

TO BE OR NOT TO BE': IDEOLOGY AND PRAXIS FROM THEORY OF
TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION TO TEXTS OF HAMLET



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Abstract

Adaptation and translation is a kind of ‘intellectual revisionism’, to use Harold Bloom’s phraseology that weaves past, present and future in one string of ‘intertextuality’. The theory of Adaptation and Translation of Master-texts as competing discourses from classical to medieval and Renaissance to the late modern times through phases of colonialism, Imperialism and post-colonialism are one of the pivotal ideologies that focus on the text, author, reader and the historical process. In this paper, I have tried to use as a framework the body of theories of adaptation and translation focusing on major dimensions of this ideology with specific reference to Shakespeare’s Hamlet (1601) and its select representations and analogues in the term of ‘praxis’. I have selected two modern-day post-colonial texts for the purposes of this paper:- one is Asit Basu’s Kolkatar Hamlet (1989) and the other is Bratya Basu’s Hemlat, The Prince of Goranhata (2006) as they re-mix, re-locate and re-create Hamlet into a network of competing discourses.

Keywords: Translation, Adaptation, Hamlet, Theory, etc.

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While dealing with the ideologies of Adaptation and Translation, questions that come first are "what is Adaptation?" and "what is Translation?" Now it may be simply answered in this way: 'Adaptation' is a literary theory, initially the fashion of changing names, titles and settings help the work acquire a local colour and a sense of familiarity among the recipients of the target language audience. On the other hand, 'Translation' is the communication of meaning from one source (master text) to another source (target text). It specifically refers to written information. At this point we may easily recall William Shakespeare, who had created a universe of literary creations by adapting a wide range of ancient-medieval legends, combining the folklore and anecdotes of the West and the East. These source texts were transformed into great works of art that have influenced numberless works afterwards, inspired a good many adaptations-translations centuries after century, across the globe. But the contemporary adaptations-translations take a bold step further. They tear the concerned text (the Master text) from its cultural and historical roots and transplant the same on a different seedbed amidst a completely different socio-cultural atmosphere where the plant thrives into a big tree with a new set of branches – leading to a hybrid form of literature. The writers of the later generation subvert the Master text by adapting-translating it. This practice has been viewed as parasitic or even cannibalistic approach as the adapting writer ingests the Source Text, assimilates with his own thoughts as a parasite does, and thrives on it, but develops something ingenious, often using the methods and techniques of parody, pastiche, collage, etc. At times the adaptor-translator hits back at his predecessor with his own version of the same thing. Sometimes he uses its analogue to suit his contemporary

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milieu, or to protest against his own situation, or to uphold his own ideology which may be at variance with the ideologies embedded in the text. Take, for example, the Bangla translation and presentation of Macbeth by Utpal Dutt in 1975 [which was later published in book form in 2006]. The performance was a political strategy of protest against the emergency clamped on India (25 June 1975 – 21 March 1977), just as Ingmar Bergman had presented a version of the same play as a protest against the Fascists in the 1940s. Here in Dutt's play, Macbeth's totalitarian rule over Scotland serves as analogue for Indira Gandhi's totalitarian rule over India.

Adaptation-Translation covers a large variety of modes of expression. The inter-textual relationship between the source and its versions may involve a complete replacement and demolition of the original form, e.g., a play into a new format (poem, the story of the film). Thus a play-text may be used for a faithful stage production, a linguistic/ translingual translation, or a brand new play or even for any subjective/objective critical perspectives. Here although in this paper, I restrict my discussion within some specific Bangla adaptation of Hamlet. But before that, we should take a brief note on some theories.

1. T. S. Eliot's Essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent" (1919) can be seen as a major basis for the theory of literary adaptations. According to Eliot, the individual talent is always in a dialectical relationship of give-and-take with the tradition. He either absorbs the tradition and extends it further from the perspective of his time and consciousness, or, he challenges the tradition, subverts it and attempts to establish a counter-tradition and 'makes it new', which in turn becomes part of the ongoing tradition of culture. Thus, the act of adaptation adds fresh trajectories of "intertextuality" to the flow of tradition.

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2. Adaptation and Translation may be viewed as an expression of **Anxiety of Influence**. This theory states that a writer shows up in the cultural shadow of his Great Predecessor. Under the circumstances, one of his responses may be to imitate him and accept the great authority. But he soon finds that his own authentic voice is stifled under the overwhelming presence of the master text. So the other response is to find his own voice in relation to the Master's voice and break away from the Master Text and assert his own self, own views, and own perspectives. Freud gives this an oedipal connotation that the child has to make an attempt to kill the father and become free. But this anxiety of influence, i.e., the continuing presence that haunts the writer throughout his life and his whole career may be seen as the map of a troubled relationship between the Master Text / Author and the writer himself/herself. Bloom sees further complications in this situation. His theory of 'Revisionism' holds that this is a deliberate 'misprision'(misreading) of a predecessor on the part of an artist of the later generation in order to clear out or carve out imaginative space for himself and in effect, for a new creation.

3. The fact is that the Master Text uses the recurring patterns of historical events or fundamental feelings or human actions (**viz. archetypes**) with such force that it attains the status of a '**Text of Power**', and remains relevant through time. Shakespeare himself was aware that there would be many adaptations of his master texts [e.g., Julius Caesar (1599)] because they contain certain archetypal forms relating to event, happenings, actions and characters that will be repeated in far off times and locales, in other contexts and texts, like the assassination of the head of a state, for instance, Julius Caesar in Rome and Indira Gandhi in India. But specifics, perspectives and ideologies will change according to the changes in time, place, culture, history and consciousness. This may be considered to be another theory

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of adaptation-translation, observed by Shakespeare himself when he makes Cassius say in Julius Caesar (1599): “Stoop, then, and wash. How many ages hence/ shall this our lofty scene be acted over/ in states unborn and accents yet unknown!” (Act 3, Sc. I).

4. But the aspect of Adaptation and Translation that attracts me most is that it is **an act of cross-cultural trans-creation**. Critics and theoreticians like D. A. Shankar acknowledge the fact that translation and adaptation are major attempts on the part of one culture to come to terms with another, and therefore, it is not the fidelity to but the departures from the original texts that are significant. This is a new life that is created out of cross-cultural intercourse (including ‘assimilations’, ‘rejections’ and ‘modifications’) between two different peoples of different nations. To quote Shankar: "... every culture consciously or unconsciously regards translation [and adaptation] as an agent which brings home both power and knowledge... and both are brought in a manner and a quantum that would benefit the receiving culture.” [Shakespeare in Indian Language, p. 15-16].

5. The cross-lingual and cross-cultural transactions are made for various reasons. Various motivations may work behind the mind of the adaptor-translator:

- 1) There may be some **commercial reason, i.e., popularity and well accessibility**: the canonical position of the Master Text entailing vast popularity and well acceptability, may serve as a certainty of success / the adaptor shares the prestige of being a kind of co-author of the master text;
- 2) Or, **experimental creative modes**: the adaptor-translator’s use of the canonical text offers him the scope of exfoliating and utilizing experimental creative modes like parody/pastiche/collage/inter-textuality;

3) Or, **the question of relevance:** the need to change the time and place of the master text in order to make a contemporary point and bring in contemporary relevance. This may be summarized as the attempt to make ‘Shakespeare our contemporary’. We may recall what Jan Kott observed in his book *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1967) with reference to Hamlet: “Shakespeare has written/ rewritten an old scenario, and the parts in it. But he did not distribute the parts. This has been done anew in every age. Every age has its own Poloniuses, Fortinbrases, Hamlets and Ophelias.” (p. 52-53)

The post-war adaptations of the canons have challenged the traditional values and perspectives of the Master Texts. The lack of faith and belief in God, Authority and Institutions, overall despair and monotony in human existence ensued from the political upheavals, economic depressions, and social degradations. Thus in a transformed global scenario resulting from the great upheavals in our history the intellectuals were led to review, re-interpret and at times challenge the Master Texts and the Great Books which had been hitherto considered to be the humanist basis of civilization and culture in new and emerging perspectives focusing ‘Power’ and ‘Domination’.

The Bengali and Indian stage with its rich tradition of culture and dynamism felt the tremendous impact of this intellectual revisionism. Accordingly, we find a number of master texts of Shakespeare have been adapted in Bangla theatre where the great artist has been relocated, reinterpreted and remodeled into contemporary Bengali Indian terms and perspectives. *Hemlat, the Prince of Goranhata* (2006) and *Kolkatar Hamlet* (1989), among others, represent this great destructive-constructive tendency that propels adaptations.

Evident from its title, *Hemlat, the Prince of Goranhata* is a Bangla adaptation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1602) relocating it in a different time and a different place, or more precisely, a subversion of the medieval-Renaissance tragedy into contemporary times. The

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Medieval- Renaissance "rotten state of Denmark" which is an oblique re-creation of London of early and ferocious capitalist ethos, is re-located in Basu's Bengal/India in general and Kolkata in particular. Shakespeare's time and ours are different but similar too except that the glory and grandeur of Hamlet are purposefully diminished. This relocation is seen in *Kolkatar Hamlet* where the playwright with communist inclination presented this city as a slaughter-house of new life and new dreams. Burning on the pyre of the Naxalite Movements and the state's ruthless means of domination this Kolkata became a replica of Hamlet's 'rotten state of Denmark' where the cloud of conspiracy, suspicion, espionage looms large; where bullet proves the authority; where the dream and aspiration of bringing about 'new' is destroyed every moment with the budding youth at every turning of the road. The spirit of Shakespeare's Hamlet appears before the protagonist Abhi and exclaims:

"My prison was Denmark...I see that Denmark has spread through the entire world like a fatal ulcer! Your country, too, I see, is just like my Denmark." [*Kolkatar Hamlet*, pg. 100-101]

Abhi, the urban Arjuna, the young intellectual 20th-century reincarnation of Shakespeare's Hamlet is caught between Naxalite extremism and quietitude. On this postmodern Kurukshetra of an unequal battle between the protesting idealism and capitalist realism, he gropes for the right action in theatre, in politics, in personal relations, in morality and ultimately gives us a quest for the meaning of life. Through the political and psychological, external and internal struggles of the protagonist and his quest, the playwright holds up a mirror to Kolkata and India of the 1970s and 1980s.

In Bratya Basu's text, the storyline follows almost faithfully the master text. The protagonist is Hemlat, a 22-23 years old young man of a declining middle-class Bengali family. His experience resembles to some extent those of the Shakespearean Hamlet as his father has

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been killed by his opportunist uncle who has a secret and mysterious intimacy with Hemlat's mother, Monoroma. Quite similar to the Shakespearean plot Hemlat's uncle Kodu wants to usurp the house and sell it to a promoter for big personal profits. Hemlat considers himself as an incarnation of Hamlet, the prince of Denmark and calls himself as 'the Prince of Goranhata' (Sc. 5, pg 100). The outline plot construction of the play follows the basic storyline of Shakespeare. In the same manner, as in Shakespeare, the hero comes across the spirit of his dead father, who reveals the truth and incites Hemlat to avenge the assassination. But in the course of the play he withdraws, commits suicide and bequeaths the task to generation next.

Diminishment, in Basu operates at various levels, such as:

a) The nomenclature – As the names of dramatis personae reveal: King Claudius becomes 'Kodu', Hamlet is equal to 'Hemlat', Polonius is 'Pol', etc. The names of the characters in Hemlat are not just Bengali- Indianised versions of the original but they reveal a conscious and inevitable degeneration and diminishment. The wicked, corrupt Claudius, for instance, becomes Hemlat's "Kodu Kaka" – "Kodu" bringing with it an association of "kada", i.e. mud, slush and mire; and immediately refers to his dirty intentions and perversions.

b) The public and political conflict in Shakespeare's Hamlet is between two opposed royal powers represented by Hamlet and Claudius fighting over the fate of Denmark. Here in the Bangla adaptation the Danish state and Elsinore has become a crumbling old mansion with greedy promoters led by Kodu-Claudius squabbling and fighting over its acquisition, to raze the property to the ground and construct a high-rise building in its place.

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c) The conflicts are also about the political turf-war between opportunistic parties and infighting among major political ideologies that are going bankrupt. This crisis time is perhaps just the right historical moment for the emergence of a third force and for ushering in something "new"- an overwhelming change in society and the nation (parivartan). The third force is never mentioned by name specifically as the Trinamool Congress. Yet there are strong, perceptible hints and observations on the development of a third force drawing within its ambit most of the disillusioned masses. The hope and promise of a new dawn, a new age of radical change reverberates through key moments in the play. "The time is out of joint", but it must "be set right".

d) "Something's rotten in the state of Denmark" (Hamlet, I, iii, and 1.90) reverberates in Goranhata too. The squalor of this Red-light district of Kolkata and the piled up corruption of this decadent, crumbling late 20th-century post-colonial erstwhile capital city of India is brilliantly caught by Basu in Hemlat.

e) Basu's use of popular culture represented here by Hindi films that mesh in with the revenge motive and themes of corruption and decadence of the harrowing present moment of our history and culture. This is highlighted in the telling utterance of Hemlat's father's ghost who screams out:

"Paap se dharti fatti... fatti... fatti...

Adharma se asman... man... man... "(Hemlat, sc. 6, pg. 101)

[In our translation: "The earth is fissured and broken apart with sin, impiety is erupting across the skies... in man, in man, in man..."]

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The ghost's screams haunt the entire play and the characters and serve as a reverberating curse in and through the world of Hemlat. As Sadhan utters this mantra in the background we hear the theme music from Tridev.

Both Hamlet and Hemlat struggle desultorily and through fits and starts "to take arms against a sea of troubles". Both stumble tragically as they vow revenge. Hamlet achieves revenge, if at all, accidentally while Hemlat takes sleeping pills and attempts and commits suicide. In the eleventh and last scene of the play, Hemlat reappears on an empty stage. Behind him stands Sadhan in front of the burning pyre. Only the sound of the wind blows as a small boy (supposedly, Hemlat's son) plays with a toy sword. Hemlat speaks directly to the audience: "I could not do it. My sword is broken. You cannot kill Time with it. Rather one can pull Laertes' sword toward one's own heart. This is what always happens. But this I know, that our failures will not be seen as important on another day. Those failures will be superseded and transcended by many, many successes. The successes of my children. My son's achievements. I know he will succeed. Shefu (Shefali) will teach him how to succeed and win. Harish, Paulda, uncle, my mother, Lacchu, Ponka all of them together will teach and train him. Then come, let's go, go. But before I leave let me give you this advice – press your lips with your index finger and be silent. Do not say anything. Express nothing. Our times are bad. As if the time is out of joint. O hate, have I been born only to embrace hate, malice and revenge? Come, come, let all of us go now."

The play ends as a smiling Sadhan places his hand on Hemlat's head, and Hemlat with a fixed gaze places his hand on his son's head, and all freeze reminding us the 'baravaya' mudra of Buddhism.

The three generations stand one after another in line. They seem to console that in every age, time and again, whenever corruption and depravity engulf humanity, Hamlets will be born

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and re-born to avenge the wrongs and purify society. The eternal warriors who embody the great teachings of the Vedanta: “Karme`uu adhik^araste m^a phale`uu kad^achana (work incessantly.

Your duty is to work but not to expect the fruits thereof). They seem to reverberate the encouraging words of Lord Shri Krishna in Shrimadhbhagvad-Gita: “yad^a yad^ahi dharmasya glanirbhavati bh^arata abhyutth^anamadharmasya tad^atmanam srij^amyaham” (whenever there is a discrepancy in religion and the earth is engulfed with sins I'll come to fight for the justice).



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