

**GEOFFREY KENDAL, SHAKESPEAREANA, AND THE AMBIGUOUS IN-BETWEEN: A POSTCOLONIAL PERSPECTIVE**

Sraddha Nag

Assistant Professor

Department of English,

Chandraketugarh S.S. Mahavidyalaya, West Bengal

Email: sraddhanag@gmail.com

**Abstract**

*Geoffrey Kendal, a British theatre-actor and manager, came to India to perform the plays of Shakespeare for the Indian audience during the 1940s and 50s—a time heavily fraught with socio-political tensions and nationalist sentiments. Whereas Shakespeare in India was primarily introduced in academic and performative spheres as a tool for colonial mimicry, the image of Kendal provided a live model for the same. However, he was not a simple emissary of the colonial hegemony; he was deeply in love with India and its people. His touring company Shakespeareana performed the plays of Shakespeare across the subcontinent in spaces ranging from the palaces of maharajas to crammed schoolrooms in rural areas, gaining huge success and popularity during the time of decolonization. The warm reception of him by the people of a country which was seeing the dawn of independence, however, puts him in a complex and arguably ambiguous relation to postcolonial consciousness. The paper aims to read Kendal's challenging and rewarding journey throughout India as a touring performer and to study how his engagement with Shakespeare and the colonized people of the nation on the verge of freeing themselves from the British Raj underlined the aspects of both cultural imperialism and interculturalism and their intersection. To what extent his work and achievements can be read as contribution to popularizing the playwright and to what the colonial discourse of racial superiority, is what constitutes the central argument of the paper. In an attempt to understand how theatre connects people of foreign cultures with each other, the article also seeks to establish a critical overview of how the Indian people in general responded to performances of Shakespeare from the earliest of times.*

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Geoffrey Kendal, cultural imperialism, interculturalism, postcolonialism

Engaging in performances of Shakespeare in India has often led to a critical enquiry: to what extent this practice can be seen as an act/offshoot of cultural imperialism and to what, an important mode for postcolonial intercultural exchanges. Geoffrey Kendal, the titular theatre-actor of this paper and his theatre company Shakespeareana toured the Indian subcontinent both before and after the independence of India—an event which, in turn, often presented the scope of interrogating the above question. Whereas postcolonial interculturalism refers to “a respectful balancing of cultures in the encounter and challenging Western hegemony”, cultural imperialism means using Shakespeare as a tool; such encounters “serve the colonialist ideology although produced in a postcolonial era” (Venning150). In this context many theorists and theatre practitioners have argued that presenting Shakespeare in the Asian geopolitical space most certainly entailed an unequal power dynamic, using which the practitioners would consciously attempt to bestow Western influence over the native cultures. Richard Schechner observes that Asian artists are encouraged to perform Shakespeare while no real attention is given to Asian dramatic literature in the West: “That’s a residue of colonialism; the native can ‘step-up’, but the Western developed person ought not to ‘step down’. It’s a kind of reverse patriarchalism” (qtd. in Sasayama et al 10). Rustam Bharucha remarks that the West foists Shakespeare onto a foreign society “as a way of extending the information retrieval on an arguably burned-out Bard” (4). Similarly, Yeeyon Im, analysing Lee Yountaek’s 1996 production of *Hamlet*, argues that so called intercultural performances are only mirages of interculturalism, performing “comlicit postcoloniality” (273). On a different note, some scholars such as Diane Daugherty argue that encounters between Shakespeare and Asian theatrical tropes often have led to “intercultural theatre at its best” (65).

Against these observations reading Geoffrey Kendal, the Shakespeare Wallah of India, appears interestingly critical. The descriptive suffix ‘-wallah’ is popularly and widely used in the Indian subcontinent in combination with a noun to indicate a person involved in a particular kind of activity or trade, who sells something. The suffix ‘-wallah’ abounds in the Indian national language Hindi as well as in many regional languages such as Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi, Urdu etc. Geoffrey Kendal, the Shakespeare-wallah of this paper arouses interest on many levels in the context of a postcolonial reading of the performance and practice of Shakespeare in the colonies. While trying to configure the stages and layers through which the English Bard was absorbed into the native cultures of the colonized nations, Kendal’s name and his unique presence can hardly go unobserved.

Kendal’s works centre mostly around the time when India was gaining its independence from the oppressive colonial reign of the British and also during the post-independence period. As the paper reads Kendal’s contribution in spreading and popularizing Shakespeare in a country which was the colony of his homeland for 200 years, an interesting

intellectual battle between the postcolonial subject position and the truth about the transcendentalism of Shakespeare that takes one beyond the problematics of theories and -ismsmanifests.

As a nation, India has been brutalized, exploited, ransacked, robbed; at the same time the people here have been immensely eager to immerse themselves in all sorts of cultural cross-currents, sometimes because the national bourgeoisie found it to be a shortcut to be near those who are in power, and sometimes because the ordinary natives simply loved what a foreign culture had to offer. While the desire to experience something new is only a normal human instinct, the question, however, remains as to what extent the reception of Shakespeare and the resistance towards him should have/could have affected the crucial moment of consciousness of a nation transitioning towards a decolonized identity; also, where does Geoffrey Kendal stand in the scenario in appropriating Shakespeare, both to flourish as a strolling theatre actor and to become India's very own Shakespeare-wallah by embracing and celebrating the indigenous geo-cultural pulse of India? Was Shakespeare a cultural imposition? Was Geoffrey trying to profit by selling him to a race which was ideologically manipulated into believing itself as inferior to the white representatives of imperialism? Did he choose India to become a cultural icon in the easy way—a desire that he could not have satisfied in Britain because of too much competition? Or was he a man who fell in love with a country chiefly because it had no similarities with his own, and who, in his unwavering love for the great Bard and theatre combined, just wanted to reach out to the best audience in the world as he himself called us? After all, every seller, who has complete faith in his product, wants to be acknowledged by the most rewarding buyers.

Spreading English literature and arts was first a conscious strategy to build a strong weapon of cultural hegemony as an ideological state apparatus; on the other hand, it began to be celebrated in its own right when the miscegenation of cultures took place quite naturally—as is often the case in settler's colonies. The earliest surviving record of a Shakespeare performance in India is that of a staging *Othello* in 1780 at the Calcutta Theatre, to mark the retirement of the manager who himself played the title role (Chaudhuri 32). The formal study of Shakespeare's text began with English schools set up in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by missionaries, English laymen, Anglo-Indian proprietors and, surprisingly, Indians. Jyotsna Singh observes:

Starting in 1775, when the Calcutta Theatre or the New Playhouse opened under the patronage of the empire, specifically of the then Governor General Warren Hastings, and continuing for a period of about a hundred years, English theatres in Calcutta entertained a largely British audience of officers, merchants, scholars and clerks of the East India Company. By all accounts, in its early years at least, this was an exclusive

theatre determined to insulate itself from the “natives” so that even the ushers and doorkeepers of the Calcutta playhouse were English. (2)

The introduction of English theatre in cities like Bombay, Calcutta and Delhi was adumbrated with enthusiasm by the learned elite—who sought after a distinguished cultural identity which they thought would make them part of the colonizer’s community more than that of the natives—and eventually gradually gained popularity with the common people. In this regard, one may observe what S.K. Bhattacharya had to say in “Shakespeare and Bengali Theatre”:

While the English playhouses by their production of English, specially Shakespeare’s plays, created an appetite for theatrical performances, the foundation of the Hindu college in 1816, and the teaching of Shakespeare by eminent teachers like Richardson (who was also a founder of Chowranghee Theatre) created in the minds of the students – the intelligentsia of modern Bengal – a literary taste for drama as such, and taught them, not only how to appreciate Shakespeare criticism but also to recite and act scenes from his plays. This fashion spread to every academic institution. In 1837 Bengali students staged scenes from *The Merchant of Venice* in the Governor’s house, in 1852 and 1853, the students of the Metropolitan Academy and David Hare Academy staged Shakespeare’s plays, while the old and new students of the Oriental Academy staged...Shakespeare’s *Othello* in 1853, *The Merchant of Venice* in 1854, and *Henry IV* in 1855. Shakespeare’s dramas became an indispensable part of English education and a popular item in all cultural productions. The Bengali theatre which made its mark in the later decades was the natural outcome of this new-found passion. (29)

The observation amply outlines how the practice and performance of Shakespeare in pre-independence India—especially in Bengal, which was the cultural capital of the colonized nation—gradually began to influence the young native minds. It was not until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century that the regional theatres also started to erupt with violent nationalist sentiments to harness a form of cultural renaissance in order to solidify their indigenous cultural identities.

On the aspect of Shakespeare in academia and Shakespeare in theatre, famous Indian Shakespeare scholar Poonam Trivedi makes an interesting observation. She says that the fact that Shakespeare came to India with colonialism is well known. What is less known and not readily acknowledged, even in India, is that Shakespeare was first introduced to India as an entertainer. His plays are known to have been first performed, in English for the diversion of European traders in Calcutta and Bombay around 1775, but by the 1850s they were beginning to be performed in translation in the Indian languages and reached more common people (4). She remarks further that not “just in politics and governance but in the arts too, and particularly in literature, the engagement with the West began with the imitation of the Western forms” (24). However, while the study of the English Language and Shakespeare

was an imperial imposition, the performance of Shakespeare was not—and the stage forms a vital part of this long history of intercultural engagement. Therefore, one should keep in mind this very important fact that Shakespeare as a text and Shakespeare as a performance were two different events altogether, and Geoffrey Kendal should be read against this background.

In the introduction to Kendal's autobiography (which is also titled *Shakespeare Wallah*), his youngest daughter Felicity writes:

The war and ENSA took him to India—and the subcontinent becomes the other hero of this book. He fell in love with it, and returned there after the war—a touring actor still, but this time under his own command, travelling from fit-up to fit-up with my mother, my sister and a four-month old me.(9)

Born as Geoffrey Bragg in 1909 in the town of Kendal in the north of England which gave him his surname, Geoffrey was already linked to India through various family members. He embarked on his first journey to India as a member of the ENSA (Entertainment National Service Association) in 1946 after serving for sometime in the British Merchant Navy. ENSA supplied entertainment to troops serving overseas. His description of his first impression about the people he met on the shore was thus: “The crowds had an energy and attention I had never seen in Britain...They are the best in the world. Nothing escapes their attention.” (77)

It is befitting to mention here that till the early seventies, Geoffrey was almost exclusively known among the crowd as Shakespeare-wallah – or the man who produced, directed and acted in Shakespeare's plays. Few knew his real name. Felicity notes, “Shakespeare presented with a minimum amount of fuss to the maximum number of people – to hundreds and thousands of people, in fact, who would meet the plays often for the first time and remember them forever. In this he succeeded and that is his achievement” (5). He was a renowned British actor-manager who put up Shakespeare's plays across India, to packed houses. For two generations of schoolchildren, Kendal's Shakespeareana provided their first introduction to the Bard. His company performed across a wide spectrum of spaces—from shabby village halls, school and college halls to opulent royal palaces, often joined by a variety of young local actors who later went on to earn international cinematic acclaim. He was publicly anointed ‘Shakespeare wallah’ after the 1965 Merchant-Ivory movie of the same name.

Touring India in the pre-independence year spanned for six months encompassing Darjeeling and the East, the North-West Frontier, Peshawar, the borders of Afghanistan, Karachi, Burma, Calcutta. Kendal speaks much in the tone of Joseph Conrad's narrator Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* when he expresses his ambivalent reaction to the reports about how their activities as a touring theatre company were valorized by *Here and There*, the ENSA's news-sheet:

When the history of this war in the far East comes to be written, there must be an honored place kept for the theatrical artists, who, quietly and with no hope of reward either monetarily or in publicity, have done their turns amidst the jungles and burning heat of the tropics under every conceivable kind of discomfort and danger. (55)

To what extent this quintessential patronizing colonial discourse, conceived to back colonial cultural interventions, should represent what Kendal was doing in the heart of the Indian colony remains to be an aspect for thorough investigation. The essence of the above observation may bring home references of the threefold exercise of colonial power: to rule the colonized interpreting them as ‘savages’ who need saving from themselves; the implementation of the Macaulayean project to colonize the mind by educating the colonized in a way that would make them politically handicapped and spiritually crippled; and, finally, to teach them English literature to castrate them from their authentic indigenous cultural identity.

However, upon reading Kendal’s theatrical journey across India, one may clearly perceive why ENSA does not/should not qualify for what he felt about his work and for the people he performed for. Throughout his autobiography, the excitement with which Geoffrey narrates all his adventurous episodes while touring and performing in all over India leaves no room for doubt about how much he enjoyed the ‘discomfort’ and how rewarded he felt by it. The juggle, the sweating, the heat that melted the make-up beyond salvation, the mosquitoes biting at the wrong times when perhaps a romantic scene is to take place, the crowded streets, the almost impossible conglomeration of the most disparate and heterogenous objects, smells and people, constituted the bane of his spirit as a wandering actor. He evolved in the image of the ‘actor-manager’ building a theatre of ‘fit-ups’, ‘portables’ of weekly and twice weekly reps. He recalls with love the incidents where a hyper-obeying Anwar, an Indian member of his group, crawled around the stage during the soliloquy of Iago, having been asked by Geoffrey to lower the bulbs; he reminisces how bewildered he felt by such prompt obedience(124). He further observes, in good humour, that in India, like in Chinese operas, there was no pretense that what was going on on the stage was anyway different from the real. He also tells us about the time when he swallowed a bluebottle during a long sigh by Othello—after which he could not utter the next line, and Jennifer, his daughter playing Desdemona, almost panicked(111). Often they had to do their make-up and put on their costumes in crammed schoolrooms, where suddenly the characters would appear from underneath the benches as witches while the children would peek from the windows(154). Such vast panorama of technically inaccurate or artistically inappropriate ambiances is reminisced with immense warmth of heart and are esteemed as the most challenging and powerful impetus for a strolling actor. This was the spirit of a theatre-actor that Kendal celebrated.

Here, it should be noted that that before Kendal started touring with his company to perform the plays of Shakespeare, Shakespeare was included in the academic curriculum as a means of implementing cultural hegemony of the colonizer. But Kendal was not teaching Shakespeare, or preaching the greatness of the British race by upholding their cultural icon; he was sharing the timeless appeal of the universally relevant creations of Shakespeare by performing his plays for an audience that otherwise would not have had the chance to experience them first-hand. The difference between the two can hardly be overlooked. The fact that they had already done eighty-six shows in just over six months in 1946 (thereby creating a record) proves how much the native Indians liked and loved Shakespeare on stage. Interestingly enough, it was the same time around which native theatre—which chiefly concerned itself with protesting and rebelling against the colonial rule and spreading anti-British sentiments—was at the helm. In *Theatres of Independence*, Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker notes the importance of the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) in 1943 in constituting the idea of a ‘national theatre’ that contributed highly to focusing attention on the social and political evils of the immediate post-colonial era, such as the dire economic consequences of the Bengal famine, the partition of India, and the political and communal riots. In a series of detailed appendices, she lists the major playwrights, directors and plays according to date, language, and location. Delving deep into the details of it might require a larger scope than what this article is likely to provide. However, the fact that Shakespeare performed in local settings in the various parts of the country gave rise to a huge and unanimous popularity of both the Bard and the player cannot go unheeded. Shakespeare productions in post-independence India also made a conspicuous presence and often incorporated elements from folk and other indigenous as well as traditional theatre-currents. Girish Ghosh, a notable Bengali director and actor blended various traditions in his plays, taking elements of jatra, the Sanskrit tradition, the newly emerging social drama, and Western classics. Christy Desmet notes that the process of adapting Shakespeare in a postcolonial society was one in which “post-colonial societies take over those aspects of imperial culture ... that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities” (49). In this regard the famous theatre and film personality Utpal Dutt’s contribution should be cited. His theatrical training came from Geoffrey Kendal while he toured with him and his Shakespeareana in 1947. Jyotsna Singh notes that “after independence [Dutt] used his theatrical skills with the Little Theatre Group to produce a new play of Shakespeare every month—*Othello*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Hamlet*” (5). Dutt, however, soon realised that in order for theatre to reach out to the maximum number of people and to produce a targeted impact, he needed to cater to the taste of the common people and not only the numbered westernized intellectuals of the post colonial society. His Bengali translation of *Macbeth*—which was performed in various villages of Bengal—showed elements from the

ritual world of jatra, the vigorous folk theatre of Bengal and “thus by transforming Shakespeare’s language into a bold, declamatory form of incantation, typical of jatra, his company brought Shakespeare to the rural masses who had never figured in the colonial project of edification” (Bharucha 56). Performances of Shakespeare in a post-colonial India started to adumbrate native cultural identities which not only opened avenues to re-interpret and re-contextualize the Bard but also widened the scope of popularizing him among the common people.

The distance between a foreign culture and a non-Western audience in a post-colonial India was also traversed successfully by Kendal himself. Kendal performed at boarding schools, colleges, small town squares—in short, wherever anyone was willing to defray basic costs; he toured from the turbulent North-West Frontier Province (now in Pakistan), the home of the war-loving Pathans in the north, to the sylvan environs of Ooty in the south. In its meanderings, his troupe slept on crowded station platforms, suffering privations even the most dedicated of actors would have happily foresworn. When money was tight (which was often), Kendal’s retinue travelled third class by rail—a mode of transport which, in India, has always been nothing short of a nightmare (120). The tour took Kendal and his company to various frontier and territories, where they travelled with army convoys, passing great camel-trains and women with rifles—an extraordinary experience which earned Kendal a highly racist compliment back in London, where an actor at Drury Lane exclaimed, “Well, so it is possible to play in India” (131).

However, coming back to India after the ENSA business was over was an emotional compulsion coupled with intellectual stimulation, although it was a dangerous time for a white European man. As Kendal reminisces, “Armed with Shakespeare, whose plays were so much appreciated in India, we felt that we could ignore the warnings about the nationalist movements and the possible troubles. India was moving towards independence, but we did not see that it might affect us, though we knew there had been many killings the year before” (152). However, he had his sense of belonging more in theatre than in his racial identity—a sense which boosted his confidence to stay when times seemed alarming for a white European in India.

But things were not always so grim for Shakespeareana, as it received patronage from Countess Mountbatten of Burma and the fabulously wealthy Maharaja of Jaipur. In the late 1940s Kendal’s ‘princely tour’ took him to the royal states of Hyderabad and Travancore in the south and to Patiala and Gwalior in the north, where they were feted by the wealthy and glamorous; there he witnessed first-hand the opulence and majesty of some of India’s richest potentates. After a performance in Trivandrum, the company received a letter of appreciation from a local amateur group known as the Forward Block. Geoffrey quotes one of the remarks from the same:

Although we have read almost all the plays of Shakespeare, we were not able to get a correct understanding of his stage business. A full understanding of Shakespeare as a practical playwright can be had only through knowledge of the action or stage business, which is an integral part of a performance and is seldom fully described in the play's written form...we thank you all for having given so much knowledge about Shakespeare and his plays... Let Shakespeare keep India and Britain united! (173)

*The Statesman* also wrote about one of the performances of *Othello* in Calcutta:

[T]he Repertory Company's stay in Calcutta has raised the cultural level of the city and could they be persuaded to make it their home, at least every winter, Calcutta would be less cut off from the rest of the world. (110)

On one hand, this might lead one to argue that these are biased eulogizations of the colonizer's art and culture; on the other hand, they might as well read like the expression of unadulterated enthusiasm of a people seeking to be enriched with something new, something that they held dear to their hearts—the stage.

Forced to leave India after the assassination of Gandhi, Kendal could not help feeling a loss of belonging-ness:

As the Gateway of India sank below the horizon, it seemed that it was all over, like a vanishing dream...we were just a few more of the Raj going home. But I could not help looking back. Why, I cannot say, but India now seemed more important to me than England. I had gone there three times and was certain I would return again, though I did not know how inextricably my life would become linked with it. (178)

His next important visit to India was in 1953, which was solely possible for the initiative taken by Lady Mountbatten who shared a very cordial relation with Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India. The prospect of returning to the India of the 1950s gave birth to a large amount of uncertainty; he recalls: "In 1953, India was in its first flush of independence, and we had no idea how we would be received" (177). However, he later observes that Shakespeare still worked as a binding thread in post-colonial India:

We would ask to see the principal – who might be a Hindu in a dhoti, a Goanese Mother superior, a Christian brother, a Parsee or a Muslim. Shakespeare was the password, and the reception was nearly always warm. (182)

At a newly built Hindu college, the principal once asked him: "You act Shakespeare? Shakespeare is my Guru" and continued to prove his point by reciting "What is man/If his chief good and market of his time/ Be but to sleep and feed?" (188)

The reach and power of only the name of Shakespeare in India was surprisingly enormous. And in this respect Kendal has a very interesting incident to share. Once, Brian and Connor, members of his company, got detained by the police for trying to leave the docks without their passes. But the two had given an eloquent account of how they had come as

members of a distinguished theatre group to present a signed copy of Shakespeare to the officers of the ship. "Signed by Shakespeare?" The officials allowed them to go (165).

This affinity that the native Indians shared with Shakespeare was at the heart of Kendal's affinity with India. He was so dearly loved by the theatre practitioners and audiences of this country that he lived in our memory with his Indian sobriquet, the 'Shakespeare-wallah'. In the movie of the same name, which is loosely based on the actual events experienced by Shakespeareana, Kendal played the actor-manager of Buckingham, down on his luck and trying to cadge bookings from unsympathetic school bursars for his stage productions, locked in a losing battle with raucous but slickly-made Bollywood movies produced in India's film capital city of Bombay: "It was in some ways close to our experience" (190). After his elder daughter Jennifer's death in 1984, who by that time was an acclaimed actress in India and was wed to Indian actor Shashi Kapoor (who had also played in Shakespeareana) Geoffrey decided not to come back to India but still had to keep coming back several times. In 1993, he even directed his favourite play *Gaslight* at the fabulous Prithvi theatre in Bombay.

In the concluding section of my paper I would like to showcase some of the facts that I think were responsible behind Kendal's success as a strolling player of Shakespeare's plays in India. From the postcolonial point of view, it was true that the nature of the timezone where Geoffrey was spreading and popularizing the Bard in India leaves much scope to question how he created a canon that ran parallel to the nationalist theatre and yet gained such acclaim. But, then again, it is a malady of any theory that it often limits our perspective to time-constrained intellectual approaches. The prefix 'post' never can stand for the aftermath of the end of colonialism; rather, it stands for an interpretative paradigm that can shape any mind anytime at any place. Shakespeare's works followed the period of Roman and Spanish colonialism. In that sense, he was postcolonial himself. But more than that, he was a writer who carefully crafted a vast spectrum of human emotions, actions, follies, beliefs and psychologies. Such creations, like the creations of Rabindranath Tagore, cannot and should not fall in any water-tight category. A great and penetrative mind does not need to be located in a post-colonial or postmodern world to address postcolonial or postmodernist sensibilities.

On the other hand, Geoffrey Kendal, who chose to perform Shakespeare on stage, creating scenarios, costumes, new characters, atmospheres and animated emotions right in front of the eye, was invariably more capable of conveying the essence of the plays than those who put him in texts. He was as thrilled by the life that he felt in theatre and in Shakespeare as he was by the vibrancy and the pulse of the people of this country. In my reading, therefore, Kendal, despite his complex and precarious situatedness in relation to the decolonized nation of the Indian subcontinent, demands to be celebrated more as a champion

of the art and craft of theatre and Shakespeare than a chosen instrument of colonial hegemony.

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