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## Crossings with *Jatra*: Bengali Folk-theatre Elements in a Transcultural Representation of Lady Macbeth

**Abstract:** This paper examines a transcultural dance-theatre focusing on Lady Macbeth, through the lens of eastern Indian Bengali folk-theatre tradition, *jatra*. The wide range of experimentation with Shakespeare notwithstanding, the idea of an all-female representation is often considered a travesty. Only a few such explorations have earned recognition in contemporary times. One such is the Indian theatre-dance production *Crossings: Exploring the facets of Lady Macbeth* by Vikram Iyenger, first performed in 2004. Four women representing four facets of Lady Macbeth explore the layered nuances that constitute her through the medium of Indian classical dance and music juxtaposed with Shakespearean dialogues from *Macbeth*. This paper will argue the possibilities posited by this transgressive re-reading of a major Shakespearean tragedy by concentrating on a possible understanding through a Hindu religious sect—Vaishnavism, as embodied through the medium of *jatra*. To form a radically new stage narrative in order to bring into focus the dilemma and claustrophobia of Lady Macbeth is perhaps the beginning of a new generation of Shakespeare explorations. Iyenger's production not only dramatizes the tragedy of Lady Macbeth through folk dramatic tradition, dance and music, but also Indianises it with associations drawn from Indian mythological women like Putana (demoness) and Shakti (sacred feminine).

**Keywords:** Jatra, Lady Macbeth, Vaishnavism, Shakespeare adaptation, Crossings by Iyenger

### Introduction

This paper examines a culturally hybrid theatre-dance adaption of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by Vikram Iyenger titled, *Crossings: Facets of Lady Macbeth*, through the perspective of *jatra*, an Indic Bengali folk-theatrical practice. *Crossings* depicts four externalized personas of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth through the medium of Indian classical dance and music. Vikram Iyenger is a Kolkata-based dancer, director and choreographer. *Crossings* has been under constant revival after its first performance in 2004 by Iyenger's group *Ranan*. It was originally

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a part of Iyenger's Junior fellowship at Sangeet Natak Akademi (set-up by Ministry of Culture, Government of India). It is an ongoing production, having won accolades worldwide with its national and international performances in Kolkata, Delhi, Kerala, and the UK.

Indian theatre is a contested field owing to its large variety and the political influence exerted upon it. With the development of western theatre in India in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, local theatrical traditions had nearly disappeared. And in the later years, several indigenous folk-theatre traditions have lost their existence due to lack of patronage and funding. The few that survive have undergone inter-cultural mingling—both geographically across India, and historically, from the confluence between Western and Oriental performing traditions—and have lost their authenticity. Therefore, to trace a correct trajectory for theatre historiography is almost impossible. Poonam Trivedi, in her essay “Garrison Theatre in Colonial India: Issues of Valuation” (2016), identifies one reason behind the non-linearity of Indian theatre historiography:

Historiography of the theatre has also not been helped by the continuation of an ideological contestation, a politics between what is seen as a revivalist nationalist perspective which would erase the impact of the West in favour of an idealised indigenous continuity of theatre forms, and the purveyors of modernity who ignore the ancient past and see only irreversible transformation in them. (104)

However, in the past few decades there has been a revival of interest in indigenous folklore and cultural traditions in literature and performing arts. Ancient folk-theatre traditions like *Yakshagana*, *Tamasha*, *Ras Lila*, *Nautanki*, *Bhavai*, *Jatra*, and *Khyal* (Hansen 77), that have their roots in Indic dramaturgy, have now been used in modern theatre. Speaking about the history of Indian drama, Trivedi points out:

Indian theatre has its own complex and unusual development. It began with Sanskrit drama, which flourished from around 200 BCE to 1000 CE and was followed by a period of folk theatres, mainly in the oral and mythological traditions—performed outdoors, non-illusionistic with song and dance—many of which were also concurrent with later stages of Sanskrit drama. (105-106)

Recently, Government support and Sangeet Natak Akademies (The National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama) of the states offer grants-in-aid (like, Sangeet Natak Akademies Scheme of Financial Assistance to Cultural Institutions) to various folk cultural institutions to uplift artists with better work opportunities. These traditions now have much more theatrical presence in urban areas than previously.

### ***Jatra*: the Bengali folk theatre tradition**

*Jatra* is a folk-theatrical musical drama performance tradition known to have originated and developed primarily in undivided Bengal and also in the neighbouring eastern Indian states of Orissa, Bihar, Assam, and Tripura. It is not considered as ancient as other similar folk performance genres, say, *Yakshagana*, to have attained the stature of a classic. Some theatre historians are of the view that *jatra*'s development in its most mature state took shape after the religious Chaitanya<sup>1</sup> movement in 16<sup>th</sup> century Bengal. Pabitra Sarkar emphasizes that *jatra* had lacked a congruent form before the advent of Chaitanya movement. He argues that this kind of theatre must have existed as lyrical performance loosely connected by song and dance and without any prominent "plot" or "storyline". He writes:

There must have been earlier compositions which are long extinct. It is certain that the earliest *palas*, very much a part of the oral literary tradition of pre-British Bengal, were never written down and so were gradually lost to us. (87)

The Bengali word *jatra* means "travel"; the noun refers to the performances by travelling devotees of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu chanting and dancing to the mythological stories of Krishna:

These performer-devotees initiated acting in *jatra* or *jatrabhinoy* or *jatra*-acting. *Jatrabhinoy* involved mainly singing, with a few dialogues here and there in praise of the worshipped deity. *Jatrabhinoy* was also known as *gitinat* or *natgiti*, which literally would mean 'singing-acting' or 'acting-singing' (Sarmistha Saha 19).

*Jatra*, in the pre-Chaitanya movement phase, was generally a body of lyrical oral poetry and dance performance that was too loose and undefined to allow accommodation within any generic category of the performing arts. But in the later phase, the idea of *bhakti* built in it a concrete structure of religious oral lyrical-music-dance form that had a specific pattern and religious ideology of celebrating the mythological stories of Krishna, his consort Radhika, and overall uplifting of the ideals of Vaishnavism. The definition of *bhakti* is as elusive as the line "Shantih Shantih Shantih" at the end of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*

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<sup>1</sup> Chaitanya Movement, also called the Gaudiya-Vaishnava movement, is a revolutionary devotional movement in Hinduism which was spearheaded by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1486-1534) in 16<sup>th</sup> century. It offers an emotional and unrestricted form of *sadhana* (worship) towards Krishna and Radha, the God and Goddess of spiritual and emotional love. Chaitanya developed *bhakti* cult as a defense against religious fanaticism and casteism by the orthodox religious communities of the time. For a detailed understanding of the background and future development see, Rai Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Chaitanya and His Age : Ramtanu Lahiri Fellowship Lectures*. See also *The Chaitanya movement : A Study of the Vaishnavism of Bengal*, Kennedy, Melville T. 1925.

(1922), both having sources in the *Bhagawat Gita*, the holy book of the Hindus. *Bhakti* is a Hindu concept that preaches mutual unconditional attachment to an Ideal on the part of a devotee irrespective of their personal identities, and *vice versa*. It opens up the idea of worship to a more self-dissolving prayer to absolve oneself of any discriminatory notions. To put it in Saha's (103) words, "the notion of *bhakti* within the public sphere has not only been an expression of devotedness to a god, but it has been used to denote 'a movement' of social protest against caste, class, religious, or gender inequities' as early as the sixteenth century."

### **Cross-cultural intersections of *Jatra* with *Crossings***

It is in this context that Iyenger's *Crossings* needs to be discussed. He uses a religious theatrical-dance tradition, with three most elevated forms of classical dance in India out of eight, recognized by the Sangeet Natak Akademi (The National Academy of Music, Dance and Drama)—Kathak, Bharatnatyam and Manipuri—to project the overwhelming ambition of Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth*. This makes the performance an interesting attempt to project the subversion of the traditional notions of good and evil in *Macbeth*. *Crossings* begins with a jubilant *Lady Macbeth* re-reading the letter received from *Macbeth*, which reignites in her the idea of killing Duncan. Unlike *jatra* where the performance runs through a storyline that intends to indulge the audience in a purging sense of *bhakti*, *Lady Macbeth* prepares herself for regicide and damnation in a fashion as religious as *jatra*. Iyenger achieves this by splitting the character of *Lady Macbeth* into three dancers and an actor. The three dancers entice the actor to shun the "milk of human kindness" (1:5:17) in her and acquire the power to perform "the deed" (1:7:14). Interestingly, Iyenger re-reads the original Shakespearean text by dispensing off all male characters in the play, including *Macbeth*, conferring the autonomy of violence upon *Lady Macbeth*. One gesture of articulating *bhakti* in *jatra* is the use of repetitive words or phrases to indicate absorption in the thought of the Ideal. As Saha points out,

For example, when Ramakrishna<sup>2</sup> suggested to the actress Binodini<sup>3</sup> to repeat the name of Hari (an avatar of Krishna), it was in order to perform *bhakti* or

<sup>2</sup> Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa (1836-1886), born as Gadadhar Chattopadhyaya, was a nineteenth century mystic and philosopher who followed several religious traditions believing that there is no one way to reach God. He believed in the principles of "Tantra, Vaishnavism, Vedanta, Muslim and Christian religions and realized God. He came to the conclusion that all religions were true." (*Biography of Sri Ramakrishna*).

<sup>3</sup> Binodini Dasi (1864-1941), popularly known as Notee Binodini, was a thespian and theatre entrepreneur of undivided Bengal in the nineteenth century. She is notable for

bring the feeling of *bhakti* (*bhakti-bodh* where *bodh* could mean sense, feeling, experience, etc.) that would purge her from all evil that lay within her as it were. Many audience members/devotees/*bhaktas* would often bend down their heads, cry, etc. feeling a sense of connectedness/oneness as a result of *bhakti-bodh*. This is a very common practice known as *darshan*, which is visual contact with the deity. Essentially the *bhakta* within the performative space (or ritual space?) of the *jatra* experiences a divine view of the one he or she is a *bhakta* of, turning it into a holy ritualistic space. (103)

In Iyenger's production, several phrases repeat themselves in various stages of the performance, indicating various phases of development in the character of Lady Macbeth. In the beginning, she repeats "my husband", who is honoured profusely, and this shows her apparently undaunted devotion towards her husband. A little later into the performance, when the "actor" Lady Macbeth ("conscious self") has grown aware, if not fully convinced, of her power to murder, one of the dancers ("vile self") repeats exasperatedly "come, unsex me here" (Figure 1) and thereby unlocks herself to the evil spirits. The music here



Figure 1: "Crossings: Facets of Lady Macbeth"  
Direction, Concept and Design: Vikram Iyenger  
Premiere UMA Gallery, Calcutta March-April 2004, Revival: Gyan Manch, Calcutta.  
April 2016, Produced by Ranan (Calcutta, India)

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her contribution to modern Bengali theatre. She also introduced new styles of theatre makeup and broke all established constraints on femininity of that period (see Susie and Tharu).

turns upbeat, coming to a sudden halt when her transformation is complete. The moment is as intense as one might imagine in a *jatra* when the audience is drawn into the vortex of an invigorating chanting ritual to awaken their spirits.

The idea of *Darshan*, inherent in the philosophy of Vaishnavism can also be traced in *Crossings*. Here *darshan* (God appearing in front of His disciple) occurs in the dance-drama production when three personas of Lady Macbeth observe the transformation of the fourth persona into *Shakti*, the goddess of cosmic energy and nature's elemental forces. But while *Shakti* is a revered goddess in the Hindu pantheon, in *Crossings* her *darshan* or purpose of appearance may invite comparison with that of the goddess of witchcraft Hecate. The myths and tales of *Shakti* are an integral part of the Bharatnatyam repertoire. This classical dance tradition often interprets tales from the epics and represents the power of *Shakti* in new and innovative understandings of feminine strength and triumph over evil. The usual pose that indicates *Shakti* in Bharatnatyam is one leg lifted in a position that suggests that *Asura* (the demon) is pinned to the ground, one of the hands lifted upward and the other drawn diagonally downward to suggest the *trishula* or trident with which she vanquishes the terrorizing reign of *Mahisasura* (demon). Here in this production (Figure 2) the Bharatnatyam dancer (one of the four personas of Lady Macbeth), along with the Kathak performer, performs a similar gesture to indicate the



Figure 2: “Crossings: Facets of Lady Macbeth”  
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triumph of her devilish ambition over her “conscious”, “humanly” self. The idea of two performers repeating the action creates an odd sense of unity in the fragmented psyche of Lady Macbeth.

In Iyenger’s words, the dance-forms are used, “to bring the vocabularies of text and dance together to initiate a conversation and develop a dialogue” (qtd. in Paromita Chakraborty and Swati Ganguly 2). In the oldest surviving Indian classical treatise on performing arts, *The Natyasastra*,<sup>4</sup> dance is an integral part of drama. Kathak is a traditional courtly dance form connected with the “story-tellers” or bards of northern India who narrated mythological stories from the Indian epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It also expresses the love of Radha and Krishna through hand gestures, musical articulations and intense rhythmic dance movements, as does the second one, Manipuri, a dance from the north-eastern Indian states of Manipur, Mizoram and Assam, depicting stories of the love of Radha and Krishna. And the third one is Bharatnatyam, a classical dance from the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu that uses intense body movements and choreography to depict themes of the epics and Vaishnavism and other traditions. These dance-forms are thoroughly theatrical, often performed by a solo performer who represents one or many characters just by changing dance gestures. These dance-forms represent a dialogic space between theatre (*Natyam*) and dance (*Nritya*) in the manner described in the *Natya-Shastra*. The idea of *Nritya* and *Natyam* are forms of expression that Iyenger intelligently uses to embellish Lady Macbeth’s most important soliloquy “Come... unsex me here” (1:5:40-41) and her majestic metamorphosis into the Goddess of power, *Shakti*. *Nritya* means “to dance; to act on stage” (Williams 568) and *Natya* means “...dramatic element of a stage performance... a mimicry of the exploits of gods and asuras (demons), kings as well as of householders of this world” (Massey 33). The sequence where Lady Macbeth commits the murder is thoroughly choreographed as a *nritya-natya* with props that bear thorough religious connotations, as observed by Chakraborty and Ganguly:

This marking out of space is an integral aspect of the invocations in all Indian classical dance forms. This sequence uses props imbued with sacral significance like a brass urn, marigold petals and the dhunuchi exuding camphor-laden smoke. The scene starts on a muted tone with a soothing Kanara

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<sup>4</sup> *The Natyasastra* is the oldest surviving Sanskrit treatise on performing arts in India attributed to sage Bharata Muni. It is notable for the development of the aesthetic theory of *Rasa* that advocates that spiritual self-recognition, not entertainment, is the primary aim of performing arts. Susan Schwartz (12) calls it “part theatrical manual, part philosophy of aesthetics, part mythological history, part theology.... Its goals include providing a precise description of stage construction and equally precise guidelines for the movements, facial expressions, and *mudras* (often used synonymously with the term *hastas*) or hand gestures to be used in performance.”

alaap in the background which abruptly shifts to the Hindol, the dancer dips a marigold in liquid vermillion (sindoor) and draws a 'blood line' on the floor. This single gesture changes the mood into one of ominous unease. This "supernatural soliciting" (Macbeth.1.3 129) is watched by the other two performers, one staunchly convinced of right and wrong and unshakeable in her morals, the other tempted and confused responding to the power of the invocation and the promise of greatness it held out to her but at the same time uncertain of the morality of such an act. (7-8)

Iyenger's use of religious tropes as the backdrop of this production amplifies the suggestion of foulness in the original text making "Fair is foul, and foul is fair:" (1:1:9) a lived experience throughout its stage-time. He brings before its audience a murderess, a great schemer, with a broken, divided consciousness; an infanticidal mother with a strong motherly instinct who gesticulates the desire for power, and the power of desire. In *jatra* and the indigenous traditions the celebration of Krishna's childhood and his powers as an *avatar* of *Vishnu*<sup>5</sup> are a recurrent theme. One important episode that celebrates the power of Krishna is his conquest of the demoness *Putana* who tried to kill him by suckling him poisonous milk from her breasts. Lady Macbeth is equated with *Putana* and she is seen to suckle her child reminding the audience of her most poignant words "I have given suck" (1:7:54) but instead of milk which is the sign of motherliness poison spills out and that threatens her. *Putana* was the *rakshashi* or demoness mentioned in the *Mahabharata* who served king *Kansa*. *Kansa* feared the divine prophecy that his sister's eighth child would be the cause of his death. Therefore, he sought to eliminate every child from the holy cities of Vrindaban and Mathura. *Putana* was appointed for this job and she entered Gokula in the disguise of a beautiful woman and began to suckle young Krishna, unaware of who the child was.

*tām tīkṣṇa-cittām ati-vāma-ceṣṭitām*  
*vīkṣyāntarā koṣa-paricchadāsi-vat*  
*vara-striyam tat-prabhayā ca dharṣite*  
*nirīkṣyamāṇe jananī hy atiṣṭhatām*

Though she looked like a very affectionate mother, *Putana*'s heart was fierce and cruel. Thus she resembled a sharp sword in a soft sheath. Although they saw her in the room with the child, *Yashoda* (*Krishna*'s foster-mother) and *Rohini* did not stop her but remained silent; overwhelmed by her beauty and seeing her apparent motherly affection. (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 10.6.9 qtd. and trans. in Srila Sukadeva Goswami)

<sup>5</sup> Vishnu is one of the Hindu trinity Gods along with Shiva and Brahma. He is worshipped as 'The Preserver' and as the supreme by followers of Vaishnavism.



Krishna feigning innocence had allowed her to give him suck. Putana was devoid of any humanly affection while killing the babies by poisoning her breast-milk. But when it came to Krishna she felt an unwavering sense of maternal instinct flooding through her veins, making milk gush out of her breasts.

*pūtanā loka-bāla-ghnī*  
*rākṣasī rudhirāśanā*  
*jighāmsayāpi haraye*  
*stanam dattvāpa sad-gatim*

Putana was always hankering for the blood of human children, and with that desire she came to kill Krishna; but because she offered her breast to the Lord, she attained the greatest achievement. (*Śrīmad-Bhāgavatam* 10.6.35 qtd. and trans. in Goswami)

Lady Macbeth in *Crossings* keeps failing in her intention of acquiring evil strength to commit regicide apparently because of her maternal instincts that pull her to her supposed child. She does eventually kill the supposed child to advance in her murderous design but the presence of this gesture-image of the child nurtures the possibility of going beyond “I have given suck” (1:7:54). It encourages the audience to visualize the rest of the speech—how she plucks the child from her nipple and dashes its brains out.

What Shakespeare wrote for Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy—“The raven himself is hoarse... To cry ‘Hold, hold!’” (1:5:38–54)—Iyenger breaks down into episodes to minutely delve into the internal battle of Lady Macbeth, using Kathak movements and parts of the dialogues to be repeated as phrases. The Kathak performer makes rapid hand movements that are not attuned to the thudding music in the background, perhaps indicating the unnaturalness of her prayer, while the repetition of the dialogue resonates in Lady Macbeth’s mind.

In Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, the use of the idea of nourishment (milk) in the lines,

Come to my woman’s breasts,  
 And take my milk for gall, ... (1:5:47-48)

may imply the presence of her basic humanly instinct. She calls upon malevolent forces to change her “milk” to poison unnaturally, thereby altering her femininity/humanity to an unfeeling inhumanity. The altering of body fluids to highlight the dichotomy between human and beast is present in Indian mythological stories as well, *Putana* being its chief example,

...since milk is good, an evil woman has either no milk or else poison in her breasts, like Pūtanā. Poison as the inverse of Soma appears throughout the mythology; a fiery poison is said to devour the world—like the doomsday fire—in contrast with Soma or milk, that is itself devoured (O’Flaherty 54).

The soliloquy “Glamis thou art...To have thee crowned withal” (1.5.15-30) is shown through dance choreographies, through imitating hand gestures, and whispering among the four split characters of Lady Macbeth. But interestingly, she gradually shifts her attention to herself from her husband. She frees herself from desiring for her husband and begins to desire for herself. She encourages herself with Macduff’s famous enumeration of “king-becoming graces”,

As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness  
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude (4:3:91-94)  
You have it all (Iyenger’s addition)

Her desire to go beyond her designed idea of femininity makes her challenge the notion of womanly benevolence; in this sense, her idea to acquire kingship is not just to acquire power to rule but also to acquaint herself with the role of a masculine ruler. The essence of this choreography lies in the interspersed episodes of Lady Macbeth’s faltering, scared reveries and in her personality clashes.

There are moments when the facets strive to defeminize themselves to foreground their potency towards violence; at one point one of the personas claims, “What man dare, I dare” (3:4:97), albeit in a different context and significance than in Shakespeare’s play. But at other times they acquire strength through their inherent eroticism and sensuality. This duality perhaps is a direct reference to the duality within Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare. That a woman’s eroticism is a threat to the moral standards and ethics of a society is present both in the Shakespearean *Macbeth* and is also played upon in this Indian adaptation of *Macbeth*. O’Flaherty observes:

Poison is also thought to reside in the genitals of the destructive erotic woman, the poison damsel...Snakes (often symbolizing women) perform an alchemy in which milk is transmuted into poison, the inverse of that alchemy that women perform by turning blood into milk (54)

This observation gives the idea that a negative female character is always looked down upon from a puritanical perspective. Quite so, and Lady Macbeth uses her eroticism to seduce Macbeth into doing the deed and she speaks about being “the serpent under’t” (1:5:66) in the Shakespearean text. Iyenger translates this dichotomy by altering all the sanctimonious rituals associated with eroticism in

Hindu religion including *sringar*. In a theatrical sense, *sringar* signifies erotic love between a man and a woman that, in turn, signifies the *Nara-Narayana* relationship which is amorous love between the soul and the divine. *The Natyasastra* categorises *sringar* as one of the most important eight Rasas. It consists of facial expressions and physical gestures that translate into myriad emotions like compassion, physical intimacy, jealousy, fear, and anger. However, in *Crossings*, Lady Macbeth articulates gestures that imitate the *sringar* rasa method while conveying the ominous. Culturally, outside the theatrical stage, sandalwood and sindoor (vermillion) were two of the main ingredients among wives of kings in their bath and decking up (also called *sringar*) while they awaited their husbands' return from war. Both sandalwood and sindoor are essential components in daily sanctimonious rituals and worships. They signify purity, victory and anything auspicious. Sindoor is also a marker of marriage and romantic love in Indian culture. Iyenger disrupts these religious understandings of the holy and the auspicious by twisting the significance of these cultural markers to signify the vocabulary of murder and blood. He reorganizes Shakespeare's play text into a pattern of symbolic visuals. While Lady Macbeth's "good soul" is unaware of the travesties of the other halves they perform a ritualistic *puja* (worship) and *sringar* (beautification) to enwrap themselves within the clutches of their ambition until all their hands are painted in red vermillion that signifies blood. They smear sandalwood on their breasts (Figure 3) as a sign of poisoning



Figure 3: "Crossings: Facets of Lady Macbeth"  
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their milk, or, in other words, the altering of their essential bodily fluid, their femininity and their human spirit, likening the character of Lady Macbeth to the demoness Putana.

On stage, modern performances of *jatra* often use cloth and lighting to demonstrate fire when referring to *yajna* (worship) in any scene from the epics that demands it. In Indian rituals fire constitutes one of the most essential elements of worship as a source of energy and purification. Fire is the symbol of God and purified soul in the Indian view. In Vaishnavism fire refers to God's Oneness with human soul:

jīvera 'svarūpa' haya — kṛṣṇera 'nitya-dāsa'  
 kṛṣṇera 'taṭasthā-śakti' 'bhedābheda-prakāśa'  
 sūryāmśa-kiraṇa, yaiche agni-jvālā-caya  
 svābhāvika kṛṣṇera tina-prakāra 'śakti' haya (Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta Madhya-  
 līlā 20. 108-109 qtd. in Prabhupada)

which is translated to

It is the living entity's constitutional position to be an eternal servant of Kṛṣṇa because he is the marginal energy of Kṛṣṇa and a manifestation simultaneously one with and different from the Lord, like a molecular particle of sunshine or fire. Kṛṣṇa has three varieties of energy. (trans. by Prabhupada)

The philosophy propagated through this is *achintya bheda abheda*. *Achinta* means "unthinkable", *bheda* means "difference", *abheda* "identical" (Dasgupta 398, 153). This philosophy is at the centre of Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu's teachings. It celebrates the idea of a soul's oneness and difference with God. According to the school of Sri Chaitanya, "Transcendence and Immanence are made the associated aspects of an abiding unity in God..." (Kapoor 152). The following verse is worth considering:

gītā-śāstre jīva-rūpa 'śakti' kari' māne  
 hena jīve 'bheda' kara īśvarera sane (Śrī Caitanya-caritāmṛta 6.163 qtd. in  
 Prabhupada)

which translates to

In the Bhagavad-gītā the living entity is established as the marginal potency of the Supreme Personality of Godhead. Yet you say that the living entity is completely different from the Lord. (trans. by Prabhupada)

In *Crossings*, Iyenger alters the connotation of the holy fire to signify the impurity of the soul instead of purification. Lady Macbeth religiously calls upon the supernatural beings to alter her bodily fluid and make her a non-human entity

who may commit regicide by chanting the prayer-like incantations “come unsex me here” in front of a burning candle on stage (Figure 1). It is important to note here that while Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* has very little reference to light—most of the play is set in darkness and both the central characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth speak of “darkness”, “hell”, “murkiness”—*Crossings* is choreographed mostly in bright filtered light or in front of live fire, perhaps implying the idea of darkness more as a psychological state than as an antithesis to illumination. It is also worth noting that fire may here be a direct reference to the “taper” (5:1 stage direction) in Lady Macbeth’s bedchamber in the sleepwalking scene and also to Macbeth’s “Out, out, brief candle,” (5:5:22) soliloquy that is here placed in the mouth of Lady Macbeth alongside many other dialogues uttered by other characters in Shakespeare’s play. Towards the end of the play, a Manipuri dancer (the character who also played the “human” self of Lady Macbeth) enters the stage to project the guilt-ridden loneliness of Lady Macbeth. Light becomes an important signifier in this case too. The Manipuri dancer holds a lamp and gradually takes in all the separated selves of Lady Macbeth under her long veil. She is then able to stand up on her feet when all her segregated selves form a single structure as if to mend the damage Lady Macbeth had caused by splitting her soul into four parts. The sequence may reflect the craving for light in her otherwise dark psychological sphere; it may also reflect the reintroduction of her essential feminine self that she had forsaken for her “fell purpose” (1:5:46). Given the grace and poise of Manipuri dance and the thoroughly significant mythological associations of Manipuri performing arts, the scene may intend to portray the cosmic source of redemption and rebirth that Lady Macbeth needed. But she fails. Iyenger also adds the reference to Michelangelo’s *The Creation of Adam* (1512) fresco that bears strong religious iconography (Figure 4) to achieve the desired effect and create a direct allusion to the re-birth.

However, Lady Macbeth’s malevolence and her madness make her such an ambiguous character. To allow her a specific source of regeneration based on a sympathetic approach to her, ironically, will deny her character full development and the possibility to outrun patriarchal ideologies, as William C. Carroll says,

This focus on Lady Macbeth’s maternity also emphatically reinscribes her in patriarchal discourse, since the activities of her womb constitute her primary identity, and that womb is dysfunctional, capable only of miscarriages and deformity when not simply barren. This move, too, devalues or deflates the agency Shakespeare grants her in the play; it is a horrific power, and it crumbles into nothingness, but it belongs to *her*.

The end of *Crossings* portrays the pitiful condition of a mother, a wife of royalty pining away at the pyre of her own self-destructive ambition. She burns the letter that had enkindled in her the desire to kill in an attempt to redefine her lost past



Figure 4: “Crossings: Facets of Lady Macbeth”  
 Direction, Concept and Design Vikram Iyenger  
 Premiere UMA Gallery, Calcutta March-April 2004, Revival: Gyan Manch, Calcutta.  
 April 2016, Produced by Ranan (Calcutta, India)

while repeating its contents. The sound of the ripping of the letter is an intelligent use of sound to suggest the ripping apart of her soul. Live music is an integral part of all folk traditions. Beginning with an *alap* (introduction or beginning), the music by live performers rise in a crescendo to the *jhala* (climax). Music builds up the religious context of the theatre-dance performances to an extent that it lends the performance an atmosphere of spiritual ecstasy. In several phases of *Crossings*, the music stops to intensify the absence of sound that elevates the chaotic exuberance of Lady Macbeth’s troubled psyche. The scene building up to the regicide, accompanied by rapid drumbeats, is first followed by an intense scene of killing the supposed child of Lady Macbeth that had earlier pulled her back from her desire to murder. The vocalist uses a variety of classical vocal renditions that resonate with each stage of Lady Macbeth’s character development whereas classical instrumental music, especially *tabla*, is used as an accompaniment to every dramatic action.

Iyenger, who was inspired by an opera performance of a Chinese solo artist performing Lady Macbeth, has followed a long tradition of Shakespeare adaptations in India. Several productions adapting Shakespeare to the traditions of indigenous folk-theater have paved the challenging path for post-colonial readings of Shakespeare. Utpal Dutt (1929-1993), a celebrated thespian of Bengal, adapted *Macbeth* in the *jatra* form. Breaking away from the enclosed walls of a theatre-stage, Dutt organized public theatres where he staged *Macbeth*

in 1975. With the large-scale development of western proscenium-style theatre in the modern Indian theatrical milieu in the post-independence period, *jatra* began to lose its stature and popularity among the rising intellectual class. A gradually declining demand and lack of innovative scripts relegated *jatra* to being a rural form of entertainment only. However, it never lost its appeal among the simple rural population who did not know about Shakespeare or other such canonical authors but drew pleasure from popular forms of entertainment. Utpal Dutt's *jatra* production of *Macbeth* (1975) was an iconoclastic step in the history of Indian theatre. His Little Theatre Group produced *Macbeth* ninety-eight times, a landmark contribution to the development of Dutt's formula for a "revolutionary theatre". Dutt describes revolutionary theatre in the following words:

Revolutionary theatre is essentially people's theatre, which means it must be played before the masses. The audience is our first concern; matters of form and content come second" (Dutt qtd. in Dharwadker 114)

and

The Revolutionary theatre must by definition, preach revolution, a radical overthrow of the political power of the bourgeois-feudal forces, a thorough destruction of their state-machine. (Dutt qtd. in Naina Dey 193)

Even before him, a significant number of adaptations of Shakespeare into indigenous forms were made that had broken, in post-independence India, the tradition of simple mimicry of European dramatic forms; for example, *Barnam Vana* (Birnam Forest, 1979) based on *Macbeth*, *King Lear* in Kathakali (1989) and *Othello* (1996). *Kamdeo ka Apna Basant Ritu ka Sapna* (The Love God's Own, a Spring Reverie, 1993) based on *The Midsummer Night's Dream* was directed by Habib Tanvir (Panja 17). A 1982 production of *Macbeth* by B.V. Karanth in the *Yakshagana* mode was also phenomenal in the way it brought classical folk dance improvisations into the Hindi verse translation of *Macbeth*. The adaptation of a Shakespearean text through the use of indigenous religious theatre traditions opens up the field for experiments and newer understanding of possibilities. As Trivedi points out, a multicultural approach to Shakespeare breaks the binary of the "self" and the "other" and creates a co-inhabitable space for reevaluating cultural signification:

The post-colonial Indian theatre critic is particularly challenged with a responsibility towards knowing the 'other'.... Here the 'other' is not the subordinated native, but a representative of the ruling power, who is to be subjected to re-examination from a post-colonial perspective. This is not merely a question of reversing the 'gaze', as it were, of 'provincialising' English theatre history, but is rather to attend closely to the knottedness and the many interstices in this cultural formation. (106)

## Conclusion

Iyenger's production makes a transfusion of Indian folk and dance-theatre gestures into Shakespearean dialogues. He challenges cultural prejudices regarding post-colonial remakings of Shakespeare by synthesizing the marginalized "rural/local" or "*deshi*" (indigenous) theatre traditions with the form of an apparently "elite" *videshi* (foreign) text. Adapting Shakespeare to the currents of a folk theatre tradition always runs a chance of being ostracized from the academic circle by critics who, in the words of Trivedi ("Folk Shakespeare" 155) disparage it as "not Shakespeare". She writes:

This high-minded, colonially inflected, critical discourse created a myopia: indigenized Shakespeare was marginalized as both textually and morally "inauthentic." It resulted in a lack of intervention in mainstream Shakespeare studies and, more damagingly, prevented the development of an indigenous critical idiom. Adaptative folk performances still meet with either an uncertainty or a predictable fixity of response. They are rejected on both nativist and radicalizing grounds for either not being true to the spirit of the folk form, that is, not "pure" enough, or for not being interventionist, that is, adaptative enough. (Trivedi and Bartholomeusz 155)

*Crossings* gives ample scope to view it from the perspective of the form and ideology of *jatra*. Through the powerful rhetoric of dance and *jatra*, *Crossings* can easily be accommodated into an important theatre tradition, and also provide the foundational politico-religious sentiment behind the subversions that Iyenger so skilfully blends. The production takes up the enormous challenge of presenting an all-female *Macbeth*, without a trace or need for a masculine character. It does question the autonomy of "masculine" violence, and a further subversion of overtly religious connotations implies that Iyenger is bent on walking against the original/hybrid dichotomy usually associated with intercultural approaches to Shakespeare.

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