

# Reshaping Canon:- William Shakespeare and The Bengali Theatre of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Calcutta

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**Abstract:** Bengali Theatre primarily refers to theatre performed in the Bengali Language. Bengali Theatre is produced mainly in West Bengal, and in Bangladesh. Bengali Theatre has its Origins in British Rule. It began as a Private Entertainment in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. But, William Shakespeare came in the Bengali Theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century through the hands of Girish Ghosh, a remarkable Personality in the Bengali Theatre. My Paper deals with “William Shakespeare and the Bengali Theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Calcutta”. The Central Arguments of My Dissertation includes three things:-

- The “Indianization” of William Shakespeare.
- William Shakespeare as a Heterogeneous One rather than being a Homogeneous One, and
- The Liberties that the Bengali Theatre have taken to adapt William Shakespeare in their own Language(Bengali).

**Keywords:** Bengali Theatre, Private Entertainment, Indianization, Heterogeneous.

## Contents

1. Introduction.
2. Objective, Methodology and Scope.
3. History of Bengali Theatre (Rimli Bhattacharya).
4. William Shakespeare in the history of Bengali Theatre.
5. Why Shakespeare was adapted in Bengali Theatre.
6. Forms of these various Bengali Theatric adaptations of William Shakespeare.
7. William Shakespeare and the Bengali Theatre:-
  - “Bhanumati Chittavilash”: “The Merchant of Venice”.
  - “Bhranti Bilas”: “The Comedy of Errors”.
8. Conclusion.
9. Bibliography.

## Introduction

Bengali Theatre primarily refers to the theatre performed in the Bengali Language. Bengali theatre is produced mainly in West Bengal, and in Bangladesh. The term may also refer to some Hindi theatres which are accepted by the Bengali people. Bengali theatre has its origins in British rule. It began as private entertainment in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In the pre-independence period, Bengali Theatres played a pivotal role in manifesting dislike of the British Raj. After the Independence of India in 1947, Leftist movements in West Bengal used theatre as a tool for Social Awareness. This added some unique characteristics to the art form that still have strong effects. These groups differentiate themselves ideologically from Commercial Bengali Theatre. The Notable Personalities in the Bengali Theatre include Ajitesh Bandopadhyay, Ashoke Mukhopadhyay, Bibhas Chakraborty, Utpal Dutt, Girish Chandra Ghosh and others.

**Objective:** This Paper deals with “William Shakespeare and the Bengali Theatre of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Calcutta” for which I have taken two remarkable plays by William Shakespeare- one is a tragedy i.e; “The Merchant of Venice” and the other is a comedy i.e; “The Comedy of Errors” and then I have analyzed the Bengali Theatric Adaptations of these two plays i.e; “Bhanumati Chittavilash” for “The Merchant of Venice” and “Bhranti Bilas” for “The Comedy of Errors”. The central argument of my thesis includes three things:-

1. The “Indianization” of William Shakespeare.
2. William Shakespeare as a heterogeneous one rather than being a homogeneous one and;

The liberties that the Bengali theatres have taken to adapt William Shakespeare in their own language(Bengali).

**Methodology:** The analysis is divided into four parts. The first part deals with the idea of Bengali Theatre and the history of Bengali theatre through the eyes of Rimli Bhattacharya. The second part deals with the reasons why William Shakespeare was adapted in the Bengali Theatre. The third part deals with the forms of these adaptations of Shakespeare in Bengali Language and the fourth part deals with the two Bengali theatric adaptations of Shakespeare’s “The Merchant of Venice” and “The Comedy of Errors”.

**Scope:** The adaptations of William Shakespeare in the Bengali Theatre gives us an idea about the “Indianization” of Shakespeare, how Shakespeare becomes a heterogeneous one and what are the eastern outlooks that has been put on William Shakespeare.

### **History of Bengali Theatre (Rimli Bhattacharya)**

The history of Bengali theatre is also a history of the Proscenium stage, the absence of the body and the presence of the intangible mind. Bengali theatre has tottered time and again not only for want of quality texts and favourable social conditions but for its addiction to a fixed idea- with occasional exceptions- of Public Performances which revolved around the Proscenium stage, and a vague mind unable to establish a direct communication between the people(the audience or reality) and the re-produced, made-up, make-believe, fake reality of the stage. Having seen the customs of the Colonizers and considering them ‘Progressive’ in character, the Colonized Mind immediately took to the ritual of ‘staging’ and the succeeding procedures. To the average educated Urban Bengali the proscenium stage became a fixed object of obsession around which their thoughts of performance evolved. That was why dramatic performance and proscenium staging became almost habitual and synonymous, at first, in the amateur of Private theatres and, subsequently, the public theatres of nineteenth-century Bengal. It was one of the many practices that the Bengali inherited from the British and painfully struggled to improve on.

Leaving aside productions by the English, only the rich and the influential Bengalis could organize and enjoy such costly theatrical events during the early Colonial period. Most of them were either Zamindars, Rajas or servants of high rank in the British employ. The ordinary people had no access to these private affairs when the Commercial public theatre was first established in Kolkata in 1872 all people were allowed to enter by buying tickets. Even though the ticketing system was as old as the first proscenium production in Bengali(1795), it was the commercial public theatre which opened its door to the previously debarred sections. Nevertheless, those who could not afford it still remained outside its gamut because the socio-economic conditions of Bengal as a whole could never support such a Bourgeois medium of popular culture. This is one of the important reasons why a small minority of contemporary theatre exponents in Kolkata still shies away from experimenting with Proscenium Theatre.

Instead, a very strong tradition of folk culture was at hand, though, unfortunately, this ‘de-myth-ic’ culture could not draw the attention of the educated, sophisticated city dwellers. Ironically, it is now appropriated to suit ‘our’ tastes whenever necessary, but historically, the folk traditions have always been of little importance to Urban Bengali theatre practices, which privileged the preferences of the upper and middle classes. Irrespective of such circumstances, it is noteworthy that the influence of Western theatre forced the early native entrepreneurs of theatre to explore the classical Sanskrit Literary Texts, symbolizing the monarchical and brahmanical hierarchy, for their source material. But contrary to the popular belief, neither the principles of Sanskrit plays nor the popular cultural practices had much influence on the formation and development of Modern Bengali Theatre.

It was rather a direct result of the British educational system and the new elements of the Proscenium stage, which later even penetrated the inner structure of native genres like Jatra and destroyed their individuality. As a matter of fact, the socio-cultural languages of the poor and common people had no place in the Coterie of an Opportunist class born out of Colonial Governance. In other words, the history of Urban Bengali Theatre is a history of exclusion(of a large section of the people) and disdain( for the indigenous popular culture) by the aristocracy and the impressionable Bourgeois Citizenry.

After a gap of forty-one years “Nabaprabandha”, a periodical, wrote under the title of “Natakabhinay”: “we request the managers that they build one theatre together, keep salaried actors and actresses and sell tickets which can be used to meet the expenses of acting and the surplus amount can help improve the quality of acting. Moreover in anticipation of money, the performers will also be able to entertain the audience by diligently acquired acting-skill”.

These editorial pieces were unequivocally concerned for “all classes of Society” on conditions of “Shares”, fixed “salaries”, and a particular “place of public entertainment”, but of course on the basis of a competitive market- all of which were considered noble whereas Jatravallas(the people associated with Jatra) were considered as ignoble tradesmen and filthy elements of society, even by someone of the stature of Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

The trajectory of the art of acting in Bengal before the English influence had developed chiefly around the popular religious beliefs and had little connection with “the courts of the Princes”. Rather, the mobility of itinerant players kept every kind of performance alive, be it the presentation of songs, lectures, stories or jatras. The reasons may be defined thus: a fixed place brings exclusivity into the economics of performance, which can be avoided by travelling from place to place; moreover it was the best possible means to divulge one’s ideas to the farthest corners at a time when there was no media.

### **William Shakespeare in the history of Bengali Theatre**

The reception of Shakespeare in India, here deep and pervasive, there scanty and sparing, is as complex and problematic as the story of the Western impact on Indian Literature itself. We do not know the precise number of translations of Shakespearean texts in different Indian Languages. On the evidence of available catalogues and accounts of the Western impact on Indian Literature, the number appears to be substantially large. These translations, which also include adaptations of various kinds, coincided with the growth of a new narrative and dramatic Literature in different Indian Languages. Some of them were inspired by the growth of a new theatre distinct from the performing traditions of Pre-Colonial India. To read a translation of an English text in Hindi or Bengali or Telugu was admission of one’s inferior status. Even today an English translation of a French or German works is considered more respectable than its translation in an Indian Language. One must understand this cultural context to appreciate the complexities of Shakespeare translations in Indian Languages. The most influential section of the Indian Literary Community, unlike, say the Japanese did not require translations of Shakespeare- they enjoyed Shakespeare in the original both in the classroom which was the major channel of Propagation of Shakespearean texts, and on the stage, howsoever limited its sphere of influence.

What then were the motivations of translating Shakespeare into Indian Languages? The primary motivation was to present to Indian readers who were not proficient in English Specimens of English Literature that had already been accepted by English-educated Indians as models of the highest literary excellence. These translations were as much an exercise to introduce foreign literary models to general Indian readers as to bridge the increasing gap within the Indian Literary community. The Indian translations of Shakespeare, as indeed the translations of various other English works, were designed to supplement the exercises initiated by creative writers in Indian Languages themselves. These translations present two facets of the modernization of Indian Literatures, that were more or less identical with Westernization:- Literary and Social.

Michael Madhusudan Dutta, one of the first modern playwrights of India, took Shakespeare as his model, and his friends invariably applied Canons of Shakespearean plays in judging the newly emerging dramatic Literature. He defended the “foreign air” about his first play “Sharmistha”(1858) and wrote significantly in a letter to one of his friends, “I am writing for that portion of my Countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with Western ideas and modes of thinking; and it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration for everything Sanskrit”. In a society where marriage is strictly utilitarian and arranged by the guardians, where premarital Love is almost an impossibility, “Romeo and Juliet” could be seen as a serious threat to social norms. The distinguished Bengali Poet Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, in his translation of “Romeo and Juliet”, omits the line “I will kiss thy lips”(5.3.164; refers to act, scene, line) but retains the next lines:-

Haply some poison yet doth hang on them

To make me die with a restorative. (5.3.165-66)

An expression like “I will kiss thy lips” was not unusual in non-dramatic Literatures, but it was extremely offensive in plays intended to be staged. To translate or not to translate such “foreign” texts, therefore, was not an innocent literary question; it was a political act in a deeper sense, a choice between defending the social codes and challenging them. Haran Chandra Rakshit(1864-1926) had “translated” Shakespeare into Bengali prose in twelve volumes(1896-1903). He wrote: “Mahavir sei apurva natakavilir marmanuvad ami upanyasakare grahita kariyachi” (I have summarized the wonderful plays of that great poet in the form of a Novel).

The first Bengali translation of Shakespeare, “Bhanumati Chittavilash”(1853), a translation of “The Merchant of Venice” by Hara Chandra Ghose(1817-84), is yet another example of the move toward Indianization. Not only did he Indianize the names of the dramatis personae, but he also changed the story by adding new materials. In the English Preface to this translation, Ghosh wrote that he had written 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....”

The first Shakespearean play to be staged in India in an Indian Language is “The Taming of the Shrew”. It was staged in Surat in November 1852: the text was in Gujarati entitled “Nathari Firangij Thekani Avi” (A Bad Firangi (European) woman brought to sense). The titles of the Kannada translations- Chandi Mardan Natakam (1910, by K.Laxamana Rao) and Tratika Natak (1920, by H.H.Gadigeyya)- and of the Bengali Translation, “Chamundar Shiksha” (1915, by Nagendra Nath Ray Chaudhuri) indicate how desperately Indian Translators had been looking for the equivalents of the “Shrew”.

Indianization of Shakespeare followed different strategies. One was to recast the dramatic form into narrative and to assign it to a new and Pseudo-Sanskritic subgenre. Vidyasagar’s translation of “The Comedy of Errors”(1869) with the title “Bhrantivilas” is a fine example. He took every care in changing the title of the play, names of people and places, eliminated all traces of foreignness, and substituted all references to Western Customs and Social behavior by appropriate cultural equivalents.

The most popular plays, if frequency of translation can be taken as a criterion of Shakespeare among the Indians are “The Merchant of Venice” (translated more than fifty times) and “The Comedy of Errors” (translated nearly thirty times in different languages). “The Comedy of Errors” had great success on the screen as well. Among the tragedies, the most frequently translated (and staged) are “Othello”, “Romeo and Juliet”, “Macbeth”, “Julius Caesar”, and also “Hamlet” (this has been translated fifty times). One of the main reasons for the popularity of Shakespeare in India is the story, the ingenuity of the plot. The first Bengali translation of Shakespeare, to which I have referred earlier, changed the play considerably, retaining only the main plot highlighting Portia’s cleverness in outwitting Shylock.

### **Why William Shakespeare was adapted in Bengali Theatre?**

When Queen Elizabeth granted a company of English merchants the right to trade in India on the last day of 1600 Shakespeare was thirty-six years old and had written twenty-three plays, including “Romeo and Juliet”, “The Merchant of Venice”, “Julius Caesar” and “Hamlet”. The Indian reader did not know these plays till at least two centuries after this event. But even if the ship of Captain William Hawkins had brought some works of Shakespeare to the court of Jahangir in 1609 it seems extremely unlikely that the Indian mind steeped in the Bhakti Literature of the age of Tulsidas would have found them very edifying. Obviously neither Captain Hawkins nor Sir Thomas Roe, who was James I’s ambassador to Jahangir’s court in 1615 would even incidentally talk about English Poetry to their Royal Listener. Their strong commercial instincts would disallow such digression. But let us imagine they had fine literary instincts too, and that both Sir Thomas and his chaplain Edward Terry loved to speak to the elite of Surat about the plays shown at the Globe and the Blackfriars and gave them lessons in English to make them see their excellence. When Jahangir showed favors to the Portuguese Jesuits the greatest poem in their language, “The Lusians”, was more than thirty years old, and we can be certain that there was no interest in Camoens in the Mogul court. The Emperor was pleased to see a Persian Version of the Gospels but there was none to think of a Persian Version of the Portuguese epic. In fact, the Indian mind did not respond inquisitively, far less creatively, to Western Literature till the middle of the nineteenth century. Dion Chrysostom of the late first and early second century says that the Indians sang the poetry of Homer and translate it into their own language and we must value the statement as the fancy of a great lover of Greek Poetry. This is important in a study of

Shakespeare's influence on modern Indian Drama because the Psychology which delayed that influence and made it weak when it came is the Psychology which prevented Greek influence on Sanskrit Drama.

The Brahmanical Universe of the Sanskrit dramatist was a good Universe and its men and women did not need the solace of a tragic tear. And they did not need the comic wrath of an Aristophanes either. That the ancient Hindus did not produce an "Antigone" or an "Acharnians" is not primarily a failure of dramatic genius: it is the consequence of their tremendous success in Philosophy. The Hebrews were too pious to write tragedy, the Hindus were too wise to need it.

In Bengal, however, study of English Literature should have begun early in the eighteenth century. The city of Calcutta was founded by Job Charnock in August 1690. The English established their factories, built their fort and became a community with habits and tastes of its own. And the community was not altogether indifferent to Literature. It appears from the "Diary" of Sir William Hedges, covering the period between 1681 and 1687, that the English settlers on the Hugli had literary interests even before the foundation of the city. They read the "Eikon Basilike" or the "Religio Medici" and their letters home were full of "Latin saws and elaborate compliments and invocations for Heliconian irrigation". But they did not have literary clubs and although many of them had Indian wives they took no interest in the Literature of the land. Nor did they think of acquainting the Bengalis with their Language and Literature. This lack of literary initiative seems strange when amongst the elite of the English Community in Calcutta in the early years of the eighteenth century were men like John Russell, a grandson of Oliver Cromwell.

Later in the century English officials and English missionaries began to take great interest in the Bengali Language, but their efforts were mainly in the field of Grammar and Lexicography and they did not think of presenting their own Literature to the Bengali reader. The missionaries produced Bengali Versions of the Bible and the official produced Bengali Versions of the rules and regulations of the East India Company. None thought of translating Shakespeare or Bacon. The Enlightened Bengali of the age of Bharatchandra and Ramaprasad was not acquainted with the work of Pope, Dr. Johnson or Goldsmith. If they had been, the response of the Bengali mind to English Literature in the middle of the following century would have been still deeper and more creative. We can, however, imagine that the kind of people who mixed with the Englishmen in Calcutta had very little of literary enthusiasm and there was no scope for a literary conversation in their business transactions. About the time of the Battle of Plassey the Englishmen in Calcutta achieved a public theatre and this is important in the history of our interest in Shakespeare, for when the Bengalis first thought of producing a Shakespeare play on the stage the incentive came from the local European theatre. In the Seventies of the Century the English residents of Calcutta built a new theatre by subscription and amongst the subscribers were Warren Hastings and his Colleagues on the Supreme Court Bench. That Calcutta had a theatre before it had a church speaks of the intellectual temper of the Englishmen who took charge of the affairs of the East India Company in Bengal after the Passing of North's Regulating Act.

It is, therefore, not particularly strange that in the travel diary of the first Bengali to visit England there is no mention of Shakespeare in the chapter on theatre, circus and magic. When Kazi Ehteshamuddin visited England in 1767, Dr. Johnson's edition of Shakespeare was only two years old and David Garrick was still acting at Drury. But the Bengali visitor does not even incidentally speak of Shakespeare in his few paragraphs on the English stage.

But there was a great change in the intellectual temper of Bengal at the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. The increasing volume of trade in Calcutta created a middle class who felt the need for some knowledge of the English Language. The Fort William College founded in 1800 for the education of the British administrators brought the Bengali Pundits in closer contact with the speakers of Shakespeare's Language and although they did not make any contribution to the study of English Literature their Institution made many realize that there was a Literature other than their own. They began to read that Literature when the Hindu College was established in 1817. We can assume that between this date and 1835 when Bentinck signed Macaulay's Minute on English Education there was a small class of readers in Calcutta who were acquainted with the works of Shakespeare. Two teachers of the Hindu College created great enthusiasm for English Literature amongst their students. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio(1809-1831) was a rationalist and an inspiring teacher and his pupils came to be known as Derozians for their excessive love of everything Western. They were the products of an enlightened reaction against the intellectual conservatism of the Bengali society and they did not conceal their indifference to their own literary traditions.

The first Bengali translation of a Shakespearean play was equally poor. The work, Harachandra Ghosh's "Bhanumati Chittavilash", a version of "The Merchant of Venice" published in 1853, was intended to be textbook and the author's other Shakespeare play, "Charumukha Chittahara-Natak", a translation of "Romeo and Juliet" published in 1864, was intended for the stage. Both are poor, though they are historically important as early manifestations of our interest in Shakespeare. Amongst other translations and adaptations of Shakespeare's plays are Satyendranath Tagore's "Sushila Virshingha Natak"(1867, "Romeo and Juliet"), Benimadhab Ghosh's "Bhramakautuk"(1873, "The Comedy of Errors"), Tarinicharan Pal's "Bhimshingha"(1874, "Othello"), Haralal Ray's "Rudrapal" (1874, "Hamlet") and Hemchandra Banerjee's "Nalinivasanta"(1888, "The Tempest") and "Romeo and Juliet"(1895). Of these the first three that is the translations of "The Comedy Of Errors", "Othello" and "Hamlet" were staged. At the turn of the century Girish Chandra Ghosh, the popular Bengali Playwright translated "Macbeth", but although it was staged at the Minerva it never became an important item in that theatre's repertoire. On the whole, our translations of Shakespeare's plays are not a part of our finest dramatic Literature and they have never been a popular feature of our public stage. The meaning of the word "Theatre" is very wide indeed and in that wide sense "Theatre" existed before a simple play was written down.... The Theatre is simply the "acting out" something; it does not even need a special building and stage for it can take place in a threshing circle, in a street or on any piece of ground. It will, no doubt, sound like a paradox that though the theatre is very old in India, the modern theatre in Bengal is largely a gift from England in particular, Shakespeare's. That theatre, in its restricted sense, had a promising beginning and a rich development in India, is well corroborated by the old texts of Bharata's "Natyasastra" which describe the three types of Natyagriha or play-house, with the stage or acting platform and its subdivisions such as Rangapitha, Rangasirsa and Mattavarani, the Nepathyagriha or the Green-room, and the gallery system of seat-arrangement for the spectators and of the ten types of Rupakas or dramas.

While the English play-houses by their production of English, specially Shakespeare's, plays created an appetite for theatrical performances, the foundation of the Hindu College in 1816 and the teaching of Shakespeare by eminent teachers like Richardson created in the minds of the students- the intelligentsia of modern Bengal- a literary taste for drama as such, and taught them, not only how to appreciate Shakespeare critically, but also to recite and act scenes from his plays. This fashion spread to every academic institution. In 1837, Bengali students staged the court scene from "The Merchant of Venice" in the Governor's House, in 1852 and 1853 the students of the Metropolitan Academy and David Hare Academy staged Shakespeare's plays, while the old and new students of the Oriental Academy staged in the Oriental Theatre Shakespeare's "Othello" in 1853, "The Merchant of Venice" in 1854 and "Henry iv" in 1855. So, it came about that recitations from Shakespeare and production of Shakespeare's dramas became an indispensable part of English Education and a popular item in all Cultural functions. The Bengali Theatre which made its mark in the later decades of the century was the natural outcome of this new-found passion. So, we may safely conclude that the teaching and production of Shakespeare's plays was the main source of inspiration in the origin of the modern Bengali Theatre.

### **Forms of Various Bengali Theatric adaptations of William Shakespeare**

Though Shakespeare inspired the Bengali Theatre, it is not true that it opened its doors with Shakespeare's plays. The Bengali stage presented Bengali dramas with Indian themes and plots though Shakespeare's plays exerted a constant influence. Most of these plays have been translated or adapted for the Bengali Language and a good many have been produced on the public stage. On 31<sup>st</sup> October 1874, "Rudrapal" an adaptation of "Macbeth" by Haralal Roy, was produced in the Great National Theatre; "Othello" in translation on 27<sup>th</sup> February 1875, in the Bengali Theatre; on 28<sup>th</sup> February 1893, a translation of "Macbeth" by the famous actor-playwright Girish Chandra Ghosh in the Minerva Theatre; on 21<sup>st</sup> June 1897, "Hariraja", an adaptation of "Hamlet", by Nagendra Chaudhury in the Classic Theatre; on 5<sup>th</sup> September 1914, "Cleopatra", a translation of "Antony and Cleopatra" by Pramatha Nath Bhattacharya in the Minerva Theatre; on 4<sup>th</sup> December 1915, "Saudagar", an adaptation of "The Merchant of Venice" by Bhupendra Bandyopadhyaya in the Star Theatre; on 18<sup>th</sup> March 1919, "Othello" translated by Debendra Nath Basu in the Minerva Theatre; and on 19<sup>th</sup> June 1920 "Kuhaki", an adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" by Debendra Nath Basu, in the Star Theatre.

Shakespeare's influence is not to be measured by the number of productions of his translated and adapted plays on the Bengali stage. His influence went much deeper, and it would be no exaggeration to say that the budding playwrights and critics of nascent Bengal had their initiation in dramaturgy from Shakespeare. Shakespeare's influence on the plot-structure of Bengali drama is palpable. Though the Vritta(plot) of Sanskrit drama is basically romantic in structure, and Sanskrit dramaturgy sanctions double threads of plot- one Adhikarika(Main Plot) and the other Prasangika(Subplot) as well as a comparatively free use of time and place, it cannot be said that the present romantic structure of Bengali drama descended from the structure of Sanskrit drama. We find that the "Action" in Sanskrit drama has, generally been divided into five or more or less Ankas(Acts) with no subdivisions or scenes within the Ankas. The structure of Bengali Drama resembles more the Shakespearean plays than the Sanskrit Drama and this was due to Shakespeare's influence.

As the teaching of Shakespeare in Colleges and Academies influenced and shaped the criteria of criticism, so the performances of Shakespeare's plays by the English Theatrical Groups of Calcutta set the standard of Acting. We find that Keshab Gangooly whom Michael Madhusudan Dutt called "the Avatar of Roman Roscius and English Garrick" as well as Priyanath Datta, Radhadas Basak and others- the future directors of the Belgachiya Theatre and the Theatre at the Villa of Joyram Basak- had their training in acting in the production of Shakespeare's plays in the Oriental Academy. The influence of Shakespeare's plays on the development of drama and stage-craft in Modern Bengal is thus both significant and considerable.

### **William Shakespeare and the Bengali Theatre**

#### **"Bhanumati Chittavilash" : "The Merchant of Venice"**

"The Merchant of Venice" is a 16<sup>th</sup> Century play by William Shakespeare in which a Merchant in Venice must default on a large loan provided by an abused Jewish Moneylender. It is believed to have been written between 1596 and 1599. Bassanio, a young Venetian of noble rank, wishes to woo the beautiful and wealthy heiress, Portia of Belmont. Bassanio, approaches his friend Antonio, a wealthy merchant of Venice because he has lost his estate and is in need of 3000 ducats. Being a cash-poor, Antonio asks Bassanio to find a lender for him, so Bassanio turns to the Jewish moneylender Shylock and names Antonio as the loan's Guarantor. Shylock at first being reluctant to grant the loan to Antonio, citing abuse he has suffered at Antonio's hand; finally agrees to lend the sum to Bassanio without interest upon one condition: If Bassanio is unable to repay it at the specified, Shylock may take a pound of Antonio's flesh. There arrive Gratiano, a likeable young man and the two leaves for Belmont with money at hand. In Belmont, Portia is awash with suitors. Her father left a will stipulating each of her suitors must choose correctly from one of three caskets- one each of Gold, Silver and Lead. If he picks the right casket, he gets Portia. Many suitors such as Prince of Morocco, Prince of Arragon and others leave empty-handed, having rejected the Lead Casket because of the baseness of its material and the uninviting nature of its slogan, "who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath". The last suitor, Bassanio chooses the Lead Casket and wins Portia's hand. Meanwhile, Antonio's ships are reported to lost at Sea which make Shylock enraged more with revenge. At Belmont, Bassanio receives a letter telling him that Antonio has been unable to repay the loan from Shylock. Portia and Bassanio marry and Bassanio and Gratiano leave for Venice with money from Portia to save Antonio's life. The Climax of the play takes place in the court of the Duke of Venice. Shylock refuses Bassanio's offer and demands Antonio's pound of flesh. Portia and Nerissa, arrives in disguise of Men and asks Shylock to show mercy, advising him that mercy "is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes"; but Shylock still insists on the pound of flesh. Meanwhile, Portia allows Shylock to remove the flesh but only on one condition: she says that the contract allows Shylock only to remove the flesh, not the "Blood" of Antonio. Thus, if Shylock were to shed any drop of Antonio's blood his "lands and goods" would be

forfeited under Venetian Laws. She tells him that he must cut precisely one pound of flesh, no more, no less; she advises him that "if the scale do turn, But in the estimation of a hair, Thou diest and all thy goods are confiscate". Thus, in this way Portia saves Antonio from Shylock and the play ends happily thereafter.

In the 1852 Bangla adaptation of "The Merchant of Venice" by Hara Chandra Ghosh the centre of the play shifted from Antonio to Bhanumati, the Bengali Counterpart of Portia, the play becoming a Romantic drama between Bhanumati and Chittavilash(Bassanio). Belmont and Venice becomes Ujjain and Gujarat respectively, and in place of Nerissa we have Sulocana and Sushila, the two attendants of Bhanumati. Merchant has been hugely popular globally since the mid-nineteenth century, notably in places where the Jewish population has traditionally been small-implying that a Judaeo-Christian framework is not the only way of understanding the play. Adapted in the 1860's as a Bengali drama called "Bhanumati Chittavilasha" by the writer Hara Chandra Ghosh, it was the first Shakespearean text to be remade in an Indian Language, and sparked a run of localized versions that continued into the 1910's, many of them written for the popular theatres of Mumbai. The staging of Shakespeare in English and Bangla by both amateurs and professionals remains an active and vigorous tradition up to this day. Ghosh took many liberties in translation so that it was more an adaptation. The first Bengali translation and adaptation (1853) of "The Merchant of Venice", entitled "Bhanumati Chittavilash", was described as "Shakespeare's ideas, but given in a Bengali dress". Ghosh changed the entire Shakespearean play and give it a new form. The set or the stage has been given a Bengali outlook where Ghosh sets the "Nartak-Nartaki"; the so called "Babu" or the "Bhadrolok" of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The play describes the two lovers "Bhanumati" and "Chittavilash" who live in the small town of Ujjain. Here, however Ghosh changed the entire Western formats. Bhanumati's mother "Chitra" does not want her daughter to get married with "Chittavilash"; so she fixes her own brother "Nabanendu" to kill her own daughter's lover "Chittavilash". Somehow, "Bhanumati" came to know about all these and saves "Chittavilash" by travelling to Gujarat in disguise and getting married there. The role of Antonio has been played by Dinabandhu Guha and he acts as a former catalyst in the play. Dinabandhu Guha as "Antonio" gives "Bhanumati" and "Chittavilash"; a shelter in Gujarat. Nabanendu came to know about all these things and plots Guha's Life Imprisonment for giving shelter to a "Beshya" i.e; "Prostitute" in his own house being an upper class Brahmin. Now, here Ghosh changed the entire Portia-Antonio's plot. In Shakespearean edition; Portia in disguise saved Antonio from the hands of Shylock, but here Krishnakanta(as Antonio) saves himself by giving Nabanendu a multiple terms i.e; 1.His lands and properties(which belongs to Bhanumati's mother) will be confiscated as it was not his own, 2.He had illegally seized all Chitra's(i.e; Bhanumati's mother) property, 3.Being an Upper class Brahmin how he can confiscate his own sister's property who is a "Beshya"(Prostitute) and, 4.Bhanumati and Chittavilash has married each other, and after that Nabanendu can't apply his own force on the married couple, it is not applicable at that time. The play ends happily with the two lovers getting United together and all of Nabanendu's property has been taken away from him and has been returned back to "Chitra" i.e; Bhanumati's mother. The play protests against the general discriminations given to the "Beshyas" i.e; "Prostitutes" in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal. The play ends with the line:- "Bhalobasha sudhu Bhadrlokero noy, Chottolokero, Bhalobasha Mangshomojjar noy, Hridoyero"(Love is not only for the Civilized people, it is also for the Uncivilized; Love is not only for flesh, it is also of two hearts (Hridoy)). Poromesh Acharya, a prominent Bengali scholar says that "The play gives a clear picture of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengali "Bhadralok" and the "Beshyas" (i.e; Prostitutes) who are still struggling for their own self-recognition in this so called privileged society". Acharya says; "Ami Natoker Moner katha jani. Bhadrlokera namei Bhadra, kaje toh noy"(I know the play's inner meaning. The so called "Gentleman" of Bengal are gentle only in their name, not in their work). Development in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal generally took place because of the so called "Colonialism" in Bengal which gives rise to the large number of "Bhadraloks" or "Educated Gentleman" in the Bengali Society. Jalshas were severely held at that time. "Nachnewali"(Dancing Girl) who were given a huge sum of money to dance on this "Jalshas" have to spend a night with this so called "Babus" present in the Jalshas. "Bhanumati Chittavilash" present this so called vivid picture of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial Bengal. The famous line in Shakespearean version; "Mercy is twice blest: It blesseth him that gives and him that takes" changes to "Karuna Dwigun kaaj kore: Kaoke Toirio kore; abar kaoke Dhongsho o kore"(Mercy has a double sided impact on a person: it creates as well as destroy that person). The speech has been uttered by Dinabandhu(Antonio) in "Bhanumati Chittavilash" instead of Portia in "The Merchant of Venice". Another Famous Speech:- "All that glisters is not gold;

Often have you heard that told:  
Many a man his life hath sold  
But my outside to behold:  
Gilded tombs do worms enfold".

Changes to:-

"Jaha kichu chomok dilei  
Sona hoy nah. Bhadrlokera  
Chomkay, kintu tader  
"Hridoy" sonar noy".(All that glitters is not "Gold"; the so called

"Bhadralok" also shines; but their hearts doesn't "shine" like gold).

To conclude, we can say that Hara Chandra Ghosh's "Bhanumati Chittavilash"(an adaptation of William Shakespeare's "The Merchant of Venice") encrypted or satirizes the so called "Privileged Bhadrlok"(Upper Class) of the Bengali Society and also provides a space for the Prostitutes(Beshyas) present in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Bengal. The play "Bhanumati Chittavilash" as said by Girish Chandra Ghosh is "Shakespeare's ideas in a Bengali Dress".

### **"Bhranti Bilas" : "The Comedy of Errors"**

Egeon, a merchant of Syracuse, is condemned to death in Ephesus for violating the ban against travel between the two rival cities. As he is led to his execution, he tells the Ephesian Duke, Solinus, that he has come to Syracuse in search of his wife and one of his twin sons, who were separated from him 25 years ago in a shipwreck. The other twin, who grew up with Egeon, is also travelling the World in search of the missing half of their family. (The twins, we learn are identical, and each has an identical twin

slave named Dromio). The Duke is so moved by this story that he grants Egeon a day to raise the thousand-mark ransom that would be necessary to save his life.

Meanwhile, unknown to Egeon, his son Antipholus of Syracuse (and Antipholus' slave Dromio) is also visiting Ephesus - where Antipholus' missing twin, known as Antipholus of Ephesus, is a prosperous citizen of the city. Adriana, Antipholus of Ephesus' wife, mistakes Antipholus of Syracuse for her husband and drags him home for dinner, leaving Dromio of Syracuse to stand guard at the door and admit no one shortly thereafter, Antipholus of Ephesus (with his slave Dromio of Ephesus) returns home and is refused entry to his own house. Meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse has fallen in love with Luciana, Adriana's sister, who is appalled at the behavior of the man she thinks is her brother-in-law.

The confusion increases when a gold chain ordered by the Ephesian Antipholus is given to Antipholus of Syracuse. Antipholus of Ephesus refuses to pay for the chain (unsurprisingly, since he never received it) and is arrested for debt. His wife, seeing his strange behavior, decides he has gone mad and orders him bound and held in a Cellar Room. Meanwhile, Antipholus of Syracuse and his slave decide to flee the city, which they believe to be enchanted as soon as possible only to be menaced by Adriana and the debt officer. They seek refuge in a nearby Abbey.

Adriana now begs the duke to intervene and remove her "husband" from the abbey into her custody. Her real husband, meanwhile, has broken loose and now comes to the Duke and levels charges against his wife. The situation is finally resolved by the Abbess Emilia, who brings out the set of twins and reveals herself to be Egeon's long-lost wife. Antipholus of Ephesus reconciles with Adriana; Egeon is pardoned by the Duke and reunited with his spouse; Antipholus of Syracuse resumes his romantic pursuit of Luciana, and all ends happily with the two Dromios embracing.

"Bhranti Bilas" (Illusion of Illusion) is a 1963 Bengali film based on the 1869 play "Bhranti Bilas" by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, which is itself based on William Shakespeare's "The Comedy Of Errors". In 1968, the film was remade as a Bollywood musical named "Do Dooni Char" and remade again in 1982 as "Angoor". Although the original play was set in an unspecified, but distant past, the film relocates the story to Modern Day India. The film tells the story of Bengali Merchant from Kolkata and his servant who visit a small town for a business appointment, but, whilst there, are mistaken for a pair of Locals, leading to much confusion. "Bhrantibilas" (1963) was based on Vidyasagar's prose narrative adaptation of Shakespeare's play. With the exception of the framing story of Aegeon and Emilia, the film is nonetheless, an exact rendering of "The Comedy of Errors" with various key points such as the argument over a Necklace, the Lock Out scene, the Pinch episode and the recognition scene faithfully recreated. Even the plot material that Shakespeare had borrowed from Plautus' "Amphitryon" where Alcmena is seduced by Jupiter, the king of Gods in Roman Mythology, who takes the form of her husband Amphitryon has been paralleled in the legend of Ahalya, wife of the sage Gautama Maharishi, who is seduced by Indra, the king of Gods in Hindu Mythology. This legend is retold in the film at a fair through a puppet show just before Bilas/Luciana finds the wrong Chiro/Antipholus at the fair and takes him home to her sister who also mistakes him for her husband.

The reception of Shakespeare within Bengali Literary Culture arguably evidenced a greater commitment to Shakespeare's Literary Authority than the tradition of Parsi Theatre. Vidyasagar's prose adaptation Indianizes the characters and locale and turns Shakespeare's drama into a story, but otherwise it is quite faithful to the Original. "Bhranti Bilash" explicitly alludes to its source in Vidyasagar with a literary text that introduces the film, accompanied by a picture of Vidyasagar and Ramakrishna, the Guru with whom he came to be associated. This acknowledgement suggests, indeed performs, the direct transmission of literary authority to the cinema. Just as the earlier adaptation of Shakespeare was crucial in supporting the emergence of Bengali Literary Culture during the Bengali Renaissance, so the invocation of a Literary Pedigree in Bengali Cinema sought to elevate its status against the "Popular Cinema" emerging from Bombay and elsewhere. However, as a cinematic adaptation, "Bhranti Bilash" departs from Vidyasagar's story in two significant ways. First, the Realist Aesthetic of Bengali Cinema shapes both the dramatization and narration of "Bhranti Bilash" with the film's setting becoming a contemporary one. Second, influenced by the Idioms of Indian Folk Theatre transferred into popular Indian Cinema, "Bhranti Bilash" features a Love Story expressed through song and dance or Choreographed movement.

Vidyasagar's text finely deals with the plot keeping it almost the same but transforms its dramatic form into a story. Interestingly, this text was further adapted into a Commercial film in 1963 directed by Manu Sen thus justifying the Bengali fascination for Shakespeare over the centuries. The plot of "The Comedy of Errors" had been craftily adapted by Shakespeare himself from the Latin Comic Master Plautus. Ishwarchandra had however followed the plot composed by Shakespeare and other than the generic, dialogic and Socio-Cultural transformations did not make any serious alterations. As a direct result of such a complex characterization and plot, the play gives rise to a series of confusions thoroughly contributing to its comic essence. Ishwarchandra's selection of this particular Shakespearean text was probably due to the same reason. The comic essence had appealed to his literary sense strongly enough to provoke him to make a cross generic adaptation of it. Translation ventures gives in to the claim that a lot is lost in the process of translating but Ishwarchandra does by no means attempt to go for a direct translation but advances towards a new venture of positing the text in a different cultural range altogether.

More than a work of translation "Bhrantibilash" is a free adaptation of "The Comedy of Errors". While the former is a prose narrative, the latter is well recognized as a comic play. What Vidyasagar does not reveal is his sincere intention to avoid the exposure of the fact that in his attempt of Indianization he had very smoothly rejected the English essence other than the structure and genre he spoke about. While the twin brothers Antipholus of Ephesus and Antipholus of Syracuse, sons of Egeon and Emilia becomes Chiranjib of Hemkuta and Chiranjib of Jayasthala, sons of Somdatta and the Priestess Labanyamoyee, Dromio of Syracuse and Dromio of Ephesus becomes Kinkar of Jayasthala and Kinkar of Hemkuta serving their respective masters Adriana and Luciana is transformed into Chandraprabha and Bilashini. Other than the Geographical Setting and in digenous construction of characters, certain other minor differences can also be located. However, if those differences are intentional or accidental is of course debatable. For instance, on entering the forbidden land of Ephesus, Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus penalizes Egeon to pay one thousand marks, where as all he can barely afford is a hundred marks, "A thousand marks be levied,

To quit the penalty and to ransom him.  
The substance, valued at the highest rate,  
Cannot amount unto a hundred marks”.

On the other hand in “Bhrantibilash”, Somdatta is asked to pay five thousand rupees and two hundred is all that he had. The Value of the amounts clearly shows disparity hinting at the economic differences that probably existed between the two Countries. Similarly, Shakespeare had been satisfied with a single mast, accidentally separating the twins as the texts suggests; “My wife more careful for the latter-born,

Had fastened him unto a small spare mast,  
Such as seafaring men provide for storms;  
To him one of the other twins was bound,  
Whilst I had been like heedful of the other:  
The Children thus disposed, my wife and I,  
Fixing our eyes on whom our care was fix’d,  
Fasten’d ourselves at either end the mast:”

But the Bengali narrative had presented two masts contributing to the fatal separation caused by the natural calamity.

The famous speech; “If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave were ink, your own handwriting would tell you what I think” changes to; “Jodi Hather Lekha Mon porte pare, taley amar lekha tomake bolbe amar moner katha”(If handwriting has the ability to read one’s mind, then my words will tell you my feelings). Similarly; “Ill deeds is doubled with an evil word” changes to “Manusher Byabohar Manusher kathar modhyei”(People’s behavior lies in their words only). Thus in the words of Pramathanath Bishi; “Vidyasagar’s “Bhrantibilash” enhances the Bengali culture in the Western Outlook through its comic and satiric elements, it uplifts the character of so called “Bengali” people within its own Literary Realm.

### **Conclusion**

The Love of Shakespeare inculcated in the mind of the Bangla Intelligentsia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century continues unabated even to this day with its spread-effects reaching a part of the Bangla Masses so that altering a bit Keshab Sen’s proud declaration in England we can say that Bengal had as much claim on Shakespeare as England. It is a sort of Reshaping the Shakespearean Canon beyond its own Cultural and Regional boundaries.

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