
Shakespeare Re-Configured: Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay's Bangla Transcreations

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Abstract

Translation presupposes the existence of borders between cultures. The translator is aware of these borders and the necessity of crossing them. In actual fact however there is a common resonance zone between cultures without which translation would not have been possible. The borders too are not lines but dots, which offer entry points to the translator to come and go freely across cultures so that the intersections become horizontal portal lines. Borders, which are thus porous and open, should not be considered barriers. That the activity of translation obliterates borders is not quite true. The translator's knowledge of the source text may be termed internal knowledge. She knows the language and culture of the source text as well as the target text she creates. The reader's knowledge is only of the target language and culture and she is made aware of the source text only as it appears in the translation. The translator is supremely powerful and may empower the translation with a linguistic nationalism and instrument of resistance, which may reinforce borders rather than annihilate them. The above hypothesis is cogently expressed in the

*writings of Anthony Pym. I would like to add that the translator herself is necessarily bilingual and is the self-styled agent of the source culture but the vehicle she drives is meant for monolingual, mono-cultural people who respond better and become more politically charged if that vehicle belongs to the colonizer's territory. The reassembling of it, re-configurations, are suitable instruments of appropriation which re-inforce the differences between the two cultures -- the British colonizer's and the native colonized people's, and at the same time show the way towards vulnerable entry points. I have chosen two late 19th century translations of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Romeo & Juliet* by the poet Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay as paradigmatic of the above viewpoint. Since there is no record of their performance I shall treat them as texts to be read.*

The Bengali translations of Shakespeare began to appear during the 1890s. Most of these were adaptations and not 'faithful' translations. Shakespeare's world was so far removed from that of the Bengali middle class that it was felt to be comprehensible only on being endowed with the Indian ambience. In the preface to his translation of *The Merchant of Venice* (adapted as *Bhanumoti Chittabilas*) Harachandra Ghosh (1817-84) says,

"I undertake to write it in the shape of a Bengali natuck or drama taking only the plot and underplots of the *Merchant of Venice* with considerable additions and alterations to suit the native taste; but at the same time losing no opportunity to convey to my countrymen, who have no means of getting themselves acquainted with Shakespeare - save through the medium of their own language - the

beauty of the author's sentiments as expressed in the
best passages in the play in question".¹

(---- 1964: 8)

The translator is armed with internal knowledge. She/he is bilingual and is supposed to have acquired intimate knowledge of the SC and SL (Source Culture and Source Language). She/he is also conscious of her/his power over the text as well as aware of her/his responsibility. She/he knows at what point the border is crossed and how best to plant a foreign seed in the native soil. The 19th century Shakespeare translator was on the one hand the colonizer's deputy, and on the other, a cultural ambassador as well as an agent of subversion of the SC and ST. If opening up of gateways was the aim of 19th century translations of the English dramatist, the task was not easy at all. It was found that translation, more often than not, set up barbed wire fences across cultures. The translator crossed borders not to erase them but to mark them afresh on the cultural map.

The availability of translated texts of mainstream British narratives to the educated middle class Bengali must have lessened the desire to take the trouble to read the originals. It also must have given him the opportunity to develop a sense of self-gratification for accessing a text across the border and transgressing into the white colonizer's territory. The SC certainly acquired an indigenous look through transcreation. The politics of translation as an intercultural exercise paved the way towards decolonization of the bard. The accession of agency in a linguistic nationalism is the subtle appropriation of Shakespeare who was more precious to the British than the Empire.

Ironically, the first appropriation of Shakespeare into an 'other' script in an Indian language (=Bengali) was done by an Englishman, one Monckton. He translated *The Tempest* into Bengali as part of a college exercise in 1809/1811. The text is lost and there

is no record of its performance. There is no way of studying the quality of the translation for no copy is extant. One may assume however that the translation was more or less literal and the problem of intercultural transference may not have been attended to. Though it is unfair to suggest attitudes without first hand knowledge one may take a theoretical stance and even attribute a certain condescension on the part of the British colonizer and a certain nationalistic pride in handing over an object of the white man's literary domain to the colonized people and in their own language - a touch of ego and a consciousness of power.

In the event of an Indian writer translating a Shakespeare text the satisfaction of having attempted a difficult task would have been commingled with a subtle, unarticulated consciousness of power, a feeling of gratification at the thought of having appropriated the colonizer's product and indigenized it, because cultural transfer is an integral part of translation. In translating an alien culture into one's own realm of knowledge the consciousness of difference, the difficulties of erecting bridges led to adaptations and Indianized versions of Shakespeare. It was also the dawn of a sense of the power and potentiality of one's own mother tongue and an awareness of the need to develop it so that it should cope with Shakespearean nuances. It may not have been a coincidence that the creative potentialities of the Bengali language came to be realized in the hands of subsequent generations of original writers, just as its critical power was explored in the articles of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's periodical *Bangadarshan*.

In this paper I seek to examine the relevance of the above remarks with reference to Hemchandra Badyopadhyay's *Nolini Basanta* (1868), and Romeo-Juliet, which are transcreations of *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet* respectively.

Hemchandra Vandyopadhyay Indianized the names and tried to preserve the Shakespearian characteristics of the characters.

He pours the Shakespeare's plot and characters into a native mould in order to please the readers. We do find that Hemchandra's Prospero - Baijayanta - is endowed with a native tenderness and becomes a sentimental Bengali father. Gonzalo - Procheta - is likewise sentimentalized.

In the case of *Nolini Basanta* there is no record of the play being performed. Shakespeare's blank verse becomes in Hemchandra's hands a monotonous undramatic rhymed verse. The sentimental - lyrical - poetic disposition of Bengal was imposed upon the robust mature blank verse of Shakespeare. The reason perhaps was that because Hemchandra was primarily a poet, the theatrical potentialities of *The Tempest* attracted him less than its lyrical richness, its political symbolism less than its romance.

Culture is manifested not in social custom and manners alone but in the overall ambience as well. Drama, more than other genres, communicates the atmosphere of the period of its textual location as well as that of the social space of the dramatist and contemporary audience. In the case of translated drama something of the background of the translator's milieu may very well interpenetrate the TT.

The transcultural spaces in the ST and the TT are where cultures overlap and points on the border are pierced through. As Anthony Pym suggests the borders are not impregnable lines but innumerable dots, operative points along which the translator moves in a horizontal trajectory. But by introducing major deviations from the ST Hemachandra trespasses into the canonical narrative's hegemonic territory and reinforces the borders, draws demarcating lines, underlines differences.

In *Nolini Basanta* Hemchandra transplants the Shakespearean text from its Mediterranean terrain and introduces

various regions of India as the habitat of its characters. This necessitates a parallel change in depicting race, custom and folk psyche.

Right from the outset a barrier is erected between our culture and that of the bard. The seafaring nature of British culture, the gruff and growling jargon of mariners and boatswain, the Elizabethan consciousness and Shakespeare's realism undergo a sea-change when the first scene of the shipwreck and the tempest is omitted and the play opens with scene ii. Miranda-Nolini and her father Baijyanta, while a ship can be seen sinking far off, speak entirely lyrical, monotonous rhymed verse.

The geographical locale of the setting is transformed from the Mediterranean region to distant places in our vast subcontinent. Caliban-Barbat's mother is made to hail from Udaipur and not Argier as in Shakespeare. One may venture to conjecture the reason for this curious change. Was it because Udaipur was sufficiently remote from Bengal? But then, historically it was the seat of the heroic Rajputs. Perhaps romantic distance and the exotic locale fascinated the poet? The racial significance, the equivalence of black-ugliness-evil is definitely obliterated and Sycorax-Trijata is a simple witch. A nation's prejudices indicate the nature of its culture. Witch is simply evil but Shakespeare's Sycorax would have provoked greater abhorrence among his contemporaries. The point at which Hemchandra crosses the border induces a culture overlap as far as witch hatred is concerned. A culture transformation occurs when he does away with the concept of the traditional European medieval 'darkness' and the white man's racial arrogance.

Moreover in the translated text, there are ironic references to the fragrance of Varanasi's sewage system, the scent of Sunderbans soil; also to '3 crore deities' of the Hindu pantheon and 'kinkoris', the beautiful dancers of the court of Indra, the king of gods. It is interesting to note however that in order to explain fairy rings, which relate to authentically English rural superstition Hemchandra sticks

to the original and adds an explanatory footnote on English superstition², a brief incursion into hybridization of cultural space.

Barbat's servility is subtly Indianized when Baijayanta calls him 'padukabahak', carrier of shoes. Carrying the master's shoes upon one's head shows reverence, obeisance, and humility. A nation's culture is assessed not only by its intellectual resources but also through the culture of the body, its eating habits. "Do you mean I shall not have rice?" *tai bole ami ki bhat khabo na?* asks Barbat. A Bengali ambience is at once created. The Bengali's unequivocal love for *machher-jhol bhat!*

The post-colonial signifier is preserved when we find Barbat pointing out that he, who once was the king of this vast island, is now their one and only subject. Here is a bit of culture overlap. Colonization is the common signified but was Hemchandra thinking of India's colonization of the Far East? The work becomes an exercise in mixing and matching the ST with the setting of the TT. The methodology is uneven. Culture equalizers are used without consistency but they do remind the reader that the ST is being steadily injected with cultural inputs from the T culture. A subversion of the dominant narrative and a creation of boundary fencing reinforce the differences.

In spite of the inputs of local culture the very fact that Shakespeare was so easily absorbed into Bengali literature is a measure of the eclecticism of Bengali culture, which from the 17th century onwards absorbed into it some of the elements of other cultures. Jagadish Nandi in *Bangla Sanskriti Sampute Sakespeare* (Nandi 1998: 28) points out that from the 17th century onwards inter-culturality became part of the fabric of Bengali literature, which became popular even outside Bengal because of this universality. It included deities of the Hindu pantheon as well as the sayings of Jesus and Allah. It was accommodative. For instance the lines from the *Raimangal Kavya*

Ardhek mathate kala ekmatha chura tala
 Banamala chhili mili tate
 Dharla ardhek kaye ardhaneel megh praye
 Koran puran dui hate.

(Nandi 1998: 28)

Nandi points out further that liberal eclecticism was the hallmark of Bengali literature, and because of this Shakespeare was enthusiastically received into the culture. Apparently this suggests that there were no barriers, no opaque lines, only a border comprising dots.

From the middle of the 19th century (1855) the exuberance of the 'Alal' and 'Hutum' tradition of picaresque adventurism, didacticism, farce and derision pervaded literature.³

The tradition of 'Prohoson' and 'Hasyakautuk', robust appreciation of the inconsistencies of human nature, farcical elements, the Gopal Bhanr type of coarse stories form part of the fabric of 19th century culture. So in Bengal the ground was already prepared for the reception of Shakespeare's fools and the boisterous appreciation of the moral as well as questionable ingredients of society.

Jokes and pranks reveal the psyche of a nation and are embedded deep in local culture. The adventurous strain in Elizabethan culture, the deep-seated nautical temperament, the sailor's loose conduct and generic songs are either omitted by Hemchandra or transferred into something bawdily urban and smacking of the 19th century babu's excursions into brothels. One should also recall that Bengal's folk culture accommodated 'tarja', 'kheure' and 'kobigan'.⁴ The salty, sea-drenched ambience of *The Tempest* is transformed. Shakespeare's Stephano enters singing, 'I shall no more to sea, to sea / Here shall I die ashore.'

In *Nolini Basanta* sings Tilak

'O amar adorini pran

Chalo jabe gangasnan

Hathkholate tomay amay khabo paka pan.

Chalo adorini pran'.⁵

Hemchandra's transliteration is in keeping with the cultural ambience in which he locates Shakespeare. The metaphoric, ribald implications of 'ganga-snan' (literally, a bath in the Ganges), taking pan together, and 'adorini pran' or 'O my heart's darling.'

Let us now take Trinculo's speech in T II I "*If I were in England now ... not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver... When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they would lay out ten to see a dead Indian*".

The locale-specific reference to the American Indian, the recreations of the people of Shakespeare's own time is transferred into locale-specific reference to the space of the target text and satire against Hemchandra's urban contemporaries. Uday says that the babus of Calcutta nowadays make merry ever so often, indulging in 'bibir nautch' (referring to what the white sahib would call 'nautch girls'), horse's dance, spirits' dance, motley clown's dance--- they spend money on all this. Yet they do not give even a fistful of rice to a beggar. Even though the pundits in the tol have become almost extinct, they would not give a paisa to these Brahmin pundits.⁶

The derision is in keeping with the strain of satire prevalent in contemporary Bengali literature. There is intercultural fusion of the 17th c. Shakespeare text with local 19th colour. As Shakespeare was steeped in his own age, so also Hemchandra's rendering of the Shakespeare text. Although the historical time and culture were so different, yet the culture overlaps between the SC and TC lead to

embedding in the TT subaltern voices that are critical of their colonial betters. In this way the translation is made to create cultural equivalences.

But when all is said and done, and though borders are not lines and intercultural change is valid, the changes incorporated do draw a line of difference between the two texts. The colonial grand narrative is subverted and appropriated in order to enrich Bengali literature. The ST on the other hand becomes a viable paradigm of flexibility. The irony is that instead of obliterating borders translation very often reinforces them at least in the regions of the text where such changes take place.

Gonzalo's speech on the ideal commonwealth derived from Montaigne, based on the concept of an illusory golden age, acquires in *NB* a different hue. The gist of it is as follows: I have always wanted to rule but our country being an old one is so very overcrowded with rulers... I used to think if I could get a smaller land to rule, a secluded one, I would show people what it was to be a good ruler. This island is ideal for that. If there could be a few communities of subjects here it could be organized. There would not be any of the superstitions one finds in an ancient land. There would not be the convention of marriage and inequality in the distribution of wealth - All women would be enjoyed by all men and all men by all women. There would be no jealousy, malice, and rivalry. There would be no falsehood. Everyone would be altruistic. Disease, sorrow, agony, tension would all be eradicated.⁶

The embedded references to India, and criticism of its ways yoked to the Shakespearean framework, politicize the TT, creating an intercultural ideology that lends to the work an additional *raison d'être*. The ST allows itself to be broken into by intercultural material while at the same time the areas of culture-overlap suggest that borders are not impenetrable lines. In translations in which the ST and the TT are so far distanced in historical time, space and

culture translation initiates a discourse of inter-culturality. This in its turn reinforces the notion that although translation activity is meant to obliterate borders it is also a way of impressing borders. On the part of the common reader, thanks to translation, she/he is able to glean the fruits of an alien literature with just a bit of external knowledge. Whereas the translator's power and dominance become overwhelming as the only person who holds the key to the ST: who has, what is termed 'internal knowledge', a close acquaintance with both SL and SC. The translator is thus empowered.

Hemchandra's translation of *Romeo & Juliet* appeared as *Charumukh Chittahara Natak* in 1864 and 17 years later as *Romeo-Juliet*. But Hemchandra was basically a poet and did not think of making his work stage-worthy so that it reads like a verse drama addressed to the sentiments of the romantic Bengali middle class. There is neither Shakespeare's robust blank verse nor the bard's theatricality. It is lyrical and quite faithful to the original especially where dialogue is concerned. Hemchandra did get carried away however by the excitement of the sequence so much so that he sometimes introduces an extra scene e.g when he splits II. ii into two. Proper names are also transformed into their nearest Bengali equivalents e.g. Verona becomes Barana, Capulet becomes Capalat, Montagu becomes Montago, Paris becomes Parash and so on. Only Romeo and Juliet remain unchanged. Friar Lawrence is metamorphosed into Mathurananda, a Hindu monk and Brother John is transmogrified as Gonshai, a Hindu priest. Funnily the graveyard becomes a crematorium. The play is therefore a translation-cum-adaptation. The two families are like zamindar families. The preparation for the marriage of Juliet with Paris is rendered in the guise of such a marriage ceremony in an upper class Bengali home with all the women gossiping away and typical Bengali social rituals taking place in Act II iv which becomes II v in Hemachandra. The play is thus uprooted from its Mediterranean ambience. Rather incongruously however the word "duel" is retained. Though odd in

the changed social context this must have sounded a fashionable note to the English-educated Bengali middle and upper middle class readers; technical words relating to a duel e.g. 'passado' and 'punto reverso' are however omitted.

In this article I have endeavoured to point out the intercultural aspect of Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay's Indianized translation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Romeo & Juliet*. The texts become paradigms of the paradox that instead of deleting borders translation reinforces them. Though the borders are not impregnable, border crossing is done at the cost of losing some of the goods on the way, although compensatory material is also accessible.

NOTES

1. See also Sanatkumar Mitra's 'Shakespeare O Bangla Natak' (Mitra 1983).
2. The note may be translated thus: 'In the olden times there was among the common folk in England the belief that such a ring was drawn by fairies; and at night the fairies would assemble and dance within these rings Nobody would dare to touch the grass within the rings'.
3. Peary Chand Mitra's *Alaler Gharer Dulal* (pampered son of a front ranking family; 1855-57) is a work of fiction in the picaresque vein of didacticism and humour. Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutom Penchar Naksa* (Sketches by a watching owl, 1862) Sukumar Sen in *History of Bengali Literature*, Sahitya Akademi, 1960, rpt.1992, p.210 calls the latter "an enjoyable work, if one goes in for cheap and vulgar wit".
4. Tarja: popular folk song in the form of question and answer.
Kheure: obscene song; ribaldry.
Kobigan: light song in the form of questions and answers

5. The original Bengali reads: *Sekhankar babura aajkaal bhari hujuge hoye uthechhe; Ghora nach, bibir nach, bhut naban, sang nachan niye boroi sakharache hoye poreche --- kintu edike ekjan bhikiri ele ek mutho chal jote na. --- tolchauparigulo ekbare lop pabar jo hoeychhe, tobuo brahm;ian punditder ek poysha dite sahajya korlo na.*
6. Hemchandra's Bengali runs as follows: *Mahasay balyakal obdhi amar basana achhe je ami ekbar rajatya kori; kintu prachin desh matroi rajarajrader eto bhir je, tar bhitor matha gunje probesh korai bhar; tai chirokalta mone mone bhaktum je, ori modhe chhotokhato nirela desh pai to seikhane ekbar rajoty kore ni, ar kemon kore rajotto korte hoy ekbar dekhai. Ei Dwipti dekhchi, tar samyak upojukto shan. Eikhane katakguli projar basati karywe tader uttamroop taribat dite palle ekti ekti ashcharya janapad srishti hoy. Prachin deshnibasidiger je samasta kusangskar achhe, tar kichhumatro ekhane probesh katte di na. Amar thake na, dhon sampattite swattaswatter probhed thake na, she rajye bibahoroo kuprotha swechhadheen sokol streee sokol purusher ghogyo --- sokol pui sokol streeer karushmyo, abal btidhho banita sokolei chaushotti kolaye kathaye byutpanna, hingsha dwesh, bishad bisambad , juddha bigraha rajyamodhey ekebare bilupto hoy; protaronashunyo satyabadi janagan porohitayshi paropokari hoy; --- swatasidhha dharmajyotite sakolei nirudbeg shantochitto thake. Rog, shok, taap, chinta, daridra nirmool hoy ebang sukh swachhanda sarbatre birajito hoye preeti sampadan kore.*

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