

Something is Rotten in the State of the State: Kaushik Sen's *Macbeth* and Contemporary Bengal

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“Macbeth is the name of a disease spreading out with the greatest speed in the contemporary world and across so-called advanced civilisation. It is a dangerous epidemic.”

- Ratan Thiyam (MPTE, 2014. *Macbeth*)

Abstract: *This paper examines Koushik Sen's theatrical adaptation of Macbeth as a politically charged reinterpretation of Shakespeare's tragedy in the socio-historical context of contemporary West Bengal. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and the conceptual frameworks of power articulated by Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault, the study analyses how Sen recontextualizes Shakespeare's narrative of ambition and tyranny to critique modern structures of state authority. Through visual symbolism, gendered performance, and the use of militarised stage imagery, Sen's production foregrounds the operation of repressive and ideological state apparatus, surveillance, and political violence. The play is further read against specific political events, such as the Singur land acquisition movement and broader debates on governance, repression, and public dissent in Bengal. This paper argues that Sen's Macbeth transforms Shakespeare's tragedy into a cultural document that exposes the cyclical nature of power and the persistence of authoritarian impulses across historical contexts.*

Keywords: Adaptation, Authority, Politics, Sexuality, Surveillance, Violence

INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Bengali theatre-goers have witnessed spurts of Shakespearean adaptations which include *Hamlet* by Bibhash Chakraborty, Bratya Basu's *Hemlat: Prince of Garanbata*, *Raja Lear* (an adaptation of *King Lear*) directed by Suman Mukhopadhyay and Ujjal Chattopadhyay's adaptation of *Macbeth*, directed by Koushik Sen. Shakespeare himself raises an important question in *Macbeth*, an important question on the notion of Evil: whether Evil lies around us in various forms and shapes or is it within us, like a disease, tormenting our psyche. In fact, it is Koushik Sen's adaptation of *Macbeth* that brings us very close to the notion of evil enmeshed within the power politics of the state. Sen probably underscores the fact that rather than a singular 'Macbeth', we are surrounded by various 'Macbeths' who ask the 'stars' to hide their 'fires' so that the 'light' might not see their 'black and deep desires'; Shakespeare's *Macbeth* probably echoes the words of all such 'Macbeths' around us.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The plays of Shakespeare have always been an important source of adaptation for the Bengali theatre personalities, be it *Hariraj* (1896), an adaptation of *Hamlet* by Nagendranath Choudhury, directed by Amarendranath Dutta and performed at the Classic Theatre (1897-1906), or *Macbeth* by Girish Ghosh, premiered at the Minerva on 28th January, 1893. *Hariraj* soon became a commercial success, whereas Girish Ghosh's *Macbeth* only received critical acclaim: although the newspaper, *The Englishman* February 1893), lauded Ghosh's *Macbeth* as “an astounding reproduction of the standard convention of the English stage” the play was performed night after night to an almost empty auditorium (Trivedi, 266). In fact, as far as the Bengali public stage was concerned, Girish Ghosh never returned to Shakespeare (Trivedi 266). The difference probably lies in the fact that *Hariraj* was an adaptation of *Hamlet*, in accordance with the socio-cultural setting and context. Girish Ghosh did translate certain allusions including 'Neptune's multitudinous seas' as 'Varuner adhikare achhe j sagar' (Ghose), where Neptune and Varun are both deities of sea in Roman and Hindu mythologies respectively, and 'Amen' as 'shanti, shanti' (Ghose) but on the whole, the production lacked transposition of the Shakespearean images in accordance to the Bengali socio-cultural context. On the other hand, Nagendranath Choudhury did a

complete Indianization of the text while adding various songs as well as certain characters (for instance, a wife of Claudius and a sister of Hamlet) to the play. A review of *Hariraj* in the *Hindu Patriot* (20th June, 1899) reads:

The popular and evergreen tragedy *Hariraj* was put on the stage of the Classic Theatre on Sunday last... The management of the theatre is excellent, and it has spared no expense in the direction of either dress or scenery to make the play attractive... The parts played by Hariraj (Amarendranath Dutt) and Aroona (Sreemutty Tara Soondary) are undoubtedly praiseworthy. (Trivedi, 253)

SOCIO-POLITICAL ADAPTATION

Linda Hutcheon writes in her essay, "Beginning to Theorize Adaptation: What? Who? Why? How? Where? When?" that an adaptation is "an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works", "a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging" and "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Hutcheon, 8). Koushik Sen's *Macbeth* does follow and stage the adaptation of *Macbeth* by Ujjal Chattopadhyay, though adding subtle changes. Chattopadhyay's radical adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* probably hints at the necessity to not only include political and social elements, but also to understand the circular flow of power within a given temporal and spatial framework. Chattopadhyay's brief introduction to the play hints at the fact that he is not always very faithful to the original text, as his interest lies greatly in the greed and lust of rulers. An adaptation, as Hutcheon writes, like the work it adapts, "is always framed in a context - a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum" (Hutcheon, 142). Ujjal Chattopadhyay's adaptation is framed, in a way, within the political scenario of the Indian Province of West Bengal, including the last years of the Left Front coalition (1977 – 2011) and the years following after their electoral debacle in 2011. In their "extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work", both Ujjal Chattopadhyay and Koushik Sen had probably tried to hint at the fact that the faces do change but the flow of power remains the same. It is the sword, a signifier of power and domination, that changes hands- be it in medieval Scotland or 21st century Bengal.

If one tries to paint *Macbeth* against the visual canvas of the stage, one has to frequently use two colours - red and black. Koushik Sen's *Macbeth* opens with the three witches wearing red and grey robes which are probably signifiers of blood and degeneration respectively.

The witches in Sen's *Macbeth* are women-like in appearance. However, their tonality and rhetoric, definitely drawn upon the source text and recontextualised to a certain extent, forbid us from interpreting it. One of the witches in Chattopadhyay's *Macbeth* asserts that 'she' can rape both the sailor and his wife, who refused to give her 'chestnuts.' State-sponsored violence has always been an important machinery to side-step and brush away the voices of protests. Interestingly, as recorded in *The Telegraph* (December 2006), Tapasi Malik, an anti-land acquisition activist and a member of the 'Save Farmland Committee', was raped and burnt alive in Singur on 18th December 2006 (Young). According to the edition of *The Hindu* (September 2007), though the Left Front propaganda machinery declared that it was a case of suicide, "the CBI (Central

Bureau of Investigation) charge-sheeted Suhrid Baran Dutta, Singur zonal Secretary of the CPI(M), and Debu Malik of Singur' (CBI). The duo was accused of murdering Tapasi Malik and was sent to lifelong imprisonment, but later released in bail (Bail). Incidentally, the Tapasi Malik rape case soon became one of the major issues that acted as a catalyst, leading to Left Front's electoral defeat in West Bengal's Assembly Elections in 2011 (Chakrabarti). Ironically, the very issue of a rape case in Park Street, 'a minor incident' in 2012, soon became a major issue for the All India Trinamool Congress, the ruling party in West Bengal (impersonators). What interests me is that how a threat of 'rape', by a witch in Sen's *Macbeth*, can be read differently in two different political scenarios.

THE ALTHUSSERIAN POWER-POLITICS

The opening scene of the witches is followed by the soldiers' narrative of the battle, and Sen's brilliance is once again noted here. The soldiers appear in army uniforms which might hint at a military regime and the use of the Repressive Apparatus by the State. Louis Althusser writes in his essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, how the Army and Police forces are a part of the Repressive State Apparatus. The Repressive State Apparatus functions primarily by violence and repression, and secondarily by ideology, as Althusser writes:

This is a fact that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology. (147)

Be it Duncan, or Macbeth or any other authority at the helm of power, the Repressive State Apparatus has always been and will be one of the most important tools to safeguard the throne from opposition. Such rhetoric is nothing but a haughty declaration of the Repressive State Apparatus that Althusser dealt in his essay. To concretise the notion of the Repressive Apparatus of the State, the soldiers in Sen's *Macbeth* are in army uniforms, having swords instead of guns. Sen probably tried to juxtapose the medieval Scottish soldiers and the modern army, signifying that there is essentially no difference. Althusser further writes:

The soldiers in army uniforms, in Sen's *Macbeth*, might hint at the notion of 'an organised whole' (Althusser 143) which is centralised beneath a commanding unity. The repressive power politics is applied and governed by the political representatives of the ruling party in possession of the 'State Power'. Furthermore, in Sen's *Macbeth*, power politics is dependent not only on the Repressive State Apparatus but also on the role of sexual position and body politics.

LADY MACBETH and SEXUALITY

Lady Macbeth's notion of 'unsexing herself' might hint at her ambiguous gender identity, full of 'direst cruelty'. In the opening act of Sen's *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth turns out to be more commanding and dictatorial than Macbeth. Lady Macbeth could be at once distinguished from Macbeth by her strength of will and her everlasting lust for power. Lady Macbeth felt that the prophecies of the witches should soon take shape if Macbeth acts accordingly. Even before meeting with Macbeth, Lady Macbeth realises that there

should be no separation between will and deed. From Shakespeare down to Sen's version, Lady Macbeth makes it sure that the valour of her tongue might chastise Macbeth and will prepare him for the 'golden robe' that 'fate and metaphysical aid' have in store for him.

One may find in Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, as Tapati Gupta writes in her essay "Yesterdays and Tomorrows: In Step with *Macbeth*", "a shadow of Eve, the corrupting influence on the male" (Gupta). The topical notion of witchcraft related to women might further stigmatise the image of Lady Macbeth. Koushik Sen, keeping with the version of Ujjal Chattopadhyay, intensifies the sexuality of Lady Macbeth and allows her to play a dominant role during a sexually charged moment on stage. Generally, during sexual intercourse, the penis always dominates the vagina and not the other way round, probably as a visual signifier of male domination. On the contrary, in Sen's *Macbeth*, there is a reversal of sexual roles in copulation on stage that might serve as a contrast to the conventional paradigms of sexual positions. Macbeth, played by Sen himself, lies in a quadrupedal position, almost animal like, while Lady Macbeth, played by Reshmi Sen, lies on his back. Lady Macbeth instigates Macbeth to channelize his innermost black and deep desires, the act of murdering Duncan, while their body moves in a rhythmic pattern, probably hinting at foreplay and sexual intercourse. As Tapati Gupta writes in her essay, in "Lady Macbeth's relationship there is the shadow of *purusha* and *prakriti*", the sexual act in Sen's *Macbeth* might also be read as a mutual flow of power between two bodies. In Sen's production, Macbeth takes refuge in his wife's bosom, a safe haven in the midst of the 'hurly-burly'. Thus, Lady Macbeth's notion of motherhood is probably replaced by the notion of nourishment from the breast during her sexual foreplay with Macbeth. The gender categories of the Tudor Age, as defined by Sir Thomas Elyot in 1531, remained rooted and firm throughout the age:

"A man in his natural perfection is fierce, hardy, strong in opinion, covetous of glory, desirous of knowledge, appetiting by generation to bring forth his semblable (i.e. eager for offspring). The good nature of a woman is to be mild, timorous, tractable, benign ..." (Gupta)

In both Shakespeare and Sen, Lady Macbeth wants to 'unsex' herself in order to persuade Macbeth in performing the 'bloody act' of murdering Duncan and then to 'look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it'. In her desire to see Macbeth as the head of the state and regulate the power structure, Sen's Lady Macbeth uses her body as an important apparatus to achieve her goal. The powerful and at the same time the alluring physical presence of Reshmi Sen further complicates the notion of gender and different preconceived notions associated with it. Sen is hereby challenging the conventional notion of Macbeth as a 'real man' since masculinity and the power it engenders have been the core issue of Sen's *Macbeth*, though this was merely a subsidiary issue in Shakespeare.

THE SETTING

The locale in Sen's *Macbeth* is probably a visual metaphor for the degenerated state of the country. The pervading 'fog and filthy air' engulfing clarity of perception speaks deeper than the abject condition of Scotland during

the Shakespearean *Macbeth*'s misrule. (Gupta) The phrase 'fog and filthy air' generally echoes the iconic words of the witches. The 'fog and filthy air' might also hint at a deep-rooted malaise that goes backward, as Gupta writes, "into the abyss of degeneration both political and environmental". Furthermore, it might be added that the 'fog and filthy air' even refer to our moral and ethical degeneration that allows the beast within us to hanker for power. There is also a reference to 'infertile land' and arsenic in the water. Although Duncan promises to consult with scientists, Macbeth initially feels that it is of no use to be a king in such a country. The 'infertile land' might suggest the absence of life and fertility in the rotten state which is engulfed in 'fog and filthy air'. This issue has been further substantiated by the fact that the couple are not blessed with any offspring: a symbol of their moral and spiritual impotency. The problems in Sen's *Macbeth* are pre-existing, even before Macbeth's accession to the throne. Let us now look at these two problems vis-à-vis the contemporary Bengali political scenario. As documented by Ritanjan Das in his essay "The Politics of Land, Consent, and Negotiation: Revisiting the Development-Displacement Narratives from Singur in West Bengal," a debate over fertile and infertile land followed soon after the TATA Motors Group was handed over 997 acres of farmland, at Singur in Hoogly district, for their proposed factory of NANO cars. An agreement was signed under the 1894 Land Acquisition Act between the Left Front Government and the TATA Motors in 2006. Many villagers became unwilling to give away their fertile agricultural land, their only source of livelihood, in exchange for the proposed compensation to set up the NANO plant (Das). Soon the opposition leaders jumped into the scene, started protestations, went on to a hunger strike, and it gradually became a mass movement. Abha Patra, a villager of Singur, said to *The Telegraph*, "When the *raja* (the king, in this case the state) sides with the rich and powerful and leaves the poor to survive on their own, a mass agitation is bound to take place...we'll not give our land." (Dutta). Voices were raised by intellectuals against the atrocities of the State Government on poor farmers in Singur. In fact, Koushik Sen himself was part of the intellectual movement which condemned the forcible acquisition of fertile land in Singur. Finally, Ratan Tata, then chairman of TATA Sons, decided to shift the TATA Motor plant from Singur to Gujarat (Das). The success of the Singur movement, along with the support of intellectuals, soon became an important factor in bringing an end to the 34 years of the Left Front coalition in West Bengal in 2011 (Chakrabarti). West Bengal is one of the most arsenic-polluted states in India, and about six million people are exposed to arsenic pollution every day (Basu). The degenerated Scotland, in Sen's *Macbeth*, in every sense, probably turns out a visual metaphor of the 'rotten state' of West Bengal.

After ascending to the throne, Macbeth declared that he had his ears in every household in Sen's *Macbeth*. Even in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, one may note Macbeth explaining to Lady Macbeth regarding his espionage over all his subjects:

"There's not a one of them, but in his house
I keep a servant fee'd."

(Shakespeare, *Macbeth*. Act III scene iv, 137-138)

Koushik Sen has intricately explored the process through which power, in this case political power, flows and is filtered through information. The State always relies on information and espionage to mark its opposition. The moment it listens to their voices, it curbs protests. This constant surveillance of the State follows Jeremy Bentham's notion of panopticism and gives a similar result, be it the soldiers in the medieval Scotland, the Gestapo during the Second World War, the Stasi in the East Germany who are probably most notably depicted in Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck's Oscar winning film, *The Lives of Others* (2006) or even the police force and party cadre in 21st century Bengal. Jeremy Bentham's panopticon is an architectural structure constructed on the principle of constant surveillance on its inmates who are shut up in each cell, be it a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. In fact, no part of the Empire or the State remains out of surveillance and every single threat to the throne is nullified at once, be it Banquo in *Macbeth*, Antigone in Sophocles' *Antigone*, or the opposition leaders in our society. In a way, panopticism creates a vicious circle from where there is no scope of escape as visibility itself is a trap, as Michel Foucault writes in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* that we are "neither in the amphitheatre, nor on the stage, but in the panoptic machine, invested by its effects of power, which we bring to ourselves since we are part of its mechanism." (Foucault, 217)

In Sen's *Macbeth*, the murderers, a natural product of the corrupt segments of society of all ages, probably allude to the notion of economic deprivation in Bengal. According to Macbeth, Banquo destroyed the roadside stalls of the murderers, a regular phenomenon in Kolkata. In Sen's production of Chattopadhyay's text, the murderers are presented as dispassionate and creature-like, almost a grotesque representation of modern goons. Every political party has such lumpen cadres who might openly threaten to throw bombs at the police, when in power, and are ready to change their master with a change in the status quo. Even the way in which Macbeth instructs the murderers, in Sen's *Macbeth*, has resemblance with the way in which one treats the street dogs. The murderers change their side just after the murder of Macbeth and starts flattering Macduff, the new centre of power. Macbeth uses a sword the weight of which increases continuously with every act of murder. Ultimately, before fighting with Macduff, Macbeth fails to raise his sword. The blood-smeared sword of Macbeth, probably a signifier of his own guilt, grows so heavy that it betrays its own master at the moment of crisis. In Ratan Thiyam's *Macbeth*, performed in New Delhi on February 2016 Macbeth carried an almost 8 feet longsword that might serve as a visual metaphor of the brutal and omnipresent power of any authority, be it medieval Scotland, or a tribe in Manipur or West Bengal. In the political scenario of West Bengal, the sword in Thiyam's *Macbeth* might be read as a phallic symbol which the members of the ruling party boast quite openly to intimidate the mass. Ironically, we often fail to realise that those huge and heavy weapons would soon inflict pain and suffering on its bearer.

CONCLUSION

The ending of Thiyam's *Macbeth* shows that we might kill the diseased body and sweep it away, but it is difficult to eliminate the disease altogether. Similarly, Sen's

vision of *Macbeth* shows a circular pattern in the flow of power. After the death of Macbeth, Malcolm picks up the same sword, sits on the skulled throne and starts planning Macduff's murder with the same set of dog-like murderers, who had timely changed their master. On the other hand, Donalbain starts painting on a blank canvas, probably a space to express his repressed desires. Sen's *Macbeth* thus stands out as a distinct visual metaphor which indicates our hidden primeval instincts of survival and the eternal desire to taste power at all costs.

Sen's *Macbeth* has a documentary value because it yields 'specific evidence' about the political scenario in West Bengal, both during the last years of the Left Front coalition and after their electoral debacle in 2011. Shakespeare is very often a source of adaptation because financially it has been tried and tested, has a global acceptance and is universal in nature. Sen's choice of *Macbeth* is in order to expose the naked truth of the society around us and how the State uses various apparatuses in order to have a constant surveillance over its subjects. *Macbeth* is undoubtedly Shakespeare's most "profound and mature vision of Evil" (Knight, 160), enmeshed within a web of 'absolute power' that 'corrupts absolutely' (Acton) and then justifies its cause. Koushik Sen himself said that he neither believes nor accepts the bard's notion of 'restoration of order' at the end of all. In contrast, Sen's version of *Macbeth* hints at the future under yet another version of tyranny. Sen's *Macbeth* not only shows a circular pattern in the flow of power but also underscores the fact, as Michel Foucault writes in *The History of Sexuality, Vol.1*, that "there is no escaping from power that is always already present" around us, be it in the disguise of Macbeth or Malcolm who mows down all oppositions. Essentially, there is no difference between the medieval Scotland, a tribe in Manipur or the contemporary political scenario of West Bengal because each has its own Macbeth, enacting the same version of tyranny, on different stages of the world.

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