The Changing Shakespearescape in Bangladesh

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Abstract

The article examines the reception of Shakespeare in Bangladesh. It scans the theater scene and the academic presence of the bard to understand the now ambiguous presence of the author who inarguably enjoyed unquestioned canonicity for centuries. The cerebral exercise to recalibrate Shakespeare's relevance to a contemporary audience through current theories is confined only to academia. However, in the last two decades, the official promotion of communicative language teaching that holds the Elizabethan author's language falls short of being "authentic material" for local culture has marginalized Shakespeare in the syllabi of the English departments. The somewhat muted celebrations of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare in 2016 are indicative of such a change. There is an emerging trend in Theater departments, which receive occasional funding and patronage from different agencies, to indigenize Shakespeare. This article investigates the availability and mutability of Shakespeare in Bangladesh through translation, adaptation, performance, and digitization in the last fifty years to explore the changing attitudes towards the author. It will examine the acceptance and rejection of Shakespeare and its impact on our cultural imagination primarily through the critical discourse produced in Bangladesh.

Reputation, Reputation, Reputation

In his *Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, the unapologetic mimic man Nirad C. Chaudhuri observed, "I do not know if any other country or people in the world has ever made one author the epitome, test, and symbol

of literary culture as we Bengalis did with Shakespeare" (Chaudhuri 1968, 225). Imtiaz Habib, a Bangladeshi-born Shakespeare scholar, echoed the sentiment, claiming the Indian subcontinent as "one of the most prolific non-European sites of Shakespeare study and veneration in the world" (Zaman and Khan 2018, 17). Given the shared legacy of colonialism and prevalent Anglophilia in English departments, one might assume that Bangladesh's cultural scene would validate such propositions. A survey of the syllabi of certain English departments in Bangladesh (Table 2) that have traditionally promoted Shakespeare's work as master texts, and the bard's presence on stage in the last one hundred years (Table 1), however, reveals a different reality. Shakespeare's relevance in Bangladesh is changing, if not fading altogether. One can graduate from English literature without reading a single play by the bard. The change perhaps has to do with both the global changes and Bangladesh's sociopolitical and cultural history of being under three flags over the last two hundred years. I shall restrict my discussion to the local reality of Bangladesh, with a primary focus on the critical scholarship that has emerged from this part of the subcontinent.

As the latest born of the three countries, Bangladesh refers to the same theatrical tradition that saw the introduction of "universal" and "humanist" Shakespeare to the Indian subcontinent in the late eighteenth century (Ahmed 1988, 1–6).[1] After the Partition in 1947, the country as the Eastern wing of Pakistan experienced a reverse culture shock against the backdrop of a state-sponsored Islamization resisted by both the political activists and the secular intelligentsia; Shakespeare became a "thing" of amateur performers and of academia (Zaman and Ali 2019). The nationalist zeal with which the independence of Bangladesh was earned in 1971 brought the mother tongue, Bangla, to prominence. The glory of establishing a nation-state pivoting on language as an identity marker made the English language a suspicious entity. The study and scope of Shakespeare in its original language and form remained within the confines of the English departments of four public universities. Performances of Shakespeare were mostly in Bangla translation or adaptation (see Table 1).

The number of stage performances, mostly in the country's capital, did not really boost the reputation of the bard. Local translation, adaptation, and indigenization were featured as "new" works with the shadowy presence of their originator.[2] The amount of translation produced in the country is also not congenial to the evolution of Shakespeare that is to be found in India and Pakistan. Meanwhile, Shakespeare's import through mass media has kept the writer's brand value intact. For instance, the popularity of Bollywood versions of *Omkara* (2006) and *Maqbool* (2004), directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, shows that there is a willingness to appreciate Shakespeare. The same audience, however, is not willing to go to the theater to watch his plays.

1 In *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human,* Harold Bloom admits that "universalism" has gone out of fashion except for in religious institutions. Shakespeare has become a "mortal god" whose works can be deemed as "secular Scripture" characterized by "certain universalism, global and multicultural." He alludes to Borges's short story "Everything and Nothing" to claim, "I hardly see how one can begin to consider Shakespeare without finding some way to account for his pervasive presence in the most unlikely contexts: here, there and everywhere at once" (Bloom 1998, 3). Earlier, Bloom refers to Dr. Johnson to explain Shakespeare's "humanism" by labeling him as someone who "taught us to understand human nature" (Bloom 1998, 2).

2 Many of the prominent writers in Bangla appropriated Shakespeare for the local audience. *Yours, Pen Friend* by noted playwright Selim Al Deen; based on *The Comedy of Errors; The Last Seven Days of Shakespeare* (1988), a medley based on the works of Brecht, Shakespeare, and Plutarch by Nilkantha Sengupta; and *Gononayak* (People's Hero) by Syed Shamsul Haque, based on *Julius Caesar*, are cases in point.

The dialectic of presence or absence of Shakespeare is not due to any conscious political subject positioning found in Britain's other former colonies, where people with their newfound independence asked, "Why are we still performing this sixteenth-century Englishman? Why are we venerating this white guy?" (Bogaev 2016). Conversely, for one actor, Aly Zaker, who performed the lead role in *Macbeth* during the military rule in the 1980s, Shakespeare was a source of resistance to "colonial invasion." Speaking to Shahman Moishan for an interview published in *The Daily Star* (Bangladesh), he justified the renaming of *Hamlet* by Syed Shamsul Haque as "Darpan" (the mirror) to claim that for a country that had just adopted parliamentary democracy after a long period of military rule, Shakespeare's play mirrored our sociopolitical reality (Moishan, "A Search for the Shakespearean Semiotics").

Shakespeare's academic merit is studied in English departments where students learn to apply critical theories to critically appreciate his texts; that too, with some reservations. Shawkat Hossain, a professor at Dhaka University, criticizes the over-theorization of Shakespeare in his essay "What is the Politics of Shakespeare?" He gives examples of two readings of Shakespeare. In one reading, the bard is presented as anticommunist and antibourgeoisie. In another reading, he is presented as an aristocratic elite-sympathizer. Hossain warns us to stay away from assigning arbitrary labels to Shakespeare, which would simply belittle the writer and his work (in Habib and Majid 2016, 185–90).

Shakespeare's reputation in Bangladesh is thus contested, where the once-canonical Shakespeare is slowly becoming peripheral. Attempts to read Shakespeare in English and perform Shakespeare with Elizabethan dramaturgy are almost nonexistent. There has hardly been any serious attempt to stage Shakespeare in English since the country gained its independence from Pakistan in 1971. Only a few English-medium and international schools have done so as part of their annual festivals. The theatre departments of the public universities came to the scene in the 1990s, and most of their productions are experimental in nature as they adopt folk narrative, improvisation, or biomechanics.[3]

This article contends that Shakespeare in Bangladesh has been gradually lost, not only in translation but also in purpose. The "multiple temporalities" enacted by the free translation and experimental adaptation have removed local scholar-performers from "Shakespeare as literary master-text and as theatrical property" (S. Chaudhuri 2015, 101). There is, however, a slowly emerging trend outside English departments where the theater departments of a few public universities have started staging Shakespeare with a new historicity. These performances are done mostly in Bangla and are often commissioned by donor agencies. I will reflect on this changing Shakespearescape in relation to the subcontinent's shared colonial heritage.

3 An unpublished MA thesis by Ahmmed Raufur Rahim (2020) of the University of Dhaka lists five public universities and one private university that have staged Shakespearean plays from 1971 to 2020. Dhaka University theatre departments have staged ten productions of *Macbeth*, *Othello*, *Hamlet,* and a medley of seven plays between 1996 and 2020; Jahnagirnagar University produced nine academic productions of *Macbeth*, *A Midsummer Night's Dreams, Merry Wives of Windsor, Romeo and Juliet, The Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*; Rajshahi University and Kazi Nazrul University produced three each; Chittagong University had six stagings, while the Private University North South staged two academic productions.

The Spice and Salt that Season a Man

Colonial Bengalis felt a pragmatic urgency to study Shakespeare, best captured by a parodic rhyme circulating in Calcutta — the intellectual nerve center for Bengali people in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

> I dreamt last night that Shakespeare's ghost
> Sat for a Civil Service post:
> The English paper of that year
> Contained a question on King Lear,
> Which Shakespeare answered very badly
> Because he had not studied his Bradley.
> (quoted in Ahmed 1988, 16)

The concluding couplet of the rhyme gibes at the complementary criticism that takes away the pleasure of reading. The anonymous rhymer also scorns the idea of learning Shakespeare for competitive exams (Bhatia 100). Both remained true as late as the 1990s as English graduates would conventionally do well in the civil service examinations.[4] Shakespeare would inevitably appear in civil service viva-voce examinations. However, with the country's adoption of an open market and the privatization of higher education, there are new career alternatives that no longer require familiarity with English literature as a testimony of a candidate's language competency.

The market value of Shakespeare has been traditionally ensured by the English departments. Under a neoliberal milieu, most English departments are forced to accommodate Communicative English Language Teaching, which questions the "authenticity" of Elizabethan English for learning everyday English. Ironically, the British Council, the ostensible bastion of English culture, promotes this idea. As a development partner of the government, the British Council administers the UK government's funding to design language programs for primary and secondary schools. There is a revised learning objective for English department graduates who are expected to teach in these institutions. The British Council thus moves away from its public diplomacy and soft power, which once included the critical outsourcing of cultural commodities including Shakespeare, to engage in the language development business (Mortuza 2020, 174).

The shift was evident in the celebration of Shakespeare's 400th death anniversary when the British Council commissioned a social drama for the national art academy involving amateur performers with disabilities. The transcreation of the play involving star-crossed lovers in *A Different Romeo and Juliet* featuring disabled actors opens up the familiar debate on the appropriation and mimicry of Shakespeare in an intercultural setting. Is it possible to understand Shakespeare without studying the context that conditioned him? Behind all the wheel-

4 "A quick glance at the academic background of the officers from the administration cadre of a particular batch will illustrate the case: 47 out of 250 officers had their first degrees in English (18.8 percent), followed by sociology (6.4 percent), Economics (5.6 percent), law (4.8 percent), and international relations (4.4 percent) (*A Souvenir of Bangladesh Civil Service Officers*, 27th Batch BCS Officers)" (Mortuza 2020, 176).

chair drills and local names, was it possible to trace Shakespeare? Or was the director interested in pursuing a national allegory while rendering the drama in Bangla? Does such adaptation include any love for Shakespeare, the English playwright? This last question was asked by Alexa Alice Joubin (2021) in her book *Shakespeare and East Asia*: "Works from the Global South or Asia, assumed to be operating as national allegories, are valuable only for their political messages rather than their aesthetic merits, leading to research questions driven by polity—for example, 'Why are there so many global Shakespearean adaptations in cultures with no love for Great Britain?'" (Joubin 2021, 8).

For a parochial purist who acts as a cultural gatekeeper, the beauty of Shakespeare lies in his words. What if the cultural capital is not there to consume Shakespeare in its original form? What sort of mediation or negotiation should we adopt to understand and appreciate Shakespeare? Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan point to a different dilemma that we face in constructing Shakespeare. When we utter the name, do we think of "the man, the actor, the theater manager, the writer, the cultural entrepreneur, the financial speculator, the country landowner?" (Kennedy and Lan 2010, 3). If we conceive of him as "a phenomenon rather than a man and his works, and almost necessarily allude to an icon, even an idol . . . [then] are the meanings the same across the globe?" (Kennedy and Lan 2010, 3). Unfortunately, these fundamental questions have not been duly raised in Bangladesh.

Those who teach Shakespeare know that the bard's prize possessions are also his greatest liabilities. Students try to make sense of Shakespearean language through paraphrased texts. They respond to examination questions often in ultra-theorized, jargon laden criticism made popular by the academic publishing industry. The critical vocabulary demonstrates a generational gap in the way the old and the young view their relations with Shakespeare. While the young generation is more in tune with viewing Shakespeare through the lens of thing-theory, queer studies, or the remake of Shakespeare in different genres, including graphic novels, video games, anime, manga, and online streaming, many teachers of the old generation still romanticize their experience of performing, watching, or reading Shakespeare sitting on the lush green lawn of the British Council in Dhaka. For upper-middle-class intellectuals, the British Council once created a niche to nurture this colonial hangover. In the early days, Shakespeare Studies were considerably shaped under the curation of the British Council.

Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, a nineteenth-century Bengali novelist who served as District Collector under the British Empire, anticipated the recent shift of attitude of the British Council through a type of role reversal. In his satirical pamphlet, *The Life of Muchiram Gur*, an aspirant clerk, Muchiram, fakes poor English, knowing the fate of other jobseekers. Muchiram overhears the English Collector dismissing a local applicant, saying, "I dare say you are well up in Shakespeare and Milton and Bacon and so forth. Unfortunately, we don't want quotations from Shakespeare and Milton and Bacon in the office. It is not the most learned man who is best fitted for this kind of work. So, you can go, Baboo" (Chatterjee n.d., 18). Thus, Shakespeare is rendered simultaneously "useless" and out of bounds for the local applicant. Chatterjee thus reminds us how protective the colonizers were of their literary icons. They sincerely did not want us to be educated beyond a certain point.

The primary nineteenth-century audience of Shakespeare that gathered in theaters in Kolkata and Mumbai were European sailors, local traders, and laborers (S. Ali 2016). There are ample resources on Shakespeare in Bengal and his reception in the British period (Ahmed 1988, Bhatia 1998). Here, I look mainly at how Bangladeshi scholars and theater performers received and appropriated Shakespeare. In so doing, I follow an observation made by Bangladeshi Shakespeare scholar Syed Manzoorul Islam:

> Notwithstanding the two-hundred-year-old tradition of studying Shakespeare in Bangladesh, holding him as a bastion of literary icon for the educated Bengali populace, and championing him as the key literary figure for Bangla theater, the number of plays performed in Bangladesh is only a handful. There can be two or three formidable translations. In staging him in the original, the number is zero and likely to remain so in the future. Any discerning reader-viewer knows that Shakespeare is absent in our theater ideation and tradition. (in Habib and Majid 2016, 237 [my translation])

In what follows, I shall explore these issues to understand the chiaroscuro of Shakespeare in the Bangladeshi academy as well as in our theater.

The Studious Universities

The celebration of Shakespeare's 400th death anniversary was important for a stocktaking of Shakespeare Studies in Bangladesh. Two relatively young private universities organized conferences: Independent University Bangladesh and University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh. Notably, none of the traditional public universities held any celebratory program to mark the occasion.

Independent University Bangladesh invited Imtiaz Habib and Fakrul Alam to give keynote addresses. Habib's reading of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* located the Indian boy in the rivers of Bengal. Citing Shakespeare's familiarity with the account of a leather trader, Ralph Fitch, who boated along the rivers of Bengal, Habib writes: "Bengal was the unmarked faceplate of Shakespeare's India" (I. Habib 2018, 19). In the other keynote, Alam recalled how teaching Shakespeare was considered prestigious among faculty members. He wrote, "Most academics in English departments vie with each other to teach Shakespeare's plays. . . . It took me a long time to get to teach Shakespeare at the University of Dhaka. I had to be a senior academic myself to claim the right to teach him" (Alam in Zaman 2018, 60–61). Reflecting on his teachers, Alam observes that the previous generation of teachers gave lip service to Shakespeare's greatness simply by paraphrasing the texts or contextualizing them. Referring to Edward Said and Jan Kott, he thinks that the major challenge for a teacher is to "read his plays in such a manner that they will come alive in classrooms in our part of the world and at this period of our history, despite the obstacles posed by the extent of time and space that separate our students from Shakespeare's England" (Alam 2018, 64).

Alam is a senior professor of English at the University of Dhaka, which was established in 1921 as an "imperial concession."[5] After Partition, the Australian scholar A. G. Stock, joined the department and eventually became its head. In her *Memoirs of Dhaka University*, Stock recounted the performance of two scenes from *Othello* as part of the department's commitment to "make learning active" (Stock [1973] 2017, 145). She narrates the experience of preparing her students to perform before a packed audience at Curzon Hall in 1951: "We played in the true Elizabethan tradition with men in the women's parts . . . Our experienced actors needed no teaching to use the whole of the stage. They also had a natural grace of movement, and their gestures were free and spontaneous, not made like so many English beginners, as if their arms from shoulder to elbow were clamped to their sides. Most Indians talk with arms and fingers, sometimes with head movements" (Stock [1973] 2017, 148–49). Stock's generous praise for the performance of local students is dented by her following candid remarks: "The main difficulty in English play is speech, because the intonation and accents are strange: the actor knows he is not speaking as the author intended, and there is always a danger of drilling him into so much self-consciousness of pronunciation that he loses the expressive spontaneity of movement" (149). Such traditions of performing Shakespeare as a classroom activity have dwindled over the years.

In recent days, the scope of accommodating Shakespeare in the classroom has been heavily impacted by the short academic trimester. Furthermore, the reduction has also decreased the number of texts being taught. Most universities now have just one sonnet of Shakespeare in their "Introduction to Poetry" courses. In some universities, Shakespeare is no longer an independent or core course. Shakespearean plays are taught under Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama. Dhaka University is still heavily invested in Shakespeare, as it includes the highest number of plays in its BA and MA programs. In contrast, a liberal public university, Jahangirnagar University, has dropped Shakespeare from its MA program and replaced it with Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature.

The Play's the Thing

The performance of Shakespeare by the few English-language theater groups and drama circles that existed during the Pakistan period of Bangladesh's history died their natural deaths after the Liberation of Bangladesh. In *Curtain Call: English Language Plays in Dhaka, 1950–1970,* Niaz Zaman and Raza Ali offer a useful survey of these amateur performances by groups such as The Amateurs, The Thespians or The Last Promethean (see Table 2). The paucity of performance can be explained by the absence of a proper stages to give these theatrical initiatives an institutional shape. Noted theater personality Sayeed Ahmad explained the context in an interview with Marranca and Dasgupta. For Ahmad, in the absence of any professional theater, the nature of

5 "Established in 1921, the University of Dhaka is the first university of East Bengal (later East Pakistan, now Bangladesh). Dhaka University was considered an imperial concession made to conciliate the hurt feelings of the Muslim middle class of East Bengal consequent upon the annulment of the Partition of Bengal in 1911" (Mannan 2007).

performance remained amateurish. The tradition of staging foreign plays in translation started "dying out" in the 1950s and 1960s due to financial reasons (Ahmad, Marranca, and Dasgupta 1992, 105).

In 1964, during the quatercentenary celebration of Shakespeare, one such amateur group, The Prometheans, was called in to perform *A Winter's Tale* with British Council Director David Bradley as the director. Niaz Zaman, then a student at Dhaka University, recalled, "One of the advantages of having a British Council Director work with young people whose first language wasn't English was that they learnt pronunciation" (Zaman and Ali 2019, 84). Stock and Zaman's observations hint at the obvious lack of English language competency in the country. Language is one of the main reasons why Shakespeare failed to thrive in Bangladesh. In poetic prose, Syed Manzoorul Islam discusses the language barrier. He writes:

> How will they, the ones who are the majority in number, who have heard of Shakespeare, and are curious to study him, read Shakespeare? The simple answer is that they must read him in translation or watch him in translated work. Here, we need to draw a line between two types of readers-viewers. The first type [with their knowledge of English] sees and enjoys Shakespeare from a close quarter; the other group comes across him through an opaque mirror [of translation]. They can sense the shadow of Shakespeare, but even before they can see him in full, his figure disappears." (in Habib and Majid 2016, 236; [my translation]).

For Islam, Shakespeare Studies in Bangladesh has failed in the want of proper translation and contextualization. In a country that had its birth through political struggles, modern European drama made a larger impact. The Angry Young Generation and the Absurd Theater appealed to our theatergoers more than the unfamiliar Elizabethan world (255).

In a postwar scenario, Bangladeshi theater took a much more political stance. Cultural activists of the country had their political orientation during the movement for autonomy in the 1960s. Hayat Hussain, for instance, was supposed to take part in the quatercentenary production of *Macbeth* at Dhaka University in 1964. But because of a warrant of Tk. 500 on his head, Hayat was forced to go into hiding in the hill tracts to avoid police arrest. His predicament highlights an alternative reality. He wrote to one of his fellow performers, "Dear friend, before the grotesque Shakespearean drama could be staged the real drama of my life had started and I don't know when it will end" (Zaman and Ali 2019, 90).

During the nine-month guerilla war that earned Bangladesh's freedom from Pakistan, many of the theater activists took refuge in Kolkata and came into contact with its theater scene. The spirit of freedom and revolution enlivened Bangladeshi theater in the postwar period. There was social angst as the government struggled with "unemployment and economic questions" in a war-ravaged country (Ahmad, Marranca, and Dasgupta 1992, 105). The young men and women who started the theater movement in Bangladesh embraced contemporary issues and politics. Ataur Rahman is one such figure who aptly stated, "our theater has learned to speak the truth and has attained the character of a rebel" (quoted in Ansarey 2020, 565). Against the backdrop of mil-

itary rule after the assassination of the father of the nation, Group Theater was formed that looked at various sources to find the resonance of their national allegory. For many groups, the modernist European school provided fertile ground for their existential crises in a nascent country plagued with social issues. The few performances of Shakespeare seemed to be acts of intervention by the British Council or the Ministry of Culture.

Syed Shamsul Haque's rendering of *Julius Caesar* is an exception, as it started as a work of passion. He wrote his *Gononayak* in response to the assassination of the Father of the Nation, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975. The treacherous murder of Mujib by his close associates has made *Julius Caesar* an often-used political referent. Haque's reputation as a translator inspired London-based director Christopher Sanford to approach him for a translation of *Macbeth* into Bangla. The British Council, Dhaka, commissioned Sanford to direct the play. The theme of regicide went along the line of thought that Haque was pursuing in *Gononayak*. The military junta, who had usurped power, made Haque weaponize *Macbeth* against autocracy. Two local theater groups staged the play in 1982.

Recalling his performance in the lead role of Macbeth, Aly Zaker remembered gazing directly at the Air Chief of the military government in the audience while uttering his line with the crown in his hand, "*Eta Howa Kichhu Noy, Eta Hoye Thakatai Kichhu* (the Bengali translation of 'Nothing to be thus, but to be safely thus')" (Moishan 2022). Zaker believed that the line made the officer uncomfortable because it could be interpreted as "you got the crown, but will you remain on the crown?" Such relevance makes Shakespeare unique. The translator Haque, who was a student of English literature at Dhaka University in the 1960s, explained his translation process, saying: "While translating *Macbeth*, I had to take various parts out, arrange them, and put them back to make the machine work. While disengaging from the original English and engaging with Bangla, I felt that Shakespeare himself has been working in me with all his crafts and skills to write in Bangla" (Haque 2006, ii; [my translation]).

Haque went on to translate two more Shakespeare plays, evidently inspired by the compliment he received from the veteran Utpal Dutt for his Bangla translation of *Macbeth*.[6] In his introduction to the three plays that he translated—*Macbeth, Troilus and Cressida,* and *The Tempest*—Haque looked for a thematic organic unity in Shakespeare. For Haque, the violence found in the antiautocratic *Macbeth* is rejected in *Troilus and Cressida,* where the bard airs an antiwar sentiment. *The Tempest*, for the translator, is the ultimate battle between chaos and harmony; the tension must be resolved for the progress of humanity. Haque's rendering of Shakespeare points to another important influence of Shakespeare—without showing any anxiety about it.

By modelling their work after Shakespeare, many Bengali writers mastered the art of characterization and plot construction. This view was upheld by Sarwat Ali, who wrote an article titled "Shakespeare's Shadow over the Subcontinent" in Pakistan's daily *TNS*. He maintained: "Shakespeare was indirectly responsible for the growth

6 Haque received two signed copies of books from Utpal Dutt who praised the translation of *Macbeth*, saying, "No one in the next one hundred years will be able to supersede what you have done" (Haque 2006, iv).

of popular theatre in the subcontinent. The greatest playwrights of the nineteenth and early twentieth century [*sic*] either acknowledged or did not acknowledge that the plots, the language, and the expression that they used were Shakespearean" (S. Ali 2016).

Many of these translators of Shakespeare come from English departments at universities. The stage directors who translate these texts for the stage often look for local ingredients or folk references to make them relevant for their audience. Sudip Chakroborthy, who directed Haque's *Macbeth* recently, was interviewed by Rudrani Gangopadhyay for the multimedia archive *Shakespeare in Bengal*. Chakroborthy told Gangopadhyay that he "did not research any literary criticism" and he did not have any problem with Shakespeare as he worked in Bangla. He also does not think Shakespeare is being deglamorized in the current trend of appropriations. For Chakroborthy (2019), "Shakespeare remains relevant to us because of the political aspect, especially in countries which are still struggling to find a place of their own."

In his experimental staging of *Macbeth*, Sudip Chakroborthy uses minimalist boxes and chess boards to depict the plot. He uses a gender neutral term for the evil forces instead of using the word "Dakini" for the witches that was used by the translator Shamsul Haque. Such sanitization shows the director's desire to be politically correct in a donor-driven social drama landscape. This is different from Aly Zaker's performance mentioned earlier, in which the focus was on resisting autocracy. It is no wonder that Zaker credited Shakespeare for being a "realistic" playwright (Moishan 2022), whereas Chakroborthy presents the abstract side of *Macbeth*. But in both cases, one thing stands out: Bangladeshi writers and directors have no qualms about contentedly accepting their creative lives under the Shakespearean sun.

Overthrown Charms and Faint Strength

Shakespeare continues to inspire theater activists and literary aficionados in Bangladesh. Each making-remaking of Shakespeare is bound to be dictated by the literary, theatrical, political, and cultural orientation of individual directors and writers. But to reclaim Shakespeare as our own, we need to create a critical mass that will deal with its historicity. Directors and writers render Shakespeare primarily to tell a tale. To give life to the story, we need to locate it in its history. As Walter Benjamin reminds us in "The Task of the Translator." He writes, "the history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artists, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations" (1977, 71).

Shakespearean Studies in Bangladesh suffers from this lack of tradition to appreciate the past and present in which the bard wrote, performed, directed, produced, and sold his plays. For the greater part of our national history, there was a deliberate move by the British government to outsource Shakespeare as a cultural commodity. Unfortunately, the most profitable commodity for England today is its English language, and their reorientation has impacted the curricula of the English departments. Shakespeare is a shadowy figure who is brought forward for celebratory rituals. In academia, Shakespeare is nothing beyond a course to be passed.

And for theater practitioners, Shakespeare is a tag to help us find a global niche until we form our own. The presence and absence of Shakespeare in Bangladesh are symptomatic of a culture that is looking for cultural stability. Shakespeare plays an ambivalent part in the cultural milieu of Bangladesh as both a matter of attraction and nostalgia for the older generation and resistance and appropriation for the younger generation. Both are valuable in themselves as a gateway to the world and a by-the-by cultural placeholder as the country awaits its "real" (Bangladeshi) voice to mature and morph.

Table 1: Shakespeare in Bangladesh, 1902–2022

Title	**Details**	**Group**
Othello	1902	Dhaka College
Othello [two scenes]	April 12, 1951, AG Stock	DUCSU,
The Merchant of Venice	Sept 19–20,1952	The Student Association of Dhaka University, Jagannath Hall, DU
Julius Caesar	British Council, 1963	The Amateurs
The Winter's Tale	Quatercentenary celebration	The Prometheans
Macbeth	1964	Dhaka University English Department
Bhrantibilas (Trans. *The Comedy of Errors*)	1964	Bangla Academy
Twelfth Night, King Lear, A Midsummer Night's Dream, The Merchant of Venice, As You Like It, The Taming of the Shrew	1957- 1971	The Thespians, Holy Cross College
Mukhora Romoni Boshikoron (The Taming of the Shrew)	1971, trans. Munier Chowdhury	BTV
Othello	1981 trans. Munier Chowdhury	Theater
A Midsummer Night's Dream	1982	Loknatya Dal (Sidheswari) Loknatya Dal (TSC)
Macbeth	1983, trans. Syed Shamsul Haque	Nagarik & Theater (Bailey Road)
Darpan (trans. *Hamlet*)	1983, adapt. Aly Zaker	Nagarik
Darpan (trans. *Hamlet*)	1983, adapt. Aly Zaker	Loknatya Dal
Othello	1981, trans. Munier Chowdhury and Kabir Chowdhury	Theater (Topkhana)
Coriolanus	1989, tr. Mannan Hira	Mahila Shamiti

Title	**Details**	**Group**
Hamlet	1991–1994, trans. Nazmul Ahsan (11 performances)	Khulna Theater
Darpan	1983, adapt. Aly Zaker	Nagarik
Macbeth	1984, trans. Syed Shamsul Haque	Nagarik and Theater, British Council, and Mahila Samiti
As You Like It	1992, adapt. Rabiul Alam	Tirjak Natyagoshthi, Chittagong
Ganonayak (*Julius Caesar)*	1983, adapt. Syed Shamsul Haque, Dir. Ataur Rahman	Chakrobaak, Dhaka
King Lear	1993, Trans. Syed Manzoorul Islam, Dir. Kamaluddin Nilu	Theater (Arambag)
Venicer Sandagar	1994, Trans. Abdus Selim	Tirjak, Chittagong
Hamlet! Oh, Hamlet!	1994, adapt. Biplab Bala	Natyadhara
Romeo and Juliet	1995, trans. Abdullahel Mahmud	Dir. Israfil Shaheen, Shilpakala Academy
The Merchant of Venice	1997, trans. Mafi Choudhury	Dhaka Theater
Twelfth Night	1998, dir. Israfil Shahin	Subochon, Dhaka
Troilus and Cressida	2007 [1983], Dir. Ataur Rahman, trans. Syed Shamsul Haque	Nagarik
The Tempest	2012 [1987], dir. Nasiruddin Yusuf	Dhaka Theater at the Globe to Globe, World Shakespeare Festival, UK & Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka
Macbeth	2013, dir. Sudip Chakraborty	Shilpakala Academy, Dhaka
Hamlet	2015, July 15	Globe Theater, UK performed at Shilpakala Academy
A Different Romeo and Juliet	2016 [400th Death Anniversary of Shakespeare]	British Council, Dhaka Theater and Graeae Theater Company, UK
Ekti Ashare Golpo (*A Mid-Summer Nights Dream)* and *Ochin Diper Upakhyan* (*The Tempest*)	2016, adapt and dir. Mukid Chowdhury	Performed by tea garden workers, Habiganj, Sylhet
Hamlet	2017, dir. Ataur Rahman	Shilpakala Academy
Macbeth	2018, dir. Sudip Chakraborty	Padatik Shilpakala Academy

Title	**Details**	**Group**
Mukhora Romoni Boshikoron (The Taming of the Shrew)	2018, trans. Munier Chowdhury	Nazrul Institute, Theater ULAB
Caliban	2019, adapt. Rani Drew	Department of English, ULAB
A New Testament of Romeo and Juliet	2021, adapt. Saymon Zakaria	The Theatre Troupe, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy
Julius Caesarer Bogatta	2021, trans. Abdus Selim	Natya Tirtha

This list, certainly not exhaustive, is based on information available in Nazmul Ahsan's essay "Shakespeare in Bangla" (Zaman and Khan 2018, 50–59); Niaz Zaman and Raza Ali's (2019) survey of English language plays in Dhaka, 1950–1970; Ahmmed Rahim's unpublished MA thesis (Rahim 2020); and Bangladesh Theatre Archives.

Table 2: Shakespearean Texts Taught in Select Universities in Bangladesh

University (est.)	**Public/ Private**	**Poetry**	**BA**	**MA**
Dhaka University (1921)	Public	Sonnets 18, 130	3rd Sem: *Macbeth* 8th Sem: (Optional) *As You Like It; The Merchant of Venice; King Lear; Hamlet; Richard II/ Henry IV Parts I & II/ Julius Caesar*	*A Midsummer Night's Dream, As You Like It, Julius Caesar , Othello, The Tempest*
Jahangirnagar University (1971)	Public	1st Sem: Sonnet 18 Elizabethan Poetry: 5 Sonnets	Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: *Macbeth, Hamlet, As You Like It, The Tempest*	No
Jagannath University (2005 as university, 1858 as college)	Public	Sonnet 18	Introduction to Poetry and Drama: *The Merchant of Venice* *Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama:* *Macbeth*	Shakespeare: Our Contemporary — theater performance, film adaptation
Khulna University (1991)	Public	Sonnets 18, 130	Shakespearean Drama (Core):*Henry IV–Part I, The Tempest, Hamlet, Measure for Measure*	N/A
North South University (1992)	Private	N/A	Shakespeare (Concentration Optional): Instructors select texts	No
BRAC University (2001)	Private	N/A	Shakespeare (optional): 4 plays are taught selected by the teacher	N/A
Southeast University (2002)	Private	Sonnet 18	Introduction to Drama: *Hamlet* Shakespeare in Theory and Practice: 4 plays	Shakespeare Studies: 4 plays, 8 sonnets
University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (2004)	Private	Sonnet 18	Shakespeare: 4 plays	Cultural Construction of Shakespeare

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