

**Shakespeare and Bengali Little Magazine:
Indigenous Responses and Framing of an
Alternative Discourse in Post- Independence
Bengal**

SYNOPSIS

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Introduction

In this research study, the researcher aims to show how Shakespeare has been penetrated in Bengali little magazines in an unconventional manner beyond traditional academic discourse. Let's have a brief background of the area of study. The historical journey of Shakespeare's influence in India began around 1780 when employees of the East India Company introduced his works to Calcutta. This introduction marked the beginning of a significant impact on Indian theatre and literature, which has been explored in various scholarly works. Notable studies include *Shakespeare in Indian Languages* edited by D. A. Shankar, *Shakespeare's Impact on Hindi Literature* by Jagdish Prasad Mishra, *Shakespeare Came to India* edited by C. D. Narasimhaiah, and *Shakespeare in the Media* by Lipika Sikdar. These studies illustrate how Shakespeare's presence in India evolved during the 18th century, leading to a profound influence on theatre and literary practices across major Indian languages. The Charter Act of 1813 marked a significant turning point in the educational landscape of India, particularly in Bengal, by promoting Western education and literary excellence among the Bengali intelligentsia. The introduction of English literary studies during this time was viewed by some remarkable scholars like Gauri Viswanathan, Ania Loomba, Jyotsna Singh, Jasodhara Bagchi, Rosinka Chaudhuri, and a plethora of critics. Most of them viewed the initiation of English studies during the colonial period as a strategy by colonial authorities to maintain control over the Indian populace. Recently, in his latest book *Shakespeare and Indian Nationalism*, Manojit Mandal has recaptured the issue 'following Viswanathan, Jasodhara Bagchi held a substantially different view relating to beginning of English literary/Shakespeare studies...' (Introduction, 8). Jasodhara Bagchi presented a significantly different perspective on the origins of English literary studies and Shakespearean scholarship compared to Viswanathan. She emphasized the proactive involvement of notable figures in these developments. According to Bagchi, the traditional and progressive factions within the Bengali elite found considerable advantage in embracing English or Western education. However, post-independence in 1947 brought with it a new era of engagement with Shakespeare's works, characterized by a deeper understanding and appreciation of his complexities. Shakespeare was no longer viewed merely as part of the colonial curriculum but was increasingly adapted to suit local sensibilities. The quatercentenary celebrations in 1964 highlighted a renewed affection for Shakespeare among Bengali intellectuals. The quatercentenary anniversary of Shakespeare's birth in 1964 was celebrated with great enthusiasm in Bengal and across India. In the postcolonial period, another aspect that has enriched the study of Shakespeare is how his works have been practiced and adapted into films. The book *Shakespeare and Indian Cinema* edited by Poonam Trivedi and Paromita Chakravarti, represents a significant contribution to the study of Shakespeare's influence in Indian cinema.

Now let's have a look at the second part of my title- Bengali little magazine. A little magazine is a small, non-commercial publication. Little magazines are often produced on a limited budget, with a small print run and are usually aimed at a niche audience. Little magazines prioritize experimental work and the promotion of emerging or avant garde writers and they are anti-establishment in nature. Little magazines are not little in the littleness of their size. It is the repercussion of an intellectual movement that tries to build a resistance against the popular mainstream literary practices. Little magazine movement had its roots in the early 20th century, paralleling similar developments in the West. In India, the little magazine movement gained momentum during the 1950s and 60s across various languages, including

Bengali, Tamil, Hindi and Gujarati. Kolkata emerged as a central hub of this movement. There has been a rich heritage of Bengali little magazines from *Sabuj Patra* in 1914 to contemporary magazines in this digital era. Writings on Shakespeare in Bengali little magazines started to flow in the post-independence period. According to Arindam Mukhopadhyay, in his doctoral thesis (2014), mentioned –“It was Srikumar Bandopadhyay who pioneered the journey of writing on Shakespeare through his article Shakespeare Pratibha” (5). Various magazines like *Uttaran*, *Uttarsuri*, *Parichay*, *Ispater Chithi*, published Shakespeare Issue to commemorate the quatercentenary anniversary of Shakespeare in 1964. *Nandan*, *Alapparba* published special issue on Shakespeare’s 450th anniversary in 2014. Besides, *Ebong Mushayera* published a *Hamlet Issue* in 2002 and *Natun Disha* dedicated a special issue on Shakespeare’s 441st birth anniversary in 2005, emphasizing the fact that Bengali passion and enthusiasm for Shakespeare is not tied to any specific occasion like tercentenary or quatercentenary, but an ongoing process. The representation of Bengali little magazines in Shakespeare study in Bengal is still underexplored. This research study, therefore, address the insufficient exploration of how Bengali little magazines have contributed to Shakespeare discourse and shape a non-mainstream alternative discourse surrounding Shakespeare study in Bengal in the post-independence period.

Literature Reviews

Shakespeare in Bengal has been a fertile site to researchers for quite some time and various perspectives have extended this field and added new dimensions to it. Let’s see the groundbreaking works that shape the Shakespearean study in Bengal and in India. Shakespeare’s 400th anniversary, the quatercentenary year, saw a body of writings coming out addressing multiple issues related to Shakespeare’s works. The year 1964, was the powerful platform for the discussions and debates concerning indigenization of Shakespeare’s writings. *Indian Literature*, published by the Sahitya Akademi, commemorated a special volume on this auspicious occasion. K.R. Srinivasa Iyengar’s essay, “Shakespeare in India”, published by *Indian Literature* in 1964, is a seminal work in Indian literary criticism that delves into the profound impact of Shakespeare’s writings on Indian literature and culture.

Gauri Viswanathan’s iconic book *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, published in 1989, critically examines how English literary education was systematically introduced in colonial India as a tool of imperial control. She argues that English literature was not merely an academic subject but a cultural and ideological instrument used by the British to establish intellectual and moral authority over Indians.

Jyotsna Singh and Gitanjali G. Shahani’s article “Postcolonial Shakespeare Revisited”, 2010 (*Shakespeare*, 6:1, 127-138), explores how Shakespeare’s works continue to resonate in a postcolonial world, offering fresh insights into the ongoing dialogue between Shakespearean literature and the complex legacies of colonialism.

Arindam Mukhopadhyay’s 2014 doctoral thesis “The Changing Bengali response to Shakespeare- A Critical Study of Shakespeare criticism by Bengali writers and academics”, at the University of Calcutta under the supervision of Professor Dipendu Chakravarti, delves into

the evolving engagement of Bengali intellectuals with Shakespearean works. This thesis underscores the dynamic relationship between Bengali literary circles and Shakespeare, highlighting a journey from colonial imposition to creative assimilation and reinterpretation.

Supriya Chaudhuri's article "Remembering Shakespeare in India: Colonial and Postcolonial Memory", published in 2019, explores the enduring influence of Shakespeare's works on India's cultural landscape. Chaudhuri delves into both colonial and postcolonial periods to unravel how Shakespeare's plays were received, adapted, and remembered in India.

Shakespeare and Indian Nationalism: The Bard and The Raj, Manojit Mandal's book, published in 2024, explores the complex reception of Shakespeare by 19th-century Bengali intellectuals and their nuanced relationship with the Indian Renaissance and the emerging nationalist movement. Highlighting the cultural dynamics of British imperialism, the book examines the works of six early nationalist writers- Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, Hemchandra Bandopadhyay, Girishchandra Ghosh, Purnachandra Basu, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, and Rabindranath Tagore- and their engagement with Shakespeare.

Research Problem:

The existing body of literature on Shakespeare study in Bengal primarily focuses on traditional academic discourses, translations, and theoretical adaptations. Scholars have delved into how Shakespeare's works were adapted and localized to suit the Bengali socio-cultural context. Research has also highlighted the role of formal educational institutions and mainstream publications in shaping the Shakespearean discourse in Bengal. Despite the rich scholarly attention on Shakespeare in Bengal, little magazines-a vital component of Bengal's literary culture, have received minimal focus in this context. The glaring research gap lies in the insufficient exploration of how Bengali little magazines have contributed to Shakespeare studies in Bengal. Bengali little magazines, often characterized by their independent, non-commercial nature, have historically served as vibrant platforms for alternative literary and cultural discourses. Bengali little magazines offer a space for voices that might otherwise be marginalized or overlooked in mainstream literary circuits. This gap in scholarship is particularly pronounced when considering non-mainstream, grassroots perspectives that challenge or diverge from conventional academic narratives. The under-researched role of Bengali little magazines in the study of Shakespeare in Bengal presents a significant gap in the existing literature. Addressing this gap could offer a more comprehensive view of the cultural and literary landscape in Bengal. The core research problem, therefore, lies in uncovering and critically examining how Bengali little magazines contribute to and shape the non-mainstream discourse surrounding Shakespeare study in Bengal.

Research Objectives:

1. To explore the role of Bengali little magazines in decentralizing Shakespearean discourse in Bengal and how little magazines have contributed to a Bengalized understanding of Shakespeare.
2. To interrogate how little magazines subvert mainstream literary hegemony by fostering experimental interpretations of Shakespeare.
3. To examine the transformation of Shakespeare's presence in Bengali little magazines from the quatercentenary year onwards and to evaluate contemporary relevance of little magazines in Shakespeare studies.
4. To compare metropolitan vs. suburban/rural little magazines' engagement with Shakespeare, examining how regional socio-cultural contexts shape divergent critiques and adaptation of Shakespeare's works.
5. To understand criteria for classifying independent theatre magazines as 'little magazines' based on editorial autonomy, non-commercial ethos, and grassroots engagement with avant-garde or subversive Shakespearean performances

Research Questions:

- i. What is the contribution of Bengali little magazines in the realm of non-mainstream Shakespeare discourse in Bengal?
- ii. How does little magazine challenge the mainstream literary discourse?
- iii. What alternative narratives and critiques of Shakespeare's works emerge from the pages of little magazines?
- iv. What unique perspectives do little magazines offer on Shakespeare published in metropolitan space and those from suburban or rural regions?
- v. How do the Bengali little magazines cater to the demands of Shakespeare studies in Bengal in the contemporary time?
- vi. What makes an independent theatre magazine qualify as a little magazine?

Methodology:

Since I mentioned in my research problem that the contribution of Bengali little magazines to the non-mainstream Shakespeare discourse in Bengal is often overlooked, I decided to work on this topic as there has been no significant effort to collect and highlight the scattered writings on Shakespeare in Bengali little magazines. First, I collected specific issues of little magazines focused on Shakespeare from various little magazine libraries. Then, I have organized these articles according to different chapters. My research spans writings from 1964 to 2014. Then, I conducted a content analysis of writings on Shakespeare across metropolitan space, non-metropolitan spaces, writings in the contemporary times, and independent theatre magazines, considering them under the category of little magazines. The researcher did not frame the analysis in a pre-biased manner with any specific theoretical framework, rather, the emphasis has been given on how these articles represent Shakespeare. The researcher has allowed articles to speak for themselves in terms of themes, and this analytical framework has been applied accordingly. I focused only on critical essays about Shakespeare in these little magazines, which are limited to West Bengal. As secondary data, I have included edited volumes, dissertations, and research articles.

Chapterization:

This research study has four core chapter excluding Introduction and Conclusion. In the Introduction of my research study, I have discussed the background of Shakespearean studies and also elaborated in detail on little magazines and the little magazine movement. In the Introduction, I have included literature reviews, identified research gap, stated the research objectives, and research questions, described the methodology and provided a chapter-wise summary. I have divided the first two chapters into metropolitan and suburban and rural responses to Shakespeare in Bengali little magazines.

Chapter I-“Echoes of the Bard: Metropolitan Interpretation of Quatercentenary Issues in Bengali Little Magazines”, explores the metropolitan response to Shakespeare in the context of quatercentenary celebration of 1964, as reflected in three different Bengali little magazines- *Uttaran*, *Uttarsuri*, and *Parichay*. These little magazines, publishing from Kolkata- a hub of intellectual and cultural excellence- provide a unique lens through which to examine how urban elites, intellectuals and cultural practitioners engaged with Shakespeare. Despite their metropolitan origins, these magazines often embraced the ethos of subversion, challenging dominant narratives and offering alternative perspectives. Within the elite space of Kolkata, there was a conscious effort to move beyond Eurocentric frameworks. The quatercentenary issues of three Bengali little magazines explored in the first chapter exemplify this trend. Most of the essays analysed in Chapter I, though came out from the metropolitan hub of Kolkata, yet engaged in the form of cultural resistance and presented alternative readings of Shakespeare. While the quatercentenary celebration was a global phenomenon, these three little magazines localized the celebration within the specific cultural and political context of Bengal.

Chapter II-“Shakespeare Beyond the Metropolis: Suburban and Rural Responses in Bengali Little Magazines”, focuses on the rural and suburban responses to Shakespeare in *Ispaater Chithi* and *Natun Disha* little magazines. The unique perspectives offered by little magazines published in metropolitan space versus those from suburban regions are noteworthy. Metropolitan little magazines often reflect the views of the urban, English-educated elites, who often tend to approach Shakespeare from an exclusionary perspective. In contrast, little magazines- *Ispaater Chithi* and *Natun Disha*, explored in this second chapter, provide a more localized engagement with Shakespeare. These magazines challenge the elitism of mainstream literary discourse and break the linguistic and cultural barriers. These magazines have expanded the scope of Shakespeare study in Bengal, making it more inclusive and representative of Bengal’s diverse cultural landscape.

Chapter III-In the Chapter III, I have discussed Shakespeare in the context of contemporary Bengali little magazines. In the Chapter III, titled as **“The Bard in the Digital Age: Shakespeare in 21st Century Bengali Little Magazines”**, the study of *Ebong Mushayera*, *Alapparba* and *Nandan*, three digital era little magazines, reveal how Shakespeare’s legacy has been reimaged through the interplay of technology, globalization and regional identity. Digital platforms have democratized our engagement with Shakespeare. The special dedicated to Hamlet and published in 2002, is an important contribution to the exploration of Shakespeare in the digital era of the 21st century. *Ebong Mushayera* has maintained the essence of little magazines in spite of having a publication house. Other two little magazines- *Alapparba* and *Nandan*, are also known for their engagement with cultural and intellectual themes and tend to lean towards the elite. The 450th anniversary issue of both these magazines have played a significant role in popularizing Shakespeare in the contemporary time and continuing the rich heritage of Shakespeare study in Bengal.

In the **Chapter IV-“Alternative Voices: Bengali Theatre Magazines’ Independent Responses to Shakespeare”**, I have discussed how independent theatre magazines can also be considered under the category of little magazines. Independent theatre magazines often share the same ethos of intellectual and artistic freedom that characterize little magazine. To determine whether a theatre magazine can be classified as a little magazine, one must consider its (i) Intent and Content: Is the magazine exploring innovative ideas in theatre? Does it prioritize artistic expression over commercial success? (ii) Audience: Does it cater to a niche audience and (iii) Independence: Theatre magazines must be free from institutional control. The examination of *Natyachinta* and *Epic Theatre*, two independent theatre magazines in this chapter, reveals how Shakespeare’s works have been reimaged as tools of artistic subversion. These theatre magazines, operating outside institutional frameworks, demonstrated a radical departure from colonial era reverence and metropolitan elitism and posit Shakespeare as a catalyst for experimental theatre. By rejecting commercial and institutional pressures, both *Natyachinta* and *Epic Theatre* exemplify how alternative media can preserve the artistic autonomy and amplify counter-hegemonic voices.

Research Findings:

Key findings in Chapter I- first, the metropolitan response to Shakespeare was shaped by the city’s colonial legacy and its status as a centre of intellectual and cultural excellence. The elite’s

engagement with Shakespeare was shaped by a desire to maintain the cultural capital. Second, this chapter underscores the role of little magazines as sites of cultural resistance and third, this chapter reveals the interplay of global and local influences in shaping the metropolitan response to Shakespeare. Chapter II underscores the popularity of Shakespeare in the suburban and rural belt. Little magazines from the margins provide a more localized engagement with Shakespeare. These magazines have expanded the scope of Shakespeare study in Bengal and making it more inclusive. In Chapter III, the study of three digital era little magazines, reveals how Shakespeare's legacy has been reimagined with the interplay of technology, globalization and regional identity. Digital platforms have democratized our engagement with Shakespeare. In the digital era, little magazines face both challenges and opportunities in upholding their true essence. But their role as platforms for diverse voices, innovative expression, and community engagement remains vital. In Chapter IV, the study of two independent theatre magazines posit Shakespeare as a catalyst in reimagining Shakespearean performance and interpretations in Bengal.

Limitations of the Study:

While this research study on Shakespeare's representation in Bengali little magazines of post-independence West Bengal offers critical insights into cultural renegotiation, it is constrained by several limitations:

1. Benagli little magazines often exist in scattered, poorly preserved archives, with many issues lost or incomplete. Access to rare publications is limited to specific libraries or private collections in West Bengal, restricting the comprehensiveness of primary source analysis. Digitization efforts for these magazines remain minimal, exacerbating challenges in constructing a holistic narrative.
2. This study focuses on post-independence West Bengal, excluding pre-1947 colonial-era engagement with Shakespeare, which might have provided deeper context for continuity or rupture.
3. Similarly, this research study does not account for Shakespearean discourse in other Indian languages or regions, limiting comparative analysis of 'Bengalization' as a distinct phenomenon. The analysis relies heavily on Bengali texts, requiring nuanced understanding of linguistic and cultural subtexts. Non-Bengali speaking scholars might face interpretive barriers.
4. The methodology of this study has a limitation. Since the articles in this thesis have not been analysed within a specific framework, this aspect also falls under its limitations. The thesis focuses on a chapter-wise analysis, emphasizing the unique responses of the articles. The articles have been allowed to 'speak for themselves'.
5. I had planned to include a chapter based on feedback collected through a questionnaire from readers, editors and writers of little magazines about the discussion of Shakespeare in Bengali little magazines. However, not receiving any substantial feedback has also become a limitation of this study.

Scope for Further Studies:

Future studies could expand this inquiry in the following directions-

1. A comparative analysis of Shakespeare's reception in little magazines across other Indian languages (e.g., Hindi, Malayalam, or Marathi) could reveal how regional identities shaped diverse "Indigenized" responses to colonial cultural icon. This would contextualize Bengal's unique 'Bengalization' within a pan-Indian framework.
2. Investigating pre-1947 Bengali little magazines could trace how Shakespeare's portrayal evolved from colonial-era reverence to postcolonial reinterpretation.
3. Digitizing fragmented little magazine archives and employing computational tools might uncover overlooked patterns in Shakespearean engagement.

Conclusion:

The role and contribution of Bengali little magazines to Shakespeare study in Bengal is profound and multifaceted. They have challenged the mainstream literary discourse by offering alternative narratives and critiques of Shakespeare's works, rooted in the socio-political and cultural realities of Bengal. They have provided unique perspectives on Shakespeare that reflect the diversity of Bengali society, including voices from the metropolitan, suburban, and rural regions. In contemporary times, they have continued to engage with Shakespeare in ways that address the pressing issues of the day, ensuring that his works remain relevant and dynamic. Finally, independent theatre magazines, as a subset of little magazines, have played a crucial role in reimagining Shakespearean performance and interpretation in Bengal. Through their commitment to intellectual and artistic freedom, Bengali little magazines have ensured that Shakespeare remains a living and evolving presence in the cultural life of Bengal. Finally, it can be said that the essays discussed in little magazines have brought forth a new dimension to Shakespeare study in Bengal. While most Shakespearean discourse remains confined to academic circles, focusing on translation, adaptation, theatrical productions, and mostly Anglo-centric, little magazines have introduced a fresh perspective. Bengali little magazines have tried it's hard to transform Shakespeare from a colonial icon to a figure of cultural manifestation from the perspective of Bengalisation. However, Shakespearean studies in little magazines have not yet penetrated suburban spaces in a significant way; they remain largely limited to Kolkata-based publications. This does not mean that little magazines are not discussed in small towns and marginalized regions of Bengal. Writings on Shakespeare from areas like North Bengal are indeed hard to find. Nonetheless, these discussions in little magazines will undoubtedly enrich Shakespeare study in Bengal.

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