

Adaptation of Shakespeare's Plays from Bangladesh Perspectives

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Abstract

The Bard of Avon refuses to be limited in time and space. Shakespeare wrote plays for the late 16th and early 17th Century Elizabethan-Jacobean audience but left thousands of readers and audiences of the world spellbound indicating the timeless nature of his works. In this twenty-first century also, a standard number of people take reading and watching Shakespeare's plays as a hobby. This level of esteem also has inspired the adaptation of his works by the scholars, translators, and dramatists of Bangladesh. This paper intends to underline the historical background of adaptation of Shakespeare's works in the subcontinent Bangla plays, and show how worldwide psychological chaos like Othello Syndrome prevails in "Othello ebong (and) Othello" and "Othello Syndrome," the television dramas of Bangladesh. The study will try to discuss how Shakespeare's plays relate to the context of Bangladesh and its culture, thus proving Shakespeare's universality.

Key Words: Adaptation, Bangladesh, Shakespeare, Othello Syndrome, and Television Drama.

In the subcontinent during the colonial period, the city of Calcutta (Kolkata) built new theatre houses for the elite class of the society during 1775-1808 and mostly presented the plays of Shakespeare by translating them into Bangla. The popularly staged plays were *Othello*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*. By contextualizing in Bangla the names of the characters, places, and actions without changing the plot, Bharotendu Harishchandra (1850-1885) presented the first-ever adaptation of Shakespeare in the subcontinent. The audience of the time enjoyed *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-99) in the name of *Durlobh Bandhu* in 1880, where the playwright portrayed the conflict between the Hindu and the Jain religions instead of that between the Christians and the Jews. The power politics of religion has been in the scenario for ages and it reminds Dr. Sataybrata Rout of Nandi Bhatia as she says that "The adaptation also

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indicates how the knowledge of colonial models used like a tool to strike back the colonizers.” (Rout, 2018) Another pioneer of Bangla prose Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-1891) also adapted Shakespeare’s *The Comedy of Errors* (1623) as *Vrantibilash (Luxury in Errors)* where he kept the plot of the original play but highlighted the time he belonged to.

The “Shakespearean Theatre Company” (1947) came to the subcontinent by a British actor named Geoffrey Kendal, a dedicated Shakespeare lover, whose company performed Shakespeare across India with Utpal Dutta, one of the most gifted actors of Bengal joining the company as an actor. While speaking about the indigenous expressions used in the production of Dutta’s adaptations, Rout (2018) refers to Rustom Bharucha who said that “Dutta’s conception of staging Shakespeare for the (Bengali) masses may have been crude but it was in all probability closer to the guts of the Elizabethan audience of Shakespeare’s plays in recent years” (Rout, p. 7). Though he left the group later, Dutta formed his own company “The Little Theatre Group,” where he also had adapted Shakespeare’s plays in Bangla. His famous adaptation was *King Lear* into a Jatra performance “Ajker Shahjahan,” that had created a milestone in the history of the theatre and which was made into a Hindi film “The Last Lear” (2007) for which Ritupornro Ghosh, an eminent cinema director, was awarded by the National Film Fare.

Bangla plays have adapted Shakespeare in different dimensions. Shakespeare has been explored in various ways by the scholars and playwrights of Bangladesh. The eminent Shakespeare scholars in Bangladesh are Prof Munir Chowdhury, Prof. Kabir Chowdhury, Prof. Serajul Islam Chowdhury, Prof. Imtiaz Habib, Prof. Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, Abu Shahriar, Syed Shamsul Haque, Shamsur Rahman, Prof. Selim Sarwar, Prof. Fakrul Alam, Prof. Quazi Mostain Billah, Prof. Dr. Mohit Ul Alam, Prof. Salimullah Khan, and Mafize Chowdhury. Shakespeare’s works are rediscovered and adapted by the scholarly and creative artworks of these Bard-fans in Bangladesh. Just before the Independence Professor Munier Chowdhury (1970) translated *The Taming of the Shrew* in Bangla as “Mukhora Ramany Bashikaran.” In the 80s Bangladesh Television telecast the play, which was immensely enjoyed by the audience. That step accelerated other playwrights to adapt Shakespearean themes in Bangla representations, while some changed the names of the characters and some others directly translated from the works of Shakespeare. Chowdhry had started another translation of *Othello*, but he could not complete that. His

brother, Professor Kabir Chowdhury (1923-2011) completed the task. Abu Shahriar translated *Hamlet*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* (1978). Many of the Bangladeshi writers had translated *Hamlet* in Bangla, like Syed Sajjad Hossain in 1974 and Shamsur Rahman in 1995. The family feud for properties and infidelity of the family members have echoes in Bangladesh too. Kott (2018) is appropriate in justifying the plot and theme of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* as a universal one to be translated by the writers of the world. He declares the importance of *Hamlet* in the essay "Hamlet of the Mid-Century" in the following way:

There are many subjects in Hamlet. There is politics, forces opposed to morality; there is discussion of the divergence between theory and practice...there is the tragedy of love, as well as family drama, political, eschatological and metaphysical problems are considered. (Kott, p. 33)

The adaptation of Shakespeare's artworks has been staged by different theatre groups of Bangladesh. Syed Shamsul Haque's *Macbeth* (1984) and *The Tempest* (1987) had jointly been staged by the two renowned theatre groups, Bangladesh Nagorik and Theatre. He also had translated Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* (1602) for Nagorik and wrote "Gananayak" in 1983 based on Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599).

The translation of a poem from one language to another language is a difficult task as there is a fear of misinterpretation. But this tough job is very well completed by two eminent scholars of Bangladesh, Prof. Zillur Rahman Siddiqui, and Prof. Dr. Selim Sarwar respectively. The twelfth line of the Sonnet number 146 of Shakespeare, "Within be fed, without be rich no more" is translated by Prof. Shudhindra Nath Dutta of Kolkata as 'মিটুক মর্মের ক্ষুধা, ঘনঘটা অশ্রুতে গলুক', (Tofayel, 2014). Prof. Siddiqui translates it as 'অন্দরে ঐশ্বর্য আনো, বারে যাক বাহ্য অলংকার', (Tofayel, 2014) and Prof. Sarwar translates it in the following way, 'মিটুক আত্মার ক্ষুধা, শরীরের জেল্লা আর নয়', (Tofayel, 2014).

The translation of Shakespeare's plays in Bangladesh takes place almost after four hundred years that proves the universality of Shakespearean creation and its impact in Bangladesh. Professor Serajul Islam Chowdhury's "The Female Characters of Shakespeare" (শেক্সপিয়ারের মেয়েরা) in Bangla has received immense popularity among the students of the English Departments and equally among general readers for its elaborating on the female characters of his plays.

There have been a series of Shakespeare's translations done by Mafize Chowdhury and Professor Dr. Mohit Ul Alam. They have translated almost all the famous plays of Shakespeare, and the latter's oeuvre includes in prose translations in Bengali the following plays: *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *As You Like It*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. Both the translators provide the authentic essence of the original plays. Those translation works echo the words of Jeremy Munday (2008) in *Introducing Translation Studies*, "The process of translation between two different written languages involves the translator changing an original written text (the source of the text) in the original verbal language (the source language) into a written text (the target text) in a different verbal language (the target language)" (Munday, p. 5). Professor Quazi Mostain Billah edited *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2013) with an introduction and notes and also published a short biography of Shakespeare, namely, *William Shakespeare Jibon O Kormo* (2006). Prof. Mohit edited *As You Like It* (2014), *Hamlet* (2019), and *Macbeth* (2021) from the Albatross Classics, Dhaka.

The following part of the study elaborately discusses a drama published in *The Daily Star* back in 2010, namely *Hamlet in Love*, written by Professor Dr. Mohit Ul Alam, and two television dramas telecast in the late 90s and at the beginning of the 21st Century, namely "Othello ebong Othello" ("Othello and Othello") by Saeed (2000) and "Othello Syndrome."

Inspired by a course he conducted on Shakespeare's comedies at the tertiary level, Professor Alam published a drama in *The Daily Star* in 2010 where he adapted renowned characters of Shakespeare in shortened forms like Hamlet as Ham, Ophelia as Ophi, Macbeth as Mac, who is Hamlet's closest friend, Antony as Ant, as Ham's other friend, while Cassio turns into an immigrant to America, and Desdemona becomes the Khala or aunt of Ophi. Of the other friends of Ham, there are Horatio as Hor, Iago, and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. While Romeo and Juliet, Polonius (Ophi's father), Shylock (Polonius's friend), Brabantio (Polonius's friend), Cordelia; Rosalind; or Portia as Ant's ex-beloved, Enobarbus, Cleopatra as Ant's would-be fiancé and the Lux beauty of Bangladesh also form the the group of other characters. There are two scenes in the drama, one is located in the Dhanmondi Lakeside and another one is in the Campus Lobby of a private university of Bangladesh.

In the opening scene, Ophi informs Ham about her father Polonius's decision. As we can see in *Hamlet* that Ophelia is puzzled by Hamlet's attitude towards her, the present Ophi of *Hamlet in Love* is also in-between "To be or not to be" (*Hamlet*, Act: III Scene: I), that is, whether to become Ham's wife or not. Polonius has arranged his daughter's marriage with an American Immigrant, Cassio as he wants to assure the red passport for his daughter and a settled immigrant future. In the beginning, Ophi promises not to leave Ham; but within a very short time, she says that Cassio has sent the plane ticket to fly to Boston next week and both her *khala* (aunt) Desdemona, and her father, Polonius, will accompany her. Ham's appeal doesn't help him in any way to continue the relationship. The lover-beloved conflict remains the same along the traditional line of being assured of a better future by getting married to a man with fortune than a classmate. Today's Ophi is more practical, unlike the Elizabethan Ophelia.

The next day Ham shares his sorrow with his childhood friend Mac, who studies with him in the same Department at a private university in Dhaka. Ham is in a great crisis like Shakespeare's Hamlet and echoes the world-famous quote, "I'm in a do or die situation. To marry Ophelia, or not to marry her..." ("*Hamlet in Love*", Scene 2) that reminds the readers of Hamlet's agonizing query whether to commit suicide or not, to end the pain of experiencing the bitter truth of his life, "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (*Hamlet*, Act: III Scene: I). It seems both Mac and Ham belong to the same affluent class of society, families of which can send their children to expensive private universities. And Shakespeare's Macbeth and Hamlet also bear the royal blood; so they can have easy access to each other to share and care.

Mac suggests to Ham by following their predecessors Romeo and Juliet to elope with Ophi and then marry her. This modern Romeo along with his friend searches on the website "to see pictures on how the Romeos in the world elope with their Juliets," ("*Hamlet in Love*, Scene 2) which is justified in the context of the twenty-first-century that whenever there is a problem, there is 'Google' to solve it. Ham cannot endure the breakup, so he justifies like the actual Hamlet "Frailty, thy name is woman!" ("*Hamlet in Love*", Scene 2), indicating his dissatisfaction at his mother's second marriage.

Professor Alam adapts this in Ham's speech at his distressed moment, "But Mac, you said so prominently that all our tomorrows turn disappointingly into

the dust of the present.” (“Hamlet in Love”, Scene 2) The dramatist is here intensely focusing on the very fact of the marginalized position of the women of Bangladesh, whether it is a male chauvinistic approach or not it is left to the readers: “...Ophelia is a woman, she believes in the future. They see education as future, marriage as future, children as future, houses as future, and American as future.” (“Hamlet in Love”, Scene 2). The charisma of the dramatist lies in adapting the high tragedy to the light vein of comedy.

Keeping the characters' basic attitudes alike, the dramatist justifies his adaptation. Polonius's friends are Iago and Mr Brabantio. In this play, Antony has the habit of switching his love from one lady to another. He has now fallen in love with Cleopatra, “The lux beauty of this year” (“Hamlet in Love”, Scene 2). Horatio as Hamlet's true friend guides him as Horatio of Shakespeare has done in *Hamlet*. With his sound and reasoning mind Horatio suggests that if the ladder is placed inside the wall to elope with Ophi, “Ophi climbs over the wall” (“Hamlet in Love”, Scene 2). According to him if they put the ladder inside the wall “then Ophelia's fleeing her father's charge, and she is an adult, it's her choice, and the law will defend her” (“Hamlet in Love”, Scene 2). If the ladder is placed outside the wall then Hamlet will be considered an intruder and the law will be against him. He again assures all that “If Hamlet jumps the wall and goes to Ophelia, that'll be outright kidnapping. If Ophelia jumps the wall and glides onto the street side, it's not kidnapping” (“Hamlet in Love”, Scene 2). Then all agree with him and keep the ladder inside the wall to have a ‘they live happily ever after’ kind of ending to the drama. Shakespeare's Hamlet admires Horatio for his reasoning qualities, praises him for his virtue and self-control: “Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man/As e'er my conversation cop'd withal” (Alam, 2019, Ed. *Hamlet*, Act III, Scene II, p. 138). The dramatist also ends the drama with the pragmatic decision of Horatio, Hamlet's true friend, who has always been a balanced and truly guiding friend to Hamlet in Shakespeare's world.

Professor Alam sets the story from the Bangladesh perspective but the adaptation does not violate the essence of Shakespearean flavours. The names of the characters, plot, and dialogues according to the situation of the plot justify the adaptation contextually, culturally, and successfully. The Shakespearean lovers read his famous tragedies and are moved by their intense psychological portrayal of human nature, but by reading this play by Alam they may have a scope to think over the matter from a different dimension, namely, comedy, the other side of life necessary to live and love.

Ekushey Television Channel of Bangladesh telecast the drama “Othello ebong (and) Othello” in the late 90s. The drama begins with the setting in an ancient building in Dhaka on a rainy day. Three passers-by take shelter in the building. Hamid Ali works in a local humanitarian office. Next is Rafik Uddin, who is a college lecturer in the Department of Politics. But he loves to read Shakespeare’s plays. Then after the third character arrives in a very shabby dress and with restless eyes whom some can identify as a beggar, and some others will call *him* a mad man. The college teacher opens a copy of *Othello* (1603), one of the famous tragedies of William Shakespeare. Then an interesting story begins. The shabby man starts assimilating himself with the Moorish General Othello and says, “I have also committed the same crime as Othello has” (“Othello ebong Othello”, TV Drama).

In a high-pitched tone, he declares that Shakespeare does not complete his *Othello* in the right way. Othello’s committing suicide is very dramatic, there is no doubt “I kiss'd thee ere I kill'd thee: no way but this; Killing myself, to die upon a kiss” (*Othello*, Act V, Scene II, Ln- 410). But his death or suicide cannot justify the punishment of Othello for the murder of an innocent wife like Desdemona. Committing suicide or death means the end of every pain. According to the shabby man, “If a person bears the pain of crime in every conscious breath, he/she will go through the remorse in every moment. If he cannot sleep for a while in his lifetime, only then we can say that he is duly punished” (“Othello ebong Othello”, TV Drama). Then he begins his own story after delivering a long prologue assimilating elements of Shakespeare’s *Othello* with him in it.

The name of the character is Shahed who is from a well-off family background and gets married to his beloved from Dhaka University. While describing his wife, Mst Jebunnesa or Jebu, he equates her beauty and posture with the ideal beauty, sometimes called, “Rabindrik,” which represents her as a traditionally Bengali woman who loves to wear saree, has a very tender touch in her eyes and vocal tone, and also she adores Tagore’s songs that shows the sophistication of her mind. There is another couple, namely Rasheda and Reza, who are family friends of Shahed and Jebu.

The crisis begins at the second couple’s house and it enhances the destruction of the happiness of Shahed and Jebu. Reza has had an illicit relationship with his secretary. Rasheda has seen them together while they were making love in the office and then she decides to take revenge on her husband. As part of her

payback motive against her husband, one night Rasheda calls Shahed at her home and seduces him to stay with her at night. Shahed is tempted and lies to Jebu that he has to stay at the office overnight but he makes love to Rasheda that initiates the cursed moment in Shahed and Jebu's life.

After achieving her goal Rasheda suggests that Shahed forget that perturbing night of their life, and behaves and walks around him with her husband very normally as if there had been nothing on that very dark and mischievous night in Shahed's life. There is no trace of their one-night physical relationship in her attitude. But Shahed cannot come out of his trauma, which troubles him to no end as he loves his wife unconditionally. It then leaves him with a new idea. The seeds of suspicion are culminating in his mind where Othello starts to emerge in Shahed's mind. He thinks somehow Jebu or Rasheda may come to know about that night and they may also take revenge. Since then if any man other than Jebu's husband talks to her, Shahed suspects that there might be an illicit kind of relation between them. One day Rasheda comes to their home to give a big ruhi fish for Shahed and also helps Jebu to fix the electric line of her bed-chamber. Maybe the dramatist has the bed-chamber scene of Othello in mind to end the life of a twentieth-century Desdemona, Jebu. Soon after he has departed from the house, Shahed shows his other face to Jebu. He strangles her to death over his suspicion and jealousy and echoes the dialogue of "Put out the light and then put out the light" (Othello, Act V, Scene II). Now he is facing death in every moment living with the secret of his crime. He believes, "Othello also deserves my kind of punishment like life in death condition" Here, the playwright has mingled crime and punishment as issuing from the same kind of guilt.

The playwright cannot go out of Shakespearean influence. He ends the play dramatically when his protagonist says to the lecturer that since he has found Shakespeare's *Othello* in his hand, he tells him the story of his life and how it echoes the similar guilt like Othello's. If he had *King Lear* in his hands, maybe the story would evolve round how the children let the old father get out of the stormy night after inheriting the properties of their father. Finally, he demands money from the lecturer and gets a twenty taka note for food. The humanitarian worker finds him a fraud who has told a fabricated story assimilating with Shakespeare's *Othello* to get money. Whatever it may be, the playwright of Bangladesh assimilate the plots of Shakespearean drama in his television drama very successfully.

The next discussion will be on the drama “Othello Syndrome” written by Robena Reza Jui, a budding dramatist, and the drama was telecast on one of the television channels of Bangladesh in 2017. Shoaib and Diba are a newly married couple. Shoaib works in a multinational company. He remains busy in his office throughout the day. He cannot spare enough time for his wife. The wife wants him to take her to the shopping center, or to have their meal together, but nothing works out to satisfy the twenty-first-century fun-loving wife. One day, out of curiosity, she follows her husband and finds him going to the office with one of her lady colleagues and since then she starts following them to the office. Unfortunately, for the next few days, the wife sees the same thing of her husband and the lady colleague going to the office together. It makes her crazy and she leaves their house for her friend’s house. The whole night Shoaib looks for her here and there and while early in the morning she comes back home. Finally, they decide to overcome their problem and take a professional guideline from a psychiatrist on their problem. The psychiatrist diagnoses the wife as suffering from ‘Othello Syndrome’. The psychologist suggests the husband to take her somewhere outside the known city for a change. On their first day, they enjoy their time together in the new place. While the next day, the husband takes her to a place he had visited earlier, It makes the wife crazy and she asks him angrily, “Did you come here earlier? Who was with you? Maybe you were with your ex-girlfriend, that’s why you cannot forget the place?” (“Othello Syndrome”, TV Drama) These words are enough to spoil the happy tour of a happy couple. They go back to Dhaka in the same depressed mood. Finally, the truth comes up that the wife has an affair before marrying Shoaib. She cannot forget her ex-boyfriend, and that makes her suspicious of her husband. She thinks her husband may have such a relationship and becomes crazy. The tv drama ends with the husband’s loving tone of helping her to forget her past and have happy conjugal life for the rest of their life.

The term *Othello Syndrome* is initiated from William Shakespeare’s *Othello*, where the protagonist Othello is plotted by Iago into thinking that his wife, Desdemona, has an affair with another man. He is overwhelmed with jealousy and kills his innocent wife. In the study of psychology, Othello Syndrome refers to “a person experiencing illogical and unfounded rage” (Cowing, 2018), and it is also called “morbid or delusional jealousy, this is a psychiatric disorder exhibiting obsession, delusion, violent tendencies, and is often associated with a mental illness.” (Cowing, 2018) The present world has given birth to so many of Shakespeare’s Othellos throughout the world. In most cases, the partner

becomes jealous out of a silly thing or nothing like the husband divorces a wife for kissing a horse. (Jensen, 2015) The above-mentioned drama has covered all the symptoms of a wife suffering from the Othello Syndrome, and obviously, the drama and the study of psychology are greatly indebted to the great Bard of Avon for the worldwide accepted term “Othello Syndrome” for a jealous husband or wife.

The Bard of Avon remains in the hearts of the scholars, translators, playwrights, readers, and audiences of Bangladesh to inspire them to adapt the universality of his plots and themes. Shakespeare’s articulation of human feelings is the core of human life that the readers and audience of Shakespeare can feel even in the adaptations of Shakespeare. He has not bound his plays essentially in a temporal context which makes the playwrights of the other culture and context adapt Shakespeare’s works so voraciously even after ages. More adaptations of Shakespeare’s works in Bangladesh will make the literature lovers more enthusiastic to read and connect Shakespeare’s creation to Bangla culture as Professor Fakrul Alam believes that the “beginning of our fascination” for Shakespeare can be “accentuated through reimagining them [his works] for our students in Bangladeshi situations” (Alam, 2016).

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