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Shamsur Rahman's Translation of *Hamlet* in Bengali: A Search for Peace, Stability, Resolution, and direction in the 1990s Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Translation of William Shakespeare's drama in Bengali language has a boastful history. Many of the important writers have attempted this with significant contributions. The list includes stalwarts of Bengali literature like Girish Chandra Ghosh, HemchandraBandyopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, JatindranathSengupta, UtpalDutt, and, in recent times, BratyaBasu and so on. Again Bengali is not limitedly used/practiced only in India but also transcends this geographical boundary to reach Bangladesh where it has a status of a medium of revolution. Bangladesh obtains a rich culture and heritage of theatre productions, mainly, in vernacular language. So Shakespeare, the master craftsman of the stage, is a natural selection for them. India may the undivided Bengal started Shakespeare translation under the shadow of the colonial rule while this practice in Bangladesh gained momentum after its independence in 1971. So the histories of Shakespeare translations in Bengali in both these countries have simultaneously similarities and dissimilarities. The study of Shakespeare's translation in Bangladesh without the English colonial power in the rule is in itself an important matter of research. ShamsurRahman (1929-2006), the notable poet, Journalist, and columnist of Bangladesh completed his translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Bengali in the year 1995 after the end of Hussain Muhammad Ershad's autocratic rule (1982-1990). He had to bridge, like any other translator, two different historical times, cultures, languages, religions, and societies etc. But all these boundaries are blurred when he considers his Hamlet suffering from the same insanity as by the Jesus or by Prometheus. All of them carry the burden of cleansing the 'corrupted time' to reach a utopia of ultimate freedom. The universality of the text is, thus, stamped and the relevance of it in a post colonial or rather 'neo colonial', democratic country is proved. In this paper I have tried to explore the Bengali translation of *Hamlet* by ShamsurRahman from the points of view of linguistic and cultural studies to justify the importance of the Target Language Text in the glorious history of Shakespeare's Translation in Bengali.

**Keywords:** William Shakespeare, Translation, adaptation, culture, Linguistic equivalence, Bengali, Bangladesh, Drama, peace, power, autocracy, secularism.

"Where there is power, there is resistance"  
-Michel Foucault

Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is one of those writers who has been considered in the subsequent ages by the writers or translators of the

whole world as a master source of ideas for their writings. So many researches have been conducted to find out the reason of this ageless and world wide popularity and acceptance of Shakespeare. But he remains as mysterious as forever he was and his popularity has grown with the growth of time and with the expansion of the world. Shakespearean dramas, both the tragedies and the comedies, have been frequently translated and /adapted in almost all the languages of this world. Bengali is a blessed language to get in touch with the Shakespearean world of dramas as early as in 1870<sup>1</sup>. From then on the translation and /adaptation of Shakespearean dramas in Bengali language has got momentum in quantity as well as has gained in quality. The field of the translation of Shakespeare in Bengali has been enriched with the presence and contributions of many important Bengali writers like RabindraNath Tagore (1861-1941), Girish Chandra Ghosh (1844-1912), Jyotindranath Sengupta (1887-1954), Hemchandra Bandopadhyay (1838-1903), Utpal Dutt (1929-1993), and in recent times, Bratya Basu(1969-) and so on. This is a partial history of the translation of Shakespearean dramas in Bengali language because Bengali is also an international language as it is used by the people of Bangladesh too. Bangladesh obtains rich culture and heritage of theatre productions, mainly, in vernacular language. The popularity of Shakespeare on the other side of Bengal is almost the same. Bangladesh achieved his political freedom and independence in 1971 but the tradition of Shakespearean adaptations in Bangladesh started earlier than that. In 1970, just before their independence Bangladesh started to accept Shakespeare in Bengali translation popularly when Prof. Munir Chowdhury(1925-1971) translated *The Taming of The Shrew (Mukhora Ramani Boshikoron)*. Then on this tradition started to gain impetus and attracted some prolific and skilled translators like Syed Shamsul Haq(1935-2016), Abu Shariyar, Dr. Mafiz Choudhury, Kabir Chowdhury(1923-2011), Shamsur Rahman (1929-2006) to name a few. The popularity of Prof. Munir Chowdhury's translation in 1970 was a hallmark in the history of Shakespeare translation in Bangladesh. Shafi Ahmed in his book, *Bangadeshe Shakespeare (Shakespeare in Bengal)* published by Bangla Academy, Dhaka in

1988 provided a list of Shakespeare translations in Bangladesh up to 1988 where we only get three more Shakespearean dramas translated in East Pakistan before 1970. All of these three translations were done by Rehanuddin Chowdhury and one of them was *Hamlet* (1964) the other two were *Tempest* (1966), and *Twelfth Night* (1966). But these texts are not later discussed so much or referred to in the subsequent history of Bangladeshi theatre. The difference between Shakespeare translation in undivided Bengal and in Bangladesh is multifarious. Shakespeare came into Bengal as an ideological tool to strengthen the British Colonial power and, sometimes, for simple entertainment for the English people living in India. But it is completely a different atmosphere when Bangladesh accepted Shakespeare as a source of translation. Rabindra Nath Tagore was enchanted with the "complexities" of the plots of Shakespearean dramas, Girish Ghosh tried to Indianise Shakespeare in the tradition of 'jatra', Utpal Dutt took it as a tool of revolution. But it is a different history when it comes to the translation of Shakespeare in Bangladesh. Jyoti Sen Gupta wrote a book, *History of Freedom Movement in Bangladesh (1943-1973): Some Involvement*, published by Naya Prokash in 1974. In that book Sen Gupta describes the situations in Bangladesh immediately after the 1971 independence:

"The scene in Bangladesh is a struggling economy, baffling law and order situation. People are taking the law into their own hands by beating to death a number of people every day on suspicion that they are dacoits or thieves." (p498)

Shamsur Rahman, the notable poet, Journalist, and columnist of Bangladesh- the prestigious *Ekushey Padak* and the Bangla Academy Award winner completed his translation of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in Bengali in the year 1995 against another background of a traumatic experience of the whole nation due to the autocratic rule of Hussain Muhammad Ershad. Banglapedia (National Encyclopaedia of Bangladesh) comments:

"Towards the end of Hussain Muhammad Ershad's autocratic rule (1982-1990) Shamsur Rahman became involved in the anti-autocracy movement of the people."

I have taken this translated text of *Hamlet* in Bengali and in this paper have tried to consider it from the context of the contemporary socio-political background of Bangladesh.

**Main Body:** ShamsurRahman in the preface of his translation of *Hamlet* published by Samay Prakashan in 2005 has accepted that in translating Shakespeare he has got influences from some of the important books like *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* by Jan Kott. Jan Kott (1914-2001), a polish political activist, critic and theoretician of the theatre in the essay *Hamlet of the Mid-Century* has accepted the importance of *Hamlet* for many reasons:

“There are many subjects in *Hamlet*. There is politics, force opposed to morality; there is discussion of the divergence between theory and practice,...there is the tragedy of love, as well as family drama; political, eschatological and metaphysical problems are considered.”p33

Kott also considers *Hamlet* as a ‘Sponge’ (p36) and “it immediately absorbs all the problem of our time” (p36). Bangladesh during the latter half of 1980s and the first half of 1990s was under a severe political turmoil. And it starts with the emergence of Lt. Gen. Hussain Mohammed Ershad in 1982, when he removed democracy and declared Martial Law. This period continued till the early 1990s. During this period the democracy in Bangladesh was greatly hampered and the peace and stability of the Government was not supported by the choice of the common people. The people experienced during this time several protests, mass petitions, violence, hypocrisy, sabotage and corruption. It is in this context that Shamsur Rahman started to translate *Hamlet* in Bengali and finally published it in 1995. He was one of the thirty one distinguished citizens who issued a milestone statement demanding end of the autocratic rule and restoration of democratic policy on the March 30, 1987. At about the same time the country’s poets formed their own *Kavitaparishad* to join hands with others in opposing the rule. ShamsurRahman was made its president. For three years from 1988 to 1990 the country’s poets led by him observed with great enthusiasm on February 1 and 2 a poetry festival under a huge canopy in front of the Teacher-Student Centre (TSC) of Dhaka

University. They wanted to show their hatred and grudges through the sharply pointed weapons of poetic lines directed towards the oppressive power of a tyrannical ruler. Literature can’t be separated from history. They have close connection between them forever. According to Jan Kott,

“Every age has its own Poloniuses, Fortinbrases, Hamlets and Ophelias.” (p36)

Utpal Dutt, another phenomenal translator of Shakespeare in Bengali expressed in an interview with Samik Bandyopadhyay in 1989 his design behind translating *Macbeth* into Bengali against the backdrop of Emergency in India in the year 1975 as a protest against the autocratic rule:

“...we understood that there was no ‘better play’ than Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* against the autocracy. No play was better to protest against the Emergency than that.” (*Macbeth*, Utpal Dutt, pp1-2)

(The translation into English is mine)

On the contrary Rahman has expressed his reason behind the translation of *Hamlet* as a form of respect shown to the great dramatist, William Shakespeare. In his own way he has found the story of *Hamlet* mysteriously complex and at the same time universal. Hamlet’s dilemma appeared to him as a universal dilemma of the intellectuals and his motive of correcting the corrupted world reminded him the sacrifices of Jesus Christ or Prometheus. Rahman wrote in the introduction to his translation of *Hamlet*;

“In Hamlet’s dilemma we can find the reflection of the contemporary Bengali intellectuals’ indecisions....They neither can accept the present state due to its gross brutality nor they can jump into an open protest or war against it along with the common masses.”(pp17)

He also added,

“Hamlet is undoubtedly mad if we also consider Jesus Christ or Prometheus so.”(pp16)

(Both these quotations are translated into English by me)

At the same time he has also found the task of translating Shakespeare an enormous one and at the same time the most difficult task for a translator

to execute. Through this translation of *Hamlet* Rahman has tried to find out a solution to the prolonged political and religious problems. As a journalist he was in constant touch with the contemporary socio-political situation of his country and as a sensitive poet he was forced to react against it through the poetries written by him. Rahman's Bengali works namely *Bidvasta Nilima* [Devastated Sky] (1967), *Samson*<sup>2</sup> (1971), *Adbhut Andhar Ek* [One Mysterious Darkness] (1986) have clear indications for the poet's feelings about the topical incidents of the society mainly the demolition of democracy, thrashing of humanity, and casting his native people off their individual freedom and rights. Though he was compassionate with the martyrs, freedom fighters, and pro-democracy leaders and agents yet he was not a believer in one party rule of a country of any form. Banglapedia informs:

"Despite his firm admiration for him [Bangabandhu', Sheikh Mujibur Rahman] and unbroken confidence in his leadership, the poet remained one of the exceptional few who did not join Bangabandhu's 'Baksal'<sup>3</sup>. Its only meaning was that he did not approve of the proposed one-party rule."

Rahman was actually against any form of absolutism. He was highly modern in his expressions of poetic thoughts and his perceptions of life were tinged with the colours of liberal humanism devoid of any kind of narrowness whether be it political, social or religious. To pay for his revolution against the supremacy of autocracy he was severely dishonoured instead of having enviable international repute. During the period of President Ershad he got involved with internal turbulence in the *Dainik Bangla*. A rank of 'Chief Editor' was created to take away his position as the top executive and to rip him off all executive powers. In 1987 he left the daily as a protest against this injustice and started serving the nation with his talents in literature. As a blessed critic of literature Rahman has tried to see the impact of *Hamlet* in a simplified way. He has only considered the theme of 'revenge' as a motivating theme for him to translate it. This motif of revenge

was actually to wage a war against the every oddity of a cursed shadowed state.

In the process of translating *Hamlet* Rahman has followed the process of 'word by word' translation. Rahman's *Hamlet* contains exactly the same number of Acts and scenes with its similar divisions as it is exactly the same in the original work of Shakespeare in English. It has not also changed the settings. Hamlet is still the prince of Denmark, so is the other characters as they were in the original text of William Shakespeare. Only one minor change has been done by him in his Bengali text where the presence of the soldiers in the list of characters is omitted. Though there are some important changes in the part of finding out the equivalence of the Bengali words in place of the English one. He has incorporated the idea of the 'Babu' characters of the 19<sup>th</sup> century undivided Bengal in replacing the idea of the foppish character. Priest has been translated as *purohit*, grave digger is translated as *gorkhodok*, Ghost has been translated in different ways like *ashoriri*, *pretatya* etc in different contexts. God has been translated in different speeches of Hamlet as *debota* (by following the Hindu tradition) like in Act I sc. ii, *khoda* as in Act I sc.v, (to assimilate the Islamic ideas), and also as 'jishu' [Jesus Christ] found in Act II sc. ii. Heaven and hell are also translated in different ways like *swargo*, *narok*, *behest*, *dojok*. 'Dooms day' has been translated as *rojkeyamat*. So the Bengali or Arabic words are coming in place of English words. The differences in religious beliefs are merged in the works of Rahman. He was in search of a utopic secularism against the backdrop of his country's history of gross fundamentalism. So is the case of allusions in Rahman's *Hamlet*. In Act I Scene ii Hamlet refers to Hyperion<sup>4</sup> and Satyr<sup>5</sup>, both are taken from Greek mythology and Rahman has translated them as *Suryodevota* [the Sun God] and *naroposhu* [the *Narasimha* avatar of the Lord Vishnu] interestingly both are from Hindu mythology. In the same speech Hamlet refers to Niobe<sup>6</sup>, a character from Greek mythology again and it is kept intact in Rahman's Bengali translation possibly because of the lack of parallelism with the life and activities of Niobe in Hindu or Islamic mythologies. Every translated text has a typical target readers or audience. But the confusion arises

when we find these kinds of combination in reference to the mythological incidences or characters. The mixing of Hindu, Greek, Latin, Christian and Islamic mythologies is a support to his idea of secularism or a free world where the right to express religious opinion is well established.

The idea of multiplicities in political ideology, theological belief, and cultural difference was also there at the background of writing of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. *Hamlet* was first performed in July 1602, based on a 12<sup>th</sup> century Latin history of Denmark compiled by Saxo Grammaticus and a prose work by the French writer Francois de Belleforest, entitled *Histoires Tragiques*. Shakespeare modified his source and made his play a great study of Renaissance Humanism. He set his story of *Hamlet* in the latter part of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, obviously after the Protestant Reformation of 1517. Elizabeth I restored the Protestantism in England in 1559. *Hamlet* is presented as reading in the University of Wittenburg, the homeground of the reformer Martin Luther. As Elizabeth I did not have any heir, the possibility of a fight over the throne and a fight between Catholic and Protestant occupied the thoughts of many Englishmen.

Apart from the idea of political connotations and ideological confrontations the best part of Shamsur Rahman's translation of *Hamlet* into Bengali is its poetry. It is a poetic translation and as a skilled poet Rahman has translated the Elizabethan blank verse into its exact parallel in Bengali to remind us of the beauty of *amitraksar* chanda [one type of blank verse in Bengali prosody] in the poetries of Michael Madhusudan Dutta (1824-1873). Shamsur Rahman in his Bengali poetries mainly followed well known Bengali meters like *payar*, *akhsarbritto*, and *matrabritto* as dominant rhymes but here in this translation to cope up with the style of blank verse he has adopted the *gadyachanda* or free verse. The vocabulary of his poetry in this text is especially noteworthy. There is a speech of Polonius in Act I scene II:

"He hath, my Lord, wrung from me my slow leave/ By laboursome petition; and at last/ Upon his will I seal'd my hard consent./I do beseech you give him leave to go." Line no. 58-61

Rahman has translated it as

"pravu, parishrami prarthanay nieche adaykore/ amar manthar anumoti ebang akhere ami/ tar se ichhar prati anichhuk sammati diechi;/ amar minoti take apno din anumoti".

In the same scene Rahman's *Hamlet* says, "Atyier cheye kichu beshi, atyajer cheye kom."

In place of Shakespeare's

"A little more than kin and less than kind".

The beauty of Rahman's translation not simply rests on the choice of words but also delves deep into the level of phonology and rhetoric. The ambivalent relationship between the prince and the king is expressed by Shakespeare in using the antithetical pattern of the sentence, which is correctly reproduced by Rahman here. He also traces the repetition of /k/ sound in Shakespeare in this line and replaces it with the /a/ sound in Bengali. There are so many of these kinds of graceful parallels in this translated text. The soliloquies of *Hamlet* are another area of interest where the inner consciousness of *Hamlet* is, to some extent, revealed. As a specimen I take the most discussed soliloquy of *Hamlet* in Act III Scene I :

"To be, or not to be, that is the question:/ Whether it is 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...".

Shamsur Rahman has translated this soliloquy as

"thakbo ki thakbona, pranso halo tai...".

"To be" is translated as "to live" or "to exist". Rahman has incorporated the idea of existential crisis in the characterization of *Hamlet* and thereby associating it with the contemporary political situation of Bangladesh. Rahman's criticism of the contemporary Bangladeshi intellectuals' lack of determination and resolution probably found this as a source of reason. Rahman has not stopped himself by only comparing *Hamlet* with the intellectuals but goes beyond that and compares him with Jesus Christ or Prometheus who sacrificed their lives in the process of rectifying the "unweeded garden" or in the way of setting the 'disjointed time' in right tune. Rahman mourns the death of *Hamlet*, a true revolutionary in his term but

also praises the Shakespearean sense of Time. This sense of Time and its relation with the theatre is also supported by the view of Bertolt Brecht and in terms of *Hamlet* he says:

“... The Theatre should always be mindful of its time. Let us take, as an example, the old play of *Hamlet*. I believe that in the view of the bloody and gloomy times in which I am writing this, in view of the criminal ruling classes and general despair of reason... the story of this play may be read thus: it is a time of war.”

### Conclusion

Syed Shamsul Haq, one of the great dramatists of Bangladesh once expressed his anguish over the lack of practice of the bold and revolutionary ideas through dramatic representations in Bangladesh in an essay<sup>7</sup> in 1985. He said

“There was no reason for drama in subservient Bangladesh; there may be poetry, painting, story but not the drama for the subservient people.”

Shamsur Rahman definitely filled this gap. His *Hamlet* is in one sense a climax of his poetic genius in projecting the ideas of revolution, reformation and creation of a ‘golden millennium’. Whatever he had attempted in his poems and novels prior to *Hamlet* is nothing but a chain of continuous thought process which achieved its ultimate shape in this translated text of ‘immortal’ Shakespeare. Considering all these elements it is very much apparent that *Hamlet* is a story of ‘power and heredity’ and Shamsur Rahman has utilized it to reflect the hopeless, unstable, corrupt, and unruly political atmosphere of the 1990s Bangladesh with a dream of changing it into a positive one.

### Notes

1. *Prabhabati*, an adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* by a group of Bantra, Howrah, West Bengal and was performed on stage in 1870 as recorded in the book, *Shakespeare on the Calcutta Stage: A Checklist* edited by Ananda Lal and Sukanta Chaudhuri, 2001. 96
2. *Samson* (1971) was a poem of Shamsur Rahman written to pay respect to the great Bangladeshi leader and later President of Bangladesh, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman who

has been compared here with the biblical figure of the Israeli hero, Samson.

3. The Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) was an all political party platform out of which no political party had the permission to perform their agenda vide the presidential order in 1975 Bangladesh.
4. According to the penguin *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* Hyperion was one of the Titans, the son of Uranus and Gaia. Sometimes the name Hyparion was applied to the Sun himself since it means ‘he who goes before’.
5. According to the penguin *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* again Satyrs are demons of nature who appeared in Dionysus’ train. They were represented with the lower part of the body resembling that of a horse or a goat and the upper part that of a man.
6. Niobe according to the penguin *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* is the daughter of Phoroneus by the Nymph Teledice. She was the figure of a bereaving mother waiting for the deaths of her children.
7. The essay is found as a reference in the essay “*Bangla Nataka Desh Videsh*” [“The Home and Abroad in Bengali Drama”] by Syed Manjoorul Islam published in the collection of essays, *Natya Parikrama: Char dashaker Bangladesh (1972-2011)*, Ed. By Ramendu Majumder, Nabayug Prakashani, Dhaka, 2013, pp111

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