

# Negotiating Difference: Contemporary Bengali Representations of *When We Dead Awaken* and *The Wild Duck* in Bengal

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**Abstract** This article concentrates on two recent Bengali productions of Ibsen: *When We Dead Awaken* (Punorujjibon-new life) and *The Wild Duck*. (Dulali-literal-ly, daughter, here the name of the wild duck; hence the identification with Hedvig is made). Both were first produced in 2006. For the source material for this article I had to depend on the director's scripts since the translated and adapted texts are not available in print. I must acknowledge my debt to the respective directors, Amalesh Chakraborti and Suranjana Dasgupta for access to the scripts and for enabling me to watch the performances. The first is more or less a faithful translation while the second is a condensed adaptation which is also an interesting excursion into the intra-cultural. The negotiation of sociocultural differences through strategies of intercultural theatre will be the thrust of the discourse. Although Amalesh Chakraborty the translator-director of *When We Dead Awaken* is more or less faithful to the original English text the nuances of the poetic rhythm of the Bengali language naturally creates differences that are inevitable. Moreover there is the added responsibility of making the Bengali version stage worthy and socioculturally acceptable to an "other" culture. "Playability" and "speakability", or rather a "playable speakability" are important criteria of drama translation.<sup>1</sup> He has, "out of practical necessity", edited and omitted certain passages and scenes. One of the main reasons for the director to keep to the original Ibsen is because he felt that the characters, especially a knife-wielding Irene may not be acceptable to a Bengali audience. The problem could perhaps be solved by trying to maintain the western ambience. Also the artist-model relationship as problematized in Ibsen is alien to Indian middle-class reality. Hence a transcultural production has been attempted. The irony is however that he has effected a major change through the mise en scène of the conclusion and his approach to the figure of the Deaconess. Such changes are perhaps aimed to inscribe a foreign play into the Indian cultural context and introduce a free and alternate readability in an otherwise faithful translation.

**Key words** acculturation; interculturality; multiculturalism; multilingualism; diegetic space

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Every translation especially of a drama text is bound to be an adaptation especially in the stage version. It is a constant process of the production of meaning which adds to the meaning of production.<sup>2</sup> The issue in this case of a Bengali version of Ibsen's *When We Dead Aowaken* is how an Indian audience will receive the character of a knife-wielding Irene of her gory and symbolic deeds, striding the stage in western costume and deportment but speaking the local language. The actors' bodies raise the question of the validity and commensurability of western deportment in an "other" language situation. In the case of India, however, the residual colonial culture and the tradition of producing Shakespeare on the Bengali stage (begun in the nineteenth century) somewhat validates the western costume of the Bengali speaking actors and helps the process of acculturation. Speaking from his western location, Pavis says, "The fact that other cultures have gradually permeated our own leads (or should lead) us to abandon or relativise any dominant western (or Eurocentric) universalizing view."<sup>3</sup> In the case of postcolonial India and the contemporary wave of globalized culture, the audience is more ready perhaps to admit and accommodate difference.

Does interculturality focus on the element of sameness in cultures? So it does, according to Jelena Luzina,<sup>4</sup> Interculturality, she points out presupposes sameness while multiculturalism involves difference. In this case the culture that gives (the First Culture) is no less gratified than the culture that receives (the Second Culture), by this reciprocal understanding of the sameness in an ideal. On the actors' part it is transmigration into a different cultural space therein discovering and making the audience discover the truth, in the case of this play, at the core of creative living and creative death. The source culture, on the other hand, is enriched by extending its operation in an "other" rhetoric which loses its otherness by aligning itself with a similar poetic mission. The Bengali language and the western costumes meld into a balanced cross-cultural apprehension that creates what I would call a "hybridized" performative multilingualism: the western attire and body language are made to link with the Bengali language. The stage language of the body merges with the linguistic communication creating a multilinguistic fusion, though it is not logocentric multilingualism. We hereby arrive at a new definition of multilingualism. If the objective of language is communication, then it is widely acknowledged that this aim may be achieved, in life as in drama through extra linguistic means; viz. dress and bearing, gesture and facial expression, choreography and scenography etc. At a recent international Ibsen festival a foreign delegate was surprised to find how body language changed with dress. This she had observed in Indian delegates who carried themselves differently and spoke a different body language when they wore western dress. We may surmise from this that when in western dress they spoke in the native tongue the result may be termed 'multilingualism'. The concept of course is more pertinent to theatre.

Transcultural presentations, though empowered by sameness are at the same time deconstructed by differences that are negotiated through stage presentations, which, if successful, are positively mediated by the audience reception. Here we have an intertwining rather than a merging of cultures. In this play the most important deviation from the original Ibsen is perhaps the *mise en scène* related to the appearances of the

Deaconess, nurse and the apocalyptic last scene. Although the audience was aware of this being a western play, the Christian meaning of the figure of the Deaconess was bound to overshoot the mark. Yet the enigmatic presence of the black-clad woman is too powerful a spectacle to be omitted and too redolent with symbolic possibilities if enunciated through a suitable *mise en scène*. In the Bengali play she appears ominously in the dark and vanishes as ominously as she appears. In the scene of the avalanche in the end, she too is crushed and extinguished. This is the death of Death. With her out of the way, Irene is free to lead a new transcended life away from worldly travails as the ascent to the mountain heights suggests. This is how the translator-director responded to my queries on May 14, 2009.

I consider the Deaconess to be a symbol of death in the play. Irene considers herself to be dead—she is like a dead soul roaming the earth for redemption. The deaconess, who always travels with Irene is dressed in black and is symbolic of the spiritual death which Irene has suffered. Her persistent desire to get rid of the Deaconess is symbolic of that attempt to overcome her spiritual death. Unlike Ibsen's text where the Deaconess remains alive, we chose to portray her death in our production to suggest Rubek and Irene's eventual triumph over spiritual death. This interpretation is largely derived from my understanding of hints offered by Ibsen in his text.

The chaos with which the original Ibsen play ends is a finale, to some an extremely ambiguous one, shunned by Chakraborty. In his play Irene and Rubek's death is illuminated in a visionary glow. They do not die but move towards new light and new life. This is positive and definite as admitted by the translator-director himself, when he answered my queries regarding the production, I am tempted to quote his very interesting remark on the conclusion:

Ibsen concludes the play with the death of Rubek and Irene and the lingering sound of Maja's song. But I feel that prominence should be given to Rubek and Irene whose love doesn't simply die. Artists do not just die. The concluding vision in our production, which is not present in Ibsen's text, signifies the triumph of both love and art beyond the realms of physical death. It suggests man's eternal quest for an enlightened existence to overcome the frustrations of our lives. A play should not end in such a note of frustration. As a dramatist it is my duty to show hope symbolized by the protagonists' attempt to look forward to a new dawn, a dawn of spiritual regeneration.

This remark leads us to the leading issue of the *mise en scène*, which is how the production relates to the middle class milieu, which the director may not have thought of. We can, however, find a place for the religious sensibilities of a Bengali middle class audience among the other issues of ideology, social context, audience reception, and what is called director's theatre. In the Hindu philosophy death is a passing into a new state of being, a positive new life. The title *Punorujjibon* means new life.

*Tagore's Post Office* is a classic example of the negation of death and the passing into a new and better life.

This fusion of Ibsenian ambiguity and Indian traditional belief fits a strategy of syncretic theatre that Christopher B. Balme says:<sup>6</sup>

theatrical syncretism is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or post-colonial experience. It is very often performed in a europhone language, but almost always manifests varying degrees of bi- or multilingualism. Syncretic theatre is one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other.

In this case an English Norwegian text is recreated in an Indian language but the ambience is europhone<sup>7</sup>. Furthermore one may say a new kind of multilingualism emerges in the dress and deportment of specially the women, Irene and Maja. Speaking Bengali, wearing western Victorian costume their gestures and deportment are at best, hybridized. A new stage language and *mise en scène* evolves, a range of signifiers through gesture, native Bengali accent and intonation and other non-linguistic signs enunciate a new form of communication.

Suranjana Dasgupta took up the challenge of Indianization in her condensed adaptation of *The Wild Duck*, as "Dulali". (first performed in Calcutta on 31st December 2006). Writing under the constraints of time, and to tailor the play into a night-long theatre festival in which a number of plays were enacted, she had to condense it into 40 minutes' performance time.

Realizing the difficulties of transferring the play into a middle class Bengali character and social ambience, Dasgupta makes it take a journey to north-western India, Punjab, to be precise, where defence services are a more common vocation than in Bengal. All this makes the character of Old Ekdal or Herman chacha plausible, as the menagerie on the roof and the revolver in the domestic setting are also plausible. A text belonging to the culturally different sphere (Culture of the First) is melded into an Asian language, Bengali, which is just one among the many languages recognized by the Constitution of India, besides hundreds of other Indian languages. This transference into the Linguistic Culture of the Second simultaneously produces a sub-textual ethnical Culture of the Third which belongs to a distant Indian state. In this production I find a problematized and politicized intra-culturality which is worth exploring.

Dasgupta was faced with the difficulties of overcoming the intertextual expectations of the audience many of whom would be familiar with the original *The Wild Duck* albeit in English translation. Also within a span of 40 minutes the realism and the symbolism of the original had to be expressed. Since the language used was different, intertextuality was mediated through the difference, and a new text emerged. The *mise en scène* enunciated a different and artificial dramatic tradition. Gregers (here *Rajbinder Singh Mal*) doubles as the narrator (*or equivalent to Vivek, or Conscience in*

*the indigenous jatra*).<sup>8</sup> Gregers ascends the stage passing through the audience (as in the *jatra*) uttering a Punjabi proverb related to the beauty of Truth: “*Jo bole so nehal / sat sri akal*”. The difference is this that it is not a narrator who stands outside the text but very much a protagonist. Gregers would recount the past, (not out of keeping with Ibsenian ways), create a diegetic space, and give choric commentary. He also sings snatches of Hindi film song. There is simultaneous utilization of stage space: Gregers running his commentary on one side, signifying sometimes the outside, at other times his own room in the Ekdal family while the intense family drama would go on within what we would call the Edvig (here Himani) space. Intertextuality is complex and deeply entangled with the *mise en scène*. According to Aaltonen, “Intracultural theatre does not cross its own cultural boundaries, whereas transcultural theatre does—proposing to go beyond particular cultures on behalf of a universality of the human condition. Transcultural directors are concerned with traditions only in order to grasp more effectively what they have in common and what is not reducible to a specific culture.”<sup>9</sup> In this instance, a western text transmigrates into Indian space. In this vast imagined community characterized by internal differences, the play enunciates Punjabi *mise en scène* while keeping to the language of Bengal, a province on the extreme east of India. In this play Bengali is spoken with a north Indian accent and intonation as Punjabis would do. The “jungle” on the roof and its menagerie, specially rabbits and the wild duck, has not lost its mystery and deep interrelationship with old Werle (*Joginder Singh Mal*), old Ekdal and above all, Hedvig who symbolically substitutes as the dead and maimed bird. This rooftop jungle and old Ekdal’s occasional forays into rabbit shooting was only credible in a north-west Indian farmhouse.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, what has Dasgupta done with the text? She has appropriated an Ibsen text and due to the constraints of performance, condensed it. The act of condensation has made her introduce elements of narrative and commentary embedding these in the text. With an eye to naturalism she has transferred the setting to distant Punjab in north western India.

The alternative space the audience confronted is that of a Punjabi household speaking with a Punjabiised Bengali accent. With an eye to the social context Dasgupta has made use of intracultural elements placing the Bengali language text within a Punjabi setting. She has created a traditional Punjabi atmosphere, introducing the Punjabi lori (lullaby) song at the end and making Gregers utter a Punjabi proverb in the beginning. She has Indianized the names and made use of some typically Punjabi ones eg. *Rajbinder Singh*. Drawing out the Ibsenian message of a layered and socially variable attitude to love, the transcultural has also come alive. The lori the mother Gina (Gayatri) sings over the dead body of Hedvig (Himani) creates pathos and resignation, a permanent end to untruth but also the dawning of new realization of love. As in Ibsen husband and wife find oneness in their love for the child but in this Indian version, the mother gets more prominence than the father. One realizes that the play is based on love, even though it may be love for morally maimed beings living in a fictionalized world thriving on the life-lie. The fiction of the text is newly fictionalized through the *mise en scène*. The text is intercultural, intracultural and transcultural-

al. In this cultural collage genre boundaries overlap.

In this article I have attempted to analyse the various modes and rationales of adapting Ibsen texts into different social settings. Although the context is a particular regional culture of India this kind of research if applied to different global situations, does point to the rich variability and therefore livingness of an Ibsen play.

### 【 Notes 】

1. 5. 9. See Sirku Aaltonen, "Time-Sharing on Stage. Drama Translation in Theatre and Society," *Multilingual Matters, Topics in Translation 17* (Clevedon, 2000) :41, 30, 13.
2. One has to be able to help a "genuine", audience understand the meaning of the production (and the production of meaning). See Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992)3.
3. Patrice Pavis, *Theatre at the Crossroads of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1992)5.
4. Jelena Lužina, "Interculturalism: trends, exotica, aesthetics, poetics and so... forth!" *Theatre Theory Blesok* 47, March-April (2006) : 22.
6. Christopher B. Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 2.
7. The translation is from that of Eva La Gallienne (New York: the Modern Library-Random House, 1961).
8. An indigenous open air play popular in Orissa and West Bengal, districts in the eastern part of India.
10. Dulali can best be described as intracultural theatre. Sirku Aaltonen (Clevedon, 2000) points out how modern Japanese theatre has incorporated Western elements but also infused elements from the traditional Noh and Kabuki.

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