

## Decolonising Shakespeare

by Azfar Hussain

*On the occasion of the 430th Birth-Anniversary of Shakespeare, the writer who teaches English literature at Jahangirnagar University makes a few observations on Shakespeare's oeuvre as assimilated into the canon and the discourses of colonialism, and emphasises the need for decolonising Shakespeare whose work, as shown, exhibits signs and symptoms of deconstructionist politics, animated and activated by Shakespeare's characteristic opposition and resistance to fundamentalism, absolutism and autocracy.*

To speak of Shakespeare in this part of the world is to speak of a middle-class reflex-action, namely, a response to Shakespeare with an overwhelming sense of awe and wonder. This response, often indicating the unchallenged greatness of Shakespeare, does not necessarily stem from reading as such, but mostly it draws its energy from belief, from hearing — passed on from generation to generation. It is indeed characteristic of a middle-class educated man, let alone an English literature graduate, to say unwaveringly: "Oh, Shakespeare? He is great." Aldous Huxley's response to Milton comes to mind, when he says that this poet is no doubt great, but it is difficult to say where his greatness exactly lies. Saying so, Huxley of course goes to sleep, undisturbed. Similarly, our taken-for-granted Shakespeare in this part of the world has often been subject to a sleeping response — to what one can say, a theology of response which invites calm resignation more than critical inquiries.

This irresistibly theological apotheosizing of Shakespeare is not of course an innocent middle-class phenomenon. It has its own politics of texts generated by what went into our past remaining in the now-and-here of our realities. One can hardly miss the point that Shakespeare's arrival in the Indian subcontinent was accompanied by colonial politics. The kind of Shakespeare that, in fact, most of the English colonies received was a fragmented one — of course, a great Shakespeare, but, more importantly, an English one; and, in the name of Shakespeare, the images of the unchallenged greatness of the English nation were overplayed, focused, magnified, in keeping with the politico-cultural, colonialist project of conveniently programming the consciousness of the colonized. Repetition has its own method — and magic and miracle, too. Shakespeare, one can see, has remained, for long, in the box

of such repetitions, generating and reproducing certain types in favour of colonialism, in favour of a colonial cultural domination, in favour of a critical *fatwama* that would demand resignation, not resistance. But, the fact that Shakespeare himself is opposed to the idea of *fatwama* (notice the tragedy of Hamlet who never subscribes to *fatwama*), to the idea of arrogant absolutism as can be exemplified in *King Lear*, and to the forces of domination, colonial or otherwise, as one can see in *The Tempest*, among others, has hardly been brought to the fore in this part of the world.

It is not that the process of decolonising Shakespeare has not at all set in. True, Shakespeare has been appropriated by colonialism for centuries; in fact, he has been almost completely assimilated into the canon as well as into the discourses of English colonialism, in particular. This Shakespeare is certainly English; he articulates the vision, the experiences, the aspirations of the English people. The fact that Shakespeare does not keep the scale and space of his plays limited within England at all has been interpreted as a sign of *world-responsibility*, which is indeed a rhetorical signifier for *imperialism*, with the view that the English have a natural access to Greece, Rome, Venice, Africa, India — in fact, to all parts of the globe. But, as indicated, counter-discourses are not absent now, where Shakespeare is counter-appropriated by the postcolonial writers and readers in the

Commonwealth countries, particularly in Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean and India. Shakespeare has been creatively used extensively in the plays, poems, literary criticisms, and also in psycho-social-political works of these writers.

To cite only a few examples, one can speak of such writers as Aimé Césaire, Anthony Phelps, Taban Lo Liyong, George Lamming, Edward Brathwaite, Dominique Orlando Mannoni, Roberto Fernandez Retamar, Albert Memmi, Lemuel Johnson, Kofi Awoonor, and so on. The question — "is Shakespeare English?" — was asked at a recently held Australian convention on Shakespeare, and it received a resounding "No!" for an answer. We would not go into the details of such postcolonial treatments of Shakespeare, but we would try to frame our own question — "where is our Shakespeare?" However, it needs mentioning here that this question takes its cues from what Shakespeare has done to the world, namely, his *textuality* — a postmodernist concept meaning that texts cannot be frozen and fixed as entities; that they slip, slide, break, make, and keep going *ad infinitum* like the mystical, stranger bird of Fakir Lalou, or even like Hamlet's ghost slipping in and out. Prior to seeking an answer to the question posed above, now a few words about Shakespeare's life and works may be in order.

Shakespeare can only mislead us, yielding no fruits. Though Shakespeare's biography is unsatisfactory (G B Harrison, while introducing Shakespeare, helplessly exclaims: "so famous an Englishman, and such an unsatisfactory biography"), it is clear from the town records of Stratford-on-Avon that Shakespeare's family



Stratford-upon-Avon

was of good middle-class stock, and that John and Mary Shakespeare had at least five surviving children, William Shakespeare, being one of them. Shakespeare was baptised in the Parish Church of Stratford-on-Avon on 26 April, 1564, and he probably attended the Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford.

In 1582, a marriage licence was issued for William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, his wife. At eighteen, Shakespeare was eight years younger than Anne who was pregnant at the time of their wedding. In the same year, Shakespeare's daughter, Susanna Shakespeare, was christened; while, in 1592, Shakespeare's son Hamnet, who lived only nine years, and his twin Judith were christened. And Shakespeare's active contact with the world of theatre began in 1592 when he was listed as an actor with Lord Chamberlain's Men, and it was in this very year that



Shakespeare's first known play, *Henry VI Part I*, was produced, appearing as a spectacular hit and making record takings of 1840 pence. *Henry VI Part II* and *III* followed in the same year.

In fact, within an unusually short stretch of time, the spotlight of attention of the English theatre-goers in the Elizabethan age — an age historically famous for the flowering of the drama, was unswervingly focused on Shakespeare who, in turn, began responding to popular demands, coming up with scores of plays in a headlong succession. According to recently researched records, Shakespeare wrote *Richard III* in 1592-3; *The Comedy of Errors* in 1592-4; while, in 1593-6, besides writing those

famous sonnets. Shakespeare wrote poetry, for example, *The Rape of Lucrece* along with a couple of plays such as *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew*. Then in 1594-5, *Love's Labour's Lost* was written; in 1594-6, *King John*; in 1595-6, *Romeo and Juliet*; and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; in 1596-7, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry IV Part I* were written. In 1597, Shakespeare, obviously enriched by his earnings as one of London's most successful playwrights, bought New Place, considered to be one of the finest houses in Stratford. However, there is no indication that he spent any considerable stint of time in Stratford at this period.

In fact, Shakespeare wrote, and his company produced, as

many as 37 plays within a period of about 19 years from 1592 to 1611 (the year of *The Tempest*). In 1599, the Globe theatre was opened, and Shakespeare was one of the 'sharers' of this theatre. The Globe was built from the materials used in the Theatre which was, in fact, dismantled and rebuilt on Bankside to become the home of Lord Chamberlain's Men. It was after the opening of this Theatre that some of the finest plays of Shakespeare, including his four great tragedies, were written and produced. Among his four great tragedies, *Hamlet* was written first, in 1600-1; then followed Shakespeare's second great tragedy *Othello* in 1604 which also saw the production of his famous dark play called *Measure for Measure*, and both *King Lear* and *Macbeth* were written in 1605.

In 1610, Shakespeare had probably returned to live permanently in the town. But, after six years, in 1616, Shakespeare died when he was only 52. He was buried in Stratford Parish Church, and most of his estate was left to Susana, his daughter.

Given the scale and space and scope of Shakespeare's oeuvre, one begins to get carried away by the richness and diversity of the Shakespearean world which, in fact, puts under erasure any fixed centre of gravity as such. This is why some of the postmodernists tend to reject a Shakespeare in an attempt to zero in on many Shakespeares, constantly in a state of flux — even free play, to use Derrida's terms. Our Shakespeares are to be sought from our own experiences, from our realities which in fact tend to generate counter-discourses, already indicated. *Hamlet*, for example, brings to us the possibilities of breaking forms such as autocracy and fundamentalism imposed on us for a long period of time.

In fact, Hamlet's encounter with the ghost, as we can see, *Continued on page 11*

## Romania's Oldest Alma Mater AL I Cuza University in Iasi

by Mohammad Amjad Hossain

Let me first explain briefly the reason for writing this piece, on such a university which is hitherto unknown to this part of the world. Traditionally, the names of the Oxford, the Cambridge or Georgetown or Boston Universities are familiar here, but the name of the century old Alma Mater in Eastern Europe remained behind iron curtain during the communist regime. And it is such a university which has a name in the Western world for research oriented and theoretical education.

Located in a beautiful landscape of central-southern Romania by the terraces of the Bahlui river, the AL I Cuza University of old Jassy, which is now known as Iasi, was founded in 1860. It is Romania's first university and is named after Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza, ruler of Moldavia, who was instrumental in unifying Moldavia with Wallachia to become the Union of Romania. It may be worth mentioning that Moldavia joined Wallachia (Bucharest) back in 1862. Iasi where the university is situated was the capital of United Moldavia between 1564 and 1568, during the second reign of Alexandru Lapusneanu. Moldavia's south-eastern part of Bessarabia was annexed by Stalin after Second World War to form the Moldavian SSR (Soviet Socialist Republic) despite bitter protests from the Romanians. With the crumbling of the Russian empire, Soviet Moldavia declared independence on 27 August 1991. In spite of the artificial barriers created by Stalin, there is considerable homogeneity and a sense of common identity among Romanians and former Soviet Moldavians. Iasi which is 430 kilometres from the capital city of Bucharest has a diverse and complex character as it has experienced long struggles in its history.

While I was approaching towards Iasi from Bucharest some time in 1989, I was really fascinated by the landscape of Iasi. Accompanied by my family, I was driving a station wagon and ascending the roads with zigzag turns towards Iasi. I am inclined to share the views of renowned Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga, who said, "It is not the town that makes the roads, but the roads make a town." We spent three nights in Trainan Hotel which probably was a part of the holi-

day resort of Moldavia's Prince. A very rapid development took place in Iasi during the last decades of the 14th century which brought about urbanisation to its settlers. By 1408, the town became an important crossroad of commercial activities for Moldavian ruler Alexander the Good. In 1538, Moldavia came under the occupation of Ottoman Empire when Mahomed II captured the princely state. Development of Iasi flourished during the occupation period of the Ottoman Empire.

The inauguration ceremony of the University on 26 October, 1860, marked a turning point in the national cultural arena, which played an important role in the complex process of transformation of Romanian society. But because of the establishment of communist system, transformation did not take shape as was expected by Romanians in pre-communist era. According to the regulation which was framed in 1851, the university had three faculties at the initial stage. These were: The Philosophical Faculty which

comprised philosophy, literature and science; the Law Faculty and the Theological Faculty. Although it was stipulated in the regulation but the situation did not permit to open the Medical Faculty.

During the reign of Prince Cuza, reforms in education and agriculture were introduced but his methods of implementation were autocratic in nature which evoked criticism. In keeping with the law for education promulgated on November 25 and December 5, 1864, the university was re-structured in the following manner: Faculty of Philosophy and Letters, Faculty of Physical Sciences, Mathematics and Natural Sciences, Law Faculty and the Faculty of Medicine which started its courses in 1879. However, the Faculty of Theology was abolished for want of students. Since the introduction of new education policy in 1878, emphasis has been laid on the Science disciplines in line with the process of industrialisation of the country. The study of mineralogy, petrography, palaeontology, geology, apart from agri-

cultural chemistry, organic chemistry, inorganic chemistry, heat and electricity molecular physics, were introduced in the Faculty of Science.

During the First World War the university faced difficulties as the city of Iasi had become the main front of the Romanian resistance against the German-Austrian-Hungarian forces after the fall of Bucharest in November, 1916. In 1897, a new building of the University was built on the site of National Theatre as the old building could not cope with the growing demands of higher education. It consists of 350 lectures rooms, laboratories, seminar rooms, a spacious assembly hall and a rich library. The old building is used for the Faculty of Medicine.

Rector of the University Prof Dr Viorel Barbu, whom I met in 1989, was in praise of the faculty members of the nineteenth century whose dedicated teaching and research work had contributed to make this alma mater as one of the very few prestigious educational institutes of the world. The Rector mentioned the names of Vasile Conta, Professor of Law whose 'The theory of fatalism and the theory of universal undulation' is in wide circulation, Dr D Gusti, an initiator of a new method of investigation of sociological monograph, historian A D Xenopol whose works 'Les Principes Fondamentaux de l'histoire' (1899) and 'Theorie de l'histoire' (1908) deserve special mention, and Professor Grigore Cobalescu, the father of Romanian geology. It may be noted that Romania's foreign minister, between the two World Wars Nicolae Titulescu, who was one of the pioneers in establishing League of Nations, was a Professor at the Faculty of Law of this university. As foreign minister, he championed the French sponsored policy of collective security and was one of the architects of the Little entente with the former states of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. Incidentally, he settled in Paris following the introduction of communism in Romania and died honourably there. After the fall of the communist regime in Romania the Romanian leaders recalled the services of Nicolae Titulescu with due respect.

In Iasi University, the *Continued on page 11*



A front view of the university

## 'To Sorrow I Bade Good Morrow'

by Syed Maqsood Jamil

"HAVE I not reason to lament what man has made of man!" The note of dejection in this candid statement on the degradation of humanity is deeply touching. Thus spoke William Wordsworth, a poet with a blithe spirit who rejoiced in the beauties of nature. There is a message in the sadness of this lofty soul whose imagination and spirit soared among the bounties and beauties of creation. Even the mightiest of man is not immune against sadness which overpowers in a sudden but sure sweep. Young, however differs to say that "Tis impious in a good man to be sad". Sadness is dark and is therefore likely to put out the light of faith and hope in weaker spirits, leading them to desperate acts of folly. But piety in good men has enduring strength. Occasional blue moods are like wandering dark clouds, soon they are sundered apart, the light once again comes out with renewed effulgence.

It is common for us to seek the cause of our sadness in our fate, in our circumstances. The onus of the blame is often put on a capricious element called "luck". But the plain fact is that, human beings are constitutionally vulnerable. They fall prey to host of things. In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Cassius sums up the reality of the situation when he tries to convince Brutus by saying "The fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars, / But in ourselves that we are underlings". Sadness is endemic in human life. The seeds of sadness, sprout from the finite nature of life. Their trials and triumphs, dreams and dejection perish in the finality of death. Ghalib, the legendary Urdu poet describes the tragic irony of human life in his couplet, "Kaid-e-hayat aur band-e-gam, / Asme dono ek hain, / Mau se pehle aadmi gum se najat paye kiyoon" — The captivity of life and the thralldom of sadness, both of them are alike, then, how can a man free himself from sadness before death.

The spell cast by mundane attractions is not everlasting. It withers away under the glaring blaze of stress and strains of time. We come crashing down to the reality of our banal existence. Such bitter realisation led Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor to contemplate human life with much sadness in his soul-stirring couplet "Umre daraz mangke laye char din, Do arzo me kat gaye, Do entezar me" — I obtained only four days, after praying for long life; of it two were spent in

dreaming, the other two in waiting. Sadness, being a potent thought has easy access to human mind. No matter how favourably we are placed in life, no matter how disciplined and tutored are our minds, sadness follows us like our shadows.

There is fatalistic approach in this attitude towards life. It was Thomas Hardy who took fatalism to such idolized heights in his works by hallowing sadness. One of his classic works, "The Return of the Native" begins with the following memorable lines of John Keats: "To sorrow / I bade good morrow / And thought to live her far away behind, / But cheerily, cheerily / She loves me dearly, / She is so constant to me, and kind, / I would deceive her, and so leave her, / But ah! she is so constant and so kind".

Should we believe that sadness is altogether a ponderous subject? How can that be when it deals with our inner struggles and conflicts, giving access to our deeper feelings which reveal so much about us? That is why sadness imparts great appeal and value to literary works. We love and adore them because they create such healing effect on our wounds. The unrequited love of Fanny Browne and the frail condition of his health made John Keats ideally predisposed towards this subject of immense literary appeal. He was so prolific in creating images of sadness and melancholia! His 'Ode on Melancholia' is a spellbinding pictorial description of sadness. Lovers of poems in all ages will find great emotional support in this splendid work. His imagination creates beatific effect when he says, "But when the melancholy fit shall fall / Sudden from heaven like a weeping cloud, / That fosters the droop headed flowers all, / And hides the green hill in an April shroud, / Then glut thy sorrow on a morning rose, / Or on the rainbow of the salt sand-wave, / Or on the wealth of globed peonies; / Or if thy mistress some rich anger shows, / Emprison her soft hand and let her rave, / And feed deep, deep upon her peerless eyes".

Sadness has so many names. It is often associated with a sense of loss, a dejected spirit, a sunken heart, withering hopes, gripping sense of grief which can plunge human beings into dark pits of inaction or spur them into prodigious activity. It has a wide range of overlapping emotions for a variety of circumstantial factors — when things do not go the

way we want or expect, when we loose control on the state of things, at our failures, reverses, setbacks, at cuts and wounds inflicted on us by our dear and near ones or by anyone, which we perceive to be completely unwarranted, when loss of any kind affects us etc. Melancholia, on the other hand, has a poetical resonance about it. In such state, one submits to a sense of languor which envelops the mind, imagination feeds on the adversity of the situation.

I still have the nagging feeling that a graphic and proper description of sadness is beyond my reach. It is more an exclusive preserve of brilliant minds. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, one of the three outstanding lake district poets of late 18th and early 19th century, is one such person. He portrays sadness with such lyrical thoroughness in his "Dejection — An Ode". To him sadness is "A grief without a pang, void, dark and drear / A stifled, drowsy unimpassioned grief, / Which finds no natural outlet, no relief, / In word or sigh or tear." In such a dejected state, it is perfectly humane to cogitate over the good old days. Coleridge dwells on his good old days and reminiscences — "There was a time when, though my path was rough, / This joy within me dallied with distress, / And all misfortunes were but as the stuff / When fancy made me dream of happiness / For hope grew round me, like the twining vine / And fruits and foliage, not my own, seemed mine".

Among the broad spectrum of sadness, depression is the pathological manifestation of a mental illness. The psychiatrists say that depression sets in as natural reaction to real life problems, at painful loss, a relationship gone sour, a conflict that won't go away. These are adjustment disorders. Sometimes, it is difficult to distinguish between benign sadness and pathological depression. A sad person can carry on the business of life like any other normal person, but for a patient of depression, life can come to a grinding halt. The gravity of this disease was emphasised long ago by Roman philosopher Cicero. He reminded that "The diseases of the mind are more numerous and destructive than those of the body". The scientists are more specific in their discovery that depression is in fact a dysfunction of the brain, brought by the fall in the concentration of certain neuro-

transmitters like norepinephrine and serotonin.

Sadness if not attended properly or if not kept under tight leash can have catastrophic consequences. It can rob us of our rewards, doom the flowering of our talents, distract us from our mission and lead us to abject misery. Great men triumphed over sadness by the resolute character of their faith. Robert Louis Stevenson, the writer of Treasure Island was not thought to live long and was bound to his invalid's couch almost throughout his life. But he did not let sadness to overpower him. Stevenson travelled through the mountainous tracks of Europe, braved the rigours of ocean voyage to visit Hawaii, Gilbert Islands, Tahiti and Samoa in search of a treasure which he found and immortalized in Treasure Island. Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and other memorable works. He died at his home "Vailima" in Samoa at 44. On his tomb overlooking the Pacific is graven his Requiem which bears eloquent testimony to his joie de vivre:

"Under the wide and starry sky  
Dig my grave and let me lie  
Glad did I live and gladly die  
And I laid down with a will,  
So let us watch our sad spells,  
For they can become our habit,  
With growing ascendancy  
they can become our character,  
far worse they can become our destiny,  
even worse they can bring our ruin.  
It is convenient that we should seek redemption in hope and faith.  
To illustrate the importance of this prescription, I should recall the solace offered by *sura Inshirah*. There was an interval during which prophet Muhammad (SM) received no revelation. He was mocked by the disbelievers of Mecca. They started saying "Allah of whom we used to hear so much has forsaken poor Muhammad and now hates him". The holy prophet was anxious. During such a state, *sura Inshirah* or solace was revealed. It exhorts:  
"Have We not caused thy bosom to dilate,  
And eased thee of the burden  
Which weighed down thy back;  
And exalted thy fame?  
But lo! with hardship goeth ease,  
Lo! with hardship goeth ease,  
So when thou art relieved,  
still toil  
And strive to please thy Lord".