

Damage or Pleasure? Teaching Shakespeare as a British Indian in the US
(Sujata Iyengar, zoom webinar for Seshadripuram Evening Degree College, Bengaluru, on the occasion of their Golden Anniversary)

I am borrowing the phrase “Shakespeare Damage” from my friend Dr. Tripti Pillai, who uses these words to characterize the experience of many *desi* or diasporic Indians in encountering Shakespeare’s plays and poems for the first time. (The term *diaspora*, originally used to describe the scattering of the Jewish people across the world, has been extended by Paul Gilroy, Salman Rushdie, and others not only to describe the situation of minoritized people within Western nations after colonialism and slavery but also to note the imaginary nature of that shared point of origin in many cases and the paradox by which its imaginary nature can nonetheless allow such people to coalesce for political action, analogous to the shared condition that Lani Guinier and Gerald Torres have dubbed “political race”).

All of us have such stories: accounts in which a teacher assumed a prior knowledge of Shakespeare understood as the epitome of white British culture, a culture that simultaneously excluded us and that diminished our Indian cultural heritage. The first time I heard of Shakespeare was in fourth grade, as part of the class’s celebration of an alien holiday – Hallowe’en – which to my family seemed bizarre, a celebration of ghosts and demons and witches, as it was in the early 1980s. “We’ll all say the witches’ scene from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,” opined my teacher confidently, “because everyone knows that, and everyone knows how to make a witch’s hat.” I knew neither of those things, but I remember thinking that the scene was not particularly interesting or impressive (although it was easy to learn -- and as many of my listeners will know, those lines are probably not by Shakespeare at all – they were added by Thomas Middleton in his revision of the play, and at least one of the witches’ songs was later incorporated into Middleton’s own play *The Witch*. (Since I didn’t know how to make a witch’s

hat, I received special dispensation to be a cat, with ready-made pointy ears, a black leotard and a ribbon tail, and mascara'd whiskers on my face.)

Mainstream British society in the mid-to-late twentieth century still subscribed to the beliefs of Macaulay's notorious "Minute on Education" or Carlyle's strident claims for "King Shakespeare." Macaulay, as most of you will know, enshrined British literature at the heart of the curriculum in British-ruled India because of his fervent belief that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia." Carlyle suggested both that the entire Indian Empire was worth less than the works of Shakespeare (and somewhat presciently noted that England would not possess the Indian Empire forever) but then explicitly suggested (after lamenting the loss of the US colonies) that Shakespeare be used as a method to forge racial and national unity among British colonial rulers and expatriates in far-flung outposts, because unlike King George, Shakespeare could be dethroned by act of neither parliament nor of war ([1841] 1871, 269-70).

Minoritized students living in the US or the UK – whether we are racial, religious, or language minorities – thus encounter Shakespeare in a state of what the great early twentieth-century African American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois called "double consciousness": (and I'm going to read a quotation that refers to Black people in America with a word that is today considered offensive by many people but at that time, 1903, was considered the most respectful way to describe such persons):

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others...One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self...He would not Africanize America...he would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white

Americanism....He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (DuBois 1903)

Paul Gilroy develops the concept of double-consciousness in a postcolonial context in his book *The Black Atlantic*, and subsequent critics and psychologists have extended Gilroy's discussion to communities beyond the African diaspora, such as South Asian, East Asian, Mestizo Peruvian and so on.

Double consciousness informs the postcolonial Shakespearean as what Ania Loomba, wittily quoting Thomas Middleton's anti-heroine Beatrice-Joanna out of context, describes as a "giddy turning" –the vertigo of the postcolonial feminist when "traditional Shakespeareans in India are upset at my suggestion that the Bard be removed from the fulcrum of literary studies, other colleagues because I continue to teach Shakespeare even when I have the choice not to." Loomba wrote that essay in 1993, and teaching Shakespeare since then has become controversial not only in postcolonial nations but even within England and the United States, particularly in response to justified objections from indigenous peoples and descendants of enslaved and colonized peoples that Shakespeare was historically wielded as a weapon to wipe out indigenous languages and non-European cultural traditions and to create a white identity that demands Shakespeare as "white property," in Arthur L. Little's phrase. Little goes on to argue that the Renaissance is when the quality or idea of whiteness starts to become codified as an essential characteristic of Western Europe, one that confers particular powers or abilities—and wealth—upon those who have it.

Indigenous scholars in the US have recently considered Shakespeare in the context of the boarding schools in Canada in the US where First Nations or Native children were sent by colonial authorities, sometimes late into the twentieth century. Such children were kidnapped

from their parents and tribes and prevented from speaking their own languages or practicing their own religions and cultures. While conditions in many of these schools were brutal (in some cases children died of malnutrition, disease, exposure, and neglect), and the teaching of Shakespeare was used to force children to learn English, in some schools even under these challenging conditions children from different tribes formed communities together, occasionally through putting on Shakespeare's plays (Burelle 2016). Daniel Fischlin suggests that, as a marker of what indigenous scholars call "white settler culture," Shakespeare is best understood as the cannibal demon or *windigo* of many indigenous peoples, "a ghost...among the ruins of colonial interrelations, circulating uncomfortably as an emblem of state hegemony, but also as a fugitive figure whose...rescriptings also bear the burden of the colonial referents and histories embedded."

Obviously, I didn't know any of this theory at the time. I just felt that Shakespeare, like Hallowe'en, baking cakes, and going on camping holidays to France, belonged to the other girls in my class, but not to me. So how did I get from Shakespeare skeptic to Shakespeare enthusiast? Not, at least not initially, because of my teachers. In fifth grade we were let loose in the library to undertake a research project – on Shakespeare. We were to read about his life, which I found interminably boring, and to read and summarize two plays (in reality, to summarize the prose retellings of a now-forgotten nineteenth- or early twentieth-century author, the equivalent of the Kannada retellings in the children's magazine *Chandamaama* that my mother had read in her youth).

Assigned *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Macbeth*, I found myself gripped by the stories, characters, and by phrases of lyric transcendence – lines and phrases that, I later found, the summarizers had quoted directly from Shakespeare's text. Beatrice, at whose birth "a star

danced” was a rebellious heroine in the mould of another of my favorites, Jo from Louisa Alcott’s *Little Women*, and Benedick was witty enough that I could even tolerate the romance-plot. Here’s Beatrice impudently answering Don Pedro, the Prince:

PRINCE

Your silence most offends me, and to be merry best becomes you, for out o’ question you were born in a merry hour.

BEATRICE

No, sure, my lord, my mother cried, but then there was a star danced, and under that was I born.

Much Ado About Nothing 2.1.324-9

Macbeth stirred me differently. Having invited his king to spend the night in his castle, Macbeth has just violated the laws of hospitality, kinship, loyalty and human decency by murdering the sleeping King and his bodyguards in order to seize the throne. I still remember sitting in my classroom, surrounded by other girls, silently reading my assignment and suddenly feeling the room around me become chill and dark and every hair on the back of my neck prickling as I read about the voice that cried out “Sleep no more!”

Methought I heard a voice cry “Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep”—the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,
The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
Chief nourisher in life’s feast.

...

Still it cried “Sleep no more!” to all the house.
“Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more.”

Macbeth 2.2.47-57

The next year I changed schools, and we read *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* in class. I found nothing sympathetic or interesting about that play; rather, with its focus on what seemed to be specifically English fairies and the English countryside, it alienated me.

But this was the year that the BBC began to air their television Shakespeare productions. Nowadays many scholars scoff at those productions for their relatively low production values, length, and artifice, yet it was the staginess or theatricality that made me think that there was more to these plays than I had realized. While I was hugely disappointed that Bottom (played by Hugh Quarshie) didn't *really* grow an ass's nole, I understood for the first time that these were dramas: plays, not novels, that the words were a script, and that descriptions, characterizations, and motives were all up for grabs. I understood for the first time that that the rich metaphorical ambiguity of Shakespeare's dialogue and staging, together with the complex responses of characters in each scene, afford *dramatic license* in the truest meaning of the term. Shakespeare didn't belong to the white English girls in fourth grade, nor to their parents, any more than it did to the BBC TV producers or to my sarcastic sixth-grade English teacher.

Again, I didn't know it, but I had theoretical support from prominent postcolonial critics who were writing in the eighties and who would develop their ideas over the next several decades. Homi Bhabha suggested that postcolonial writers employed a "double articulation," "a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which 'appropriates the Other as it visualizes power.'" In other words, postcolonial writers reimagine dominant powers in ways that allow them not only to use the languages and texts of their oppressors but more fundamentally to create new languages and discourses to accompany their own independence. Loomba historicized some reasons why the early modern period might continue to remain attractive to postcolonial scholars: "Renaissance and postcolonial studies...meet each other via their common interest in marginalized peoples of different sorts, and in their disparate attempts to theorize and recover subaltern resistance (or agency) and locate it in relation to power" (Loomba 1993). In other words, the era itself – and the writing of early modern dramatists, in particular – negotiated

race, gender, religion, social rank, labor, the state apparatus, how these categories intersected with each other, and what it was like to experience, chafe against, and challenge these categories.

Shortly after my epiphany, I found an illustrated copy of *The Stratford Shakespeare* on sale and convinced my parents to buy it. I read it cover to cover, understanding little but finding that the old-fashioned Victorian engravings helped me make sense of the plot and that some characters immediately sprung to life. I also recognized some of the stories from folk-tales my mother had told me or that I knew from other story-books. Shakespeare borrowed plots, characters, and elements from everything he read or heard; the age of discovery brought many such stories back to England from elsewhere in the world to add to the store of local tales and knowledge already there. The love-test in *King Lear* is a Cinderella-story with elements of the story about “The King who Loved Salt,” or “Coat-of-Rushes.” The ruling of Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* is a version of the terrifying magic scissors that amputated thieves’ hands if they were not telling the truth (I think that is from the *Baital Pachisi*, the stories of King Vikram and the Vampire, but I will appreciate confirmation if anyone knows).

Hermione’s restoration at the end of *The Winter’s Tale* recalls both the destruction of *maya-Sita* and the return of true Sita in Tulsidas’s *Ramayana* but also (I later learned) Stesichorus’ illusory Helen and Euripides’ Alcestis from Greek mythology. *Romeo and Juliet* has roots in the parted lovers of world folklore, from Bhavabhuti’s 8th century Sanskrit verse drama *Malati -Madhava*, the Arthurian Tristan and Isolde, the Persian princess Rudabah who, like Rapunzel, let down her hair from a high tower, to the many star-crossed lovers in Greek mythology (including the story of Pyramus and Thisbe that Shakespeare transformed into *Romeo and Juliet*, retold as comedy in *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and as tragicomedy in *The Two Noble Kinsmen*).

You can find and express nearly anything in this rich Shakespearean mix. Let me give you an example. Perhaps the most famous speech in Shakespeare is Hamlet's "to be or not to be" speech. I won't read the whole thing, but I've given you just the first twenty lines. Hamlet is contemplating suicide, but is filled with trepidation at the thought of what we might experience after we move to the next plane of existence:

To be or not to be—that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them. To die, to sleep—
No more—and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to—'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—
To sleep, perchance to dream. Ay, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. There's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life.
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office, and the spurns
That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin?

Hamlet 3.1.64-84

There would seem to be a limited number of ways one could deliver or interpret these twenty lines. And yet over a decade ago a student generated what was to me at that time a completely new interpretation and yet one that made perfect sense and even held a certain kind of historical accuracy.

The student had already told the class his situation. He used a name different from the name on the online student learning management system or the roll. He had been assigned

female at birth (or “born a girl,” as was correct usage at that time, though not now) and wanted to transition to male or (again in the words that he found empowering at that time) become a man (and let me remind my US- and European-based listeners that even in the US, this situation was much less common at that time than it is now). His parents were opposed: they refused to call their son by his male name and hoped he would return to his former name, dress, and pronoun, although they supported him financially. In the student’s telling, the parents and child were very attached despite their profound disagreement.

My student brought one property to class to deliver the speech – a dress. He held it up at the beginning of the speech and let it fall by the end. He explained that, for him, the speech held deep personal significance: he understood that his parents felt that by medically transitioning, he would be “killing” their daughter and that they would have to become acquainted with a new son. (At the time, this metaphor was commonly recommended to transitioning persons and allies as a way to understand the delayed or negative responses of confidants, although activists today resist this formulation. Today many transitioning persons prefer to describe their transition as affirmation or confirmation of a true and innate gender rather than as a “change”). The student wanted to make all of us, including his classmates, some of whom had expressed shock or even hostility to him – understand that for him transition would be not a death but a choice to live.

The student’s reading very movingly brought to life the stakes of gender transition for him and his family and uncovered new depths to the character of Hamlet, or rather aspects of the character that we might have forgotten. During the nineteenth century, Hamlet was often played by actresses, most famously Sarah Bernhardt, because of the character’s emotional register and excessive melancholy, a trait associated since the time of its writing stereotypically with “woman’s” tears.

This is the pleasure of teaching Shakespeare: not by presenting him—in Macaulay’s words, or in the vision of empire—as worth more than anything that Indians or Africans or indigenous peoples have produced or that students have experienced but as something that uses language, characters, and settings flexible and capacious enough to encompass what students DO know and to let them find themselves within it. In this way it is not just I who teach my students but my students who teach me, and we can all experience the pleasure of teaching Shakespeare.

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