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Reception of Shakespeare in Bengal: A Study of *Macbeth*'s Translations from 1885-1975

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Abstract

'Reception' is a thoroughly technical term which denotes how a text is received by its readers across time and culture. It has often been seen how a particular text has not been well-received at the time of its publication but has gone on to become a timeless classic. Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy* and Miguel de Cervantes' *The Adventures of Don Quixote* are some of the prominent examples. These books have survived the test of time and have reached those readers about whose existence the writers themselves were not aware of. The translations of these texts have spread them so far and wide and have made them cult texts in the history of world literature. William Shakespeare's tragedies have that timeless appeal in them which has made it possible to spread beyond the British Isles and take a permanent place in the heart of former colony India. In this case also translation into the native tongues has played a significant role in the reception of the text within a particular culture. *Macbeth* alone has more than eight translated versions in Bengali (there may be more of which I am not yet aware). This paper shall aim to provide a comparative analysis of the five prominent translated versions of *Macbeth* starting with the earliest one *Karnabir* by Nagendranath Bose, and four other translations of *Macbeth* by Rabindranath Tagore, Girish Ghosh, Jatindranath Sengupta and Utpal Dutta and explore why *Macbeth* has been translated over time in Bengal.

Keywords: Reception, adaptation, translation, tragedy, performance.

As a student of Comparative Literature for fourteen years, it has been my inherent tendency to read texts and analyse them in the context of the tools employed in studying Comparative Literature as a discipline. Susan Bassnett in her book *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction* (1993) defines Comparative Literature as a study of texts across cultures (1). Reception studies come in as a very relevant point in the study of literature then, especially when it is across diverse languages and cultures.

In his *Comparative Literature and Literary Theory* (1973), Ulrich Weisstein defines reception as a term to denote "the relations between (the literary)...works and their ambience, including authors, readers, reviewers, publishers, and the surrounding milieu"

(48). Reception studies is, actually, the study of the fortune of a text and Paul van Tieghem says that the influence of a text is directly linked to its success. Thus, according to Weisstein, "reception can best be characterized as a preliminary step to the kind of assimilation known as influence" (50). The survival of a text depends on how it is received across different ages and cultures.

In the context of literary studies in India in the 19th and 20th centuries, the most significant reception has been that of William Shakespeare (1564-1616). In his essay 'Shakespeare's Reception in India : Ambivalences and Appropriations', Sisir Kumar Das writes, "the Indian response of Shakespeare is ...one of the most complex and problematic in the history of cultural contacts....Shakespeare is the most prestigious cultural symbol for the educated middle class...Indeed, the reception of any particular author is dependent upon both internal and external factors, and the process of reception of William Shakespeare in India started as an external imposition (52-3)" He also adds ".....a quick glance at the history of Shakespeare reception in India confirms the intimate relationship between the process of apotheosization of the bard and the growth of an English educated community that accepted Western literary canons without offering much resistance...." (51-2)

Shakespearean plays were at first considered to be symbols of the Imperialist power and hence confined to the English-educated intelligentsia – "the appearance of Shakespeare on the stage in India was part of a ceremony of imperial power" (52). Bengal was the leader in this. It was primarily the influence of the coloniser which led to the adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* into *Bhanumati Chittabilash* in Bengali by Harachandra Ghosh as early as in 1853. In plays such as *Bhanumati Chittabilash* or *Charumukh Chittahara* (1864) or *Hariraj* (1896), the themes remained the same and only the names of characters and places were Indianized. Iswarchandra Vidyasagar in his adaptation of *The Comedy of Errors* into *Bhrantibilash* (1869) changed the genre from comedy (drama) to prose (narrative).

The reception of Shakespeare in India evolved with time. The translations of his plays were made according to the needs of the receiving culture. As Utpal Dutta had declared, "We are committed to an interpretation of Shakespeare in accordance with the need of our epoch" (21). Thus his own translation of *Macbeth* was performed at the time of Emergency (1975). Again, Harish Trivedi says, "Translating Shakespeare ...a typically colonial literary activity which had begun in a big way in most of our languages in the last quarter of the 19th century, has lately acquired a new justification which is often so nationalistic as to be almost an instrument of decolonization." (48-9) He cites the example of Rangey Raghav who translated fifteen plays of Shakespeare into Hindi because he felt "a language which does not possess translations of Shakespeare cannot be counted among the more developed languages." (49)

The introduction to *Shakespeare without English: The Reception of Shakespeare in Non-Anglophone Countries* states that "Shakespeare's text is seen as the starting point of a sustained, open-ended inter-textual discourse based on no single language or culture, and embracing much more than the written word." (ix) Shormistha Panja in her essay 'Not

Black and White but Shades of Grey: Shakespeare in India' says that in the UPG production of *Othello* in 1999-2000, the Kathakali form was used and the performers spoke in their mother tongues. Panja also says "The discipline of Kathakali and Ankiyo Nat break all rules and codes of Shakespearean performance dictated by the West. Docility in one culture becomes disobedience in another." (113) Earlier, Habib Tanvir's adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* into *Kamdev ka Aapna, Basant Ritu ka Sapna* (1993) had used illiterate folk actors, folk music and choreography.

Shakespeare's reception in India began with pure academic discussions of his plays by the intelligentsia. In Swapan Majumder's essay 'Bidyayotonik Shakespeare' we find the beginnings of Shakespeare study in India through academic syllabi. But the study of Shakespeare did not remain confined to the syllabus only and Shakespearean plays began to be performed. In this, the "Indian languages (became) the major instruments of negotiation between Shakespeare and the theatre audience in India." (Das 67) This means that Shakespeare was begun to be translated into Indian languages and then performed as plays. Translation of Shakespearean plays formed a major role/part in his reception.

Having laid out an introduction to the various adaptations of Shakespearean plays throughout India and across time, this essay, however, shall restrict itself strictly to the reception of *Macbeth* (1605) in Bengal. By reception I would like to clarify that this paper shall focus only on the translations of *Macbeth* and not on its theatrical or cinematic adaptations. Though *Macbeth* was translated into Bangla by Girish Ghosh and Utpal Dutta for actual performance on stage, this discussion has to restrict itself to treating those texts as mere texts only and not performance. This paper shall also not bring into discussion the later and more recent adaptations of *Macbeth* on the stage and/or screen of Bengal.

The first Bengali translation of Shakespeare, *Bhanumati Chittavilas* (1853) by Hara Chandra Ghosh (1817-84) was an example of indigenization. Ghosh had said that he had written a "Bengali" drama taking only the plot and underplots of *The Merchant of Venice* with considerable additions and alterations to suit the native taste (Mitra 17). The case was quite similar with *Karnabir* by Nagendranath Bose (1885). Though the cover page says "*Karnabir—A Translation of Macbeth*", the 'Mukhobondho' (Preface) states very clearly "Bangalay ingraji nam bhalo sunay na boliya, ingraji nam-er poriborte bangala nam ullekh kora giyachhe. Europe-er riti-nitir sahit bharatvarsger riti-nitir onek parthokyo drishito hoy..." (Since English names do not sound good in Bengali, Bengali names have been cited instead of the English ones. There is a lot of difference between the culture and ways of life between Europe and India). Hence, *Karnabir* is more of an adaptation than translation. Even if it is considered to be a translation, the domestication is to such an overwhelming extent that it becomes quite difficult to regard it as a Bengali version of Shakespeare's text. Here Duncan becomes Ananda Singha, the king of Jaipur. Karnabir (*Macbeth*) and Vijaychandra (*Banquo*) are his generals. *Karnabir*, though, was not the earliest translation/adaptation of *Macbeth*. According to *The Daily News* of 1873 (November 4), the first performance of *Rudrapaul* took place in that year itself. It is considered to be the first translation of *Macbeth* into Bengali. However, as Sisir Das says, "The translation of tragedies had to

negotiate more with conceptual rather than linguistic problems...The important issue is that the Indian mind, the Hindu mind to be more precise, was unfamiliar with tragedy as a form of literature, and was not yet prepared to appreciate it fully (76). Noted Bengali writer Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay who had translated *Julius Caesar* in the 1860s had defended indigenization by declaring that—"...I believe that without adopting such a method no foreign play will ever find a place in Bengali literature..." (Das 80)

In *Karnabir*, the witches have become 'bhairavis' and Hecate is *kalbhairavi*, the queen of the *bhairavis*. Now, the word *bhairavi* has a different connotation in Bengali. Bhairavis do not belong to the society, they practise meditation, might as well be looked upon as those who are likely to practise witchcraft. Interestingly enough, in the Preface Bose has apologised to his readers that while translating he has "mistakenly written" *bhairavi* in place of *dakini*. *Dakini* is the proper Bengali word from which *daini* is derived which literally means 'witch'. It will never be possible for us to know what had prompted Bose to get his entire translation published with *bhairavi* and later change it to *dakini*. Bose's text is overtly Hinduistic or rather, nationalistic since Hindu nationalism was the only form of nationalism that has ever been conceptualised by the Indian nation (The present scenario has not changed much in India!). Thus Nagendranath Bose equates the tussle of Duncan and Macbeth as the war between *dharma* (good) and *adharm*a (evil). *Karnabir* is ultimately the story of the triumph of good over evil, the philosophy with which Indians (Hindus) were much habituated and not the tragedy of the over-ambitious general Karnabir who tried to transgress law. Thus, it is like the battle of Kurukshetra where Karnabir, the representative of evil gets defeated and ultimate peace prospers in the country. And not unlike Bankimchandra who was the biggest influence of the time, Bose too had the English-educated middle-class readers in his mind.

Before Bose *Macbeth* had actually been translated by a very young Rabindranath Tagore. But it was a fragmentary translation. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) had translated *Macbeth* under the supervision and guidance of his tutor Gyanchandra Bhattacharya at the age of fourteen in (1875). Apart from these early translations, there have been other works too in the twentieth century. Of course no one can forget to mention Girish Ghosh Munindranath Dutta (1919), Jatindranath Sengupta (1950-3), Nirendranath Ray (1952) and Utpal Dutta were the prominent translators of *Macbeth* into Bengali. Munindranath Dutta and Nirendranath Ray translated the text faithfully without any additions or alterations. Hence, I shall keep their texts out of the purview of discussion here. In this paper I shall compare the five translations of Nagendranath Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Girish Ghosh, Jatindranath Sengupta and Utpal Dutta., The notable poet Jatindranath Sengupta (1887-1954) translated three Shakespearean tragedies *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, and *Othello* from 1950-1953, after his retirement. In the introduction to Jatindranath's translation of Shakespeare, Prof Swapan Majumdar says, "Jatindranath kabitai tragic samunnatir je sambhavana chhilo, sei jeevandarshanei take niye giyecchilo aamader tragedy chintar abahaman adarsha Shakespeareer kacche. Debata ba niyotir crur koushale manusher nigragher je – aakhan Greek tragedir aashraye, ta noi, manushie jekhane

tar aadrishter niyanta, bhagyer niamak, manuseri gahan bashana theke jekhane ghoniye aashe samuha binashti, sei Shakespeareo jagatkei tar aapon bhuvan mone kore chhilen Jatindranath.” (The possibility of reaching the height of tragic thoughts lay embedded in the poems of Jatindranath. That philosophy of life took him to Shakespeare, the eternal ideal of our tragic thoughts. It is not the realm of Greek tragedy which relies on the cruel tricks of gods or fate to punish human beings; rather he accepted the Shakespearean concept world as his own where human beings themselves control their fates and bring upon their own doom through their dark desires.) [‘Introduction ix] And *Macbeth* definitely is one such play. Jatindranath translated *Macbeth* as a piece of literature, and his intellectual superiority was far greater.

Now, Girist Ghosh (1844-1911) and Utpal Dutta (1929-1993) were both stage performers, and hence, their translation was in accordance to performability. Their reasons for translating *Macbeth* were also different. In *Girish Ghosh*, Utpal Dutta writes – “Being a people’s poet, and practitioner of Yatra, Girish had developed a technique of addressing the so-called rift-rot of the city. He knew this audience expected to be overwhelmed by intensity of passion and a veritable turmoil of events on the stage. They had a right to wonder and awe in drama, and Girish’s early apprenticeship in Shakespeare showed him the world’s greatest dramatist was not averse to packing his plays with towering violence, with witches and ghosts, with duels and battles precisely to hold the attention of the prentices who crowded into his theatre.” (10) Ghosh’s *Macbeth* was first performed in 1893 in the public playhouse ‘Minerva Theatre.’

Interestingly enough, Utpal Dutta himself had played Macbeth in his Little Theatre production of *Macbeth* in 1954. The play that was performed was based on the translation of Jatindranath’s text. Later, in 1975, Utpal Dutta’s *Macbeth* (this time translated by Dutta himself) was performed to mark the three-month long emergency declared on 26th June 1975 by Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In the introduction to Utpal Dutta’s *Macbeth*, Sameek Bandopadhyay says, “Shakespeareer natak chhitrito ei bibhisikai natyakar – nirdeshak Utpal Dutta khuje peyechilan bharater sater dashake rashtriya santrasher dyotana.” (In the horror and violence portrayed in Shakespeare’s tragedy, playwright-director Utpal Dutta had found the resonance of state terrorism of the 1960s India) [Preface 1] In an interview in 1989, Dutta himself had said, “Shakespeareer *Macbeth* jakhan aamra korlam, aamra bhujte perechilam je Shakespeareer *Macbeth*-er cheye swairacharer biruddhei better play hote pare na. Emergency-r biruddhe eto bhalo natak ar nei. Ekhono porjonto lekha hoi ni.” (When we were staging Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* we could realise that there cannot be a better play against despotism. There is no other play better than this against the Emergency. Nothing has yet been written.) [Dutta 1] Staging *Macbeth* at that time was, in Dutta’s own words, “a strategy.” Earlier in 1944, Ingmar Bergman had staged *Macbeth* in Sweden and directly labelled it as “anti-Nazi.” Dutta continues this tradition of using Shakespearean plays as forms of protest in the modern socio-political context.

It is then very clear that the target readership audience for these five translations were very different. Hence, their reception and translation of *Macbeth* had to differ.

Tagore's translation (the complete work is unavailable) consists of only the three witch scenes of Macbeth (Act 1 scene 1, scene 3 and Act 4 scene 1). As a teenager Tagore had kept the rhyme, rhythm and colloquial language like "aasche" (coming), "dakche" (calling), "koyasha" (fog/mist), "choke" (in the eye) etc. Tagore had no fixed target readership. His translation has the subtitle "Dakini" since he had translated only the witch scenes. There is no "dramatis personae" in Tagore's translation, it begins directly with "drishya: Bijon prantar. Bajra bidyut. Tinjon dakini." (Scene: Deserted Land. Thunder and Lightning. Three Witches) [97]. In Girish Ghosh, there is ("mahakabi Sekhapeare – pranita *Macbeth* natakera bonganubad" (The Bengali translation of the play *Macbeth* written by the great poet Shakespeare), then the "dramatis personae" and then a prologue "prastabona" which does not exist in the other translations. In the prologue, Ghosh makes it clear "Mahakabi Sekhapeare adarsha hethai". (The great poet Shakespeare is the ideal, I have merely followed him.)

*Abhineta matra ami, kabibar anugami,
Alochana biphal ki hetu koritar."* (451)

(I am just an actor, it is needless to argue that the poet is far superior)

In case of Utpal Dutta, it is 'bhabanubad', which means Dutta had tried to translate the essence of *Macbeth* though it is the only translated version which has the original printed next to the translation.

Now coming to the language, the last two lines of Act I Sc I
"Fair is foul, and foul is fair":

Hover through the fog and filthy air" have been translated as

1. "Dekhte bhalo jinish kalo
Kharap jeno chokkhe aalo"
Thanda hawa ghor kuyashay
Chol lo ude jai ei belay" (Nagendranath)
2. "Moder kachhe bhaloi mondo,
Mondo jaha bhalo je tai,
Andhokare koyashate
Ghure ghure ghure berai!" (Rabindranath)
3. "Bhalo moder kalo, mondo moder bhalo.
Andar pandar anach kanach
Ghure berai cholo." (Girish Ghosh)
4. "Su moder ku, ar ku moder su bhai.
Khola hawa kuashay
Dana jhere ure jai." (Jatindranath)
5. These lines have been left untranslated by Utpal Dutta which, I think, is a great flaw in his translation.

It is difficult to translate these lines word for word because all of them carry the same meaning, they are all translations from the original “Fair is foul and foul is fair”. Without the knowledge of Bengali, it would be very difficult to grasp the nuances of the slight differences among these translated lines

Among the four translations, Tagore's and Bose' are closer to the original while Jatindranath's translation is more poetic and erudite. Girish Ghosh is keen in using the colloquial tongue which is evident in his choice of words such as 'parakunduli magi' (a quarrelsome woman), 'bhatar' (slang for husband) 'udom' (naked), etc. In fact, in Act IV sc I Ghosh introduces a song, “Aboshishto dakinigoner abirbhab o geet” (The appearance and Song of the rest of the Witches) in “mishra pot-tal” (a mixed metre).. This is Ghosh's interpolation. In the original there was “music and a song, black spirits, etc.”, but that has been deleted in the other three translations. In Tagore there is no mention of Hecate, Jatindranath says, “Hecater angsha baad deoa gelo” (The Hecate scenes have been left out), and Utpal Dutta says, 'Hecate-er habijabi mahakobir rachana noy” (The gibberish of Hecate was not written by the great poet) (Dutta 113) It is noteworthy that Act III sc V has not at all been translated by Utpal Dutta, it was done by Alokranjan Dasgupta. Dutta refused to translate the scene because he thought it was unnecessary and did not go with the actual theme of the tragedy.

Tagore's translation consists of only the Witch Scene which he wrote in the colloquial language using words like 'geron' (instead of 'grahan'—eclipse), 'pitti' ((liver), 'nede' (a colloquial slang used by Hindus to refer to heathens, more particularly Muslims), He spelt Macbeth as 'Makbeth' (treating 'k' and 'b' as a single joint word to facilitate the rhyme). In Girish Ghosh the language of the Witch Scenes differs from that of the other scenes. The same applies to Nagendranath Bose too. He imitates the metre of Michael Madhusudan Dutta when he writes,

:raktomoy ronagoto ke oi sainik?

Aahoto-hriday!—tobe samar-sandesh

Paribe ki nibedite prakrito bisesh?” (Who is this soldier drenched with blood coming from the battlefield? He is injured! Will he be able to deliver the news of the battle?) [Act I Sc II]

Ghosh, though, does not use the 'sadhu bhasha' (the formal literary language), the language is a mixed one, for example—“notuba ami arogyo laav kortem, prostorer nyay otut hotem, porboter nyay ochol hotem, dhorabyapi bayur nyay swadhin hotem; ekkhone ami kshudra, ksheen karagare sondehashe aboddho” (Otherwise I would have recovered, I would be as solid as a rock, as immovable as a mountain, as independent as the wind that blows across the earth, at the moment I am imprisoned in a small prison of suspicion) (II. IV. P 452). In Act III sc IV itself Ghosh rhymes in the midst of blank verse

“briddha sarpa hoyechhe nidhan,

Je keet korechhe palayan –

Kale tahe janmibe garal,

Bishdanta heen ebe.

Jao, Kalyo punah dekha hobe." (The old snake has been killed. Those which have now fled shall be infused with poison with time. They are now without their fangs. Leave now, shall see you all tomorrow morning)

Act III Sc IV has not been translated by Tagore, Jatindranath and Utpal Dutta, but Girish Ghosh has not only translated it, but also introduced "oboshishto dakinigoner abirbhav o geet" in "emon – bhupali – pot-taal." (The appearance of other witches and Song). Nagendranath introduces the *Kalbhairavi* who speaks to the witches in a menacing and abusive tone. In Act III Sc V, she says

"amake ki ar bolte hobe

Daini khaki tora sabe" (Do I need to tell you that you all are eaters of witches!)

Girish Ghosh's *Macbeth* was for the entertainment of the common masses. Hence, all the witch scenes have been kept intact and additional songs were introduced to make them more appealing. His translation is more rhythmic and alliterative –

"Jakhon jhorbe megha jhupur jhupur,

Chak chakachak hanbe chikur,

Karkarakar karat karat

Dakbe jokhon jhanjhane?" (Act I sc I).

He has even introduced other witches at the end of Act I sc I with a song

"Kili Kili Khili Khili heshe bheshe,

Kuashay chal shethai,

Hilli Hilli Hilli Hilli, Shai Shai Shai." (Just the mere alliteration, the words do not have meanings individually).

For Jatindranath Sengupta whose target readership was the 'ordinary, educated, interested middle class Bengali', this song and dance spectacle was unnecessary. Hence, he omits the Hecate scenes, uses a more refined language which is more poetic and less dramatic. It should also be noted that Jatindranath's text was meant to be read only and not performed. Thus, he did not need to emphasize on the visual spectacle of the witch scenes. However, Utpal Dutta's *Macbeth* was also meant to be performed but it is extremely prosaic. Alokranjan Dasgupta writes about Dutta's *Macbeth*, "prothanugoto chhande sahajata adhikar thaka sattyeto natakera samlap rachana korte giye icche korei Utpal Dutta take barangbar bhegechen. Tar *Macbeth*-er kothopokothoner baishista ekhanei. Pratno o sudur katha bastuke Emergency samakalinotai jachai-jarip kore neben bolei adyanta scan kora jai emon godya abong poyarer melbondhan chhilo Utpal-er lokhyomatra" (Although he had a natural mastery over the typical usage of rhyme, Utpal Dutta had deliberately broken the metre again and again while writing the dialogues of the play. The speciality of the dialogues of his *Macbeth* lie herein. In order to assess the ancient dialogues in the light of the contemporaneity of the Emergency, it was Utpal's aim to combine a prose which can be scanned altogether with the *payar* metre) {Dutta 6} Hence, even the witch scenes in his *Macbeth* do not have rhyming dialogues.

The influence of their times on the dialogues has not been too manifest. The translators have all used a particular kind of language for the witches which is different from the rest of the scenes and in these their choice of words does not vary too much. For example,

“Finger of birth-strangled babe,
Ditch – delivered by a drab,” (Act IV sc I) becomes

1. “*beshyate gaon-er khaate*
Khasha puter aangul kete” (Nagendranath)
2. “*Aan ge re shei bhroon-mora*
Khanaye phele khun kora” (Rabindranath)
3. “*Khanaye biyiye khasha sabbonashi*
Chheler galai nije lagalo phasi” (Jatindranath)
4. “*Biyiye chhele khaner dhare*
Mukh tipe tar dechhe sere” (Girish Ghosh)
5. “*Ashati nari khanakhonde je shishur janma diyai*
Gala tipe merechhe amoni bachhar angul” (Utpal Dutta)

Again, “...never shake

Thy gory locks at me!” (Act III Sc IV) becomes “*raktomoy roktapluto kesh samudoy*” in Nagendranath, “*Rudhir Mardito oi jotabaddha kesh*” in Jatindranath, “*Shonitakto kesh*” in Girish Ghosh and “*Shonitshikta keshodam*” in Utpal Dutta. The five translations, studied side by side demonstrate that they have been composed in different periods of time and for different purposes. Though Nagendranath and Rabindranath were writing more or less within a span of few years, their aims were entirely different. And we do not know whether the successors of Tagore and Ghosh have been influenced by their translations. The fact remained that it was the timeless appeal of the Shakespearean tragedy which prompted educated Bengalis to take up the task of bringing the text to their own era and to their own readers. Since they had their own distinct purposes, these translations are creative works in their own merits,

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