

True Picture of Hindu Manners: Understanding Early Orientalist Readings and Renderings of Indian Literature and Culture

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Abstract

This paper will attempt to problematize the categories of the traditional and the modern. The paper will take into account early Orientalist readings of India and Indian literature and seek to understand the context and the consequences of the orientalist interventions and studies on Indian sense of self perception.

Keywords: orientalism, William Jones, indology, Shakuntalam, romanticism, translation

Introduction

The paper will take into account early Orientalist readings of India and Indian literature and seek to understand the context and the consequences of the orientalist interventions and studies on Indian sense of self perception. The paper will also discuss and problematize William Jones' critique of the play *Abhignana Sakuntalam*

Ever since it was first translated in 1789 into English by William Jones, *Abhignana Sakuntalam* (hereafter *Shakuntalam*) attained a such canonical status that its name and fame unmatched by any literary text for centuries to come. Jones, who was the flagbearer of Indology, glorified the drama to such a great extent that his translation of *Shakuntalam* became the model for several other translations in other European languages. In his preface, he writes,

"I turned it word for word into English, and afterwards, after adding or suppressing any material sentence, disengaged it from the stiffness of the foreign idiom, and prepared a faithful translation of the Indian drama, which I now present to the publick, as a most pleasing and authentick picture of old Hindu manners and one of the greatest curiosities that the Asian literature has yet brought to light"

One needs to notice how he seeks to substantiate his own writing by calling it not only the authentic translation of the play, but the "true picture of Hindu manners" moreover he later "confesses" to the omission of erotic passages in the play, which, according to him would not have caused any "injury" to the drama.

Also, instead of talking about India (which was really north or east India) he increases his geographical reach exponentially to count all of Asia, which is nothing short of a sweeping generalisation. Jones' translation was an instant success, It was as if that the European market was waiting for something which would give validation to their ongoing literary movement- Romanticism.

Western Romanticism and the Orient

Romila Thapar in "Orientalism, German Romanticism and Shakuntala", notes that Romanticism in Germany was particularly contributive to lead *Shakuntalam* to a Europe wide fame.

She says "Romanticism preferred the less orderly aspect of the Greco Roman past and looked for the exotic, the unusual, the irrational, the emotional and the imaginative as against the typical, the rational and the real. The availability of literature from the "Orient" revealed another world. It was a move away from the known European civilisation to the imagined fantasies of societies outside Europe, and from a long time past" (Thapar, 2004: 209) ^[11]

Thapar calls this phenomenon the "Oriental Renaissance", which was parallel to Greek Renaissance, Both these trends echoed the European endeavour to in find its roots in the ancient past. This was followed by not only many translations but many theatrical productions of *Shakuntalam* throughout Europe. Being bestowed with this instantaneous international acclaim, *Shakuntalam* was now the canon in the eyes of the Indian mass too.

It was around the same time that *Shakuntalam* started being translated into other Indian languages. Although the play had been a part and parcel of the indigenous Indian traditions, post Jones' translation definitely rose to popularity. Jones also called Kalidasa "The Shakespeare of India". This announcement later lead to a new literary trend of juxtaposing Kalidasa (representing India) and Shakespeare (representing Europe.)

J.S. Mill's India

But before looking at the reception of Shakespeare in India one could first take a look at the other attempts of the colonial readings of India. JS mill's "The History of British India" 1818, is one such Example. While the Orient was valorised and being upheld in the western imagination through orientlists like Jones who focused on the mysticism, Mill with his utilitarian viewpoint had only criticism for India, he found India, a "backward" culture which he claims to be notable only for superstition, ignorance, and the mistreatment of women.

Romila Thapar writes, "Mill's History claimed to be a critical investigation of the traditional institutions of India. These by the standard of 19th century utilitarianism, were found to be static, retrogressive, and conductive of economic backwardness. He recommended a radical alteration of Indian

society, to be achieved by imposing a correct legal and administrative system in India” (Thapar, 2004: 5) ^[11]
The trend of Valorising the Indian died with the late 19th century. The post Romantics did not have the same opinion about the orient as the romantics did. The theories of race and Darwinism coupled with Mill like historiography of India supported their disenchantment.

Shakespeare in India

With the above discussion in mind let us look at the reception of Shakespeare in India. Although the first encounter of India and Shakespeare happened through stage productions in the late 18th century itself, but these plays were not accessible to the Indian common folk. The translation process came much later in the 19th century. But the reception for Shakespeare’s drama in India was affected by a dual process. While on the one hand, vernacular speaking masses could not have the access to Shakespeare in original, there was a section of the society who would be able to capture the nuances of the original Shakespeare. This section was chiefly critical of the Indian adaptations of his plays. Poonam Tivedi, in her introduction to *India’s Shakespeare* notes that after English Education became a norm in India, there was a Schism between the English speaking and the vernacular speaking people. She also notes that while the reading of Shakespeare in literature could be looked at as an imperial imposition, the staging of Shakespeare was not.

It was for these vernacular speaking people that Shakespeare was staged. Parsi theatre groups, like the Victoria Natak mandali were the key staggers of Shakespeare. However their stage productions were not translations, but adaptations or the “adoption” of Shakespeare as Trivedi puts it. The Parsi theatre groups showed a unique blend of the English with the Indian, wherever the cultural counterparts were not available, the plays would be moulded to suit the taste of the Indian audiences.

SK Das in his essay, “Shakespeare in Indian Languages” talks about the regional variations in Shakespeare. Romeo and Juliet became “Gulzar and Gulnar” 1900, The taming of the Shrew was “Chandi Mardan bataka” in Kannada in 1910, King Lear was Safed khon in 1907. The merchant of Venice was “ek aurat ki vakila” Trivedi notes that these translations or transcriptions were a phenomenon of the early 20 th century, where the maximum translations of Shakespeare took place. There was a sharp fall in the number of translations post 1920, when the Nationalist struggle was at its high point.

It is important to note that many authors translating Shakespeare were important figures in the nationalist struggle, some of the authors who were not directly involved in the nationalist struggle were nevertheless playing a big part in the process of identity formation for nation. For these people Shakespeare was not only a literary figure his plays were representative of a better society.

Modernity and Tradition

In Gopal ganesh Agarkar’s words, “Those who advocate child marriage or the tonsuring the heads of young widows or are engaged in debates of the size of one’s turbans or codes of dress during meals or whether the husband should address the wife by her name and be proud of such need not read othello or Lear or Romeo and Juliet.” There are more examples of the modern Indian thinkers negotiating tradition with modernity.

Tagore’s critique of Shakuntala, or Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj are other similar examples of such a negotiation.

Tagore writes, “The drama Shakuntala stands unrivalled in all literature because it depicts hoe restraint can be harmonised by freedom. All joys and sorrows, unions and partings proceed from the conflict of these two forces”

But was a negotiation between modernity and tradition the only anxiety of the modern Indian Thinkers?

Then are we defining “modernity” in the Eurocentric design of modernity as rationality and objectivity.

The simplistic divide of modernity v/s tradition thus seems extremely inadequate. T. S. Satyanath’s essay on Shakespeare in Kannada answers these questions. He says “It is appropriate to identify this phase as an interface, rather than as currently accepted binary oppositions like traditional - modern, east-west etc. In fact, we can identify similarly clearly identifiable interfaces for other genres in Indian languages, especially novels and poetry. Early Shakespearean translations need to be understood as cultural productions of this interface and as an outcome of theatre-centred activity rather than as academic and literature-centred translations.” (Satyanath: 2004) ^[3]

This could be a possible way of looking at the Shakespeare translations and even the *Shakuntala* translations rather than making essentialist categories of the tradition or the modern.

William Jones on Shakuntala

Jones, in his preface narrates to his readers how he got acquainted with the “Indian Shakespeare”. It was a Brahmin, Radhakant who had given him this “delightful” information about Shakespeare.

What if Radhakant had not introduced Jones to Kalidasa? or What would have happened if Shakuntala did not fit into the perception Europe wanted to create about the orient? Would we have been devoid of a canon at all?

Amartya Sen in *The Argumentative Indian* notes, “ One of the most discouraging episodes of the literary reception happened early in this century, When Ezra Pound, WB Yeats and others lead a chorus of praise of the lyrical spiritual of the lyrical spirituality of Rabindranath Tagore, but it was followed by a thorough disregard and firm denunciation”

Therefore While the debate about modernity and tradition is a never ending one, there is still a need to readdress the process of identity formation and self perception, on part of both the translating and the translated cultures.

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