

# Essays on Shakespeare



# Essays on Shakespeare:

## *Texts and Contexts*

By

Hema Dahiya

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## FOREWORD

Hema Dahiya's *Essays on Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts* has at its heart a study of two empires: the British Raj in the nineteenth century, and the rise and spread of Imperial Rome. Brought together by Shakespeare, and hinged by a pair of chapters on the poet's own garden and on his most famous play, the two are put in dialogue with each other. Although there are no postcolonial readings here – the author explicitly disavows any ideological or theoretical affiliation – the two halves of the book implicitly comment on each other. In both India and Rome, Dahiya finds not a single governing agenda but a variety of competing perspectives and priorities. If Shakespeare came to India as a stowaway in the luggage of the East India Company rather than being deliberately introduced as part of a conscious project to 'civilise the natives,' he also exposes incoherence and inconsistency in the civilising projects of colonial Rome: *desertum faciunt, pacem appellant*. Rome's was ostensibly a strictly hierarchical society, while the official account of the introduction of Shakespeare to India sees him as imposed from the top; in both instances Dahiya reveals instead a working from the bottom up. In India, three inspired teachers of Hindu College laid the foundation for India's Shakespeare; in Shakespeare's Roman plays, women and the lower classes alike are given voices to speak truth to power.

Professor Lisa Hopkins  
Sheffield Hallam



## INTRODUCTION

Published in different critical journals of repute over the last fifteen years, the research articles included in this volume were originally presented at various national and international conferences in India and abroad. All of these publications resulted from my repeated readings of Shakespeare and the critical writings on the Bard's work that have come out in the last four hundred years following his death in 1616. Not being committed to any particular ideology in political terms has been an intellectual advantage that permitted me to consider each critical stance, as well as each Shakespeare play, with an open mind. Subscribing to Matthew Arnold's idea of culture, reflected in open-mindedness and decent conduct, I have always responded to each critical as well as creative piece of writing in the Arnoldian spirit of fairness. Also subscribing to Rabindranath Tagore's view that the artist creates his work for mankind, and not for any particular group of people known by their caste or creed, nation or region, I have read literature in terms of humanity's interests at large.

These otherwise scattered pieces – scattered in different journals and books – should make better sense as a single volume, to combine and coordinate as they would in several ways to enlarge and enhance the impact of each individual piece. The author hopes that both students and teachers of English in colleges and universities will find these essays useful for enhancing their stock of knowledge in the subject of English literature and literary criticism.



## REAPPROPRIATIONS OF SHAKESPEARE IN COLONIAL BENGAL

This paper challenges the perception of the postcolonial critics who consider Shakespeare an aid of imperialism, and view Shakespeare studies in India as merely an instrument used to materialize the colonial project of the British. The facts available about the teaching and interpretation of Shakespeare in colonial Bengal do not follow any single direction; rather, they reflect a variety of reappropriations of Shakespeare dictated by a range of vested interests. This paper aims to highlight the role of culture and ideology in the various interpretations of Shakespeare by different critics and teachers in colonial times.

The growth of Shakespeare studies in India is closely related to that of the city of Calcutta. Between the city's foundation in 1690, when Job Charnok anchored his boat in Sutnati village on the river Hoogly, and its development into a seat of power in 1773 when Warren Hastings made it the capital city of British India, Shakespeare had been introduced to theatre-going Indians, soon becoming a rather well-known personality for the city-dwellers. When the fortune-seeking British traders created the city, they also built a fort, and then a playhouse in 1753.<sup>1</sup> Kironmoy Raha sums up the growth of theatres in Calcutta as under:

Contemporary accounts of the plays and productions in the English theatre make [for] interesting reading. One is struck by the lively press coverage they received and by zest and accomplishment of those associated with them. The Calcutta Theatre [established in 1779] ran for thirty years.... In between had come and gone the brief but dazzling existence of Mrs. Bristow's Private Theatre. Brief were also the lives of the Wheeler Place Theatre, the Dum Dum Theatre, the Baitaconah Theatre and the Atheneum. The most famous was the Chowringhee Theatre whose opening in November, 1813 was attended by the Governor-General, Lord Moira.<sup>2</sup>

It was in these theatres that Shakespeare was introduced to the Indian middle class intelligentsia of Calcutta, a sizeable number of whom had already acquired a high proficiency in the English language. The acquisition of English (in India) has been described by Sheldon Pollock, using Mary Louise Pratt's theory of "contact zones": "The social mechanisms that

enabled English to migrate from its community of migrant native speakers to groups of potential Indian users consisted of four primary zones of interracial contact and acculturation," namely "the zone of employment," "the zone of marriage and family," "the zone of religious conversion" and "the zone of friendship and social relations."<sup>3</sup> Thus, English in India was introduced, not after Macaulay's Minute of 1835, or with the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817, but when the British merchants had come to India in the early seventeenth century. Through business and social contacts, from private schools run by the wives of the British officers and the missionary schools, this multi-source spread of English in India, so well mapped by Pollock, also disproves the postcolonial contention that English in India was an imperial project to subjugate the natives.<sup>4</sup> The so-called "project" came two centuries after the English language had already arrived in India, long after the natives had been formally subjugated in the battle of Plassey (1757).

To begin with, English in India was the language of the officers and soldiers of the East India Company as well as of the rich merchants and civilians who had come from England. It is quite possible that these Englishmen brought with them the plays of Shakespeare along with other European literary works for their individual reading.<sup>5</sup> In fact, the British envoy to the court of Jahangir in 1609 may well have brought Shakespeare's writings with him.<sup>6</sup> But the actual encounter of Shakespeare with the native population took place in 1753 when the first English theatre was set up in Calcutta for the entertainment of the Indian elite<sup>7</sup> and in 1817 when he was introduced in classrooms.<sup>8</sup>

In 1753, the Playhouse was set up by a society or club that called itself the "Young Writers of John Company."<sup>9</sup> Since there were no newspapers at the time to survey the activities of the Playhouse, not much is known of the particular plays that may have been popular with the Calcutta audience. Besides, the Playhouse was destroyed in 1756 when the troops of Nawab Siraj-ud-Daula attacked the English garrison in Calcutta.<sup>10</sup> However, an alternative theatre was raised in 1772 and the New Playhouse, or the Calcutta Theatre, followed in 1775.<sup>11</sup> Speaking of the old and the new Playhouse in his book on Calcutta, Moorhouse reports:

David Garrick had a hand in promoting the first and supervised the dispatch of scenery for the second, and the grateful local patrons sent him two pipes of *Madeira* for his kind interest. They then watched.,, Shakespeare from a seat in the pit at Rs. 12 or a bench in the gallery at Rs. 6...<sup>12</sup>

It is only after 1780, with the initiation of two new newspapers—*The Bengal Gazette* and *The Indian Gazette*—that one begins to learn significant details about the activities of the Playhouse.<sup>13</sup> In these chronicles one finds—in the form of advertisements, announcements, previews and reviews of performances—news about the arrival and departure of actors or of theatre companies, and other information about the numerous patrons of the Playhouse, of which Governor General Warren Hastings was one.

From these newspapers one also understands that Shakespeare was the most influential and popular dramatist of the time. Between the establishment of the New Playhouse in 1775 and its closure in 1808, the playhouse had witnessed the performance of at least eight Shakespearean plays, including *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Richard III*. The last play, as mentioned by Francis Gladwin in the *Calcutta Gazette* of 31 January 1788, seems to have been a performance that was received with "well merited éclat."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, it would not be far-fetched to assume that between 1753 and 1835, from the establishment of the first theatre to the official introduction of English education in colonial India, Shakespeare had already become a cultural acquisition of the subject population. Antonio Gramsci has argued that cultural dominance often precedes political dominance.<sup>15</sup> However, it needs to be added to Gramsci's observation that encounters between different cultures are not always in the manner of political confrontation where the dominant power subjugates the weak one; rather, cultural encounters are marked by interpenetrations between cultures, enriching both sides. This is evident from the newspaper reports of that time which claim that the subject population of Bengal did not go to enjoy Shakespeare's plays as homage to the British rulers. Instead, while in the theatre, the mixed audience responded to the plays as theatre-going individuals, rather than as masters and slaves.<sup>16</sup>

The transition of Shakespeare from the theatre to the classroom was far from smooth. Long before Macaulay's Minute of 1835, leading Hindu citizens of Calcutta, headed by Raja Rammohan Roy, and guided by the Scottish watch-maker and philanthropist David Hare, had founded the famous Hindu College in 1817.<sup>17</sup> Rammohan Roy, a social reformer and an intellectual, believed that the traditional system of education was no longer satisfactory for the young minds of the country that needed to be exposed to western education for effecting a change in society. There were other factors as well that contributed to the foundation of this college. An affluent section of Bengali society perceived that exposure to western education, especially the learning of English, would become a means both to increase their wealth and elevate their status in society. Additionally,

there were those for whom western education was a route to better job-opportunities.

As more and more people in Calcutta were beginning to see the tangible benefits of English education, there had emerged a growing necessity for institutions of higher learning that would impart western education. Roy, who had been working in this direction for some time, collected like-minded people and proposed to start a college for the purpose. Though he was one of the key forces behind the college, Roy distanced himself from its day-to-day functioning and left that in the hands of David Hare. He did so because he felt that his 'unpopular public image,' especially in the eyes of the orthodox Hindus—created principally due to his radical efforts to purge Hindu society of various social and religious maladies—might create an adverse impact on the image and success of the college. He wanted this college to be perceived as a secular institution of western learning; with David Hare in the forefront, Roy felt assured that the college would remain unscathed by any religious, social, or political controversy.

The curriculum choices at Hindu College were initially designed by the Managing Committee, as it was a privately-run institution. From 1824 onwards, when the college started receiving grants-in-aid from the government, all matters including curricula, came to be influenced by the policies of the Raj. Despite the British influence, the college fortunately continued to remain unaffected by these external government forces, as it notably came to have H. H. Wilson—one of the English Orientalists—as Vice-President of the College Committee. The College Committee members like Hare and Wilson always insisted that the curriculum emphasis in the institute remain unbiased and secular. According to the Shakespeare Commemoration Volume of the Presidency College, Calcutta, it was in Hindu College (later Presidency College, and recently Presidency University) where great emphasis was laid on literature studies, and where Shakespeare studies became, in course of time, a hallmark of English teaching in Calcutta, carrying the impact of new education beyond the territory of Bengal.<sup>18</sup> Significantly, it was a time when missionary institutions in the country did not deem Shakespeare suitable for inclusion in the syllabus.<sup>19</sup> However, Hindu College, from its initiation, came to have a series of Shakespeare teachers who would become legends in the course of time.

The first of these teachers was Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, a Eurasian, who joined Hindu College in 1828. Derozio had a seminal role to play in laying the foundation of Shakespeare studies in India, which included not only inspired reading and interpretation of the plays but also



their performances in the college and in public places. Born on 18 April 1809, Derozio joined the famous David Drummond's school at the age of six where he studied until he was fourteen. Drummond taught his students not only philosophy – secular and sceptical – but also gave them strong grounding in English literature, especially of the Renaissance, and assigned Shakespeare a central place in reading, reciting, acting and interpreting the classics of the English literary tradition. As a student of the academy, Derozio acted in many of Shakespeare's plays, the reports of which can be traced in *The Calcutta Journal*. Before joining Hindu College, Derozio had started writing poetry and prose, which appeared in the journals of that time.<sup>20</sup> Besides the numerous echoes of Shakespeare in Derozio's poems, two of his sonnets are related directly to Shakespeare. That Derozio chose to write two poems, "Romeo and Juliet" and "Yorick's Skull" in the sonnet form, on themes drawn from Shakespeare's plays, shows how deeply impressed he was by Shakespeare. Again, in his prose writings on social, political and literary subjects, there are numerous allusions and references to scenes and characters from Shakespeare's plays. As a teacher in Hindu College, he inducted all these traits into his teaching and is believed to have electrified the classroom with his knowledge and depth of the subject. In this context, Mitra remarks:

I thus prominently notice his appointment, because it opened up, so to speak, a new era in the annals of the College. His career as an educator was marked by his singular success. His appreciation of the duties of a teacher was higher and truer than that of the herd of professors and schoolmasters. He felt it is his duty as such to teach not only words but things, to touch not only the head but also the heart. He sought not to cram the mind but to inoculate it with large and liberal ideas. Acting on this principle, he opened the eyes of his pupils' understanding. He taught them to think, and throw off the fetters of that antiquated bigotry which still clung to their countrymen. He possessed a profound knowledge of mental and moral philosophy and imparted it to them. Gifted with great penetration, he led them through the pages of Locke, Stewart and Brown. He brought to bear on his lectures great and original powers of reasoning and observation.<sup>21</sup>

However, with his irreligious and disrespectful approach towards "authority" Derozio ended up antagonizing the parents of many of his students. Although Derozio denied the allegations, the college authorities removed him from service in April 1831. Yet he continued his association with his students outside the classroom. Derozio died in December 1831 due to cholera, but he left behind a legacy which continued to inspire generations to come.

The teaching of Shakespeare received another boost at Hindu College when David Lester Richardson joined the institution. Richardson was an Englishman who joined the East India Company's Bengal Army. More inclined towards reading and writing than military activities, he took to composing verses even as an army officer. Due to health reasons, however, he returned to England in 1824. Back home, he continued writing poetry, publishing several volumes, and founded the *London Weekly Review*. He came back to India in 1829 only to retire from the Company's army. In 1835, he became Professor of English at Hindu College and remained associated with it till 1861 when he left India finally and went back home, where he died four years later.<sup>22</sup>

Richardson, the first notable Shakespeare critic, a writer of verse and prose in Calcutta, was better known for his criticism of Shakespeare. Some of his literary pieces—"On Literary Fame and Literary Pursuits", "On Care and Condensation in Writing", "On Byron's Opinion of Pope", "On Men of the World", "On Egotism", "Thelma and Clearchus" and "On Conversation"—give a fairly adequate idea of Richardson's credo as a critic of Shakespeare. Besides these, one also finds numerous references and explications of flower imagery from Shakespeare in his unique book, *Flowers and Flower Gardens* (1855). Being an inspiring teacher and influential intellectual in the world of theatre and print, his criticism of Shakespeare made an enormous impact in Bengal, earning him the reputation of a legendary teacher of Shakespeare.

Richardson was devoted to the writing and study of literature, which made him a model teacher who separated literature studies from the politics of the day, keeping it confined to the realms of ethics and aesthetics. In the changed environment of the 'post'-Theory period, such a separation may be an anathema to critics like the editors of *Political Shakespeare: Essays on Cultural Materialism* (1994). But Richardson belonged to the nineteenth century and was influenced by the literary traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' Humanism, particularly the critical theories developed by the Romantic poets. In his writings, as well as in his teaching, Richardson, while addressing the native students and intelligentsia, tried to relate Shakespeare to the local conditions in Calcutta:

Shakespeare especially has addressed himself to the universal heart. The jealousy of Othello and the ambition of Macbeth are as perfectly apprehended by the intelligent Hindu alumni of an English College in Calcutta, as the students of a scholastic establishment in the poet's native land. But Pope was too much of a London poet of the eighteenth century. He is so local and temporary that many of his allusions are wholly

unintelligible even to his own countrymen. His satires especially are limited and obscure. It would be almost impossible, for example, to make a native of Hindustan comprehend the greater portion of his *Epistle on the Characters of Women*. But Shakespeare's females are sketched with such miraculous power, and with such fidelity to general nature, that they are recognized in all countries and in all ages by every reader who can understand the language in which his plays are written.<sup>23</sup>

Almost Johnsonian, Richardson's reading of Shakespeare, pertaining to the Indian and world contexts, is a model of literary criticism, which is part of the liberal humanist tradition, selecting that which is of universal relevance in a writer or a text. The earlier colonial or imperial tone of complacency<sup>24</sup> as well as the postcolonial enthusiasm to "write back" or "reinterpret"<sup>25</sup> are both essentially against the universal spirit of great literature which Richardson finds in Shakespeare. His own writings and the memoirs of his students reveal clearly that his teaching and writing were free from the imperial tone; so was his conduct as a teacher, and later as Principal of Hindu College, in tune with the vision that Rammohan Roy and David Hare had had for their institution. The vision that the college must remain a place of secular and intellectual contemplation, away from the politics brewing in the country at that time, remained alive for Richardson. It must be mentioned that even Macaulay paid Richardson the ultimate tribute for the latter's teaching of Shakespeare, when he said: "If I were to forget everything of India, I could never forget your reading of Shakespeare."<sup>26</sup> Such references bring forth yet another underlying contention that the attempt to reduce literature to a product of local culture in contemporary Theory is to undermine the voice of literary texts that speak across cultures and nationalities.

Another prominent Shakespeare teacher at Hindu College was H.M. Percival. Percival joined the College in 1881 and taught until 1912 after which he went to England and settled in London. His nationality remains to be explored as some accounts find him Indian, born to Christian parents, while others find him British.<sup>27</sup> His nationality notwithstanding, he took Shakespeare teaching to the third phase at Hindu College (the first two phases represented by Derozio and Richardson), as he produced critical editions of five Shakespearean plays, namely *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. He edited these plays at the request of his students, his intention being to make these texts comprehensible to Indian readers. Hence, these editions are furnished with long introductions and critical comments on key issues and events, with elaborate character-sketches, besides providing copious notes on words, phrases and lines from the text. Upon analyzing these

editions, one also observes Percival's affinity with the nineteenth-century critical tradition from Coleridge to Bradley, where the employment of character and the analysis of motivation and psychology, combined with ethics, were used as tools of interpretation. The only characteristic that seems to separate him from distinguished critics like Coleridge and Bradley is the strong moralism which allows him to see Macbeth as "Mr Badman," and Cleopatra "as coal tar that looks so black."<sup>28</sup>

Percival may seem inclined towards moralism at times but there appears no overt racism or nativism in his writings. His view of Shakespeare's attitude to different races, too, illustrates his secular stance: "And by making Caliban take to Stephano and Trinculo at first sight, Shakespeare shows that he means to spare neither the black nor the white man, but to paint both as they seem, and shows how like goes to like."<sup>29</sup> It is also worth noting at this point that if Percival comes close to endorsing the standpoint of Cultural Studies—that every text is culture-bound—the fault lies with the critic, not the text, for great literary works are more universal than local. The Bard of Stratford continues to speak to readers of all cultures and nationalities. The stock of four hundred thousand books in Folger Shakespeare Library at Washington D. C. is a testimony to that strength of his work.<sup>30</sup>

Thus it is observed that these three teachers of Hindu College not only secured the foundations of Shakespeare studies in India but also did so with the conviction of intellectuals, and not as part of the hegemonic mechanism of British rule. It must be said, however, that there were forces in British India that were trying to achieve extraneous ends through English teaching, not sparing even Shakespeare in the process. There were, for instance, missionaries like William Miller, Principal of Madras Christian College and Vice-Chancellor of the University of Madras, who taught and interpreted Shakespeare from the viewpoint of the Christian colonizer. Note, in this regard, how Miller's book, *Shakespeare's Chart of Life* interprets *King Lear*:

Lear's initial error is not the only cause of the suffering he has to endure.....He makes no attempt in any way to arouse the tender feelings in which the order of the world allows it [Love or Devotion] to be obtained. They devise ways of their own for securing it. They forget that good got in an evil way would cease to be good, even if it were possible so to get it. The highest of all teaching makes it prominent that the kingdom of God.... is like the seed cast into the ground, which slowly, step by step, grows towards the perfect fruit "man knoweth not how." [.....] It is the mistake of those who seem to suppose it possible in a single generation, if not in a single year, to put into full operation in India those principles and forms of government which, rightly enough, they regard as in themselves

the best. Shakespeare *shows what this mistake results in*.<sup>31</sup>

One can see here an unabashed use of Shakespeare for purposes both religious and political. The text of *King Lear* is so interpreted that it easily changes into a battle between good and evil, and thereafter between the impatient mortals desiring quick results and God blessing the fruits to grow from the seed onwards; and finally between the impatient Indian subjects and the ruling British. Miller, unlike Richardson, appropriates Shakespeare to suit his political and religious ends. While the later approaches, such as Roland Barthes's "The Death of the Author,"<sup>32</sup> may not see anything wrong in Miller's interpretation of Shakespeare being "ethnic" and "ideological," such a reading might appear to be laden with an "intentional fallacy" from outside the text, which does not merit the title of "interpretation".

Angular interpretations of Shakespeare, or twisting his texts to suit a particular agenda, were not confined to Christian missionaries alone. On the Indian side also, there were scholars like Samarjit Dutt who interpreted several plays of Shakespeare—including *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Hamlet*—from the oriental perspective. Giving each of his interpretations the subtitle of "An Oriental Study", Dutt's endeavour was "to study Shakespeare from the Hindu point of view."<sup>33</sup> He contends that several characters in the plays of Shakespeare are created under the influence of Indian mythology. Arguing that Desdemona's "conception is not in accord with Western morality," that she is modelled on Sita, he claims:

The fall of Constantinople ushered in the Renaissance in Europe, flooding it, so *to* speak, with Eastern lore.... So it is not unlikely, nay, there is reason to believe that somehow or the other the Ramayana or Raghuvansham, so widely known in both the worlds, found its way to Europe. Research may some day find out the *missing links*,<sup>34</sup>

Quite apparently, Dutt is here relying on conjecture, making as far-fetched an interpretation of Shakespeare's *Othello* as Miller does of *King Lear*; both push their set agendas at the cost of Shakespeare's work. Like Miller, Dutt departs from the subject of Shakespeare's text, following his real agenda, hidden in the title, but overt in the "Preface", wherein he states:

The object of our dwelling at length on this point is to bring home to our readers the religious fanaticism that disturbs the peace of the world..... The spread of Islam with the sword in one hand and *Koran* in the other showed how far fanaticism might go. An archaeologist has recently unearthed a startling fact that Gregory, one of the 12 Evangelists, in his fanatical zeal

to spread the Gospel of Jesus in Armenia in 301 A.D., razed to the ground the Hindu Temple and routed the Hindu colony which had been in existence there since 149 B.C.<sup>35</sup>

Dutt seems a little confused here as Gregory, the illuminator, was not "one of the 12 Evangelists." Perhaps one could say that Gregory was an evangelist in that his mission was to convert the people of Armenia into Christianity. He can thus be said to have modelled himself on the twelve evangelists. Interestingly, all this and much more religious subject-matter is enlisted into Dutt's discussion of Desdemona in the "Preface" to his edition of *Hamlet*. What Dutt surmises might be nothing but a fantasy of his own; and even if his "historical findings" were true, of what relevance would they be to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or *Othello*? Dutt himself emerges in his commentary on Shakespeare as no less a religious fanatic than those he goes out to condemn, all in the name of teaching Shakespeare.

Thus through a comprehensive analysis of the critics of the colonial times, and their various interpretations of Shakespeare, there emerges a reasonably complex reality regarding the growth of English studies in India, a reality that challenges the *dominant* postcolonial analysis that exists on the subject. This paper disproves the contentions of postcolonial critics like Viswanathan who surmises that the British in India introduced the study of English literature "to perform the task of administering their colonial subjects."<sup>36</sup> A factual study of the way in which the first college of Western education came up, and how the authorities were involved in the area of education, reveals a reality contrary to what Viswanathan suggests. Antithetical readings of the popular belief that English teaching in India served a colonial end prove to be significant: English literature was indeed taught at Hindu College by Derozio, Richardson and Percival without toeing the imperial line. But Viswanathan's contention cannot be completely dismissed as there were critics like Miller too. Hence, the moot point is to visualize the reality as a whole rather than making sweeping generalizations. There are other critics who have made claims similar to those of Viswanathan. Ania Loomba states:

The process by which Christianity is made available to heathens, or indeed Shakespeare made available to the uncultured, is designed to assert the authority of these books, and through these books, the authority of European (or English) culture and to make the latter feel like clowns in the boudoir.<sup>37</sup>

Such observations take into account only easy examples like that of Miller and Dutt and ignore the three teachers at Hindu College and their contribution to the interpretation of Shakespeare during the colonial

period. Such approaches are as extraneous to Shakespeare as those of Miller and Dutt, for they selectively play up the interpretations of missionaries and educationists who appropriated Shakespeare for reading in schools and colleges.

Thus, it would be fair to contend that contemporary postcolonial theory takes recourse to straitjacketed theoretical frameworks through re-readings of projects of imperialism and those of the "empire writ[ing] back,"<sup>38</sup> simplifying in the process the complexity of available facts and the density of literary texts. While there is no denial of the relevance of culture and ideology as critical tools, it must be maintained that there is always room for interpretation: the manner in which the three teachers of Shakespeare at Hindu College in colonial Bengal made their significant contributions in the midst of ethnic and ideological divide, is a way of subverting contemporary approaches to Shakespeare's plays by vested interests on both sides.

## Notes

1. Kironmoy Raha's account of the foundation of Calcutta and the subsequent developments are detailed in *Bengal Theatre* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, India, 1978), pp. 8-10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 9.
3. See Sheldon Pollock (Ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 201-3.
4. See Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989).
5. See R.K. Dasgupta, "Shakespeare in Bengali Theatre," in *Indian Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 1, (New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1964), pp. 16-17.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
7. See S.K. Bhattacharyya, "Shakespeare and Bengali Theatre," in *Indian Literature*, Vol. 7, No.1, (New Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 1964), pp. 29-30.
8. See Dasgupta, p. 20.
9. See Kironmoy Raha, p. 9.
10. See Geoffrey Moorhouse, *Calcutta: The City Revealed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), pp. 41-45.
11. See Raha, p. 9.
12. Moorhouse, p. 61.
13. *Ibid.*, 58-62.
14. See Arabinda Poddar, "Shakespeare in John Company's Calcutta," in *Calcutta Essays on Shakespeare*, Ed. by Amlendu Bose (Calcutta University Press, 1966), p. 159.
15. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Eds. and trans. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

16. Raha, pp. 9-12.
17. Peary Chand Mittra, *A Biographical Sketch of David Hare*, Ed. by Gauranga Gopal Sengupta (Calcutta: Jijnasa, 1979), pp. 7-43.
18. See Amal Kumar Mukhopadhyay (Ed.), *175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoration Volume 1992* (Calcutta: Presidency College, 1996), pp. 3-5.
19. See M.A. Laird, *Missionaries and Education in Bengal 1793-1837* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), pp. 223-62.
20. See Thomas Edwards, *Henry Derozio* (1884; Calcutta: Ridhi-India, 1980), pp. 23-8.
21. See Mittra, pp. 149-50.
22. See Mukhopadhyay, pp. 6-7.
23. See "Richardson's Literary Recreations," in *Calcutta Gazette* (1851), p. 313.
24. For instance, studies like William Miller, *Shakespeare's Chart of Life: Being Studies of King Lear, Macbeth, Hamlet, Othello* (Madras: G.A. Nateson & Co., 1900).
25. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin (Eds.), *Empire Writes Back* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1999).
26. See Rosinka Chaudhuri, *Gentlemen Poets in Colonial Bengal: Emergent Nationalism and the Orientalist Project* (Calcutta: Seagull, 2002), p. 92.
27. See Mukhopadhyay, pp. 65-6.
28. See H.M. Percival (Ed.), "Introduction," *Antony and Cleopatra* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1955). Also, See H.M. Percival (Ed.), "Introduction," *Macbeth* (Calcutta: S. Chaudhuri, 1929.)
29. See H.M. Percival (Ed.), "Introduction," *Tempest* (Calcutta: S. Chaudhuri, 1928), pp. xlix.
30. See Michael D. Harkavy (Ed.), *The New Webster's Introduction Encyclopedia: The New Illustrated Home Reference Guide*, Vol. 4 (Naples: Florida: Trident Press International, 1996), p. 394.
31. See Miller, pp. 32-3.
32. See Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977).
33. See Samarjit Dutt, *Shakespeare's Hamlet: An Oriental Study* (Calcutta: Dasgupta & Co., 1928),
34. *Ibid.*, p.vii.
35. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.
36. See Viswanathan, p. 10.
37. Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 89-90.
38. See Bill Ashcroft and others in *Empire Writes Back*.



## SHAKESPEARE STUDIES AT THE FIRST INDIAN COLLEGE

Whatever may have been the individual readings in British India, as a component of a course of study Shakespeare was introduced in the first Indian college—the Hindu College—that came up at Calcutta in 1817. The environment that the college created for modern learning, as against the medieval scholastic learning in the Persian and Sanskrit schools, was most suited to the spirit of Shakespeare's plays. The first-generation teachers of English at Hindu College were the greatest, who laid the foundation of Shakespeare studies in India, considering him the most universal writer and the greatest dramatist. To know the nature of response these teachers inspired among their students is of great value to the scholars of India's Shakespeare.

The first institution to impart Western education to the Indian youth came into existence with the combined effort of some liberal Englishmen and Anglophile Indians. The most striking feature of the college was its determined effort to impart secular education, ensuring that the emphasis remained on English literature and Western science, not on Indian metaphysics. Of the early sponsors of the college, the two most prominent were Raja Rammohan Roy, an influential Anglophile Indian, and David Hare, a Scottish watch-maker in Calcutta, who were strongly opposed to sectarian or theological education. Roy regarded the propagation of purely Sanskrit learning as useless, and David Hare dissociated himself from missionaries who wanted to give a Christian bias to education. Hare used to refuse admission to students who had studied at the schools run by missionaries.

Hindu College prospered as an academic institution, with students crowding for admissions. Interestingly, this college belies the thesis propounded by Gauri Viswanathan in her book *Masks of Conquest* (1989), where she speaks of the imperial maneuverings that went into the framing of the English literature syllabus with the intent of subjugating the natives. In the first place, Hindu College came into existence, not because the British wanted to impose English education, but because the native population was clamouring for it. And it was run predominantly by the native management that framed the curriculum for the college.

The student response showed how interested they were in learning this new knowledge. The beginning of English teaching at Hindu college had started in 1828 when Henry Louis Vivian Derozio was appointed lecturer in English literature and History. He was a legendary figure who died before he was 23 years old but his legacy lived on long after his death. Oaten compares Derozio to Keats, 'for in both men there was a passionate temperament combined with unbounded sympathy with nature. Both died while their powers were not yet fully developed.'<sup>1</sup> Oaten's comparison is not quite apt, as Derozio, in his radical views, was closer to Byron than Keats. Although a great poet—the first Indian poet in English—he was still greater as a teacher. As is well known, Derozio 'exercised a magical influence on his pupils many of whom (described later as the Young Bengal Group) were cut off from their moorings in traditional beliefs.'<sup>2</sup>

A local newspaper, *The India Gazette*, reported as early as 31 December 1824, when Derozio was still at school: 'The English recitations from different authors were extremely meritorious and reflect great credit from the scholars and the teachers. A boy of the name Derozio gave a good conception of Shylock.' A few years later, when Derozio joined as a lecturer at Hindu College, he taught Shakespeare with total involvement and recited the plays with his students.

As a teacher of Shakespeare, as well as of other English writers, Derozio demonstrated an exceptional talent and inspired an exceptional following. As a report of the time reveals, 'It seems that Derozio was ahead of his times, but the spirit of free inquiry which inspired his teaching was in conformity with the best ideals of the college, and although he was a victim of intolerance, the principle he stood for has never ceased to animate succeeding generations of teachers and pupils.'<sup>4</sup> Like Keats and other admirers of Shakespeare, Derozio wrote panegyric verses on the bard. The two sonnets on "*Romeo and Juliet*" and "Yorick's Skull" are an evidence of his devotion to what Coleridge called 'the divinity of Shakespeare'.

After Derozio came Captain David Lester Richardson, who joined Hindu College in 1837 as Professor of literature. He continued the tradition of inspired teaching started by Derozio. Richardson is still remembered for his remarkable teaching and interpretation of Shakespeare's plays. As the memoirs of one of his students reveal, Richardson's impact on his students was deep and wide:

Indeed he was never so enthusiastic in his vocation as when introducing his boys to an intimate acquaintance with the great poets of his nation, and enriching their minds with the most precious treasures of British thought. The two poets he pitched upon to teach his boys were Shakespeare and

Pope, with whose writings his mind was thoroughly saturated. Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, and the two parts of *Henry the Fourth*, together with Pope's *Essay on Criticism*, *Rape of the Lock*, *Essay on Man* and *Prologue to the Satires*, were what he taught in endless alternation. Only the choice of *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Timon of Athens* and Young's *Night Thoughts* without either the *Paradise Lost* or *Childe Harold* was all the change we had. But Richardson's reading of Shakespeare and Pope was excellent... [and] made an impression which has not yet worn out in me.... So much had it charmed Macaulay that he is said to have remarked to him: 'If I were to forget everything of India, I could never forget your reading of Shakespeare'.<sup>5</sup>

Richardson as teacher-critic of Shakespeare was well aware of the critical heritage of Shakespeare's work. He mentions, besides the English critics, such as Johnson and Pope, the Schlegel brothers, which shows his wide awareness of what was being written on Shakespeare in Europe. The following excerpt from his essay 'On Egotism' is significant:

It has been made a question whether true genius is conscious of its powers, but I think there can be little doubt upon the subject. It is certain that both Milton and Shakespeare were fully aware of the greatness of their endowments.... Shakespeare's sonnets which by their personal traits have so delighted the two Schlegels, who are puzzled to account for the neglect with which they have been treated by the poet's own countrymen, abound in illustrations of that proud and lofty confidence with which the writer anticipated his immortality.<sup>6</sup>

One can see the critical context here of the debate about genius, which, initiated by Dryden, continued in the time of Coleridge and Hazlitt. Richardson seems closer to the Romantics than to the Neoclassicists.

Similarly, in another essay 'Thealema and Clearchus', Richardson speaks elaborately of Shakespeare's characters:

Take away from the dramatic writer of the present day his incidents and plots, and you leave him poor indeed; but we do not think so much of what happens to the persons of Shakespeare's drama, as of the nature of their hearts and intellects. Their character and not their fate is most important to our minds. Hamlet is an intensely interesting personage, without any reference whatever to his position; and equally so is Macbeth, though a being of a directly opposite nature. When we are presented with such full-length pictures of humanity as these, so distinct and animated, we receive an impression that can never fade with life itself. Did any man, woman, or child that has been introduced to Hamlet or Macbeth or Othello or Lear, ever happen to forget them? But he, who wishes to keep up his acquaintance with the personages of the modern drama, must have a strong

memory indeed, if he does not find it necessary to refresh it with occasional re-perusals.<sup>7</sup>

Although Richardson echoes a good deal of Johnson in the cited comment, he is certainly closer to Coleridge, once again, than to Johnson. His greater emphasis on character than on plot is typical of the Romantic criticism, especially that of Coleridge. In his essay 'On Literary Fame and Literary Pursuits', he talks of Shakespeare as an example of a great author 'who has a wider kingdom and a longer reign than any sovereign on earth.'<sup>8</sup>

Speaking of Shakespeare, that he 'never blotted a line', he agrees with Ben Jonson: 'would that he had blotted a thousand'. But he also cites Pope to show that the claim made by Heminges and Condell in their publication of the First Folio (1623) was not quite correct, because 'the great bard did not always disdain the task of correction, though he sometimes neglected it.'<sup>9</sup> Richardson asserts that *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and the tragedy of *Hamlet* were almost entirely rewritten. There are several other essays where Richardson returns to Shakespeare over and over again to reiterate his superiority over other poets, making valuable critical comments on individual plays.

Richardson also remained editor of the *Bengal Annual* from 1830 to 1837, afterwards editing the *Calcutta Monthly Journal* and *The Orient Pearl*, and during 1834-49 *The Calcutta Literary Gazette*. These periodicals are among the most valuable sources of literary activity of the time in Calcutta. Richardson himself was a poet having to his credit seven volumes between 1822 and 1855 from Calcutta and London.<sup>10</sup> As a teacher and critic of Shakespeare, Richardson considered himself equal to even the greatest native scholars of the bard of Stratford. His long commentary on Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare is a testimony to that belief.

As Derozio became the first teacher of Shakespeare in India, Richardson became the first critic of Shakespeare. It is in his prose writings that we find critical comments on Shakespeare and his scholars, editors, critics, etc. From the memoirs of his students as well as from his own writings it is evident that Richardson was highly regarded as an Indian authority on Shakespeare, though his status among Shakespeare critics outside of India would figure far below many.

From these writings of Richardson his performance in the classroom can be imagined. In his teaching, the emphasis must have been on the humanistic aspect of the text. His wide reading and critical analysis clearly show that he was able to see who was writing for all ages and who was writing for an age, as is evident in his comparison of Shakespeare and Pope. He was certainly not implementing any imperial agenda. His agenda

was of a different kind — to introduce his students to the beauties of fine writing. Another evidence of his having been an influential teacher of Shakespeare can be found in Majumdar's reminiscence—yet another student of Richardson. The Indian student reports that Richardson was such a dedicated teacher that he would correct students' essays even in the tiffin hour. Richardson always advised his students to write simple English and helped them to develop critical intelligence.<sup>11</sup>

Richardson's interest in encouraging his students to attempt creative writing in English produced many noted poets in Calcutta. Of these, Churan Dutt's *School's Hours or Poems, Composed at School* (1839) and Rajnarayan Dutt's *Osmyn: An Arabic Tale* were both dedicated to him. A famous student and an ardent admirer of Richardson's teaching was Michael Madhusudan Dutt, for whom Richardson was a role model. The amateur dramatic society, popularly known as the Chowringhee Theatre, was founded in 1813. Richardson was also among the patrons. There were other playhouses in Calcutta at the time, but Chowringhee was considered the best, which soon took its lead in staging Shakespeare's plays. The first significant performance was held in the first week of April 1814.<sup>12</sup> There is also a reference to another performance in 1816 when *Henry V* was staged to collect a benefit fund for the families of soldiers who had been killed or disabled in the battle of Waterloo. Performances of other plays of Shakespeare followed and continued for many years, lasting till 1839. Unfortunately, the famous theatre was burnt down on the night of 31 May 1839. But the tradition of staging Shakespeare continued in other theatres.

Dutt was also the first Bengali dramatist of real merit. His writings had a great influence of Shakespeare. His use of blank verse, his inception of character, of tragedy, of use of the comic in tragedy was due considerably to the Shakespearean influence. Dutt always believed that 'no real improvement in the Bengali drama could be expected until blank verse was introduced into it.'<sup>13</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a famous novelist, another student of Hindu College, compared Kalidas, the greatest Indian dramatist, to a garden in contrast to Shakespeare who appeared to him to be a sea. A prominent mention of Shakespeare is found in his novel *Rajani*:

Opened the picture of Desdemona and observed: 'you get her patience, sweetness and modesty, but where is her courage with the patience, and her pride of constancy with the modesty?' He pointed to the illumination of Juliet and said: 'You have here figure of a beauty in the first flush of youth, but you miss youth's irrepressible restlessness.'<sup>14</sup>

Chatterjee's character here symbolizes the conflicting ideologies that Calcutta was confronting at the time: the Anglicists championing the

western learning and the Orientalists promoting the ideas of antiquity. Hindu College continued its tradition to produce brilliant students who became leading intellectuals of their time and influenced the educated issues in Calcutta. Shakespeare, for sure, remained one of their proud possessions.

From the accounts of annual prize-giving ceremonies of Hindu College during 1825-38, it can be seen that every year the students used to recite from Shakespeare's plays. One such report in *Samachar Darpan* of 20 February 1830 says: 'In the Prize Distribution Function of the Hindu College some young students recited from memory, with excellent pronunciation, several parts from the poems of an English poet named Shakespeare'. At one such function, Madhusudan Dutt appeared in the role of the Duke of Gloucester in a scene from *Henry VI*.

In Hindu College, there also used to be organized play-readings and performances of snippets from Shakespeare. Among the boy participants were many who grew into distinguished personalities. These performances included the one on 27 January 1827, where some scenes from *Julius Caesar* were staged at a college function in which Kashiprasad Ghosh participated. The trial scene from *The Merchant of Venice* was enacted by the Hindu College boys on 12 January in the Government House. A contemporary comment on the performance says: 'Surely this may be called a remarkable epoch in the history of India, seeing as we do, the native youth of Bengal cultivating the dramatic literature of the West, and even encountering the difficulties of theatrical representations'.<sup>15</sup> Next year the students of Hindu College organized a number of recitations from *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Cymbeline*, *Henry VI*, and *Hamlet* at the Government House on 18 February. The Hindu College boys are said to have not fared well that year, but they revived their prestige next year with a spectacular performance of *The Merchant of Venice*. In the year 1831, Prasanna Kumar Tagore formed a theatre troupe specifically to stage Shakespeare's plays. The Hindu College students gave many sterling performances there.

In 1833, scenes from *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Othello* were staged. In 1834, Madhusudan Dutt played the Duke of Gloucester in *Henry VI*; in 1837, the trial scene was staged; performances for 1838 included the soliloquies of *Henry V*, *Richard III* and *Hamlet*.

All the foregoing reports amply demonstrate the deep impact Shakespeare had on the students of Hindu College, the first to introduce Shakespeare studies in India. The reception of the colonized to the English texts, ignored by the postcolonialists like Gauri Viswanathan, is necessary to know the impact of English studies in colonial India. The educators like