

Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* in Bangladesh: A Study of the Cultural Implications of Dramatic Adaptation

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Abstract: Foreign texts can be adapted by modifying the cultural specifics of the original to that of the target society to ensure a wider reach. The selection process of the foreign texts to a large extent is determined by the size of the theater group, the expertise of the actors, the group members' efficiency in using standard Bangla, and the level of cultural sophistication of the audience. Amongst all the foreign writers/playwrights, we have selected Chekhov's representation in Bangladeshi theater as our focus in this article. We are focusing on the adapted version of The Cherry Orchard produced by a theater group in Bangladesh and have tried to explore the transformation of the original text in terms of contextualization. While doing this, we used reception theory and Gramsci's theater criticism.

Theater offers both communication and information with relatively little investment and allows for the experience of close physical and emotional contact between actors and spectators. It is a collaborative form of fine art that uses live performers to present the experience of a real or imagined event before a live audience in a specific place. If we expand the definition, we come to see that theater embraces the notion of performance in general where the entire terrain of culture upon which society and state rests constitute performative acts. Thus, culture and society are integrated, and theater is viewed as an aspect of culture. A socio-political structure does not offer much space to the individual or the community to act on the world on its own terms, to generate its own meanings and effects. The very notion of taking the theater to people to teach them about their socio-political issues is a condescending approach. Cultural Studies, as During said, is "most interested in how groups with least power practically develop their own readings of, and uses for, cultural products – in fun, in resistance, or to articulate their own identity" (7). On a similar line, Schechner's Performance Theory helps us to understand an actual theater which should seek to answer the question, "how is it built and what are its bases? What are its functions and how does it relate to the life we live individually and collectively?" (1997, 40)

Theater groups in Bangladesh became active in post-independent Bangladesh and gave a new momentum to theater activities. The oldest groups of Bangladesh like Nagorik Nattya Sampraday and Udichi were active even in the pre-liberation period; both were established in 1968. After that, in the post-liberation period, numerous theater groups have come into being. In Bangladesh, the theater groups have extensively experimented with foreign texts. Shakespeare, Moliere, Camus, Albee, Chekhov, Sartre, Miller, Brecht, and Ibsen's plays have been translated or adapted. So, what is the reason behind the staging of foreign texts in Bangladeshi theater? To answer this, we can reference During (1993) who said that cultural products are articulated to explore self-identity. Now, the group theaters select the foreign texts because they want to facilitate their own cultural identity through adaptation of those texts. When these texts are contextualized, we find that most of the time the titles, characters' names, settings, and in some cases, even the storylines are changed to adapt and represent the culture or,

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according to Schechner, to relate to life individually or collectively (“Theater into the Twenty First Century” 5-14). In the post-liberation period, we see that almost all the theatrical groups have chosen to work with foreign texts. Foreign texts are translated or adapted in Bangladesh for the universal appeal of their diverse themes. The inadequacy of local writings on different issues is also a key factor.

According to the Bangladesh Group Theater Index 2005, Russian modern fiction writer Anton Chekhov’s works have been chosen by almost all the theater groups and staged many times, and almost all of the texts were adapted. From our interviews with theater activists of some major theater groups, we found that the selection process of the foreign texts, to a large extent, is determined by the president of a group. This, in turn, is also dependent on the size of the theater group, the quality of performance, actors, the language efficiency of the group members, and the cultural orientation of the audience. As a result, the foreign texts are either translated or adapted.

For this paper, we are focusing specifically on Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* in its Bangla adaptation, *Kanthal Bagaan* by Ali Zaker (Nagorik Nattya Sampraday), to understand its representation in Bangladesh.

Anton Chekhov was born in 1860 and died in 1904. Grandson of a serf, Chekhov started working in his father’s general store in early childhood. His belief in the power of individualism stemmed from his traumatic experience of poverty during his childhood. Chekhov contributed largely to reactionary newspapers and moved in conservative circles although later in life he became more liberal. He was aware of the social evils of Russian society. Thus, it is obvious that as a playwright, he would try to communicate this to his reader/audience.

We find a parallelism between Chekhov’s and Gramsci’s views on the purpose of plays performed on stage. Gramsci believes that while writing a play, a playwright must have a target audience in his mind, besides which the play itself has a disguised ideology to convey to the audience. In the *Chronicles* he demonstrates that drama must be viewed as ‘a form of art’ which has a function to create a self-aware and fully conscious public. Gramsci viewed theater as part of culture. In “Socialism and Culture,” he writes that people are not merely receptacles to be filled with data and isolated raw facts. This view gave a new dimension to the idea of culture that it cannot be dominated by one class in the society. Rather it is an ‘organization’ which creates awareness in an individual to attain an understanding of himself in terms of his rights and duties to society. Gramsci writes, “Above all, man is mind, i.e., he is a product of history, not nature” (qtd. in Dombroski 93). He also emphasized class consciousness which can be attained through self-realization which later would spread to a whole class. To demonstrate how this social progress would work, he believed that this awareness about oneself is more than knowing about one’s history and culture. Rather it encourages one to know “others, their history, the successive efforts they have made to be what they are, to create the civilization they have created and which they seek to replace with our own” (93). In addition, Gramsci later explains this social progress in largely socio-political terms where the class needs to know what factors regulate their lives. To reflect the complexities of society, a whole fictional world is created by Chekhov in *The Cherry Orchard* where the characters are aware of these complexities and their inclusiveness in it. Chekhov himself insisted that his plays be understood as descriptions of life, nothing more or less. He was frustrated by the misrepresentation of his text on stage and thus said:

Take my Cherry Orchard. Is it my Cherry Orchard? With the exception of two or three parts nothing in it is mine. I am describing life, ordinary life, and not bleak despondency. They [contemporary producers] invent something about me out of their own heads, anything they like, something I never thought of or dreamed about (qtd. in Magarshack 14).

Chekhov insists that the reader understand that life contains the comic and the tragic, the ludicrous and the serious, the pleasant and the painful. In *The Cherry Orchard*, when the family is leaving the estate for the last time, Gayev, a major character who is greatly agitated, says, "The train. The station" (Trans. West 59). And then, fearful that he may burst into tears over the departure, he hopelessly, pitifully, retreats into his make-believe world of billiard games with "In off into the middle, double the white into the corner" (West 59). We may smile at the meaningless remark, but we do so with tears in our eyes. These characters do reflect the people that we see around us and encounter every day.

Chekhov is relevant in Bangladesh for two basic reasons: first, the underlying ideology of his plays which is based on the belief in individualism, as in the case of the other pioneers of realistic theater like Ibsen, Shaw and Strindberg; second, the belief of these playwrights about the form of art which is associated with a moral dimension to be delivered to the audience in the theater. Modern theater in Europe went through changes in the views of life presented so as to find out what would be the moral ground of representation of reality in theater. With all the limitations of the "three-walls" stage in indoor theater, the performers seemed foolish in their attempts to represent reality. To overcome these limitations, the pioneers like Ibsen, Shaw, and Strindberg wrote about the disintegration of traditional certainties and for that they experimented with the realist form of theater, showing an abiding faith in the extraordinary individual. Ibsen, as Krutch has noted, "never shifts the burden of responsibility from the individual to 'social conditions' or economic pressure" (qtd. in Gassner 133). We note the same thing in Chekov. Moreover, to encourage the actors to establish reality in their performance in the theater, the most influential realist director, Constantin Stanislavsky, came up with an exercise for the performers where they would search in their memories for the same kind of experience that the characters in the play go through. This technique helped Stanislavsky to bring authenticity in his production of Chekhov's plays. Similarly, when we look at the adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard* in Bangladesh, the contextualization helps the performers to represent the reality from their own personal experience. Like the other pioneers of realistic theater, Chekhov also wrote plays to show the immense potentialities and at the same time defects of an individual. Modern theater attributed dignity to the commoners which the earlier traditional theater denied. In one sense, it gave a humanistic dimension to the theater. A *fin de siècle* sensibility marked the writings of Anton Chekhov but a clear perspective of positivism was also very prominent in a play like *The Cherry Orchard*.

To explore the reason why adaptation helps the audience understand the text better, we would like to discuss the terminology of reception theory which says, "the reader 'concretizes' the literary work, which is in itself no more than a chain of organized black marks on a page" (Eagleton 67). Without this active participation of the audience the literary work can never be understood by the readers or, in this case, the audience. Eagleton further says that the actual text is full of indeterminacies or gaps which can be

interpreted in different ways, and sometimes perhaps mutually conflicting ways, by the readers (or in this case the audience). The audience must come to witness the play with some pre-understanding, a dim context of belief and expectations. In the case of *The Cherry Orchard* in Bangla (*Kanthal Bagaan*), these involve Zaminder feudalism, Muslim inheritance law, status of women in the rural areas of Bangladesh; and universal issues too, such as, importance of money, morality, and so on. The theater groups synthesize these pre-understandings in the adaptation. Only then can successful concretization of items through integrated illusion happen. The same is true for the audience too because, without any prior idea, they cannot successfully receive the play. The audience also proceeds to concretely receive the items staged, sheds previous assumptions, revises older beliefs, and makes more and more complex inferences. As a result, the audience's pre-set ideas are challenged, negated or undermined. In this context, Eagleton refers to Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* (1978) where Iser discusses the strategies which texts put to work to revise our established norms. He says "the valuable work of literature violates or transgresses these normative ways of seeing, and so teaches us new codes of understanding" (qtd. in Eagleton 68). In the same way, stage performance aims at positive reformation in the society by bringing in the foreign texts and contextualizing them. Iser further says, 'it brings us into deeper self-consciousness, catalyzes a more critical view of our own identities ... working our way through a book, is ourselves" (qtd. in Eagleton 68). Quotation needs clarification/checking. In theater productions, the audience can also undergo a similar psychological journey through first-hand experience or, as Schechner says, "one will be able to belong to a 'drama culture' or 'performance art culture' wherever one lives ..." (10).

Iser's reception theory promotes the humanist ideology, a concept that gives a lot of importance on the desirability of human beings to be flexible and open minded, prepared to put belief into test, and allow being transformed. The idea of adaptation of foreign texts also promotes transformation of the conventions of human beings. The transformative power of literary adaptation plays a powerful role in bringing the desired effect that the production wants to achieve – the same transformation we see in the case of *Kanthal Bagan*, a completely transformed Bangladeshi psyche which is again not so far from the theme of *The Cherry Orchard*.

Theater groups are particularly tied to a place, particular social practices, and particular practitioners. But increasingly, texts are travelling and are frequently being domiciled outside their place of origin or primary practice. The people's inventiveness and creativity give rise to a new creation through fusion and hybridity. Anton Chekhov's various plays have been adapted by different theater groups. Amongst them, *The Sea Gull*, *The Proposal*, and *The Cherry Orchard* were recurrently chosen for their universal thematic and cultural appeal. *The Cherry Orchard* has become a popular choice for theater groups in Bangladesh as it represents the crisis and conflict of different classes of people that Bangladesh still suffers from. The text also notes the rise of a subservient class which is also identifiable in our history. Hence, the production of the adaptation successfully communicates with the audience. In *The Cherry Orchard* we see that the Russian characters like Lopakhin, Lyubov Andreyevna, Gaev, Varya, and Anya become Adu, Johora, Tasadduk, Miju, and Tamanna in *Kanthal Bagaan*, and the setting changes from a Russian estate to a village jackfruit orchard somewhere in Bangladesh. The setting and the characters' names may change, but the

inherent crisis of monetary debt is the same, and the feudal lord's oppression, meaningless luxurious way of life, the rise of the subservient classes do not change. The universal crisis of a materialistic world, the inhumane treatment of lower class people, the absence of intellect in both the subservient class and the Zaminders – all these we perceive from the adapted version too. The eurocentrism is contextualized and all the events and characters' localization leaves the audience intellectually, culturally, and socially charged.

If we consider the original play and the adaptation, the transformation of characters in the two versions becomes quite distinct according to their contexts. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Lopakhin is seen wearing a waistcoat and yellow shoes, symbol of his newly acquired wealth. He calls himself a "rich man" but he also admits that at heart he is a "peasant," "a real peasant" (Frayn 2). He shows his unusual craving for money and aptly says that he is a "money grubbing peasant" (10). In the adaptation, the central character Adu, who is presumably an illegitimate child of the Zaminder (landlord) Syed Aajmat Ali, has been portrayed as a sly crook, ready to do anything to confiscate the land of Zohra and Tasadduk. He seems, at times, to be caring about these two people, but again when he remembers the humiliation of being a servant to these people, he revolts. A good trait of Adu is his passion for work; from dawn to late night he works. He is sincere in his work, but at the same time, he always deceives people to get his work done. So, the whole attempt of Adu to become rich is based on his immoral ideology as an emerging businessman. Adu can also be read as a symbolic character from the perspective of Bangladesh. Adu is a symbol of greed, power and the destructive force which appears in the society to destroy all good things. The destruction of the *Kanthal Bagaan* is also a symbol of a destruction of nature, a looming danger ignored by the people of Bangladesh as they seem unwilling to realize what price they have to pay for the destruction of natural elements like trees.

The women characters in the original play are portrayed as weak, submissive, and vulnerable, yet they are represented as strong figures at times; whereas, in the adapted play the women are typical village women preoccupied with marriage and the security that comes with it. However, in both the cases the sufferings of the women are universal. Chekhov's Ranyevskaya becomes Zohra in the adapted play. Both being spendthrifts, they spend money on irrelevant or unnecessary things. Similarly, both yearn for the golden past they had in the orchard during their childhood. We do not find any specific image of Ranyevskaya's childhood; whereas Zohra reminisces about her childhood fears surrounding a dominating father who used to control her mother completely. Here we see that the adaptation has contextualized the patriarchal society dominant in Bangladeshi culture. The women are not empowered but rather portrayed as suffering because of their gender in the social context. Zohra is the one who started believing in the supremacy of males in the society as her mother declares that whatever her father says must be true. We do not find anything different in Chekhov's story of women in *The Cherry Orchard*. The story of Ranyevskaya is that of a tragic one too; she is married to a "drinker" who dies of "champagne" and then she falls in love with the wrong person; wrong because she drains herself and becomes worn out only to find out that the man has left her for another woman. So, she is deserted by both the men in her life in different ways. As a mother, she has to bear the suffering of losing a child of seven in the same place where she was born. The son, Grisha is drowned to death. To forget, she moves to Menton and then to Paris with her only surviving child Anya, but

again returns to her home only to find, to her disappointment, that her ancestor's place is soon to be auctioned. She finds a way to get on with her life after receiving a letter from her second husband who implores her for forgiveness, but surprisingly she rejects the idea of reconciliation with the man and tears the letter. In the adaptation, Zohra has a different story; she is married to a drunkard, the son of a landlord. After entering her husband's house, she finds out that she is the fourth wife of her husband. She is asked to take the other wives as her sisters and try to live peacefully with them till her husband's death. Then she finds out that the other wives have got most of the share of her husband's property and she has been given a very small share (as she is the youngest) to survive with her only daughter Tamanna. Being a Zaminder's daughter, her money soon dwindles, and she finds herself in a dire condition. We do not expect her to get another chance to start her life with another man again. It seems she is doomed for the rest of her life.

The characterization of Tasadduk who is Gayev in Chekhov's play has also been modified to fit the village scenario of the play in Bangladesh. Gayev is a gentleman, very loving to his sister and niece. Gayev's desperation sometimes is very visible when he considers all the unreal possibilities that he might exploit to save the orchard. He thinks about getting an inheritance from someone or marrying Anya off to a rich man, and so on. He also considers arranging a loan from the bank to pay the interest. Contrastively, in the adaptation, Tasadduk has been portrayed as a typical spoilt child of a landlord who left school a long time ago, spent money lavishly on friends, and when it was time to pay back the entire loan, he went on a world tour and returned with no money. His bonding with his sister is explicit only when he gets emotional, but most of the time we find Tasadduk trying to get the upper hand, being the male heir, and pointing out to his sister his legitimacy for getting two-thirds of the property. He does not bother to take his sister's consent before mortgaging the property. So, he seems more villainous than Gayev, reflecting the problem of Muslim inheritance law where the male sibling gets the double share of the female. It does not always end here though, but sometimes results in increasing the greed of the male sibling who ultimately tries to grab all the shares.

Another character who plays the role of conscience of the society is Trofimov (*The Cherry Orchard*) or Sohel (*Kanthal Bagaan*). The characters again have been significantly contextualized. Trofimov was the tutor of Grisha a long time ago and he is still a student. Lopakhin makes fun of him by quipping that even when he is fifty he will remain a student. But Sohel is a village school teacher and the representative of the educated, sensible young generation. He is aware about the parasites like Adu and also comments on the dishonesty of other characters. He shows his rebellious character by threatening Adu after the sale of the property to leave this job as he cannot accept the domination of an illiterate and dishonest man like Adu. He is the spokesman of other serious issues of our society unlike the inactive role played by Zohra and Tasadduk who fail to change themselves with time. He nonetheless addresses the larger issue of urbanization, a destructive force which does not believe in any sort of cooperation with nature; only knows how to exploit natural resources without thinking about the future generation. Unlike Trofimov, Sohel is a rebel who would not compromise with his conscience and has the courage to deny the domination of the emerging merchant class.

Music plays a role in both the plays and more significantly in *Kanthal Bagan*. In Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* music is used more as a background score or filler in

case of transitions. The characters hear music coming from a faraway place. Yepikhodov, a clerk, plays a guitar and sings a song commenting on the carelessness of the narrator and about the hurdles in life:

*What should I care for life's clamour,
What for my friend or my foe . . .
Had I a passion requited
Warming my heart with its glow? (23)*

At one point Gayev and Ranyevskaya even mention a “Jewish Orchestra” (28). The motive behind adding *Baul* songs in *Kanthaal Bagaan* is more significant. The *Baul* character is an addition in the play to comment on the ongoing transition in the lives of the characters and also to lament on the bygone days; the songs also resound with a profound philosophy of life. The underlying theme of “apocalypse” is very aptly projected by the *Baul* songs. Here the music cannot be seen as a separate theatrical aspect; rather it is an integral part of the play that complements the ongoing action. The songs can also be seen as a retreat from the hardships of life. They also tend to teach human beings the concept of belonging and sustainability. The writer of the adaptation even ends the play with a song, stating the looming danger resulting from the greed and egocentric behavior of some of the human characters.

Besides the characterization, both the plays are uniform in the treatment of the theme of money which is the reason for the destruction of the orchard, a symbol of wealth and power exercised by the ancestors. Lopakhin even mentions the influence of money in a song in front of his two masters: “Money talks . . .” (28). In the adapted text, from the very beginning, Adu tells Miju that he has enough money to buy the whole plot and that he acquired the money by selling the jackfruits every year. In this way, he cheats his master. The class that he represents is the emerging class with money in hand. Like the previous landlords, he is also a greedy and immoral person. In a way it can be said that this class is going to be more destructive in terms of its selfish attitude towards everyone and everything. The wish of Lopakhin to lease the land for summer cottages is similar to the wish of Adu to cut all the trees and make furniture with them. In fact, he also mentions that the ancestral building would be destroyed in order to build high rise shopping malls. Along with the theme of money, both the plays show the decline of hierarchy. In *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov shows the presence of only two classes – landlords and peasants or serfs. With the advent of capitalism, the hierarchical order is inverted: the master becomes penniless and the servant becomes rich. Only characters like Fiers and Sundernath remain loyal to their masters till the end. The similarity between both the characters can easily be comprehended by their confusions about the miserable conditions of their masters. By this, Chekhov attempts to show the end of the old order and the rise of a new system. A new class is emerging; it comprises the summer gentlemen in *The Cherry Orchard* who come to spend the summer in the cottages and the builders of the commercial multi-storied buildings in *Kanthaal Bagaan*.

In an interview with us, Ali Zaker, an eminent theater personality, and also the writer and director of the adaptation *Kanthaal Bagaan*, said he did not deviate from the main theme as conceived by Chekhov. In fact, Chekhov is chosen for socially common themes. The complexities, the class consciousness, the emergence of the nouveau riche class are portrayed in the adapted version by contextualizing them with reference to Bangladeshi culture. The play has been staged quite a number of times in different cities

and towns of Bangladesh and has had quite a positive response from the audience because of the familiarity of situations and characters. Ali Zaker also explained that the theater group Nagorik Nattya Sampraday has performed a significant number of shows of Chekov's works and the main reason for selecting Chekhov was a very personal liking for the writer's way of dealing with themes which very often reflect the spirit of the Bangalee psyche. The adapted version *Kanthal Bagaanis* set on a Zaminder's estate in a Bangladeshi village, reflecting the decadent Zaminder landlords and the emergence of the mercantile class who still harbor in their mind the lust for a feudal lifestyle, and the sufferings of women. He feels that the crisis portrayed in the main text and the adaptation does not end with the text; rather, it turns into another crisis and does not get resolved. The intentional departures in the adaptation, like the change in the merchant's character, the brother, the introduction of the Baul – all are done to depart from the eurocentrism and to contextualize the play for better reception. Zaker clarified this point by saying that the introduction of Sufism in Baul songs helps to reach the audience better as most of the people have prior knowledge about the philosophy of Bauliana. The changes in the character of the brother can also be identified with the desire to grab the share of a sister as he is eligible to a larger share according to Muslim law. The characters come alive in a Bangladeshi village and reflect the crisis of the time.

Chekhov's plays portray a crisis in social and individual life, and his role as a realist playwright also made him project life from a humanist point of view. Thus, the audience can enrich their mind by receiving the underlying message of his plays which help them to understand their local culture and the culture of others as well. The individual or collective understanding helps the audience to identify with the setting, characters, and themes emotionally. The playwright's ideology becomes culture specific through adaptation. The consciousness of the audience raised through culture redefines their history and helps them to move forward to understand the societal concerns. The concretization of literary works synthesizes the pre-understanding of the audience through illusion; their conventional ideas are transcended and they are given a new understanding. In this way, texts travelling from one culture to another culture build up a common platform of understanding in every society which is, according to Gramsci, a desired outcome of theater. The changes and contextualization of the foreign text are done solely from the perspective of the country in which it is staged and hence the writer of an adaptation makes the necessary departures, contextualizing the crisis/problems of the society. In some way, the theatrical production plays the role of conscience, changing the perception of the audience intellectually, socially, and culturally.

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