

Reception of Narratives across Cultures, Time and Spaces, through the Lens of Colonial Impact: Journey of a Chinese Legend and the Literary Works of Shakespeare

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Abstract: Colonization, as a historical phenomenon, marks the exchange of thoughts, narratives and different story-telling from one geo-political environment to the other. In the time of reception, the contemporary political and literary movements of the receiver's position play a vital role in shaping the narrative keeping accordance with its need of the moment, but keeping the crux intact. This paper explores the journey of a Chinese legend from East to West, getting nurtured and molded there, and then, further being received in South Asia. This comparative perspective expounds the relevance of reception theory under the lens of colonialism and studies the journey of Shakespearean texts in the time of colonialism in India.

Keywords: Colonization, geo-political environment, Chinese legend, East to West, reception theory, colonialism, Shakespearean texts.

1. Introduction

During the period of colonization, that started around 16th century, different kinds of contact or exchanges are evident in case of art and literature. Keeping pace with the time and space of the place of the reception, these exchanges differ. Interestingly, there are narratives which travel from east to west and then, it comes back, being received by the east again. Other than this circular journey, there is also a linear journey of the reception of the Shakespearean texts which were received by Indian academics around 19th and 20th century, in the time of colonialism in India that further caused the modernity to take place in Indian society.

2. Objectives

This paper has the objectives to,

Explore the journeys of the narratives, be it circular or be it linear, under the lens of colonial contact between the east and the west. Some literary testimonies of these exchanges are studied as genuine outcomes of the contact which allows a spontaneous flow of narratives between different socio-political and cultural spheres. Understand how the contemporary

political and literary movements are responsible for the reception of the narratives and manipulate them to enhance their accessibility in that time-space.

3. Methodology

In the exploration of the literary testimonies and the understanding of their feasibility from the background of colonialism, this paper engages reception theory and interpretation theory to contextualize the testimonies as historical phenomena.

4. Discussion and Textual References

This paper shows the journey of two narratives in the time of colonialism. Here, colonialism would be regarded as a lens to get a clear view of the time and space with their contemporary demands and efficacies. A Chinese legend undergoes a journey from China to Germany and then from Germany to India. The Chinese version of Chalk Circle was written in 14th century by an anonymous writer in the time of Yuan Dynasty (1259-1368). It is a Zaju verse play having 4 acts and one prologue of it. Here 16 years old Hai Tang was sold into a house of prostitution after her father's death. She was befriended by Ma Chun Shing, a wealthy tax collector, who takes her into his house as 2nd wife, where she bears him a son Shoulang and here, she earns the jealousy of his first wife, Ah-Siu. She accuses the second wife of adultery and claims to the court that Shoulang is her own child. Hai Tang is arrested and beaten mercilessly. As Hai Tang is about to be hanged, she is rescued by Bao Zheng in a similar scene to the "Judgement of Solomon." Shoulang is placed in a circle of chalk between the two women and each is ordered to pull the child toward her. As Hai-Tang, the 2nd wife of the tax collector can't bear to hurt her own child, she can't pull and is judged his true mother.

In the time of colonialism, Germany had few colonies in China. Through their colonial contact, this Chinese legend travelled to Germany and was received and translated into

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German by Klabund as *Der Kreidekreis* in 1924. Here we have a king, who marries the protagonist at last. But in the Chinese version, the lady gets back to her brother.

This reception was further being received by Bertold Brecht, who wrote a short story in 1940s, named “*Der Augsburger Kreidekreis*”. Here he did not bring the King from the previous story-line. Rather, the first wife is the real mother and she abandons her child. The play is a parable about a peasant girl who rescues the child and becomes a better mother than its wealthy natural parents. Further-while, in the year 1944, Brecht wrote a play from this short story, named *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (*Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis*). The play is set in Georgia around the end of WWII. It starts with a dispute between two communes, the Collective Fruit Farm Galinsk fruit growing commune and the Collective Goat Farmers, over who is to own and manage an area of farm land after the Nazis have retreated from a village and left it abandoned. A parable has been organized by one group, an old folk tale, to be played out to cast light on the dispute. In this folk tale, we see the reception of the Chinese legend. In the first scene, ‘*The Noble Child*’, we see the governor Georgi Abashwili and his wife Nutella blatantly ignoring the citizens on the way to Easter Mass. Grusha Vashnadze is a maid of governor’s wife. In this scene, governor is beheaded. After that, his wife goes out on a trip, forgetting her son. In the meantime, Grusha takes the child and starts caring it. In the second and third scene of the play, we see how Grusha takes enormous care of the child and leaves no stone unturned for the betterment of the child, Michael. She spends her week’s salary to buy milk for the child. In the fourth scene, we get a character, Azdak, and see how he becomes a judge. Later, we see Azdak is paid a huge amount of money while judging. This represents the economic discrimination in a capitalist society (relates to the contemporary systems). We find Grusha sacrificing a lot for the child, both emotionally and economically. Here the judge sits on a pile of books on law. Some judges are drunk and this portrays the corrupted judicial system of the law. In this fourth scene, Nutella, the biological mother of the child comes and wants to use Azdak against Grusha, who has brought up Michael. In the final and fifth scene of the play, the set is the courtroom, where Nutella wants the child out of a sheer greed of wealth. Judge Azdak puts the child between the two ladies and tells them to pull him. Grusha can’t do so and she is decided as the true mother of the child. Finally, Grusha becomes free of any charge and able to marry Simon Shashava, a soldier, she was in love with.

Here, singer is a character whose songs tell us about the mindset and characteristics of the characters. Contemporary time has been shown by the depiction of the drunken judges and also the biblical reference of ‘*Judgement of Solomon*’ is vital in this regard. The play stands as an answer to the prologue, where ‘*claiming the valley*’ has been talked of. The play starts on an Easter Sunday. Biblical and religious references come here one after another. A reference of carpenter is here and this is needless to say that Jesus Christ was a carpenter. Grusha here represents the fruit-growing commune, who wants the land. In the fourth scene, Azdak talks from the side of poorer folks of the society. He becomes a truth figure here. As if, all these marks

the ten developmental steps, which ends in the final scene with the disappearance of Azdak. Azdak has a Solomonic wisdom here. He has left behind Azdak garden, creating a memoir. All these show us, how Brecht has depicted the religious and Biblical references here altogether. Motherliness and biological motherhood have been subverted here. A dialectical form and the point of critical detachment have become important here. An alternative way of looking at things is here.

In 1927, Brecht said, “...the radical transformation of the theatre can’t be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time....one sees first of all the science of decline in whatever is old.... theatre, art and literature have to form the ‘ideological superstructure’ for a solid practical re-arrangement for our age’s way of life.... the essential point of the epic theatre is that it appeals less to the feeling than to the spectators’ reasons. Instead of sharing experience, the spectators must come to grasp things. At the same time, it would be quite wrong to deny the emotion of this theatre; it would be much the same thing to deny the emotion of modern science” [1]. In Brecht’s Epic Theatre, an individual is not vital. He wants to introduce ideas. A both way interaction is there. He takes audiences’ reaction into account. Brecht has always undertaken extensive research. Due to variety and population, China provided him with a wide plethora of similar social problems. Being a modern European writer, Brecht was a politically aware persona. This political awareness added an extra fervor to his works. Unequal distribution of wealth is there. In this reception, there are a few changes. One of them is, here the child has a name, unlike the one in the Chinese legend. He has wanted to portray the contemporary European situation where motherhood and motherliness could not go hand in hand. Grusha is more of a mother than Nutella. The bonding between Grusha and Michael is very important here. Here we get a comparison of 14th century Chinese judiciary system and contemporary collapse of value system in Europe. Also, the preface is missing in the Chinese legend. Brecht is capturing psyche of an anonymous Chinese playwright. [2]

Further reception of this play happens in the hand of Badal Sarkar, an influential Indian dramatist and theatre director. He was a pioneering figure in street theatre as well as in experimental and contemporary Bengali Theatre with his egalitarian third theatre. In his play *Gandi*, a reception of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, we see the same subversion of motherliness and motherhood. Here, Soma is in place of Grusha and we have Subedarni, in place of Nutella. And finally, Soma becomes the mother of the child, due to her overwhelming motherliness. This is how a narrative does undergo a journey from China to Germany or East to West at first in the time of WWII and then it further travelled from Germany to India in the time of 1990s. Following these ways, a narrative had a journey from East to west and then again West to East. In each case, it happens keeping in mind, the demand of the time and space. And this journey happened in the time of colonialism. So, we can see it through the lens of this event, Colonialism, where journey of thoughts, tales, music and other art forms happened.

In this second part, the paper explores, how in India, under the colonial rule, the reading of Shakespeare was at first a point of imposition and later, it was widely and gladly received by the Indian playwrights and academicians. At first, Shakespeare was imposed as a parallel figure to the playwright Kalidasa of India. This imposition may be regarded here as a part of colonial discourse, where the colonizers tried to impose their language and literature upon the people of the places. Before coming on stage, Shakespeare was first introduced through text books. In the end of the 18th century, English Medium Schools were set up in Kolkata. These first institutions were set up for the education of the off-springs of the workers of the East India Company. In 1947, the first school was set up in Kolkata, later it was known as Free School Society in 1789. More schools were set up with the year 1800, also schools for women were there. In Dhormotola Academy by David Drummond, the practice of the performance of the plays started for the first time. In the year 1800, Fort William College was set up and a student of this place, Charles Monkton first translated Shakespeare in Bengali. Then Hindu College was set up in 1817 and here people of the society had a chance to know more about Shakespeare. In 1840, David Lester Richardson published a collection of writings of Shakespeare, where there were 16 sonnets, Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear and so on. This was the first book, through which Bengali readers had a look on Shakespeare. One of his students said, "If I were to forget everything about India, I could never your reading of Shakespeare." In 1950-53, Macbeth and Hamlet were included in the syllabus of Hindu college. In the pedagogy of the university, Macbeth and Hamlet were in the first year and in the M.A. syllabus, King Lear and Twelfth Night were included. In 1893, Tales from Shakespeare by Lamb was in the reading list of the university. This is how Shakespeare was imposed from the very beginning of the colonial period. In 1906, all the foreign goods were abandoned by the people of the Indian society. But in this time, national Council of education is keeping Shakespeare in the education system, proposed by them. In the graduation, they had to read Hamlet, Henry IV and Merchant of Venice. Teachers like Richardson, Persival, Prafulla Chandra Ghosh, Verity, Taraknath Sen played a great role while teaching Shakespeare to the students here. Shakespeare studies in this country was more or less confined to a small culturally homogenous group and preserved exclusively in English. It happened to be the most prestigious cultural symbol for educated middle class. Shakespeare has been an integral part of politics and culture. Introduction to Shakespeare in India in academic sphere was a well-designed project of replacement of indigenous literary canons. We see an apotheosizing of the bard and growth of an English educated community that accepted western literary canons without offering much resistance. It was a dominating cultural symbol of Indian society. Shakespeare was not primarily related to Indian aesthetic consciousness rather received through readings determined by the British critics. Indian academic activity was not expected to challenge or question existing paradigms of criticism. But they accepted the greatness of the bard as an undisputable fact of literary history. It was an imposed critical

framework, imposed by the dominants.

As we said, imposition had changed into a point of reception, consciously or unconsciously. This reception has two-fold sides. Academic reception happened in English, on the other hand, creative writers' reception was to receive the plays in different Indian languages. These translations and receptions opened up new doors in those literatures of Indian languages.

Shakespearean plays challenged Hindu vision of life and in Indian literatures, we had no idea of tragedy before. So, here is a tension between two cultures. In an essay, Bankim Chandra talks about Othello and Shakuntala and says about the differences between the portrayal of nature in these two. In an essay 'Shakuntala', Rabindranath Tagore talks in the support of Sanskrit literature. He says that in case of Sanskrit Literature Nature comes to a great help when in severe emotional upheaval. He talks about the dearth of Nature in Shakespearean plays.

To talk about the reception and molding of the narrative, we can look at some examples. In Shankar Mora Ranade's Marathi adaptation of King Lear as Atipid Charit Natak (1881), no one died at the end. Here was a happy ending of the play. The English educated society was well aware of Akira Kurosawa's reception (Throne of Blood, 1957) of Shakespeare and its impact on the Japanese society. It influenced Indian writers to spread Shakespeare among the general people of the society. In this context, Parsi theatre of India played a great role while staging Shakespearean plays in front of the people of India, who had not read Shakespeare before. In the village areas, Utpal Dutta brought Shakespeare with the help of 'open-air theatre.' He was very much concerned regarding the fulfillment of the demands of time and space, while receiving Shakespeare. We have playwright like Girish Karnard, who puts "Yakkhagana" and "Sangeet Natak", indigenous performing styles of India, much above those plays. Habib Tanvir used folk songs in his reception of A Midsummer Night's Dream. In Sadarm Balakrishna's reception of Othello, there is "Kathakali", a dance form of Kerala [3] [4].

A growth of new narrative and dramatic literature in different languages could be seen in this time. But in the time of translation, linguistic and cultural issues were there as there was difference between the source language and the target language. To present a foreign text to the own literary community, translation was needed. This is needless to say that the English educated community of India did not want Shakespeare to be contaminated by translation. But due to the mentioned differences, some changes were needed too. English was the language of political and cultural authority and medium of instruction in the centers of higher learning. So, translation in Indian languages was regarded as an act of inferior status. Most influential section of the literary community did not need any translation of Shakespeare. They enjoyed Shakespeare on stage and in the classroom as well. Basic purpose of these translations was to present Shakespeare to the people who had no access to English. With the help of translation, Indianization of Shakespeare happened. First Bengali translation of Merchant of Venice was done by Harachandra Ghosh in 1853 and it is named Bhanumoti Chittabilash. Here he tried to Indianize

Shakespeare. To talk about the changing of some parts of the plays, we must mention that in the reception of *Romeo and Juliet* by Bengali poet Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, he had to keep aside the line like “I will kiss thy lips.” In this way, social codes were maintained by manipulating the narrative in some way or the other. Persi Theatre Company had a great role to Indianize Shakespeare as they produced more than 30 plays of Shakespeare and these were performed all over India. The *Merchant of Venice* was translated more than 50 times, *Comedy of Errors* has been translated in various languages for more than 30 times. *Merchant of Venice* underwent some changes here. In the translation of Bharatendu Harishchandra, *Durlobh Bondhu*, it starts with two Dohas (couplets) and songs in Sanskrit and Urdu. But never there was a parallel conflict like that of *Christian and Jew*. So, here was a hindrance of the translation as everything could not be taken. In the conservative Indian society, lines from *Hamlet*, like “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?” were to be omitted. An eminent playwright Girish Ghosh translated *Macbeth* in the very beginning of the 19th century; he Indianised the text and it was translated to be performed on the stage. Keeping it in mind, he added few songs and sorts of stage tricks to it. He brought the plays in front of the common people of the society. For the sake of the target audience, had stress on staging it and the accompaniment of music with it. But, in case of Utpal Dutta’s translation of *Macbeth* in 1975, a lot was omitted. In the time of the societal upheaval, in this period

of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, Utpal Dutta translated *Macbeth* to depict the situation. Thus, the reception and re-use of Shakespeare happened in accordance with the demand of the contemporary time and space [5].

5. Conclusion

A narrative comes in contact in the time of colonialism and it undergoes a journey (linear or circular) maintaining the crux and giving spaces to the manipulation to keep up the spirit of the time. Also, we found instances where the imposition by the colonizers in a certain time, turned out to be a reception, rather Indianization, after a span of time. And this is how, the survival of a Chinese legend and Shakespearean texts happens in India, through its literary and non-literary, artistic representations.

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