

Doing Shakespeare in the Bangladeshi Classroom: Overcoming the Challenges

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare's enduring appeal to learners across cultures stems from his rare insight into human nature, great gift for 'negative capability,' unique use of language, and aptitude for theatricals. While Shakespeare remains a formidable field in our literature departments, its true appreciation involves some inherent critical and cultural challenges as well. In dealing with Shakespeare, a teacher must consider the possibility of misconstructions by learners regarding his delineation of power and governance, the notion of kingship, intricate human relationship, gender fluidity, overt eroticism, inordinate violence and the playwright's position on racial discrimination and imperial agenda, let alone the issue of understanding Elizabethan English. When students are asked to measure Shakespeare's place in world literature, they hyperbolically portray the Bard, blurring the boundary of evaluation and eulogies. When it comes to justifying, they fall short of correct critical grounds and display their serious omissions in contextualisation. They are found in need of proper guidance to penetrate a play's "deeper meanings" through literary reading and analysis, at the same time not missing the essence of a play's "dramatic quality" available onstage. Doing Shakespeare in the classroom develops insight into the subject's subtleties which appear worth sharing in the light of the prevailing ideas on this area of study. This paper is an attempt to re-view challenges surrounding Shakespeare pedagogy in the Bangladeshi academia adding personal insight into the ongoing critical debate.

Shakespeare pedagogy demands special attention for its centrality in English Studies. For this paper's engagement with doing Shakespeare in the Bangladeshi classroom some selected plays have been referred to for their frequent use in pedagogic as well as theatrical purposes. When teachers share their deliberations on doing Shakespeare, some common challenging areas related to a text's spatial-temporal dimensions, changing values of generations of readers, and cultural shifts draw critical attention. The discussion gets new dimensions in the postcolonial and foreign cultural context of the twenty first century. The common critical areas in Shakespeare can open doors to new perspectives based on a teacher's personal experiences where cultural background plays a big role. His dramatic presentation bears the mark of contemporaneity as befits a multicultural genius of his status. The Polish playwright Jan Kott has famously rendered Shakespeare as our contemporary by interpreting his plays as allegories of modern times in his radical book about Shakespeare.¹ But there are dissenting voices also who feel that any attempt to project Shakespeare as our contemporary may result in the loss of his plays' vital Elizabethan references and meanings. There remains the problem of generalization and oversimplification in the appreciation of Shakespeare. To accept him as a dramatist of his time first and of all times subsequently has been the general praxis. Informed readers cannot miss the contemporary reflections and nuances in his dramatic presentation of the subjects of power, governance, violence race, gender, and possible imperial agenda.

Shakespeare's tragedies, as Dr. Johnson considers, bear the marks "of toil and study" while the comedies create the impression of being produced "without labour which no labour can improve."² In reality, his tragedies are found more popular with learners for reasons not very clear to them. They do not bother about measuring the relative values of his comedies and tragedies. In classifying Shakespeare's works, a teacher must explain subtle critical points about relative

importance of all categories. There exists a fundamental gap between students' personal ability to appreciate and what they hear from traditional sources. Their inability to explain factors responsible for Shakespeare's greatness is not unusual. As Shakespeare is a master craftsman his texts carry subtexts with layers of meanings. It is a hurdle for young learners to navigate complex textualities of Shakespearean art. Without unravelling the multiple meanings of the 'hidden texts', learners can only get partial view of Shakespeare through simple reading for meanings at the surface level. The complex significations of *Hamlet* or *Lear* universe emerging from irony, subversions and paradoxes may "tease one out of thoughts," to echo Keats commenting on the Grecian Urn's multidimensionality. Shakespeare's plays contain extensive references to diverse myths, folkloric traditions and histories and, by navigating them, learners can keep connection to cultures going back to antiquity. Current knowledge of human psychology helps in understanding his projection of human mind four hundred years ago. As examples one can consider Lady Macbeth revealing her guilty conscience through obsessive hand washing and Lear not feeling physical pain in the storm because he, as a 'child-changed' father, harbours sharper pain mentally. It becomes necessary to combine the knowledge of past cultures and the current thoughts on human psychology in analysing an intense dramatic situation a Shakespearean text offers.

Shakespeare being a global phenomenon, our students have sort of early familiarity with him through reading excerpts and viewing adaptations. Unconsciously they derive important life lessons and popular wisdom from his plays; Countless quotes like "Cowards die many times before their deaths;" (*Julius Caesar* 2.2), "Give everyone thy ear, but few thy voice," "Neither a borrower nor a lender be," (*Hamlet* 1.3), "The readiness is all." (*Hamlet* 5.2) 'Ripeness is all.' (*King Lear* 5.2), "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance." (*The Tempest* 5.1), construct life's guiding philosophy for many.³ This familiarity can serve as a prompt for further immersion in the poet's universe. But cultural gaps may create some problems for learners. It is not easy to know the socio-cultural elements, historical processes, and philosophical traditions informing Shakespeare's worldview. In our context, students prefer gathering background knowledge from the teacher's side, not relying much on their own reading, though there should be a balance between students' own background study and teachers' sharing necessary information to ensure partnership in reading and optimum use of the classroom time. Reading requires contextualization, for example, knowing the nature of kingship as understood by the Elizabethans, before approaching his tragedies. In a democratic culture, a ruler, unlike a King in Shakespeare, is not an important link in the Great Chain of Being. The tragedies are steeped in the Biblical traditions our learners should be made familiar with. Even sometimes Biblical framework is combined with pagan values in presenting a dramatic world as we see Hamlet's obsession with revenge or Lear's invoking gods reflecting pagan ideas rather than the Biblical.

The contemporaneity of Shakespeare's art is by now a truism; it is more so in the portrayal of politics. His tragedies, as we know, are basically political. His portrayal of politics stands out for its contemporary resonance as his tragedies become a treasure trove of political games and powerplay. While the play *Hamlet* depicts usurpation of the throne resulting in a rotten body politic, *Macbeth* displays how inordinate political ambition brings disaster and perpetuates a cycle of power abuse affecting both the power wielder and the subjects. *King Lear* dramatizes the consequences "When power to flattery bows" or "When majesty falls to folly" (1.1); it also shows when and how a moral voice like that of Kent or Fool is found "speaking truth to power" as Edward Said talks about the duty of a public intellectual in the contemporary politics. In his tragedies one can see how leaders' personal traits and decisions shape the destiny of a nation. We see the reflection of these political points in the recent reality of Bangladesh and elsewhere. A comparison of the mob in Shakespeare and the present mob culture harassing and sometimes killing the innocent becomes an exciting point of debate. One can easily find contemporary resonance in the incident of Cinna the poet being brutally murdered by a Roman mob of *Julius Caesar* just for sharing his name with a conspirator in a volatile and vengeful political atmosphere after the assassination of Caesar. We find an almost inexhaustible source of critical tools to review current debates on governance and power dynamics in our land and beyond. When a teacher, without showing political biasness, facilitates the discussion on the contemporary relevance of politics in Shakespeare, students can fruitfully add to the debate.

Race and colonialism in Shakespeare turns into delicate issues as in “recent years, both Shakespearean scholars and critics working within post-colonial studies have increasingly begun to scrutinize the ways in which the colonial and racial discourses of early modern England might have shaped Shakespeare’s work, and also the processes by which Shakespeare (in performance and study) later became a colonial battlefield.”⁴ Othello, the eponymous hero of the great tragedy can be a good point of discussion in this regard. His colour is frequently referred to against his wife’s whiteness. For its repeated use, the poet’s possible intention of projecting Othello’s human and military worth conspicuously with his black background may be overlooked. We need to guard against attributing Othello’s failed marriage to racist notions of black inferiority. The American critic Leslie Fiedler in his provocative book *The Stranger in Shakespeare* paradoxically explicates the colour question: Othello is morally ‘white’ while Iago is the true ‘black’ in actions.⁵ Still Othello is described in terms of the traits associated with blacks in Shakespeare’s time. These are sexual potency, courage, pride, guilelessness, gullibility, easily aroused passions, features central to colonial stereotyping as well. With race comes the troubling issue of colonialism, evident in Prospero’s treatment of Caliban in *The Tempest*. Caliban to the colonial master appears as a tribal ‘other’ whose deformity with blackness makes him lose his inherited land temporarily. Despite the positive portrayal of Prospero, to a critical eye his hidden colonial project does not remain unexposed.⁶ Therefore, regarding Shakespeare’s position on racism and colonialism, controversy may arise which a teacher, in the current context, must handle deftly, and turn, overcoming the sharp colonial debate, to the “Bard of Avon” for wisdom and beauty.

The issues around misogyny, repressed desire, and patriarchy in Shakespeare demands careful consideration as students may leap to easy conclusions. Let us consider Hamlet’s misogynistic outbursts: “Frailty thy name is woman” (1.2) or “God has given you one face, and you make yourselves another” (3. 1). If his mental condition is not taken empathetically these expressions appear problematic. Shakespeare does not share Hamlet’s views as one may presume; Hamlet’s dangerous generalization generates his negative attitude to women, depriving him of his last hope in Ophelia’s love. Or there might be an unfathomable gap between what he says about woman and what he conceals. Psychoanalytic critics like Ernest Jones’ attempt to apply Freudian paradigm to explain Hamlet’s repressed source of thought relating to his misogyny is hard to present convincingly in the classroom. In a different context, Lear’s corrosive comment on his two elder daughters or Albany’s generalized comment on his wife, one of Lear daughters: “Proper deformity shows not in the fiend/So horrid as in woman” (4.2) sounds sexually discriminatory and therefore unacceptable if readers do not like to consider the fact that in most cases woman includes implied man as, having lust and ingratitude, man also appears in the negative colour. Still Shakespeare’s tragedies reveal a manifest structure of male dominance through the show of violence against women in diverse modes. Hamlet’s deflected violence against his mother Gertrude, his verbal attack on his beloved Ophelia precipitating her death, and Othello’s paradoxical love-murder of his wife Desdemona portray a pattern where women are found incapable of wielding power. Underlying the scene of male dominance, one may speak of a deeper level of human conflicts in which men “strive to avoid an awareness of their vulnerability in relation to women,” thus revealing “a matriarchal substratum or subtext within the patriarchal text.”⁷

Shakespeare’s bawdy, loud and amusing treatment of sex, puts a teacher in dilemma: to teach or not to teach. What was natural on the Elizabethan stage may demand some censorship in our classroom. Again, censorship may detract from the real import. As a practical man, we can assume, Shakespeare considered both its entertainment side and thematic value. Therefore, it pervades Shakespeare’s comedies and tragedies alike and confirms its centrality in the dramatic structure. As Stephen Greenblatt notes, “Shakespearean comedy constantly appeals to the body and in particular to sexuality as the heart of its theatrical magic.”⁸ In some tragedies it initiates discussion on philosophical questions teasing our mind. When Hamlet attempts to define a man: “What a piece of work is a man” (2.2), he attempts to understand the relative place of animality and the angelic in the make-up of a man. For him it is intriguing to reconcile these two opposite tendencies in man’s physical and mental construction. When the play *King Lear* commences with Gloucester’s ‘good sport’ in begetting his whoreson, it foreshadows serious issues. Later we see his adultery entails loss of vision, the most painful incident in his life, as Shakespeare has drawn upon a tradition of

punishing a philanderer with castration followed by blinding. Again, Lear's obsession with the issue of giving birth to children appears to have centrality in the play's cosmic conception. Nevertheless, establishing the relevance of the bawdy is not so easy in a classroom context.

The homoerotics in Shakespearean comedies may sound odd within the confines of conventional gender structure. It is sometimes naively explored by referring to the practice of employing boys to act the parts of women as a dramatic convention or by interpreting the level of Renaissance friendship over love in portraying the relationship of the sonnet speaker and his male friend. Though homoeroticism is perceived as a cultural intervention in a heterosexually overdetermined field it is found "that certain Shakespearean texts display a homoerotic circulation of desire, that homoerotic energy is elicited, exchanged, negotiated and displaced as it confronts the pleasures and anxieties of its meanings in early modern culture."⁹ As for example, transvestism in *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* not only demonstrates the contemporary theatrical custom but also illustrates the crossing of erotic boundaries as psychoanalytically cross-dressing connects with homoerotic arousal. In *Twelfth Night*, Antonio's strong love for Sebastian remains an enigma for many. He says, "His life I gave him and did thitherto add/ My love, without retention and restraint" (5.1). He follows Sebastian to Orsino's place to protect him admitting that he has "many enemies there." Here is a man risking his life for his love for another man, not friendship in his own confession. Consequently, he is arrested but he does not mind considering the outcome as the byproduct of love: "This comes with seeing you/ But there is no remedy" (3.4). The mystery behind this sacrifice indicates homoerotic desire. As it is not a legitimate mode of desire in our culture self-censorship is the only option for an instructor.

Shakespeare's delineation of violence and evil is sensitive for young impressionistic minds. As we know, violence in art may have a tangible impact on viewers or readers. For the show of excessive violence some of his tragedies verge on the melodrama. Though Shakespeare's primary purpose of dramatizing violence was to cater to the taste of his contemporary playgoers, the modern audience may not consume it in the same way. The last scene of *Hamlet*, a stage littered with dead bodies, blinding of Gloucester in *King Lear*, the murder scene of *Macbeth*, and strangling scene of Desdemona by her husband in *Othello* may appear disagreeable to the audience of our time. Still, we cannot deny the visibility of violence in human history and Shakespeare has presented it to create the intended tragic emotions. As his art creates the sense of tragic waste in the readers, ultimately his tragedies do not turn into melodramas. Here teachers need extra effort to make learners understand the interconnection of tragic grandeur and sensationalism, to guard against any possible negative influence of stage violence on the young minds. Similarly evil thriving in Shakespeare's plays, in the opinion of some critics, can negatively influence readers. Dr. Johnson debatably calls him an 'immoral' writer whose unpunished evil characters may create an attraction for immoral activities. Of course, Johnson's expectation of poetic justice in a work of art goes against his own concept of the poet of nature.¹⁰ In real human society one can see evil goes unpunished and good remains unrewarded. Still a moral order can be discovered behind the tragic waste in Shakespeare. But it is not easy to make it visible for the sheer weight of tragic loss on the young minds. It is hard to make one believe that Cordelia's death, Lear going mad and Gloucester being blinded can reveal any hidden order in the Lear universe. A teacher must interpret a tragic play in such a way that the learners become convinced about the existence of a higher moral order under the apparent chaotic world, showing a silver lining under every dark cloud.

The supernatural in Shakespeare, for example witches in *Macbeth* or the ghost in *Hamlet* or portends in *Julius Caesar* initially play a note of discord in our time. In the age of super science, anything beyond scientific interpretation does not normally attract serious attention. Bringing supernatural elements on the stage, Shakespeare being presumably more concerned with immediate result, catered to the taste of his time primarily. Still the supernatural carries the note of universality; his use of it in a proper dramatic atmosphere makes readers accept it at least temporarily. The point can be supported by Johnson's notion of "theatrical illusion" or Coleridge's view of "willing suspension of disbelief". We may also explore the human basis for the existence of the supernatural in Hamlet's words: "There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5). However, this element appears more convincing in the proper theatrical atmosphere than in the classroom condition.

Language remains a key issue in our Shakespeare classroom as the dramatist's poetic beauty lies in the magic casement of language which a learner must unlock. His Elizabethan English is a language "which combined a vast range of reference—social and natural—with a unique freedom of epiphora."¹¹ This freedom would take one into a sustained network of meanings difficult for initial learners to pursue. As Shakespeare's English can create initial barrier, some learners may not try to approach his text through persistent linguistic engagement, they may have recourse to paraphrase—thus missing the beauty of Shakespeare's art. Still in Shakespeare lots of involved structures, archaic expressions and obscure references appear to be troublesome for initial learners. Besides, maybe a word meant something at that time and now, as language evolves, could mean something else. This contextual variation offers scope for studying the sociological dimension of the evolution of vocabulary. Furthermore, Shakespeare frequently uses apostrophes to shorten words that are not usually shortened, resulting in ambiguity and obscurity of expression. Here to avoid misreading, and not to lose the sheer force and flavour of certain words or phrases we may need continuous glossing. It is also necessary to justify his play upon the meanings of words providing a source of comic relief or intellectual pleasure for some readers and sometimes appearing boring for some other readers as Dr Johnson says his quibbles are his 'fatal Cleopatra.'

Comparative understanding of Shakespeare on stage and page is hard to explain to learners. Rex Gibson, who leads the Cambridge School Shakespeare project, aptly articulates the point: "Shakespeare was essentially a man of the theatre who intended his words to be spoken and acted out on stage. It is in that context of dramatic realisation that the plays are most appropriately understood and experienced."¹² In this view, reading with armchair interpretation cannot make students capture the full nuances of human interaction a Shakespearean text depicts. Some critics even go to the extreme of arguing that "reading is irresponsible unless it imitates playgoing."¹³ In the estimate of the scholars emphasizing the theatrical origin of Shakespeare's dramatic texts, if we want to understand Shakespeare fully a reading text only becomes second to drama. To some other scholars this extreme position of supporting stage-centred criticism is reductive in nature. This assessment, of course, varies from text to text. One can consider Charles Lamb's view "that *King Lear* is more effective on the page than on the stage" for its profound philosophical dimension.¹⁴ Conversely, the stage history of *Othello* gives a different view as the play's cruel and crude scenes can attract the audience more than the readers. Therefore, it is paradoxically stated by Bradley that *King Lear* is Shakespeare's greatest work but not his best play, and *Othello*, to most readers, is not his greatest work but is his best play.¹⁵ For better teaching and understanding the subtleties of different plays, whether performance should get priority over reading depends on many textual and non-textual conditions. Learners would think of reading first as it gives wider scope for critiquing. Since most classrooms have time limit, in combining teaching with performance students can have option for desk performance to act out parts of the play. In this way a convenient pedagogic bridge between traditional reading and performance method is possible, without losing their mutual benefits. Today's smart classrooms with audio-video facilities and modifications in class duration, sitting arrangement and testing system, can allow critical reading and experiencing the play on the screen concurrently.

To conclude, the above issues related to classroom dealing with Shakespeare are only hurdles to be overcome, not permanent obstacles to appreciation. The study of Shakespeare gives plenty of scope for the learners' recreation, formation of moral, intellectual, and philosophical habits and, of course, opportunities for creative teaching. To exploit the full potential of the texts, getting over the challenges a teacher must ensure that complexities ultimately lead to more engaged reading, transforming problems into dynamic learning opportunities. If learners are inspired to be actively engaged in exploring the world of Shakespeare for themselves, their potential to catch nuances of meanings is considerable. An optimal way of doing this can be applying a mixed pedagogical approach: textual close reading, contextual study and some performative attempt. Going beyond critical orthodoxy and embracing 'Cultural Poetics' one can "consider the play[s] as a dynamic interaction between artist and audience, to learn to talk about the process of our involvement."¹⁶ For their semantic density, Shakespeare texts can quite successfully be utilized

in all cultural contexts for any academic levels. Sometimes it should become a primary pedagogic step for a teacher to show how Shakespeare can transcend his foreignness and cannot be contained by any single culture or tradition as Dennis Kennedy opines: “Yet from the start of his importance as the idealized English dramatist there have been other Shakespeares.”¹⁷ In the current context of postcolonialism and cultural politics, Shakespeare pedagogy by adopting new directions and innovative strategies will continue fostering critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong love of literature.

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