Bengali equivalent, *daini*.

In *Karnabir*, The *bhairabis* are not supernatural beings but female devotees of Lord Siva and his consort, Goddess Kali. Nagendranath Bose probably was influenced in his decision by his predecessor's work, Rudrapal. In *Karnabir*, the *Bhairabis* are proficient in black magic, and vested with occult powers to raise the spirits, they are believed to be unpredictable, vengeful and malevolent as the witches though not invariably so. One important distinction is that they are not devil worshippers but legitimate and revered practitioners of the *tantrik* cult. Hecate becomes *Kalbhairabi*, i.e., "the chief *bhairabi*"; and the other *bhairabis* engage in various cabalistic rituals that intensify the bleak, sombre, foreboding atmosphere. Bose endeavors to replicate the aura of uncanny terror and eerie enchantment through the grotesque rituals and bizarre incantations and invocations of the *bhairabis*. While in the Christian religion the witches are unequivocally evil, the Hindu religion in contrast, accommodates Goddess Kali and the associated *tantric* cult within its seamless bounds. Though an average Hindu is not very enthusiastic of Tantra Practices, the idea of *Bhairabis* are not illegitimate like the original's witches. Despite being semantically different, the *bhairavis* of *Karnabir* are predominantly folkloric miscreants, malicious hags singing and dancing, which are modally similar to Shakespeare's Witches.

Rudrapal is remarkable for making several scenic and narrative additions that heighten the importance of the Witches and enhance the duration of their on-stage presence. As opposed to the any adaptation made before or after, *Rudrapal* shows the *bhairavis* to be grave and authoritative beings throughout the play. Hecate was refashioned as the Brahman Pinak, a worshipper of Chamunda performing esoteric penance sitting on a human corpse. The occult powers of the *bhairavis* as depicted in the play are comparable with the ancient concept of the eight *siddhis* or miraculous powers whose achievement traditionally forms the goal of the Tantric

practitioner. The *bhairavis* exemplifies the amalgamation of holy terror and awe that is associated with *Tantra* in the popular Indian imagination. By contrast, the *bhairavis* in *Rudrapal* are invested with a solemn religious aura and are treated reverentially despite their grotesque practices. Despite the lurid and stomach-turning horror that these female ascetics unleash in the play, they embody the most noticeable links of the play with the Hindu ethos that it seeks to celebrate as part of a cultural agenda. It can also be linked with the likes of Bankim Chandra who romanticized a violent resistance in his novels as an ideal for nation building. Dr. Sarkar points out in his essay that if the infelicity in the depiction of the *bhairavis* in *Rudrapal* ruptures the evocation of a seamless and urbane Hindu sensibility that would be attuned to colonial modernity, the celebration of their violent ways, on the other hand, may be interpreted as an attempt to bring out the inclusivity of the Hindu tradition and defy the expectations of Western enlightenment. The indigenization of the Celtic element of the Source Text, the paralleling of Elizabethan attitude towards, and belief in, black magic with similar popular and fearful notion of Tantric rites in Bengal, appropriating the colonizer's Book into our own cultural mores, the duality and ambivalence of Shakti/mother goddess worship in Bengal, while at the same time making Shakespeare recognizable in the text, though in the foreign garb of the Bengali language and 19th century popular culture. The play translates "fair is foul, and foul is fair" as the second *bhairavi*'s solemn affirmation in prose, "Good omens and bad are all the same to us. What do we care for the pleasure and pain of human beings?" They utter in unison in the same scene, "We know the future but we don't help or harm anyone". This makes possible an explanation of the Bengali Macbeth's fate in terms of the time-honored Hindu principles of *karma* and predestination.

Girish Ghosh's Macbeth: Girish's *Macbeth* is unique for it is the only nineteenth-century Bengali translation of the Bard that was custom-made for the commercial stage, which retains the original location and *dramatis personae*, and pursues the original action and locution almost to the level of individual sentences. In the essay 'Shakespeare's Translations in Indian Languages' (2001), Sisir Kumar Das sees Girish's *Macbeth* as instantiating 'a compromise between the policy of Indianization propounded by Hemchandra and that of a faithful translation advocated by the twentieth century translators' (81). However, it may be possible to argue that the balance here is tipped in favour of a defamiliarization that is designed to replicate the translator's perception of the original play.

The strategy of such translation is meticulous and Girish carefully side-stepped many problems of being faithful to original by strategic decisions. Sisir Kumar Das observes, 'Girish Chandra added five songs in his Bengali version, omitted several, if not all allusions, avoided place names as far as possible'. Girish Ghosh assigned four songs to the witches and one to the army of Malcolm. The conclave of original three witches was supplemented by a troupe of witches, singing and dancing with the songs. Girish chandra's translation surprisingly eliminates all the mentions of Scotland, and even Macduff's 'O Scotland! Scotland!' in Act 4, scene 3, becomes 'Ha janmabhumi – ha janmabhumi.' Girish's text includes names like Norway,

England, Ireland, Glamis, Cawdor, Fife, Dunsinane and Birnam, but replaces the smaller place names like St Colme's Inch, Aleppo, Forres, Inverness, Scone and Colme Kill. This indicates that evasion of foreignness was not high on his agenda. On the contrary, it is the original Proper Nouns which advertise the status of Girish's text as *anuvad* rather than *anukaran*.

As for allusions, Girish actually tries to retain most of them through various strategies. At times he tries to supply references from the indigenous culture which correspond to the original allusions. For examples, he translates 'Neptune's multitudinous seas' (2.2.59) as 'Varuner adhikare achhe je sagar,' Neptune and Varun being the deities presiding over the seas in the Roman and Hindu mythologies respectively. Elsewhere, he renders 'Valour's minion' (1.2.19) as 'Ranadev-varputra sama,' and 'Amen' (2.2.26) as 'shanti, shanti.' But on the whole he does not transpose the Shakespearean imaginary to a Hindu field of signifiers. For most of the allusions, he tries to find a middle ground where the associative horizons of both the cultures may converge. In several cases Girish tries to capture the referent of the allusion by replacing a Proper Noun with a descriptive phrase. Thus 'Golgotha' (i.e. literally 'the place of a skull,' the site of Christ's crucifixion) becomes 'asthi'r maidan,' and 'Acheron' becomes 'naraker nadi'. Girish is so loyal to the original that he is prepared to retain some of the allusions at the cost of perspicuity and felicity. Macbeth regrets that he has sold his soul to Satan and courted eternal damnation for his political ambition in the lines '-and my eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man'(3.1.67-8). Girish translates these lines as 'nara-ari pataker kare, / arpilam nitya atma mama...' The Christian lore informing the observation would hardly be accessible to Girish's audience, but he does not dispense with this remark. As Abhishek Sarkar points out such stumbling blocks imply that Girish's is a poetics of comparison and juxtaposition, not one of integration and conformity.

In his translation Girish often simplifies the syntax or clarifies the context of a line for the benefit of the theatre audience who did not have the opportunity to go over a single line again and again like the reader. For instance, Macbeth's curt observation 'To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus' (3.1.47) is characteristic of the elliptical and condensed mode of the late Shakespeare. This is helpfully rendered as 'nirapade simhasane na ho'le sthapan, / bidambana matra shire mukut dharan.'

One important deviation from the original was Girish's prosaic translation of the scenes which were written in verse in the original. Girish tries to replicate the original conceits, although he may transform a metaphor into a simile and add an explanatory tag. Girish's staunch allegiance to Shakespeare's original, led him into translating many analogies in a way which is obscure and abstruse but most of the time Girish saved the cross-cultural transference with a scholarly precision. It cannot be denied that he took much liberty in the scenes featuring the witches, adding much local colour and indulging in rhetorical excess. But these scenes operate on a separate demotic or folkloric plane. Girish's inputs are not contrary to the aesthetic function of Shakespeare's original and it preserves the essence in its rendition.

Girish's translation can be identified as 'loyal' or 'faithful and apparently, it raises the question of cultural submission through colonial hierarchy. But Girish's *refusal* to indigenize Shakespeare's text may itself be thematized as a cultural poetics fraught with potentials of resistance. Arguably his Girish his gesture can be seen as leading towards a liberal humanist paradigm of 'world literature,' oblivious of the colonial apparatus that occasioned and instituted the rise of Shakespeare in India. Textbook models of mimicry and hybridization can hardly do justice to this picture. Girish's translation does not imitate an English text, but through considerable imaginative and scholarly mediation tries to project an English text in Bengali. In an English essay entitled 'Bengali Literature' (1871) Bankim had suggested that the mission of the Bengali intellectual lay in 'acclimatising' the ideas of the superior European nations in order to bring about a renaissance in India based on the template of the Italian one. In his refusal of such an 'acclimatising' project, at least in his *Macbeth*, Girish seems to disrupt the pedagogic process whereby the colonizing culture justifies itself as the source and arbiter of knowledge. Girish's insistence on replicating particulars of the original play ascertains that its foreignness is acknowledged even by those who had no prior acquaintance with it, and that it is not prescribed as a model for compulsory emulation.

If the political investments of Girish's *Macbeth* cannot be teased out with total success, it is because it participates in a vexed web of collusion and confrontation that characterizes colonial modernity in Bengal.

Conclusion: The politics of adapting from Shakespeare—a part of the canon, is a complex one. This complexity is furthermore increased when the adapting is done within the colonial framework in a country. The problem of adapting Shakespeare at the time was how to introduce the greatness of Shakespeare to the public without making his works lose much of his originality. Girish Chandra's *Macbeth* kept the location and *dramatis personae* intact but his production was not much of a commercial success even though he intended it for the commercial theatre. The trans-located plays which preceded it were much more pragmatic in their approach. Rudrapal and Karnabir radically otherise the context to indigenize the play. The incorporation of epic parallels and medieval Indian scenario mitigates the confusions caused by the differences between the source-text and the target-text and simultaneously enlarges the ideological parameters to include a religious slant. Both experiments with several domesticating strategies to arrive at an acceptable hybridisation, but this does not align them with modern adapters who become virtual makers of meaning providing radical new interpretations with provocative socio-political localisation. In the nineteenth century social milieu they retreat into a fictional past that simultaneously Indianises and alienates by relocating outside Bengal. Prof. Chowdhury aptly reminded us of the sectarian bias due to the literacy rate of that time. Bengal's literacy rate was higher than the country's, but in comparison with the percentage of the illiterate people, their number was significantly less. The number of Western educated Bengalis was miniscule among them. The plays' efforts are directed at this miniscule but prominently visible minority who claimed to be the spokespersons for the entire society while at the same time felt "patronisingly

towards the illiterate masses, as the colonial sahibs felt towards...[them]” and subscribed to the “identification between the educated Indian and the colonial state [that] consolidated the boundary walls around school knowledge”. (Heredia 368; Kumar 15). But to conclude, we must say that as national literatures are constantly being replaced by a unified world literature, these texts gain renewed importance as they take a significant role in academia moving away from the “local” of Bengali to the global of other languages and remain important pre-cursors to the translocation of more Shakespeare texts to plays in India and various other places.

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