



Bani Basu

Novelist; Professor at Bijoy Krishna Girls' College, Howrah

(Interviewed by Sri Abhishek Sarkar)

When did you pass B.A. and M.A.? And from which institutions?

I did my B.A. from Scottish Church College in 1959. I dropped a year in 1961 and passed M.A. in 1962 from Calcutta University.

When did your first encounter with Shakespeare take place (at school or college)?

Shakespeare was not prescribed in our syllabus when I was in school, but my children studied it in school from Class 8 onwards. They had it initially in the form of stories and then later as drama. However these had less of interpretations and more of factual details.

Who taught the texts in question?

We did Macbeth, As You Like It and a third text that I can't recall. The texts were taught by P. Ghoshal and Debi Prasad Chatterjee at Scottish Church and by Shanta-di at Lady Brabourne College. However some of the teachers weren't as effective as others. They could not create the depth that is required for the study of a Shakespearean play.

What techniques were used for teaching Shakespeare?

When I was at Lady Brabourne, Shanta-di used to read *Julius Caesar* with the students. She used to harp on the emotional, passionate side of the story by making us visualize it. However, in case of Debi Prasad Chatterjee he gave us characters to read and made us understand the play in that way. All through our student lives we meet some professors who inspire us and lead us by the hand into realms of understanding that can only be created by really learned scholars. They don't just tell us the meaning but help us to map the minds of the author concerned.

What traits of any particular teacher impressed you most?

I remember the classes of Taraknath Sen who always used very difficult imagery and poetic language to put his point across. He was very lyrical and effortless while speaking. He was very scholarly and would take two-three periods to do one soliloquy and he pointed out the academic difficulties in Shakespearean scholarship. He sadly didn't write much during his lifetime but whatever he wrote was brilliant. As a teacher however he wasn't the best because of his scholarly status.



Did the teachers maintain total gravity in class or cut jokes to enliven the reading experience?

The professors of our time were serious and did not joke in class. They were very approachable and friendly during the tutorials though and helped us with our writing but there was always a clear demarcation between student and teacher.

Did the teacher enact the scenes in the class room?

Shanta-di didn't enact but did it verbally with emotions and gesticulation.

Did the teacher refer to literature in other languages while discussing Shakespeare? For example, would the teacher mention Dante, Kalidasa or Tagore while reading Shakespeare with the students?

I used to feel it is important for these necessary comparisons with Bengali or Sanskrit literature to come in, but it never did.

Were expletives and sexual references omitted?

We would understand it ourselves. Our teachers didn't refer to it.

How far was the socio-historical context of plays discussed?

In the M.A. classes, the teachers would discuss the socio-historical context wherever it was relevant.

Were Shakespeare's contemporary dramatists given the same amount of importance in the classroom?

We were taught Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* at the B.A. level. We had Webster, Jonson and many other playwrights during M.A. as well. We didn't need to be told that Shakespeare was more central to the canon than other dramatists. The sheer volume of Shakespeare plays in comparison to plays by other dramatists told us who was more important.

Were students encouraged to think independently and challenge the teacher?

They did not dislike students challenging the teacher, I think, but students themselves didn't really ask questions or express their own views.

Which editions and what critical material were prescribed and used?



I do not recall if they specified any particular edition, but we mostly used to study the Warwick edition. We also read Verity sometimes. They did not specify any critical material in class, but we read them on our own. Bradley was very popular then. There was also Dover Wilson, E.M.W. Tillyard, S.C. Sengupta among others.

What was the examination and question pattern like?

We had critical, comparative essay-type questions. The questions were very text-based - on the structure of a play, or on the characters etc.

Did the teacher refer to stage and film productions of Shakespeare?

Dilip-babu asked us to go and see films and plays from time to time. Naresh Mitra, a contemporary of Shishir Bhaduri, had come for a function at Mahajati Sadan. He used to play Shylock in his hey-day. At Mahajati Sadan, he was requested to recite some of Shylock's lines. He was an incredible performer. We were asked to attend that event. It was quite an experience!

Was the text was related to performance conventions?

Yes, the teachers would discuss the structure of the Elizabethan theatre, boy actors etc.

Was there any performance of Shakespeare at the institution?

Scottish Church had Shishir Mukherjee who performed regularly. They were not really Shakespearean plays, but there was an active tradition of performances. Rudraprasad Sengupta, Keya Chakraborty, Manoj Mitra were all erstwhile students of Scottish Church College.

Any other productions?

During the quarter-centenary year, we saw a lot of Shakespeare plays. Quite a few of them were by Shakespeareana - *Tempest*, for example. I saw *Hamlet* and quite a few versions of *Othello*. I have recently seen *Raja Lear*, which I did not like very much. But it was not bad either. I had seen a few of the Lawrence Olivier films as well, possibly *Othello* and *Hamlet*, I think.

What are your thoughts on teaching Shakespeare in class?

I have taught *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*. I believe that the tragedy in *Macbeth* is actually Lady Macbeth's tragedy. That is how I interpreted it. But it is very difficult to convince students of this.

What noticeable changes in Shakespeare pedagogy and student reaction have you noticed over the decades?



The standard of students has deteriorated greatly over the years. As far as Shakespeare pedagogy is concerned, I don't know how Shakespeare is approached in class these days. Near the end of my career, the postcolonial, postmodern aspects were emerging.

How would you react to the phenomenon of reading Shakespeare in a simplified language or in paraphrase, now popular among students in the West?

I think the language is important. How will you understand Shakespeare's transformation of a story through the play of his language if you take away that language from him?