

Biographical Criticism of Shakespeare in Bengal: A Close Study of S.C. Sengupta's "Shakespeare the Man"

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Abstract

The paper attempts to read S.C.Sengupta's essay *Shakespeare the Man* closely and critically and find out what ideological motivations have contributed to the construction of a biographical criticism of Shakespeare in Bengal. It has ventured to examine the connections that such Biographical literary criticism has with the Romantic idea of authorship and the aesthetic autonomy that the Romantics so passionately foregrounded. Alluding to Tagore's thesis that the poet in his day-to-day life is much like an ordinary man, while he lives a larger and more intense life which is reflected in his poetry S.C. Sengupta has pleaded for the reconstruction of the inner life of a poet from his works. What this paper has aspired to excavate from Sengupta's essay is an alternative idea of subjectivity that transcends the personality of the poet. Though this notion seems to foreground the Modernist creed of objectivity and impersonality, the paper has tried to show that it can be traced back to the aesthetic ideology of Romanticism which emphasized the inability and ineffectuality of the poet to understand the roots of his creation.

Keywords: Biography, Authorship, Aesthetic Autonomy, Transcendental Subjectivity

Dr. S.C. Sengupta contributed his essay entitled 'Shakespeare the Man' to the Shakespeare Commemoration Volume planned by the Department of English of Presidency College, Calcutta, in order to celebrate the quarter-centenary of Shakespeare's birth and published under the auspices of the Government of West Bengal. At the outset Professor Sengupta has alluded to Tagore's famous essay 'The Poet's Biography'. In this essay Tagore has advanced a theory that while in his day-to-day life a poet is very much like ordinary man, he enjoys a larger and intenser life in the world of his imagination and his poetic productions bear testimony to this. Any attempt to discover any subterranean connection between the external life of action and inner life of poetic vision, Tagore contends, is doomed to failure.

According to Tagore man simultaneously inhabits two worlds. One of these is the actual world, the world of action which is circumscribed by needs and interests. Here in this world man is subject to the biological laws like all other creatures. This biological self in man is not false, only a

lower kind of truth, a partial truth and in man's incessant and indefatigable effort to transcend this limited self lies the essence of humanity. But man, Tagore believed, is the resident of another world, a world which is above and beyond mere biological needs and it is in this world that man enjoys infinite freedom by realizing his potential for transcendental greatness he is born with. This world is truer than the actual world and that is why the life of a poet should be sought in the world of his creations, the world that has set his spirit free from the self immured in biological needs and desires.

In the essay Tagore asserts that the fact that there is no biography of any poet in India makes him forever curious but not sad. He writes:

No one would consider the legend current about Valmiki to be history. But according to us, that legend is the true account of the poet...People gathered these stories not from the lives of the lives of the poets but from their poetry. The facts one could have pieced together from their lives would have had no deep and lasting connection with their verse. Valmiki's everyday conversations and activities could never be set alongside the *Ramayana*, because they were momentary, transient. Perennial and undivided nature, operating within him, brought the *Ramayana* into being; it was the expression of an ineffable and immeasurable power, not the stirrings of the moment like his other activities. ([Das](#) et al. 200).

Tagore in his essay *Tathya o Satya* argues that the truth of literature does not depend upon its power to reflect reality but its power to distinguish truth from facts. While facts can be proved and verified, measured and catalogued, truth is the principle that upholds the facts and links them. Facts are fragmentary and isolated; their greater unity is revealed in truth.

In the above-mentioned essay Tagore states:

When within the fact of the individual 'I', I express the truth 'I am human'. I am lit by the radiance of eternity emanating from the light of the great One. Expression, properly speaking, is the expression of the truth within the fact. As expression is the basic function of literature and the arts, their chief task is to afford our minds the savour of truth in the vessel of fact. This savour is the savour of the One, of the unbounded. ([Das](#) et al. 15).

According to Sisir Kumar Das what is here referred to as the 'savour of truth' is identical with the 'savour' of the One and of the *asimor* unbounded- a poetic way of describing Brahma, the supreme consciousness. What Sisir Kumar Das has written in this connection may be quoted at length:

Scholars have written at length on the nature of *rasa* as conceived by the Indian *alamkarikas*, to explain how the experience of beauty in art makes one progressively conscious of the illusoriness of the empirical world and how aesthetic experience leads to the attainment of a higher form of experience. Art is an instrument to attain *ananda*, joy, which is identical with *brahmasvada*, the 'savour' or perception of supreme reality. Rabindranath uses the same terms to express his ideal of the ultimate 'savour' of art; but he does not accept the Vedantic position on the theory of *rasa*, nor does he negate the empirical world as illusion. As in philosophy so in art, he uses the metaphor of

sima (boundary) and *asim* (the boundless) to indicate how the two complement each other. The joy of attaining the infinite within the finite is one of the recurring themes of Rabindranath's creative writings and philosophical thought. The central theme of his philosophy as Abu Sayeed Ayyub puts it, 'emerges as the notion that art is a bridge across the chasm which normally separates the individual from the world around' ([Das](#) et al. 15).

Such aesthetic conceptions of Tagore may be interpreted as inspired by his submission to the Upanishadic conception of the two selves in man, *Jiva* and *Purusha*. *Jiva* signifies the individual ego, the plethora of Samskaras that we define as our personality. Personality is a continuous process, the flow of consciousness, never the same at any two moments. If *Jiva* is the personality, *Purusha* is our real self, another name for the *Atman*. These two selves, *Jiva* and *Purusha*, are described by *The Upanishads* as shadow and reality. Such philosophical speculations have prompted Tagore to discard the superficial personality of the poet as momentary and ever-changing, flux-ridden in a perilously unstable and uncertain time-bound actual world and to glorify the inner self in the poet as perennial and transcendental, beyond and above the changes and fluctuations of the ordinary world. What we have here is a binary opposition between an enworlded subjectivity and a transcendental self and it is the latter that is claimed to be reflected or expressed through the poetic creations.

We may venture to understand the implications of these ideas about the personality and the subjectivity of the poet and their manifestation in poetry with reference to the Romantic conception of authorship. 'Romantic Poets are driven to a quest for self-creation and self-comprehension that is unprecedented in literary history', comments Marlon Ross ([Ross](#), 22). As Andrew Bennet argues, 'if a defining element in the Romantic invention of the modern sense of authorship is the self-creative genius, a defining element in the notion of genius is a certain evacuation of selfhood, the genius's own ignorance or inability or ineffectuality- what John Keats memorably names "negative capability".' ([Bennet](#), 64). Writing in around 1775, the French encyclopaedist Denis Diderot wittily summed up this sense of the poet's ignorance of his own work when he declared that poetry supposes an exaltation of the brain that issues from divine inspiration. The poet, Diderot argues, has profound ideas without knowing their cause or their effects. Along with classical notions of inspiration enunciated in such texts as Plato's *Ion* and Longinus's *On the Sublime*, such ideas had immense influence on the work of Percy Bysshe Shelley. In his *A Defence of Poetry* (1821), Shelley affirms that ignorance both is and fundamentally is not intrinsic to poetry, to the work of the poet. Retorting to Thomas Love Peacock's declaration in *The Four Ages of Poetry* (1820) that modern poets are 'wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance' ([Peacock](#), 208), Shelley declares both that poetry is the 'centre and circumference of knowledge' and that it is 'not subject to the control of the active powers of the mind' and has no necessary connection with consciousness or will' ([Shelley](#), pp.503-506). Poets, Shelley says, are themselves 'the most sincerely astonished' at their own work, 'hierophants' as they are of an 'unapprehended inspiration', their words expressing 'what they understand not' ([Shelley](#), 508)

'While on one hand Romantic poetry and poetics celebrate the individuality of the author or genius, on the other they also assert the essence of genius to be an ability to transcend the self, to

go beyond the limitations of any fallible individual. The poet, Keats declares in a letter of 1818, is 'not itself - it has no self- it is everything and nothing- it has no character'. According to Keats a poet has no fixed identity. Similarly in a very Keatsian discussion of Shakespeare as a 'myriad-minded poet, Coleridge argues that one of the 'promises of genius' is the 'choice of subjects very remote from the author's private interests and circumstances of the writer himself'. This is the paradox of Romantic authorship. The paradox is that while Romantic poetics focus on authorship, it also evacuates authorship of subjectivity. It is precisely in this way that the Kantian idea of disinterestedness is in fact expressed. The autonomy of the artwork relies on the autonomy of the artist, a paradoxical autonomy in which the author both is and is not himself.' ([Bennet](#), 65).

I have examined Tagore's essay 'The Poet's Biography' and its connection with the Romantic ideology of authorship and genius so extensively because the idea of biographical criticism that we encounter in the essay entitled "Shakespeare the Man" by S.C. Sengupta owes much to the theory advanced by Tagore and the aesthetic ideology of the Romanticism.

In the first section of his essay S.C. Sengupta has tried to expose the limitations and absurdities of some of the biographical criticisms of Shakespeare that have aspired to establish a direct connection between the events of Shakespeare's life and his dramatic works. Such critical adventures have striven to pick up passages and lines from Shakespeare's plays and to explain them with reference to some biographical information. All such critical endeavours are based on wild guesses, conjectures and speculations about Shakespeare's personal life and S.C. Sengupta has shown to what extent of ridiculous absurdity such fanciful speculations can go. Sengupta writes:

Shakespeare's son and wife have been the source of some wild guesses about his personal life. His greatest character in whom he has supposedly put most of himself called Hamlet-a name that had suggestive similarity to that of his son Hamlet, and Hamlet's disgust with the world was caused by the incestuous adultery of his mother who was no longer young. Since Shakespeare had two brothers Richard and Edmund (besides Gilbert) and one of Shakespeare's greatest villains is the adulterous bastard Edmund, and another villain Richard, Duke of Gloucester, woos a lady named Anne, are we to assume Shakespeare's own wife Anne, several years his senior, was guilty of incestuous adultery with one of his brothers? That is the suggestion made in James Joyce's *Ulysses*. But it is fanciful speculation without any basis in fact. The name 'Hamlet' is derived from a well-known revenge saga; the necessities of the story require that Gertrude cannot be young; Anne Warwick, Richard III's wife is a historical character; and when christening his son at Stratford-on-Avon in 1585, Shakespeare could not have thought of the play he was to write fifteen years later. ([Sen](#),13).

Sengupta's verdict on all these critical enterprises is summed up in the trenchant observation:

...how in the reconstruction of Shakespeare's biography a fabric of guesses may be made on slenderest evidence. ([Sen](#),13).

Discarding all such critical pursuits Sengupta proceeds to highlight the fact that often Shakespeare's dramatic treatment points in a direction contrary to what may be deduced from known biographical data. A close critical reader will not miss the connection between Sengupta's argumentation and the Romantic theory of authorship and the idea of a transcendental subjectivity that Tagore in his essay 'the Poet's Biography' has elaborated on.

S. C. Sengupta's critical negotiations with Shakespeare reflects the dilemma, conflict and crises of a critic who theoretically subscribes to the Romantic conception of literature as an imaginative creation that defies all attempts at interpreting and defining it in terms of rational discourse, but in practice has to serve as a pedagogue whose professional obligation is to impart a systematic and comprehensive knowledge of literary works to the students, a task that requires rationalization of what is theoretically defined as 'undefinable' and unique. This dilemma is clearly revealed in the Preface to Sengupta's book *Shakespearian Comedy* where the critic confesses his fundamental limitations as a critic, for he has to define, classify and generalize the work of art which is characterized by its uniqueness. As Sengupta observes:

Although a creative writer is, like other men, a product of his age and although his efforts are influenced by the social and economic forces of his time, yet a work of art is, in the ultimate analysis, an individual product, its principal characteristic being its uniqueness. But criticism, which is a science as well as an art, has to proceed with the help of definition, classification and generalization. If criticism is not to fail in its purpose, it must not lose sight of its fundamental limitations. I have therefore tried to guard against imposing a rigid formula and making Shakespeare's drama fit into it. The definition put forward in the first chapter runs like a thread through the succeeding portions of the book, but it is a loose and tentative definition which may, however, be of some use to the reader in understanding and appreciating Shakespeare's achievement in comedy ([Sengupta](#), *Shakespearian Comedy* vii).

Firstly, it is to be noted that Sengupta subscribes to the Romantic aesthetics by defining the work of art as 'an individual product, its principal characteristic being its uniqueness'. Friedrich Schlegel, the German Romantic critic emphasized an attempt to identify with the particular goals of the particular work. 'Criticism', he said, 'is not to judge works by a general ideal, but is to search out the individual ideal of every work.' ([Schlegel](#), 173). Another German Romantic, Schelling defines art as a particular mode of perception in opposition to philosophy which deals with the general. Such insistence on the uniqueness of the work of art indicates three fundamental tenets of Romantic aesthetics and hermeneutics, namely the notion of aesthetic autonomy, the originality of the Romantic artist and a defence of non-theoretical understanding as opposed to discursive reasoning or systematic study of the work of art. All these ideas are interrelated and all of them originate from the subjectivism that characterizes the Romantic creed.

The philosophical impetus of the Romantic notion of aesthetic autonomy came from what the late eighteenth century German philosopher Immanuel Kant himself described as his

'Copernican revolution' in epistemology. While Lockean epistemology posited that the source of knowledge is an individual's sense experience and reflection on or of the objective world, Kant's critical idealism postulated that our understanding of the world depends on the structure of the human mind. Such idealism ensconced the human subject at the centre of the creative universe and established subjectivity as the cardinal criteria of aesthetic judgment. Kant can be considered as the philosopher who founded the notion of artistic autonomy by limiting the realm of conceptual thought. Refusing to conceptualize the notion of the 'Beautiful', which he mainly associated with nature, he designated a category of objects which were autonomous with respect to conceptual logic. Kant points out that an aesthetic judgment ('*Geschmacksurteil*') cannot be deduced from conceptual and logical reasoning and that therefore the 'Beautiful' pleases the human mind 'without a concept' ('*ohne Begriff*') (Kant, 162). Kant's critical postulation thus established the differentness of art from the world, the uniqueness of the work of art that S.C. Sengupta glorified in his above-mentioned critical observation and by implication the uniqueness of the artist who enjoys a peculiar kind of authority. It is from such theorizing of the independence of art and artist of the empirical world that the Romantic idea of a poem or of the aesthetic artefact in general as heterocosm, a new and autonomous world, originates. Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry* asseverates, 'Poetry makes us inhabitants of a world to which the familiar world is a chaos' (Shelley, 505). This idea of the autonomy of the art-world persists through a vast range of modern literary thinking. A.C. Bradley, for example, in 'Poetry for Poetry's sake' (1901), his inaugural lecture at Oxford, announced that poetry's purpose is 'to be not a part, nor yet a copy, of the real world... but to be a world by itself, independent, complete, autonomous' (Bradley, 5).

Related to this idea of artistic autonomy is the Romantic notion of originality of the artist. The Romantic conception of the role of the author emphasizes the idea of the author as fundamentally apart from, fundamentally separate from society. The Romantic author is conceived as a subject inspired by forces outside him, forces that inspire him to produce work of originality and genius and the work of genius is fundamentally new and therefore irreducible to any readymade formula or inassimilable to any general system, framework or methodology of interpretation. The most influential pronouncement on originality in literature is found in the eighteenth-century poet Edward Young's *Conjectures on Original Composition*. Young identifies originality with genius and genius, Young contends, involves 'power of accomplishing great things without the means generally reputed necessary to that end' (Young, 13). One encounters several references to Shakespeare's extraordinary genius in S.C. Sengupta's *Shakespearean Tragedy*. For example, one may cite Sengupta's essay on *Antony and Cleopatra* where the critic pondering on the question that how Shakespeare manages to make an astonishing drama out of unpromising material alludes to Coleridge's opinion with approbation that Shakespeare's 'triumph is to be attributed to his poetic genius, which may here be analysed into two special powers: his "angelic strength" which puts new life into Plutarch's narrative and his "happy valiancy of style".' (Sengupta, 31). Thus, in his insistence on Shakespeare's creative genius which transmutes unpromising materials into a unique artistic creation Sengupta remains loyal to the Romantic critical tradition.

S.C Sengupta's submission to the Romantic ideology of aesthetic autonomy finds emphatic expression in the essay under study. In order to substantiate his thesis that Shakespeare the artist transcended the limitations, prejudices and weaknesses of Shakespeare the man Sengupta shows how in the dramatic portrayals of his greatest characters the bard has betrayed his sympathy and respect for the failures and futilities in the material world that cannot dim their lofty spirits. But as a man Shakespeare was successful and aspiring to material prosperity. Sengupta observes:

The extant records are enough to show that Shakespeare was prosperous man of affairs who made careful investments in property, was meticulously upright in his dealings, and rigorous in litigation. But his greatest creations in whom we can see however dimly a reflection of his personality – Hamlet, Brutus, Othello and King Lear – are portraits of futility. And whenever he draws the portrait of a successful man, he seems to draw with some mental reservation. He is just towards Octavius Caesar but not enthusiastic. When Cleopatra says that it is paltry to be Caesar, she partly echoes our sentiment-and possibly her creator's...Why should the genius of a successful man of affairs find its richest utterance when dealing with the theme of failure and frustration? The obvious disparity between a carrier of unbroken success undisturbed, so far as we can confidently affirm, by emotional upsurges and moving portraits of passion and pain in the dramas has led some critics to think that there is no passage from the life of the man to his works. Sidney Lee one of the most competent of biographers, lays stress on the objectivity of Shakespeare's creative work. ([Sen](#), 17).

Although Sir Sidney Lee admits to the difficulty of identifying with certainty when Shakespeare is speaking as Shakespeare, none the less 'one may tentatively infer that Shakespeare gave voice through his created personages to sentiments which were his own. ([Lee](#),151). Lee also asserts that no 'direct or definite connection can be discerned between the progressive stages of his work and the progressive stages of his life. To seek in his biography for a chain of events which should be calculated to star in his own soul all or any of the tempestuous passions that animate his greatest plays is to underestimate and misapprehend the resistless might of his creative genius.'

Sidney Lee's critical view, that S.C Sengupta alludes to and seems to have approved of, may be interpreted as suggestive of the anxiety of the critic to glorify and celebrate the transcendental genius of the bard that shines resplendent over and above all the mundane limitations of the day-to-day life. By dissociating the work of the author from his actual life the critic apparently seems to subscribe to the creed of objectivity or impersonality that is one of the cardinal characteristics of the Modernist aesthetics. But a closer scrutiny of Lee's asseveration reveals his affiliation with the Romantic aesthetics of subjectivity. In a way, Lee strives to establish the superiority of the poet's genius to his mundane life which conditioned by various historical factors. Thus, what we have earlier concluded from our critical discussion of Tagore's aesthetic ideas of transcendental subjectivity is emphatically reaffirmed and corroborated by Sidney Lee.

Sidney Lee's proposition inspires S.C Sengupta to suggest an alternative way or method to explore Shakespeare's inner life independently of the known facts of his biography. Sengupta contends:

But even if we admit that Shakespeare's art is unrelated to his life, that his genius is objective, unconscious and instinctive, still the life of imagination has a reality of its own. The truest poetry may be most feigning and the poet's majestic imaginings may be airy nothings not immediately rooted in personal experience, yet the life of the imagination is not empty dreaming and the nurslings of the poet's brain are truer than the drab facts of actuality. It is this life that we have to reconstruct from the poet's work, and it is this life which Shakespeare lived inwardly that is of primary value for us. ([Sen](#),18).

By foregrounding the autonomy of the life of imagination S.C Sengupta has evidently subscribed to the ideology of Romantic aesthetics. He further admits that the critical 'attempt to distill the essence of Shakespeare out of his works is subject to another limitation. Quoting Antony, we may say that his personality was like a cloud that put on different shapes and then became indistinct as water in water' ([Sen](#),19). What S.C Sengupta here tries to indicate is the problem of extracting a total personality of Shakespeare from the varied moods that have found expression through his hectic dramatic activity lasting for two decades. Sengupta assumes that Shakespeare remained the same man through his varied experiences and it is the solemn duty of a critic to recapture Shakespeare in his totality. In this connection S.C Sengupta also compares the personality of the creator with that of his creations. Shakespeare, according to Sengupta 'loved to depict his characters changing.' ([Sen](#),19). Sengupta explains:

Othello is not in the Fifth Act what he was in the First and Hamlet, a young university student, manifestly in his teens grows into a mature man of thirty towards the end of a play, covering, large as it is, less than four thousand lines. Yet in spite of these changes, we have a total impression of Othello and Hamlet ([Sen](#), pp.19-20)

Cultural materialist critics like Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield have discovered an essentialist humanist agenda behind the emphasis on characters in Shakespeare criticism. Jonathan Dollimore traces this conception of "Man" back to 'an ideology of transhistorical human nature and an autonomous subjectivity, the second being an instantiation of the first' ([Dollimore](#), xxxii) Dollimore further identifies in such an emphasis on character a 'metaphysics of identity' that 'occludes historical and social process' and argues that 'A critique of essentialism is about making history visible both within the subjectivity it informs, and beyond subjectivity, by, as it were, restoring individuals to history' ([Dollimore](#),xxxii). Dollimore has referred to two objections raised against essentialist humanism, one that it is anachronistic, and another that it projects human self as autonomous and independent of the socio-historical factors that contribute to its formation. Dollimore argues that human identity in early modern period was viewed as constituted as well as constitutive and thinkers like Machiavelli, Montaigne, and Bacon anticipate a materialist perspective by suggesting that human identity is constituted by social forces. 'The second objection to essentialist humanism', Alan Sinfield writes, 'is that it imagines the self as autonomous, self-constituting, and self-sufficient, and as the uniquely valid source of meaning and truth' ([Sinfield](#), 62). It is this essential humanist conception of human self that inspires Bradley's statement that, 'The centre of tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in

action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action' ([Bradley](#), 7). Sinfield comments that such a conception of character 'effaces the mechanisms of cultural production and their implication in power structure ([Sinfield](#), 62).

Whatever may be the ideological implication of character criticism, history of Shakespeare criticism in the west shows that it was the Romantics who established exploration of character as a central concern of Shakespeare criticism. For Coleridge, almost unanimously acknowledged as the most important Romantic critic of Shakespeare, the poet's engagement with his characters provides the ideal model for imaginative reading. Coleridge contends that Shakespeare's characters are a 'divine Dream' whom we can help to create from ourselves. William Hazlitt, Coleridge's contemporary shares with Coleridge a sense that Shakespeare's characters are larger than life, but insists more strenuously on their individuality. Coleridge claimed that Shakespeare is a Proteus who produces characters from the creative depths of his own universalized nature. Hazlitt affirmed that Shakespeare creates characters who stand independent of their author, 'as if they were living persons, not fictions of the mind' ([Hazlitt](#),50). Hazlitt thus uses 'character' as a key to understanding Shakespeare's plays in their totality and his greatest heir in late Victorian period, who shares with Hazlitt a vital interest in characters, is A.C. Bradley. Sengupta therefore carries on the Romantic legacy by orienting his critical discussions on Shakespeare to the close reading of the characters that the Bard created.

Thus, our critical reading of S.C Sengupta's essay entitled 'Shakespeare the Man' reveals some of the ideological motivations that determine and condition the biographical criticism of Shakespeare in Bengal. The Romantic idea of genius, the notion of aesthetic autonomy and the conception of a total unified personality of the author, all these have substantially contributed to the biographical criticism of Shakespeare in Bengal.

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