



Rabindranath Tagore's Interpretation of Shakespeare: A Critical Revaluation

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Abstract:

British Bengal was a famous place for Shakespeare studies. But the Bengalis were interested mainly in enjoying the stage performances of dramas, both Bengali and English. It might be a result of the babu culture. The babus (Zamindars) patronized various dramas. As a result numerous theatre groups sprouted up in Kolkata. Prof. Darshan Chaudhury names at least 55 famous theatre groups in Kolkata, in his book *Bangla Theatarer Itihas (The History of Bengali Theatre)*. Among them a famous one was Jorasanko Theatre at the residence of Tagore who belonged to a Zamindar family. A number of members of Tagore's family, including Tagore himself, took part in the stage performances. So Tagore grew a fondness for drama from his childhood. Many Bengali authors attempted to translate/transcreate Shakespeare into Bangla. Tagore also, then a boy of 13 translated *Macbeth* in 1874(?) but only a few fragments of it are found, as evident in his comment, "Apart from this he (Jnanchandra Bhattacharya) used to tell me the Bengali meaning of a portion of *Macbeth* and to confine me into a room until I translated it into Bengali rhymes". Tagore probably left no branch of literature untroudden. But the identity of Tagore as a Shakespeare-critic is still in dark. The aim of this paper is to bring it to light. Almost all the comments Tagore made on Shakespeare were collected by the Bengali poet Mr. Purnendu Patri but they are yet to be revaluated from modern critical point of view. Tagore wrote not a single complete book or essay or an article or a chapter, save a sonnet, on Shakespeare, in particular. But very often he referred to Shakespeare in order to defend his own works. But probably this is the first attempt to give Tagore's fragmentary comments a theoretical framework and revaluate them from critical viewpoints. Now-a-days many critics deal with ecocriticism, a new born term; but some of Tagore's comments may be considered to be ecocriticism. The comments of Tagore are not found in a consolidated form but as fragments. In this paper the comments are categorized and revaluated from critical viewpoints i.e. eco-colonialism, subjectivity and realism. Research on colonialism in Shakespeare is nothing new; but Tagore dealt with colonialism in Shakespeare from environmental point of view. So it should better be termed 'eco-colonialism' which is shown in this paper. Although a much frequented area, Shakespeare and Rabindranath Tagore's popularity and contemporaneity still goes unabated. Needless to say, the whole world of literature knows Tagore as a litterateur; but another identity of Tagore, i.e. a Shakespeare-critic, is still in dark. The aim of this paper is to bring to light the hitherto unexplored identity of Tagore. The complete works of Tagore can provide us with an ample opportunity to have a preliminary idea of Tagore's Shakespeare-thoughts. Most of the comments Tagore made on Shakespeare were collected by the Bengali poet Mr. Purnendu Patri but they are yet to be revaluated critically. Tagore, who wrote not a single complete book or essay or an article or a chapter save a sonnet, on Shakespeare, in particular, was an important critic in British Bengal. Like Dr. Johnson, Tagore is neither a blind supporter nor a scurrilous opponent of Shakespeare: rather he is an impartial judge of the Bard. In Tagore's writings Shakespeare appears at various occasions, just as the name of Maharshi Valmiki does. Tagore never attempted to be a direct Shakespeare-critic but he again and again referred to Shakespeare, sometimes in order to defend his own points by citing instances from Shakespeare and, sometimes, in order to point out the limitations (in his opinion) in Shakespeare. Probably no other researcher before me attempted to give Tagore's fragmentary comments a theoretical framework and thereby revaluate them from any critical viewpoint. So the end of this paper is to do this.

Ecocolonialism

Like many other critics, Tagore finds the hints of colonialism in Shakespeare's plays; **but Tagore interprets the hints from a different point of view which we may consider to be 'ecocolonialism', a term which is a new born one and so was not used by Tagore. In Tagore's opinion colonialism is not merely the subordination of a nation by another but the subordination of Nature by human being also. He cites the instance of As You Like It where human beings conquer the Forest of Arden which is didactic but where there is no intimacy between Nature and man. Again in The Tempest Ariel and Caliban are the direct victims of colonialism, but Tagore does not consider them to be mere individuals but as the parts of nature and the subordination of Nature by man is perceptible in the play:**

Shakespeare's As You Like It is a play with a forest setting and so are The Tempest and A Midsummer Night's Dream. But there is no intimacy between human being and nature in this play. **But in these plays the dominance and sport of instinct of human being are the only thing; there is no assimilation of man's heart with the forest habitat. There is always the effort either to leave or conquer forest, either conflict or apathy or indifference. Human nature, by superseding universal nature and thereby individuating itself, has expressed its glory (Siksha:Tapoban).**

In this respect Tagore compares The Tempest with the great Indian text Sakuntala where, he says, there we find the love relationship between Nature and man; in The Tempest the colonial power exploits Nature but in Sakuntala there is a peaceful cohabitation:

In The Tempest there is torture, mastering and subjugation; in Sakuntala there is love, peace and friendly relationship. In The Tempest Nature, even assuming human shape, is not related to him in the bondage of love; in Sakuntala the animals and the trees, maintaining the self identity, have established a keen kinship with human being. (Prachin Sahitya: Sakuntala).

According to Tagore colonialism (dominance) can only gratify man's lust for power but his oppressive activities cannot bring him peace without which man's heart cannot be revealed. This is why Miranda's heart is not revealed until the love conversation between Miranda and Ferdinand starts. She also reveals her heart by expressing her sympathy for

the poor victims of the shipwreck in the tempest. Devoid of love and sympathy, the colonial power can neither feel one's heart's desire nor does he know to test true love; this is why Prospero tries to test Ferdinand's love **in a wrong way— compelling him to carry timber; but he cannot realize that it is merely an external test. Because of her lack of experience and intimacy with nature, Miranda's character could not flourish spontaneously whereas Sakuntala's character flourished through her guilt, sorrow, experience, perseverance, mercy and above all her intimacy with Nature. Tagore, here probably does not criticize Shakespeare's art of characterization but he wants to bring out Shakespeare's thoughts regarding the adverse effect of colonialism. Tagore also refers to Timon of Athens Winter's Tale and says that though they have forest settings, unlike Kalidasa, there is no friendly relationship between man and Nature. But Tagore seems to be self contradictory when he finds a similarity between Shakespeare and Kalidasa in a revolt against the artificial life in Timon of Athens:**

Strangely enough, in Shakespeare's dramas like those of Kalidasa, we find a secret vein of complaint against the artificial life of the king's court— **the life of ungrateful treachery and falsehood. And almost everywhere, in his dramas, forest scenes have been introduced in connection with some working of the life of unscrupulous ambition. It is perfectly obvious in Timon of Athens— but there Nature offers no message or balm to the injured soul of man. (Creative Unity/ The Religion of the Forest).**

In A Midsummer's Night's Dream also, according to Tagore, man cannot love Nature and man always tries to conquer Nature. Tagore's concern with subordination of nature is evident in his own writings also.

Dilemma On Subjectivity

Tagore also strives to trace out the psychological aspects in Shakespeare's dramas. He refutes the criticism that holds that Iago should have noble qualities. According to Tagore the theme of the play Othello is human psychology and he finds in the play an invisible Shakespeare who has disregards for Iago, pity for Othello and love for Desdemona. Here Tagore probably tries to point out the subjectivity mingled with psychology in the drama. But here Tagore's remarks seem to be self contradictory as what he says means that the author had no purpose of writing the play: "Questioned

about the purpose of the play Othello, Shakespeare would face difficulty. If he answered after much pondering, the answer would be wrong. (Ghare Baire: Grantha Parichay).

Tagore considers Iago to be the embodiment of ugliness self of human mind and he compares Iago with Manthara in the Ramayana and Sakuni in the Mahabharata. Regarding dramatic pleasure Tagore remarks that it is the common human psychology that nothing ugly gives us pleasure but in literature it does. Otherwise Othello would not be touched by any reader as there are ugliness like Iago and some unhappy things. Tagore again remarks that mercy and sense of beauty and love enable us to win others. We love to see, in drama, the unhappiness of others but cruelty distracts us. But it also should be kept in mind that in great poetry there remains sometimes something non-poetic which heightens the poetry in great work and, thereby, makes the work more attractive to human mind. So indirectly Tagore here appreciates Shakespeare's mingling of the beautiful and the ugly in Othello. Tagore attempts to evaluate Othello from different point of view. If we are the members of the Brahmin Sabha we will hold the view that the purpose of the play is to advice the world to maintain caste system. If we are against the emancipation of women we would hold that Shakespeare's purpose is to **advise the women not to see men other than husband**. If we are doubtful about the poet's intelligence or sense of religion we will say that he had chopped down the wife's constancy in love or cruelly ridiculed simplicity by making Iago's cunningness win. But **to say plainly, he wrote a play which reveals the poet's liking and disliking, even his place and time, but not as advice but as art.** (Ghare Baire: Grantha Parichay).

Tagore's remark is applicable to his own novel Home and the World also. The character of Bimala may be recollected in this regard. She ignored the swattik Nikhil at home and was hypnotized by the outward charm of the rajasik Sandip in the outer world and as a result she had to witness the tragic incidents like the death of her loving brother Amulya and the fatal injury of her husband Nikhil. So the adverse effect of the emancipation of the immature women is found in Tagore's writings also. Tagore is of the opinion that doubtful about the poet's sense of religion one would argue that Shakespeare had chopped down the wife's constancy in love or ridiculed simplicity by making Iago win. But Tagore again makes a self contradictory remark. He, at one place, says that Shakespeare had no purpose of revealing the above points but at another place he remarks:

In the play Othello a Muslim army commander murdered his wife out of undue suspicion. In Shakespeare's work there is an ugly hint that if there is a marriage between a Muslim and a Christian, the Muslim Husband's horrible behaviour is quite natural. On this allegation what punishment will the Muslim members of the education board fix? Engaged in communal riots we are beating one another, and will the literature begin to receive stroke at last? (Prabasi, Asharh, 1343 Beng., In Reply to Criticism in Monthly Mohammadi Patrika).

The argument that Shakespeare wrote the play without any purpose may somehow be accepted but the remark that Shakespeare had the intension to denounce the Muslims cannot be supported because in Othello in order to find out the cause of Desdemona's murder we hold Othello's jealousy responsible, and not his religion. Moreover, according to Tagore in the play The Merchant of Venice Shakespeare denounces the Christian fundamentalists. Naturally we may raise the question, how does the dramatist who may denounce the Christian fundamentalists, give the ugly hints against the Muslim Othello?

In reply to a question regarding the revelation of the author's self Tagore remarks that it is the aim of the living world to ensure the survival of self and the race. An author has the human nature in his inner self and another in the outer world. Due to the mixture of these two selves new subjects are born in literature. Then Tagore remarks that in Shakespeare's plays we find this mixture. Shakespeare's dramatis personae are like living beings as they are, thinks Tagore, animated in his own life and so in one respect Shakespeare's plays are subjective. He thinks that Shakespeare's plays sprang up from nursery rhymes and he could 'see' man and could easily give him a shape easily; this is why Shakespeare's characters are so living.

Tagore once again sounds self contradictory in judging Shakespeare's revelation of the self: he argues that Shakespeare is successful in portraying other people's heart in his dramas but unsuccessful in portraying his own heart in his lyric poetry: To reveal the self is not very easy. Shakespeare has become extra-ordinary by portraying others' hearts in visual poetry but was unable to progress in portraying his own self in lyric poetry. (Bhubanmohini Prativa, Abosar Sarojini O Duhkhasangini). It may be recalled that Tagore appreciated Shakespeare for his comingling of the inner and the outer selves in

his dramas. Moreover, in his lyric poetry (sonnets) also Shakespeare is successful in revelation of the self.

Realism

Tagore appreciates Shakespeare for portraying the reality in Macbeth: "If the witches felt hurt to see anybody's misery, it would be unnatural, although it is natural to human beings". (Criticism of Meghnathbadh Kavya). **Here Shakespeare has presented something as it is and not as it should be. Tagore opines that if the witches felt hurt to see anybody's misery, it would be unnatural though it is natural to human psychology. Tagore considers Lady Macbeth to be the symbol of sinful lust of human psychology (In letter to Andrews). He is against the Indian criticism originating out of the blind emotion in favour of motherhood:**

In our country I see a kind of literature analysis in which the value of this perceptibility is lessened on ground of various baseless reasons. Perhaps certain character specialist would say that Iago should have had noble qualities along with unnecessary jealousy; they say so because Kaikeyee and Lady Macbeth, Hirimba and Surpanakha are women, the race of motherhood and so to ascribe the stain of jealousy or ugliness on their characters is disrespectful. (Sahityer Pathe. Sahityatatwa).

As a reply to such criticism Tagore comments that Shakespeare was not Lady Macbeth; nor did he advocate in favour of her and this is why he could make her say, "Infirm of purpose ... are pictures". Then Tagore perhaps jokingly remarks:

Shakespeare might be advised, it is disrespectful and ill sounding to say that to wipe out a picture and to kill a person asleep is the same because in this deed there lies not only the sin of murder but cowardice also. This advice may be enlarged but I stop. Because the editor may of course say that which befits Shakespeare does not befit the poor sinner like Rabindranath. There is the probability of such remark; the article is the proof. (In reply to the criticism in monthly Mohammadi Patrika, Prabasi, Asharh, 1343 Beng).

Here Tagore refers to Shakespeare in his own defence and means to tell the truth that a character is the creation of the author, and not the revelation of the self of the author. Tagore considers the witches in Macbeth merely as personifications of Nature's malignant forces (Creative Unity: The Religion of the Forest) and not as the embodiment

of the hidden ambition in the subconscious mind of Macbeth. Had it been an article on Shakespeare, in particular it might give rise to a great critical controversy.

Regarding the presentation of reality Tagore sometimes appreciates Shakespeare as has been discussed above and sometimes criticized him. About Romeo and Juliet Tagore remarks that "to find an opportunity to express the intensity of instinct the European poets got excited. He remarks that when we see Romeo and Juliet in the world of literature we do not enquire of their bank balance or whether they are theists or atheists. Tagore considers them to be exaggerated creations but admits that they are exaggerations of truth. Tagore tries to find out the cause of the exaggeration; he says that as the heart's passion remains suppressed in the everyday behaviour of the Englishmen, it is so powerfully expressed in literature as in Romeo and Juliet and it is also an effect of Renaissance.

The world presented in Hamlet, thinks Tagore, is not beyond human knowledge. The picture in Hamlet is not of beauty but of truth. Tagore indirectly wants to say that Hamlet is not an artistic failure and in this respect it may be recalled that Prof. P.K. Guha also thinks Hamlet not to be an artistic failure, in his Two problems in Shakespeare: Hamlet and Troilus and Cressida (Dacca University Bulletin No. IX, 1926). Tagore again remarks that Hamlet is not meant for all.

An aspect of the presentation of reality is the presentation of eternity. Shakespeare's portrayal of Falstaff and Dogberry are eternal creations, thinks Tagore: "The value of A Midsummer Night's Dream may reduce but the influence of Falstaff will remain forever constant. (Sahityer Swarup. Sahityer Mulya)" He remarks that nobody can miss the world of eternal laughs and weeps that Shakespeare has created; one can forget a society novel tomorrow but not the world of Shakespeare.

A society novel will be proved useless tomorrow but not Shakespeare. So however variegated a society novel may be, however perfect the language and style of composition may be, it cannot be compared even to a bad Shakespearean play. What literary truth is will be clearly felt if it is ascertained why we consider the description of the rare, profound heart's emotion of everyday in Shakespeare truer than the accurate description of the everyday life in a society novel. (Sahitya: Patralap).

Regarding eternity Tagore says that if a character reveals the real human nature, his/her identity is not destroyed. So Tagore finds the skilful presentation of reality in Shakespeare's plays. Tagore also finds a figureless Shakespeare who glitters out the rays of philosophy of life for Falstaff who has friendship mingled with jokes and bears the hints of many people; thus Shakespeare incorporated many qualities in the character of Falstaff.

In order to defend one of his poems and to reply to a harsh criticism Tagore refers to Shakespeare and appreciates Shakespeare's presentation of reality in *The Merchant of Venice* in which Antonio calls Shylock 'dog'.

Probably the term (Javan) has become ill sounding in course of time. So usually in my own statement I never use the word. A few days ago a verdict came from the Muslim members of the syllabus modulation committee to delete the word. I got astonished. We, the weaker section thought, anywhere, except in our wretched country this nuisance could not be possible. In *The Merchant of Venice* the Christian (Antonio) addressed the Jew (Shylock) as dog again and again. In the whole book the disregard of the Christian towards the Jews is delineated. Otherwise the dramatic reality would be distorted. In spite of that when Lord Reading (Jew) was Viceroy did not circulate any verdict to withdraw the book from the school syllabus. Moreover, the sharp orator like Disraeli (Jew) kept silent regarding this matter till his death. But if the Bengali literature is tortured due to a small word uttered by a Maratha character, to whom will I appeal in this days of worry? (In reply to the criticism in monthly Mohammadi Patrika, Asharh, 1343 Beng.).

Tagore thinks that otherwise the reality would not be revealed. Here Tagore finds out the painful reality of racism in England—the hostile relationship between the Christians and the Jews. And it may be recalled that religious hostility was present in India in Tagore's time and Tagore's forefathers had to suffer from it as they were Pirali Brahmins and later on were converted to Brahma religion. It is evident in Thompson's book, *Rabindranath Tagore: Poet and Dramatist*:

Pirali Brahmin is any member of a sub grouping of Brahmins found throughout Bengal, which is split between India and Bangladesh. Notably, Rabindranath Tagore and the Tagore family are members of this group. The term "Pirali" historically carried a

stigmatized and pejorative connotation; its eponym is the vizier Mohammad Tahir Pir Ali, who served under a governor of Jessore. Pir Ali was a Brahmin Hindu who converted to Islam; his actions resulted in the additional conversion of two Brahmins brothers. As a result, orthodox Hindu society shunned the brothers' Hindu relatives (who had not converted),^[1] and the descendants of these Hindu relatives became known as the Pirali Brahmins — among whom numbered the Tagores.^[2] This unorthodox background ultimately led the Tagore family to dispense with many of the customs followed by orthodox Brahmins and subsequently they embraced the Brahmo sect of Hinduism.

The racism in *The Merchant of Venice* whose Indian counterpart may be casteism was pointed out by Mr. Kumudnath Das, another Shakespeare critic of Bengal in his *Scribblings in Shakespeare* which echoes the caste system in Hinduism. But Tagore disapproves of Shakespeare's use of too much passion and he remarks, **we have not got so much food from English literature as narcotics. (Jibansmriti) and To have a chance to express the intensity of instinct the European poets seem to be indomitable. They love to express hyperbolically how far instinct can go. Immense instances are found in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet. In Shakespeare's dramatic works there is not a single drama as quiet but grave, controlled but complete as Sakuntala.(Sakuntala: Prachin Sahitya). Here Tagore forgets the difference between Indian society and English society and attempts to evaluate from oriental point of view.**

Tagore appreciates Shakespeare's dramatic art and accepts Shakespearean dramas as **model for Bengali drama as he says in his introduction to his drama Malini. But the readers may** easily raise the question whether Tagore's own dramas are on Shakespearean model. Shakespeare's enormous variations and impulses have won Tagore's wholehearted admiration. In order to judge Shakespeare's history plays Tagore **says that in order to make poetry beautiful in all respects, history cannot be adopted undistorted and if the historical information were altered, the beauty of the poetry would be marred (Adhunik Sahitya).** Tagore is perhaps in favour of Shakespeare's escape from reality at certain occasions, especially when he beautifies his poetry with rhythm; rhythm in war and rhythm even in death which are found in Tagore's own dramas:

The war which I see in their dance is impossible in a warfront. But if, in heaven, there be such a rule that the war must be in rhythm and the war without rhythm will be considered to be defeated, their war would be like this. The people, who feel antipathy or consider it

funny to see the departure from the reality, should laugh to read Shakespeare because in Shakespeare there is rhythm in fight and also in death (The Eleventh Letter of the Java Passenger).

Tagore, in judging the artistic value of Othello remarks: To reveal beauty is not the end of literature but only a pretext. The picture in Hamlet is not that of beauty but of human. The picture of Othello is not beautiful but instinctive of man. (Sahitya: Patralap).

Tagore, in judging the artistic value of Othello remarks that it has greater value in the realm of art than the code of case regulations in Manu's scriptures of the law prohibiting the inhabitants of the one part of the world from receiving human treatment from other. For when facts are looked upon as mere facts having their consequences in the world of facts, they are rejected by art. So according to Tagore, the mere household event like the jealousy of a husband in Shakespeare is something more than a mere fact and this is why Othello as a work of art attracts us even today. Lastly, Tagore appreciates Shakespeare's art of 'copying' (plagiarism, in Tagore's words 'art of stealing'); but he argues that it is due to Shakespeare's sheer originality that he could make others' things his own and herein lies the contemporaneity of the bard.

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