

## Translating Shakespeare into another Genre: A Re-writing of “Othello” by Muktaram Vidyabagish

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### Structured Abstract:

**Purpose:** Translation and adaptation of a Shakespearean play is a complex process fraught with issues of language, genre, culture, ideology etc. And when this translation is not from the source text of Shakespeare, rather from the prose rendering in the form of a tale; it becomes much more intriguing. This article seeks to explore the politics behind Muktaram Vidyabagish’s translation of the “Tale of Othello” by Charles and Mary Lamb.

**Methodology:** The author is keenly interested in looking into the intention of the translator (while working within a colonial paradigm) behind his choice of the source text, as he clearly surpasses the racial dimension of the Shakespearean text and tries to draw the readers’ sympathy towards Desdemona instead of Othello.

**Findings:** The author has found that while trying to draw readers’ sympathy towards Desdemona rather than Othello, the translator actually tries to make it a tale of love and jealousy divesting it of its colonial paradigm. The present article intends to unfurl this complex web of issues behind this decision of the translator.

**Keywords:** Colonial, Racial, Ideology, Language, Politics.

Shakespeare is implicated in the biggest and most significant colonial construct in India – the English language – with all its cultural baggage. The language issue is an inevitable refrain in all considerations of Shakespeare in India, mainly through the two modes of the literary translation and the innovations and adaptations in performance. The question of language is both unavoidable and inescapable in a region where vast numbers of theatre and cinema audience were, and still are, illiterate and/ or unschooled in the English language. The agenda of a people’s education is almost always a hegemonic exercise and, in a linguistically diverse context like India, the instrumentalization of Shakespeare for education is fascinating because it yields results that are divergent and go far beyond the colonial goal of showcasing the best of the English language or imperial culture. (Panja and Sharaf 2)

Whatever is said above about India’s negotiation with Shakespeare is true in case of Bengal as well. The view that Bengali drama is a combination of western influence; western dramatic techniques like stage-craft, lighting and sound, the idea of tragedy, tragic-comic scenes, five-act division of Elizabethan and Shakespearean plays, and use of music are all imported into Bengali drama suggests that Bengali drama has a continuity and at the same time a distinctive characteristic. Its distinctiveness lies in the hand of traditional cultural forms and European dramatic techniques. Development of Bengali drama literature in nineteenth century was greatly influenced by Shakespeare. There is no denying the fact that apart from a few exceptions, the reputed literary figures of the nineteenth century, who were well versed in both English and Bengali, were generally indifferent towards translating Shakespeare into the native language. The most influential section of the literary community of the time thus preferred to enjoy Shakespeare in the original, in all his pristine purity uncontaminated by translation. Translations of Shakespeare began in Bengal when English education was more or less firmly established and a sizeable population of English-knowing people emerged. It is ironical and slightly baffling because the English-educated community could read Shakespeare in original and did not require any translation. What then were the motivations of translating Shakespeare into Bengali? Sisir Kumar Das comments: “enrichment of the emerging Indian literature” is one pivotal motivation of translating Shakespeare (“Shakespeare in Indian Languages” 115). Translations of Shakespeare were “exercises to introduce foreign literary models” to the “general” readers and these should be considered as part of experimentations of new literary genres emerging in the nineteenth century to “present a new set of canons and models replacing the traditional one” (Sisir Kumar Das, “Shakespeare in Indian Languages” 112-13). The basic motivation was to make Shakespeare accessible to the readers having limited English or no English and bridge the gap between the English knowing elite and the section of reading-public lacking English. English being the medium of instruction in higher education and the language of political and cultural authority, the distinctive section read Shakespeare in the original occupied hegemonic status and the attempt was to reduce their pervasive authority in intellectual sphere. This further aimed at mass popularisation of the bard in Bengal.

In Bengal, comparatively less influential literary persons and a few social reformers involved in translation activity. Strategically the initial translations were in narrative form providing only the elementary idea of the exotic stories of the plays. The word ‘abridgement’ means ‘contraction’ or ‘shortening’ of a text. Abridgement of *Othello* consequently implies a re-

telling of *Othello* in abridged narrative form. Technically speaking, abridgements do not fall under the purview of translations. However, it is essential to scrutinise them as Bengal's negotiations with Shakespeare's plays began with re-tellings in story form and they are crucial to the process of native assimilation. They familiarised the Bengali reader with the playwright's work, paving the way for fuller and faithful dramatic translations and eventually for innovative adaptations that appropriated and homogenised Shakespeare for the Bengali stage. The introductory groundwork laid down by these popular shortened narrative versions facilitated the transformation of a one-way imposition of the coloniser's cultural heritage into a two-way process that benefited indigenous literature and simultaneously enriched the Shakespearean repertoire. The stories providing brief and catchy accounts of the plays captured the minds of the people at all levels from folk to the elite, and thus played a great part in popularising Shakespeare.

Here, *Tales from Shakespeare* (jointly published by Charles Lamb and Mary Lamb in 1807) was an inspiration for the translators. The reason behind such choice may be traced back to Charles Lamb's essay "On the Tragedies of Shakespeare, Considered with Reference to Their Fitness for Stage Representation", where the essayist critiques the notion of dramatic performance as being at par with the power to create poetical works of imagination. He objects to the deification of the actor, whom he considers a mere imitator of the signs of passions of a dramatic character created by the dramatist. He, however, concedes that the imitative portrayal of the actor is much more impressionistic on the viewer rather than on the reader who must slowly apprehend the dramatic text through reading. And herein, the average playgoer (especially those who cannot read or write) identifies the actor with the character which they represent. So, Lambs' venture, which was primarily meant for the reading public, became a source text for the translators.

In the "Preface" to *Tales from Shakespeare*, Charles Lamb clearly reveals his intention saying

It has been wished to make these Tales easy reading for very young children. To the utmost of their ability the writers have constantly kept this in mind; but the subjects of most of them made this a very difficult task. It was no easy matter to give the histories of men and women in terms familiar to the apprehension of a very young mind. For young ladies too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters

are permitted to look into this manly book; and, therefore, instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand: and when they have helped them to get over the difficulties, then perhaps they will read to them (carefully selecting what is proper for a young sister's ear) some passage which has pleased them in one of these stories, in the very words of the scene from which it is taken; and it is hoped they will find that the beautiful extracts, the select passages, they may choose to give their sisters in this way will be much better relished and understood from their having some notion of the general story from one of these imperfect abridgments; — which if they be fortunately so done as to prove delightful to any of the young readers, it is hoped that no worse effect will result than to make them wish themselves a little older, that they may be allowed to read the Plays at full length (such a wish will be neither peevish nor irrational). When time and leave of judicious friends shall put them into their hands, they will discover in such of them as are here abridged (not to mention almost as many more, which are left untouched) many surprising events and turns of fortune, which for their infinite variety could not be contained in this little book, besides a world of sprightly and cheerful characters, both men and women, the humour of which it was feared would be lost if it were attempted to reduce the length of them.

From the “Preface” it is clear that *Tales from Shakespeare* was written primarily for the children and women. When this is translated for the colonised Indians, and not the original Shakespearean play, it says something about the construction of the colonised in the eyes of the colonisers. First it points to a ‘homology between childhood and the state of being colonised’, to put it after Ashis Nandy, ‘which a modern colonial system almost invariably uses’. Nandy illustrates,

Colonialism dutifully picked up these ideas of growth and development and drew a new parallel between primitivism and childhood. Thus, the theory of social progress was telescoped not merely into the individual's life cycle in Europe but also into the area of cultural differences in the colonies. What was childlikeness of the child and childishness of immature adults now also became the lovable and unlovable savagery of primitives and primitivism of subject societies.

In 1852, Muktaram Vidyabagish, a Sanskrit scholar, translated all the twenty stories abridged by Lamb in *Apurba upakshyan* [*Exquisite Tales*]. “Othello” is included in the collection. He was a professor of Sanskrit College and Hindu College, contemporary of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, rendered two books, *Arabio upakshan* [*Tales of Arab*] (1853) and *Apurba upakshyan* [*Exquisite Tales*] (1259) [1852/53] both for periodical publication in the “Sambad purnachandrady” (Sukumar Sen 39). The title page of *Apurba upakshyan* just mentions that it is translated from Lamb by Muktaram Vidyabagish in 1318 (1852). The name of the publisher is not mentioned (Rina Ghosh 49).

This is a collection of translations of twenty tales from Lamb’s *Tales from Shakespeare*. The author tells that this volume is intended for those people who do not know English. He says that Lamb’s version was intended for young people. Muktaram’s rendition, apart from some minor textual alterations, is largely faithful to Lamb’s storyline. He retains the place names and the names of the characters as they are in the original. The least liberty he enjoys in textual alterations, i.e. adding of a line or two or enlargements and interpretations of events and situations, is either to construct the regular form of a connected story or make them suitable to the Bengali reader. His language, in spite of Sanskritisation, is said to be transparent and easily intelligible (Rina Ghosh 50).

Muktaram Vidyabagish, as his preface testifies, is aware of the difficulties of rendering Shakespeare directly, especially the tricky task of conveying the original in the rhymes and accents of indigenous Bengali permeated by a very different cultural ethos. He feels that Bengali as a language is yet to achieve the suppleness and elasticity required for transmitting the versified outburst of variegated emotions of the Shakespearean protagonists (Rina Ghosh 50, 53). Thus, his decision to translate the simplified narrative version of Lamb is a conscious choice: it would acquaint the common people with the exotic story elements of Shakespearean plays while eschewing the alien excesses of linguistic and dramatic turbulence. Muktaram Vidyabagish is confident that even a primary awareness of the “epics” (Muktaram quoted in Rina Ghosh 49) in fiction-form aesthetically entertains the readers and makes them intellectually superior and ethically profound.

Such views exemplify the caution and seriousness with which the early translators approached Shakespeare. The earnest desire to acquaint the colonised with the achievements of the colonisers’ icon reflects a cosmopolitan rather than a slavish attitude (Nazmul Ahsan 22). Apart from providing aesthetic pleasure to the fiction-loving natives their renditions

satisfied “pedagogical necessity” as well (Sisir Kumar Das, “Shakespeare in Indian Language” 117). They contributed immensely towards popularising Shakespearean plots and characters in Bengal and laid the foundation of early, tentative Bengali translations of Shakespeare followed by more competent renditions. A significant departure from Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* is that the efforts of Muktaram Vidyabagish are not directed at children. Their intention was to open up the hitherto insular Bengali literature and readers to alien, diverse and exciting treasures like Shakespeare. Lambs act as a key mediator in the project perhaps because the adult readers of Bengal, like the British children, were encountering the phenomenal playwright for the first time and needed an easy and approachable medium for the purpose. Bengal’s engagement with Shakespeare the dramatist thus begins at a double remove: in a non-dramatic format transcreated from the original by an author for the Juvenile Library as late as 1807.

The primary motivation of translating Lambs’ *Tales from Shakespeare* was to present the section of reading-public, not proficient in English, the specimen of English literature and minimise the gap between the English-knowing elite and the larger community who did not have any English or very little English. The translators were not figures with literary reputations. It would not be extravagant to claim that they tried their hands to Shakespeare with the motivation of social reform. They certainly believed in the probability of ethical improvement of the readers while going through the stories. This is surprising while one section of the literary community of the time kept on campaigning Shakespeare as immoral by raising philosophical objections against his tragedies, these earliest translators of Bengal apart from aiming enrichment of indigenous literature with the acquaintance of the literature of the west, emphasised ethical significance of Shakespearean plays.

Now this article would like to look into the plot structure of Muktaram’s rendition. The opening or introduction to any literary work is extremely important. It is what sets the mood. How the adapting authors decide to open their version can illustrate a lot about their intentions and their audience. Shakespeare’s play begins with anger and annoyance. Iago and Roderigo are angered, jealous, and frustrated about Cassio’s promotion and Othello’s marriage to Desdemona. The very first word uttered by Iago is the profane exclamation, “Sblood”, which sets the tone for his contemptible character and the wicked plan he will soon set into motion. The opening of Vidyabagish’s rendition follows that of the Lambs, and for

doing so it can be considered the complete opposite. The opening of Vidyabagish’s tale reads:

বেনিস দেশের বিচার-সংক্রান্ত মহাসভার সভ্য মহাধন সম্পন্ন ব্রাবানসিও নামা কোন ব্যক্তি ছিলেন।  
তঁহার দেসদেমনা নামী পরমাসুন্দরী এক কুমারী হয়।

This opening passage reads like a fairy tale. Not only does it sweeten up the originally bitter opening, but also sets up Desdemona, the “fair” maiden waiting to be won, as the central protagonist. It seems that, just like the Lambs, Muktaram wants the native readers to feel most sorry for Desdemona rather than Othello. That the “greatest lady” should not be “altogether condemned for the unsuitableness of the person whom she selected for her lover” is clear from Muktaram’s rendition also

দেসদেমনা কুরূপ পাত্রকে স্বয়ং বরণ পূর্বক পতিত্বে পরিগ্রহ করিতে স্বীকার করিলেন বটে, কিন্তু  
ইহাতে লোকতঃ নিতান্ত নিন্দনীয় হইলেন না,

She can do no wrong. She is, of course, innocent of any wrongdoings in Shakespeare’s play too, but the way in which Muktaram (following Lambs) forces it upon his readers is questionable.

In the end of the Shakespearean text, the eponymous hero tragically falls victim to Iago’s elaborate plot and craves for the readers’ sympathy by begging for understanding and committing suicide, his final act of service as General. In the same sentence of Othello’s tragic demise, the Lambs are sure to mention “that his wife (poor innocent lady) had been ever faithful to him.” As Muktaram is translating Lambs’ tale, he also does the same

অনন্তর দুরাত্মা ইয়াগোর ষড়যন্ত্র প্রকাশিত হইলে ওথেলোর হৃদয় অকস্মাৎ বজ্রাঘাত তুল্য অনুতাপের  
আবেগে বিদীর্ণ হইতে লাগিল। তখন স্পষ্ট দেখিতে পাইলেন, বিনা অপরাধে ধর্মপরায়ণা পতিব্রতা  
পত্নী হত্যা করিয়া মহাপাপী হইলাম এবং পরম প্রেয়সীর পরিগ্রহাবধি সদ্ভাব ও প্রণয় স্মরণপথে  
আবির্ভূত হওয়াতে দারুণ শোকানলে দগ্ধ হইতে লাগিলেন। পরিশেষে প্রাণধারণে অসহিষ্ণু হইয়া,  
প্রিয়তমার মৃত শরীরের উপরি শয়ান হইলেন এবং স্বহস্তে আত্মগ্রীবায় তীক্ষ্ণ তরবারি আঘাত করত  
ক্লেশের শেষ করিলেন।



As in the opening, Muktaram continues to make the story about Desdemona, taking the spotlight away from Othello at the most empathetic moment. The translator omits his final speech and the fact that he understands his transgressions and cannot forgive himself for what he has done. Following Lambs, Muktaram points out the faults of Othello himself. This drastically changes the readers’ view of Othello and the play as a whole.

In simplifying *Othello*, the Lambs do very little justice to Shakespeare’s play. Muktaram’s rendition is no different. The basic framework is there. It is a skeleton of the story without the heart. This version of the text does not add anything to the play and leaves much out. The only characters in this new text are Othello, Desdemona, Iago, Cassio and Brabantio. By eliminating persons of the play, the new text is forced to ignore important contextual characters like Emilia and Roderigo. Important secondary plots have completely been excluded.

Rewriting a tragedy – a genre with its own linguistic, philosophical, conceptual norms – is an act fraught with implications and complexities. Lamb’s tale not only has to negotiate this challenge but also has to keep in mind the norms of the tale, another genre in its own right. Lamb’s “Tale of Othello” then, becomes a dominant revealing and (at the same time) problematising Lamb’s conception of tragedy. Simultaneously, the tale also traces the shift in the dominant mode of cultural expression – from drama to prose – since the time Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote for the Elizabethan and the Jacobean stage. In this connection, we should keep in mind that tragedy was not a genre alien to the European tradition as it was to the Indian classical, specifically Sanskrit (*Urubhangam* being perhaps the only instance of Sanskrit tragedy), tradition. Perhaps Muktaram, by his prose rendition, tried to bridge that gap to some extent.

To conclude, one question constantly pricks the readers regarding the reason behind Muktaram’s position as a translator who, in spite of belonging to the colonised country, completely ignored the racial aspect of the Shakespearean text in his rendition. The reason may be traced back to the act that in spite of being a dramatisation of male jealousy, doomed love and victimisation of devoted female, Shakespeare’s *Othello* fails to be a universal tale about a man coming to terms with the supposed betrayal and adultery of those closest to him. It is perhaps the only tragedy of the Bard where the protagonist’s characters and behaviours are always traced to his racial identity. The reason is Shakespeare’s arbitrary attempt to make Othello stand on the complicated crux of contemporary beliefs about black-skinned people



and Muslims. Resultantly, reading or producing the play in a society where racial discrimination and apartheid are practised is to lend a new powerful meaning to the play. Adaptation, a complex bilingual and bicultural process, is further problematised in a colonial scenario particularly inflected by burgeoning nationalism and imperialist counter-oppression. But Muktaram Vidyabagish's prose adaptation carefully avoids this dimension. The reason behind this may be traced back to the fact that dealing as it does with marriage and love, *Othello* has generic affinities with comedy or domestic drama rather than with heroic or classical tragedy. Prof. Paromita Chakravarti is quite correct to say that this could be one of the reasons why in Indian translations, adaptations and critiques, the play is always treated as a text which articulates individual freedom and romantic love against patriarchal dictates and familial pressure. The concerns of gender and women's identity receive much greater prominence than racial issues. Race is only one component in the romantic plot.

The silence about racial issues in colonial adaptations of *Othello* was not solely because of the colonial pedagogical strategy which sought to erase the racial context of the play as was clearly the case in South Africa. Nineteenth century race theories were perhaps also responsible for this silence. Most Orientalist histories traced the origin of both Hindus and Europeans to a common Aryan stock. As such no racial divide was perceived to exist between the coloniser and colonised. This theory was happily accepted and developed by Indian historians too. Thus, the Indian reader, adapter and translator of *Othello* would more readily identify with the Europeans than with the black character. Othello's predicament in a white society, his alienation and otherness, is not seen as providing a parallel to the situation of the Indian colonised subject. This is the case with Muktaram as well. So, gender issues rather than racial matters assume importance in his re-writing.

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