

Acclimatizing The Bard of Avon to the Indian Classrooms

Sukanya Ghosh
Dept of English
Calcutta University

Abstract

In the history of literature Shakespeare is one of those very few authors who has stood the test of time. The teaching of Shakespeare saw a significant reformation since its emergence from the Victorian times when the approach was primarily author-centric and biographical to the post modern days which encourages a holistic reading and promotes a intertextual, interdisciplinary and intermedia reading of the texts. Across the globe, studying Shakespeare is indispensable for all students of English Literature. India has a long tradition of teaching of Shakespeare due to historical and political reasons where Shakespeare is taught not only at undergraduate levels but also at school levels. In this paper I discuss the gradual evolution in the methodology of teaching of Shakespeare in the Indian classrooms in order to cater to the interest of the students and help their intellectual development.

Keywords : Shakespeare, classroom, India, teaching

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Reading Shakespeare requires the imagination and daring capacity to entertain ambiguity and the paradoxes of human life and history...to imagine the complex lives of powerfully historicized human beings”- Metzger.

Sir Winston Churchill in his efforts to define the role of education in the colonial project said “The empires of the future are the empires of the mind”. As we all know through our acquaintance with MacCaulay’s Minutes, English education was taken up in India mainly to create a class of people from the natives who would be able to perform the duties in accordance with colonial dictates through their induction into the colonial mindset and help the colonial project by being inducted into the ideology of their colonial ruler. Though the British followed a half hearted education policy in India western language literature and sciences made a deep impact upon the society. D.A Shankar’s edited volume, *Shakespeare in Indian Languages*, for instance, concludes as follows: “No Shakespeare came with Sir Thomas Roe or Robert Clive. In fact, to really arrive in India, Shakespeare had to wait till his countrymen were through with their business of war and commerce and could get the services of the man like Macaulay who decided that the Orientals needed to be brought up on a strict diet of English education.” Institutions for higher education were set up across India especially in Calcutta which was the intellectual and political center of colonial presence in India. Hindu college a privately funded institution established in 1817 which came to be known as Presidency college in 1855 became the main center for university level education in Bengal. Initiated by Henry Derozio and carried forward to its great heights by D. L Richardson and H.M Percival, Shakespeare studies became a hallmark of Hindu College. This college produced eminent intellectuals who became leaders of

the movement of Bengal renaissance which finally led to a greater awakening in all of India. Srinivas Ayengar the author of *Indian Writing in English* asserts, “It was not, after all, possible for people to read Shakespeare and Milton and Locke and Burke and Mill, to read about the Magna Carta and the evolution of the British Parliament, and yet acquiesce for long in British colonialism”

My aim in this paper is to loosely trace how the teaching of Shakespeare has evolved in an Indian classroom across the decades.

In recent years many wide ranging changes have cropped up within the classroom in the Shakespeare teaching learning situation. Among the different approaches prevalent, especially during the colonial period unearthing the source is often considered to be indispensable while reading Shakespearean texts. The tradition is still there in many Indian Universities where students encouraged to have certain knowledge about the sources in order to compare between the source and the text. Biographical approach or author centred approach which is an outcome of the romantic temperament is another important method of teaching Shakespeare. In the early colonial days when Shakespeare was introduced in the syllabus it was author-centric. It was probably the Romantic Movement which generally gave the thrust to this kind of study.

In the Victorian age also known as the post enlightenment age, art became “a humanist surrogate for religion”. Shakespeare’s texts were considered a kind of key to his life. There was a notion of identifying the characters’ speeches as Shakespeare’s philosophy of life. It is not difficult to gauge the Victorian temper from Carlyle’s – *On Heroes and Hero Worship and the Heroic*, in which Shakespeare is valorized. This is also an important aspect which helped students to come closer to the text and the author himself. The kind of geographical narrative that has been created by his publisher, Thomas Thorpe, who has arranged the sonnets in a particular order reflects a kind of interest in his biography. In 1985, Richard Adams condemns the static study of Shakespeare but observes that the students in spite of their disinterest in Shakespeare “... are conditioned to accept that such brushes with greatness, like some potent but ill tasting

medicine are good for them”. Focus was laid on the imagery in order to bring out the interplay of meanings evoked through them was again a result of New Critical Theory. Caroline Spurgeon’s book “Shakespeare’s imagery and what it tells us” has played an important part in promoting this particular brand of teaching.

However introduction of English studies proved to be a turning point in many respects. English literature that permeated the Indian classrooms was not merely the texts that constituted the syllabus, but a harbinger of secular outlook on life and an open sesame to the great treasures of the world as Bagchi puts it “the Mantra for New India in its fight against obscurantist traditionalism”

Shakespeare not only penetrated the Indian classrooms, in the very early 19th Century Shakespeare’s dramas began to be presented in Indian stages even in translation. Hara Chandra Ghos – whom many claim to be the first Bengali dramatist can be credited with the translation of a number of Shakespeare’s texts. His *Bhanumati Chittabilas* is a Bengali Translation of Shakespeare’s Merchant of Venice and his *Charumukh Chittahara* was modelled on Romeo and Juliet. Through this it becomes evident that Shakespearean literature was gradually spreading its roots among the colonists.

The method of teaching followed in the colonial times by the British teachers was adhered to for a long time in India even in the post independence times. There has always been a healthy balance between the kind of equipments or facilities available in the classroom and teaching. Originally teachers only had the blackboards and the text; so while reading the texts they attempted a play reading in the class. Professors like Tarak Sen and Jyoti Bhattacharya while delivering lectures in Calcutta University tried to recreate a kind of formative situation through intonation that might have been used by the actors in their effective roles . In the 60’s and the 70’s the importance of imagery in the Shakespearean texts was accentuated largely due the kind of critical texts available in those days. Focus was laid on Spurgeon’s “Shakespeare’s Imagery and What it Tells Us” a book that elaborated on Shakespeare’s imagery and its impact

in bringing out the different resonances of meaning in the play. In the 1980's some progression in the teaching of Shakespeare can be noted. A great emphasis was given to the performative aspect of the play due to the numerous photographs and reviews of the theatrical performance being available to the Indians. The theatrical presentation came to be regarded as complementary to the text. Foakes in his edition of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* highlighted the theatrical history of the play and traced the changing nuances of stage presentation through the years. In 1984 John F. Andrews writes in *American Shakespeare Quarterly* "A decade ago performance-oriented pedagogy was relatively unfamiliar among Shakespeareans and was anything but universally accepted as the wave of the future. Now it is difficult to find a dissenting voice: virtually everybody acknowledges the need to approach Shakespeare's plays as dramatic rather than literary works. The only real question seems to be just how to put the new consensus into practice."

The post modern times have witnessed a remarkable change in the study of Shakespeare in all the aspects. The spotlight has now shifted from the imagery sources and biographical approach, rather a holistic reading of the texts is being appreciated. Classrooms now promote an intertextual, interdisciplinary and intermedia reading of the texts. In the 21st century Films and theatrical interpretations do not merely complement the text but very often they become as important as the text itself where the text is seen more as a blueprint or script of the play. Revolutionary changes came into teaching when the computers invaded the classrooms and it became possible to show the students different adaptations of the original texts which in turn might trigger interest and attract even the least attentive student and also entice them to perceive a variety of cultural suppositions.

With the coming of the Post modern critical approach looking for a subtext became necessary. Jonathon Dollimore and Alan Sinfield's essay "Shakespeare, Cultural materialism and the New Historicism" is a breakthrough as they invited a more critical approach to the study of Shakespeare.

A typical focus of New Historicist critics, led by Stephen Orgel, has been on understanding Shakespeare less as an autonomous great author in the modern sense than as a means of reconstructing the cultural milieu Renaissance theatre and Shakespearean plays are seen as inseparable from the context in which he wrote them.

As a result of India's long tradition of teaching Shakespeare, students are introduced to his plays early in their life. One of the major issues that a student faces while studying Shakespeare is understanding its language. Frank Whitehead's question whether his plays come within the emotional range of the young adolescent must not be evaded. But it has to be remembered in order to extend their linguistic and emotional range, students must be introduced early to the texts. Another serious threat faced by students while studying Shakespeare is that his plays are meant to be watched and not read. The critics of the first half of the twentieth century like Tillyard, Wilson Knights, L.C Knight's journal scrutiny and A.C Bradley's character based criticism contributed much in making Shakespeare's plays texts to be studied in class. The English Association in one of its first pamphlet on *The Teaching of Shakespeare in Schools* suggests "It is desirable that all the Shakespeare chosen for study should be read aloud in class. The living voice will often give a clue to the meaning, and reading aloud is the only way of ensuring knowledge of the metre. In a class of beginners the teacher must take a liberal share of the reading, but the pupils should be brought into play. They can be cast for some of the parts; the forum scene in Julius Caesar comes one step nearer the dramatic if the teacher is Anthony and the other parts are distributed and the class transformed into a Roman mob shouting for the will."

Professor John Wilder in his lecture *Dramatic Structures and Dramatic Effect* concentrated on actual stage activity to explain his method of teaching Shakespeare. While teaching he involved the students as actors and audience and made them perform a scene from the play. Helen Vandler led students to Shakespeare's sonnets as interrelated aesthetic voices to whose questions they might respond with precise intellectual and emotional perception. The recreations and renditions of Shakespeare's works can be shown to the students through visual media even inside a classroom. Shakespearean plays such as Hamlet, Macbeth has been adapted

multiple times on stage and the screen. In Movies such a Maqbool and Haidar we see how Shakespeare has been adopted to suit a local culture. Various games, graphic novels are also being devised for young students and all these become very good entry points into Shakespeare.

Worldwide, literary study is shrinking as a discipline and the location of Shakespeare in that shrinking space is further diminishing. In foreign countries students who opt for literature studies are given the prerogative of selecting what kind of text they want to study and naturally Shakespeare is not always a choice. The future of Shakespeare in the classrooms thus will be difficult to predict

Though the condition of India is different, it is as grave. Though, Shakespeare is given a pride of place in terms of framing the syllabus, made as much compulsory and necessary for the students, in schools and colleges, the students, today, in the rush of education, mostly read them as a necessity of knowing his works rather than understanding his works and his characters in psychological terms. The students opting for studies in English Literature not because they love literature but because they feel that the study is prestigious and may perhaps make way for many opportunities in the job market- is a very alarming situation; questioning their understanding and mastery of the English language and this proves to be a stumbling block in their study of literature and the Shakespearean texts

The 'sweet swan on Avon' , as Ben Jonson correctly points out was not of an age but for all time and Shakespeare will continue touch millions of souls defying all temporal and political boundaries. However whether Shakespeare can be sustained inside the classrooms in future is debatable and whether the timeless classics of the greatest master will continue to inspire, baffle and enkindle the upcoming generations depends largely on class instruction.

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