

REVERSING THE GAZING EYES A STUDY OF THE TALE OF MEDEA AND JASON THROUGH NABANEETA DEB SEN'S PLAY MEDEA

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ABSTRACT

Historically, 'the literature arising out of the West's encounter with the East' has been anything but apolitical. The very foundation of the identity of the Occident has been in relation to, rather in contrast with, the Orient – be it philosophical, social, or purely physical. During the colonial era, as Western scholars started translating classical Oriental texts, catering to the audience of the West, this political move of establishing the Western identity in opposition to the Eastern one became strengthened. And it has been a 'luxury' to 'find oneself' in a culture that is not one's own, one that the West has delved into since the time of colonialism. But what happens when the coin is flipped and the Orient decides to make use of the Occident to find 'herself'?

In this paper, I intend to discuss how playwright Nabaneeta Deb Sen has taken a classical occidental tale – the story of Medea, the daughter of King Aeëtes of Colchis, and wife of the leader of Argonauts – Jason, who betrayed her own family to help Jason acquire the golden fleece, only to be betrayed by him, and presented it in the form of a play that has managed to capture as well as portray the very essence of Bengali middle-class life. Deb Sen's play is iconic in that it makes use of the classical Occidental tropes in order to establish a very contemporary, very modern, and very Oriental identity.

Keywords

Orient, Occident, Translation, Drama, Storytelling.

Introduction

In the introduction to her book *Why Translation Matters* (2011), Edith Grossman very rightly points out that "...the very concept of world literature as a discipline fit for academic study depends on the availability of translations. Translation occupies a central and prominent position in the conceptualization of a universal, enlightened civilization..." Translation is one of the fundamental elements that keeps together as well as expands our society and our world. It is through translation that we inherit the stories of our past, of countries and societies we would otherwise be unaware of; it expands our horizons, both literally and metaphorically. In Edith Grossman's words, "Translation expands our ability to explore through literature the thoughts and feelings of people from another society or another time."¹

The entire Western Civilization, from the ancient classical age till contemporary times, which is considered to be one of the greatest civilizations of all time, is indebted to translation. It is because of translation that the Greek and Roman classical texts have spread into the world, establishing the classical Western Civilization to be a great one. It is through the power of translation that forces such as Britain, France, and Spain dominated significant portions of the world map. And lastly, it is through the use of translation - by translating their classical tales, stories of their past valour, by accommodating and writing history and literature as well as spreading it into the world, and by consuming the vernacular stories and writings of different countries and of different people, the West has managed to retain its position of power for so long.

Historically, the West has always created and managed to substantiate its 'self' in relation to the 'other'. The very foundation of the identity of the Occident or the West, has been in contrast with either the African, or the Orient – be it

¹ In the introduction of her book *Why Translation Matters*, Edith Grossman discussed at length her personal

experiences and understanding with the concept as well as act of translation.

philosophical, social, or purely physical - a concept that noted academician Edward Said had discussed at great lengths in his book *Orientalism* (1978).²

During the colonial era, as Western scholars started translating classical Oriental texts, catering to the audience of the West, this political move of establishing the Western identity in opposition to the Eastern one became strengthened. Starting from the translation of Kalidasa's *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* as *Sacotalá or The Fatal Ring*, translated by Sir William Jones in 1790, the Oriental identity has constantly been evoked through the various stories and epics of the East, to create the Western or the Occidental identity, mostly through translation.

Which is why it is extremely interesting to note whenever any text tries to reverse that equation. In this paper, I have tried to study the nuances and politics of Nabaneeta Dev Sen's Bengali one-act play *Medea*, which is based on and is an adaptation of the story of the 'golden fleece' from the Greek myths.

The character of Medea from the classical Greek mythologies is without a doubt one of the most intriguing female characters written ever. The story of Medea has been adapted and translated many times over the centuries, but it is perhaps in this era that the significance of this particular character, and her story has created the biggest mark - as it has deeply resonated with the strains of feminism and the earning for an equal and just society. Various classical Greek playwrights have either touched upon the story of Medea, or devoted their attention extensively to this particular tale of love and loss in the classical dramas.³

Medea of the Greek myths, was the daughter of King Aeetes of Colchis, and a sorceress graced with blessings of the goddess Hecate⁴. Medea has always been portrayed as someone who was well-versed in both witchcraft and medicinal sciences, which she practiced as well. Medea fell in love with Jason, although in various depictions it is shown to have happened due to the involvement of Aphrodite and Eros. Jason was leading the Argonauts, and came to Colchis looking for the 'Golden Fleece' in order to claim his throne and inheritance. Medea helped Jason through all the tasks that her father put him through in order to attain the 'Golden Fleece', as was the custom of the time, on the condition that

he would marry her upon succeeding. She even helped him kill her own brother, and ran away with him with the golden fleece. Eventually Medea and Jason ended up escaping to Corinth, practically as refugees.

Euripides' *Medea* depicts how a power hungry Jason abandoned Medea and their children, even though they were married for almost a decade by that time, and married the daughter of Creon, king of Corinth. Medea, heartbroken and enraged, killed her own children, along with Creon and his daughter Glauce, in a form of revenge against Jason's betrayal and to find her own justice, and fled to Athens.

Dev Sen's play starts where Euripides' version of the story of Medea and Jason ends, and seems to be most influenced by this version, even though traces of influence by other versions of this tale can be found in the play. The play starts on a railway platform of a small station. The characters representing Jason and Medea, named Manas and Rupsa respectively, seems to have met accidentally after years, with Rupsa (Medea) neither being able to recognize Manas (Jason), nor having any recollection of him. As the play gradually unfolds we realize that Manas, who had abandoned Rupsa and their two children, is desperately seeking her forgiveness and trying to establish familiarity with her. While Rupsa humours him somewhat by trying to remember him initially, she is either unable to or simply does not want to recognize him. As Manas' tries get more and more desperate, Rupsa's inability or refusal to recognize him almost makes him pathologically exasperated. Especially as they touch upon the subject of their children, and Rupsa explains how due to her diseased husband's inability to have children they⁵ were forced to adopt two children from Mother Teresa's orphanage, it comes as a huge blow to Manas' manhood, as can be deciphered from this excerpt -

"Rupsa: He used to love them so much. That day when I brought Ratan from Mother's orphanage...

Manas: off! Rupu! Why are you still uttering this Mother's orphanage nonsense! Speaking like a mad woman! Look at me, Rupu!

Rupsa: He was ecstatic in joy! And grateful. He was so so grateful. It was because of some of his issues that we couldn't get pregnant - that's why I wanted to surprise him -

2 Edward Said's seminal book *Orientalism*, published in 1978, has remained an extremely important work to this day. Said defined orientalism as the Western scholarship about the Eastern world, or the Orient. This Orient consisted of societies and people of Asia, Middle East and North Africa.

3 The story of Medea has come up in the writings of classical Greek playwrights such as Ovid, Seneca, Apollonius of Rhodes etc, mostly as part of other larger tales. But the

character of Medea truly got her share of attention when Euripides wrote his tragedy *Medea* in 431 BC.

4 Hecate was the daughter of Perses and Asteria, and was the goddess of magic, witchcraft, the night, moon, ghosts and necromancy.

5 Them being Rupsa and her 'husband' as per her narrative, who was working with the railways and died in a train accident.

Manas: Oh, stop! Stop it Rupsa! Stop whatever you are saying! What do you mean by 'his issues'? Surprise! Yeah surprise indeed – only it came as a shock!"⁶

Thus Rupsa gets herself avenged, much like Euripedes's Medea, by taking away the essence of fatherhood from Manas (Jason). Although she doesn't kill her children off like the mythical Medea, just by showing that they originated as orphans from the beginning, while labelling her husband as infertile, and eventually establishing them (the children) as 'fatherless' (since in her narrative her husband died) orphans, she gets the upperhand in this powerplay of identity and relationship. Just as Jason did in the classical myth, Manas had taken her (Medea/Rupsa) away from her family and alienated her from them, and brought her to a new place where she was rootless to begin with, only to abandon her and her children for someone and something else, rendering them helpless, and turning them into displaced refugees. But by her sheer refusal to bestow on Manas the identity of her husband and the father of her children, Rupsa turns Manas into a nobody, and manages to question his very selfhood. Given the fact that impotency has always been considered as one of the biggest dishonours that can befall on a man, by claiming her husband, the person Manas identifies himself as, was impotent, Rupsa successfully evades his claims while castrating him metaphorically.

While Dev Sen expertly shows the marital turmoils and other problems between Medea and Jason through the dialogues of Rupsa and Manas, what she does with even more ingenuity is create the background of a typical Bengali middle-class life. Deb Sen's play is peppered with tropes that were the very markers of classical Greek tragic dramas, and she makes use of these tropes to strengthen the Bengali setting of the play, as well as establishes her characters as typical Bengali middle-class people.

The play starts with the background chorus⁷ of the sounds typically heard in a railway station – an amalgamation of voices talking, cries of vendors selling their products, sound of trains coming and going, people shouting for porters etc. Then the main two characters are introduced. Rupsa, clad in a colourful 'taant' saree, and carrying a 'jhola', shows up as a quintessential Bengali woman. Their names, Manas Mullick and Rupsa Mullick, along with the names of the absent

children – Ratan, Tutu, Ratna, and Tattu, are all typically Bengali names and nicknames.

We also see all of the three Aristotelian unities of drama being followed strictly in this play⁸ - the play is set in a railway platform and doesn't move from there, focusing on the single plot surrounding Manas and Rupsa, and takes place in one evening. The play also brings in the trope of 'catharsis', and gives Manas a chance to repent for his actions and thereby experiencing catharsis. Or perhaps it is Rupsa who finally is able to have a cathartic experience by avenging the wrongdoings done to her and her children by Manas.

On the other hand, Deb Sen also uses some of the archetypal markers of Bengali life, especially that of a non-resident Bengali life which parallel with the storyline of Medea and Jason living away from 'home', to establish and romanticise her characters' Bengali identity. Both Rupsa and Manas talk about living in Delhi - a place which a significant number of Bengalis have made their home away from home, especially after the partition. The playwright fleetingly mentions Durga puja holidays, which is the biggest festival for Bengalis. She mentions 'Mother Teresa' and her orphanage few times in the play, both of which were tied with the idea of Bengal closely, especially during the last two decades of the last century. Deb Sen romances the Bengali romance by meticulously drawing a mental picture for the audience of a green saree-clad Rupsa jumping to avoid dirt on the road and flashing her ankle in the process⁹ while going to the marriage registrar's office.

Thus through the use of dialogues, by evoking mental imageries, through the mannerisms of her characters on stage as well as through their costumes and props, Deb Sen successfully manages to tell the story of two Bengali characters, all the while staying true to the underlining story of Medea and Jason from the Greek myths.

Conclusion

From various studies and discussions it has already been established that 'the literature arising out of the West's encounter with the East' has been anything but apolitical. As Edward Said noted so profoundly in his seminal work *Orientalism*(1978), any approach to the stories of East by the occident is orientalist in nature, and is loaded with political

6 Translation of *Medea* by Nabaneeta Dev Sen done by the author of this paper.

7 As per the website Britannica.com, in Classical Greek dramas, a group of actors played the faceless and nameless chorus, whose job was to describe and comment upon the main action of the play.

8 Greek philosopher Aristotle prescribes three unities of tragedy, unity of time, place and action, where a play is

supposed to take place within one day, in a single physical space without change of stage setting, and have a single plot without any subplots.

9 This particular trope is very characteristic of Bengali pop culture, especially during 80's and 90's, and has been used in many novels, stories and films.

agenda and “a deliberate attempt at cultural hegemony”.¹⁰ As mentioned before, this approach started extensively during the colonial era, and manifested through the translation of classical Oriental literature, stories and other type of literary works. As scholar Dorothy Figuiera so aptly described in her book *Translating the Orient* (1991), that “The luxury of ‘finding oneself’ in any culture other than one’s own presupposes certain prerogatives...Western culture’s sophistication ensures a position of prestige and affords them the liberty to seek and pursue their need for compensatory spiritual and aesthetic discovery.” It is at that point and specifically such prerogatives that more often than not lead to the appropriation of the Oriental body of work, as well as society and people. This is where the occident makes use of the “self” and the “other” binary, establishing the “self” as the better, sophisticated choice which should be vied for, as opposed to the orient “other” which is in desperate need of sophistication and civilization.

Which is why when a vernacular oriental text makes use of the very trope that the occident has capitalized on since the time of colonialism (rather using it as a tool to colonize the orient), and establishes or creates an identity in relation to the occidental ‘other’, trying to define the ‘self’ through the culture of the occident, it becomes something beyond a simple translation or an adaptation of a story. Dev Sen’s *Medea* already stands as a profound text in celebrating the age old story of going beyond the realm of ‘womanhood’ or ‘femininity’ and reclaiming ‘personhood’ of a woman. But then it also takes the leap of finding a “self” for the text itself, within and in contrast with quintessential occidental stories, all the while working within the given parameters of a occident tale, thereby claiming a validation - that of a trailblazer in establishing its identity and mark.

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¹⁰ The quote is taken from the chapter “Background and Theoretical Considerations” from the book *Translating the Orient* (1991) by Dorothy M. Figuiera.