

Poet, Bard and strings attached

JUST as it is difficult to begin comparing the majesty of the Himalayas with the pristine beauty of the Alps, it is virtually impossible to get judgmental about the comparative wealth in the works of Rabindranath Tagore and William Shakespeare. And yet disturbing issues have afflicted contemporary society enough to prompt a multifaceted cultural personality like Biplab Dasgupta to venture into the challenge of presenting the two literary giants on a single platform. This came as a pleasant surprise and stirred a discerning audience with regard to the evils of intolerance, racial and religious hatred and the callous response to other social crimes.

It is no secret that the social philosophy expressed by Tagore and Shakespeare was not bound by time. That is precisely what made the unique effort relevant and exciting. Dasgupta, film director and scriptwriter, elocutionist and translator, joined Anasuya Majumdar to present the William Tagore Meet to an invited audience. It was here that the Kabiguru and the Bard shared the stage with the presenters bringing their works alive. Dasgupta felt that "there indeed exists such a space where their works can be traced to common roots". What the audience at The Sonnet in Kolkata got recently were glimpses of a shared vision.

Though they wrote in different languages, lived in different countries and in different centuries, they seemed to speak with the same train of thought when it came to the art of exploring human emotions. "That's why I decided to bring them together," said Dasgupta, whose inspiration was literature from his early days on campus. That helped him to emerge with the innovative idea and present it with structured elegance.

Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* brought the themes of racial crisis and revenge, which co-related with Tagore's *Biswaranjan*. Jews were universally known for their usury, but the vengeful Shylock used the despised features of his community to reveal a "hilarious" undercurrent. *Biswaranjan* has an identical theme. Both performers brought out the idea to enthrall the audience.

In Tagore's *Muselmanir Golpo*, Dasgupta drew parallels with Othello, where both talk about religious intolerance, a burning issue in India today. He said this was not a matter of reviving a traditional issue or showcasing bygone cultures but perhaps looking at a human experience in retrospect. These issues were depicted in the works of Tagore and Shakespeare, making them immortal. *Muselmanir Golpo* deals with how Kamala, an orphan, is subjected to inhuman treatment by her aunt. After she is compelled to marry, she is trapped by a gang of dacoits while heading for her in-laws' place. Habir Khan comes to her rescue but she loses her family forever because she is barred from entering her ancestral house after being saved by a Muslim.

Kamala has no other option but to go with Habir. Eventually she falls in love with his son and marries him, renouncing her old identity and religion. But, as they say, history repeats itself. Her cousin is faced the same situation when she is heading for her in-laws' house. This time, it is the protagonist who saves her.

Anushua Majumdar's magnificent voice modulation and Dasgupta's apt selection of



the play left the audience wanting more. The last presentation was that of *Badnaam*, which had strings attached to *Macbeth*, where Shakespeare condemns despotism in no uncertain terms. In *Badnaam*, the husband, a police inspector, comes to know that his wife is a close associate of a revolutionary on the run. The wife condemns her husband, a despot working for the British.

Through anecdotes, readings, recitation of speeches and enactment of scenes, Dasgupta and Majumdar reinforced the argument that "great minds think alike". This was the fourth edition of the event spread over 90 minutes. The idea has been received well abroad, the result of Dasgupta's incessant search for unknown treasures in literary classics. At a

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time when the country is faced with the prospect of a diluted culture, the attempt to rejuvenate young minds received warm appreciation among listeners who considered this to be a literary exploration with a difference.

Dasgupta made a final point, "Instead of co-relating the work of Shakespeare with *Maqbool* and *Omkara*, people should return to the originals and rediscover facets which may have gone unnoticed."