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CONTEMPORIZING JULIUS CAESAR

ABSTRACT: This article attempts to place Julius Caesar in the present Indian political context as well as the Elizabethan. Rather than viewing the work in broad absolute terms (e.g. the clash between ends and means), the article historicizes the play and finds striking parallels between the two societies with regard to questions such as political leadership, public representation, the rhetoric of persuasion, the manufacturing of opinion and consent and the control of legal procedures as a means of power.

KEYWORDS: contemporize, universalist/historicized readings, parallels, leadership, acceptability, public representation, persuasion/dissuasion, rhetoric, manipulation of opinion, control of legal procedures

About a decade and a half ago, I offered a course called “Re-reading Shakespeare” to the first batch of M.A. students of the EFL university. As I was giving out a reading list, one of the students—who had done quite a bit of Shakespeare and also some grammar as part of his undergraduate curriculum—expressed surprise at a couple of titles in my list. The first title that upset him was Alternative Shakespeares (ed. John Drakakis 1985). He had been taught that proper nouns, having unique reference, have no plural forms. (Incidentally, as I am keying this in, my computer seems to be in agreement with my student, for it too has underlined “Shakespeares”!) I confessed to the student that our library stocked many more specimens of such “ungrammatical” English, like World Englishes and International Englishes, not to speak of Poetries and Sciences! The other offending title was Political Shakespeare (ed. Jonathan Dollimore & Alan Sinfield 1985). My student had been clearly persuaded, in his undergraduate years, that Shakespeare, though an Anglican who lived and wrote in a time of religious and political turmoil, was essentially a secular and apolitical writer.

Well, much ideological water has flowed under the bridges of academia since then and today students are surprised if “politics” does not figure
in course content and even titles. But while political readings are often based on a rejection of a single essentialist universalist framework, they do not fail to situate Shakespeare’s texts in relation to our political and cultural contexts as well as his own (which after all, some may contend, does make for a “universalist” reading!). The present paper is an attempt to indicate the possible range of such “situatedness” with reference to *Julius Caesar*.

Even in the days of the older paradigms (the old historical, Bradleyan or New Critical) Shakespeare’s historical plays and most of the Roman plays (with perhaps the exception of *Antony* and *Cleopatra*) were admitted to have a political intent but the political issues that they addressed were seen in broad absolute terms, such as the irony of kingship or the search for an ideal king or the celebration of a settled nationhood after a few centuries of dispute and turmoil. The successful exploration of such issues was thought to make the plays a mirror for magistrates, after the title of a famous book of the times. Or, they were looked upon as tragedies of individual protagonists (a Richard, Coriolanus, Brutus or Caesar). Political issues in the sense of, for example, the relationship between the monarch/ruler, the feudal aristocracy and the people at large and the structures that defined that relationship were hardly explored.

*Julius Caesar*, of course, has always been regarded as a political play, but again the issues that it was seen as debating were postulated in broad terms of principles and praxis. For example, do ends justify means? Here is a quote. “Brutus best interprets the play’s theme: Do evil that good may come, and see what does come!” Arthur Humphreys, who quotes that statement from H. Granville-Barker, adds that there is a complex sense in the play of how “consequences defeat intentions”. (Humphreys 7) Most readings of the play focused on the conflict between monarchy and republicanism and how impartial or biased Shakespeare himself was between the two. Brutus (the non-titular hero of the play) was seen to exemplify the tragedy of political idealism, unsuccessful in resolving the Platonic (or Arnoldian) dilemma of how to invest reason with power or how to temper power with reason.

While such perspectives still remain valid, the focus in the last few decades has shifted to more historicized readings, with an increasing
awareness that the play, though dealing with Roman history and based primarily on Plutarch’s *Lives* (in Greek, via James Amyot in French and Thomas North in English), cannot be studied in isolation from (a) the political ideologies and practices of Shakespeare’s times and (b) those of our own times.

If the Rome of Julius Caesar represented a transition from a republican system to an autocracy (at least as Brutus and the tribunes fear), England too was passing through a similar shift. Though always a monarchy, Britain had, from the grant of the Magna Carta in 1215 (which, though described as the birth of democracy, was actually an empowerment of the landed class), witnessed the growth of a feudal oligarchy which, through Parliament and through other means, could effectively control the monarch and sometimes even depose him (as it did Richard II). But, through the Wars of the Roses and the rise of the Tudors, Britain was seen to be moving towards absolutism. If, on the religious front, Henry VIII broke free from the power of the Catholic Church, internally in the political sphere he also gained ever greater control over the barons. Though the Divine Right Theory was to be stamped with royal official authority by James I, even in Elizabeth’s own reign—during which Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* was first staged—the move towards absolutism was felt to continue. In a way the anxiety of Brutus and Cassius—that Caesar may be crowned and consequently become irremovable as well as tyrannical—is the Elizabethans’ anxiety about their monarchs. However, the opposition to such a shift had begun to express itself in sporadic resistances on the ground and representations of them in the theatre. Although the Essex rebellion was to take place only in 1601, Queen Elizabeth was upset by the staging and popularity of a play called *Richard II* (presumably Shakespeare’s) which portrayed the deposition of a monarch. As Jonathan Dollimore observes in his Introduction to *Political Shakespeare*, there prevailed two apparently contrary views of the theatre: that it had (a) the capacity to instruct the populace, keep them obedient but also (b) the power to demystify authority and even subvert it. Perhaps the special feature of *Julius Caesar* was that it ambivalently did both. On the one hand, it let Cassius and Casca debunk the supposed godlike stature of Caesar and presented the human nobility of Brutus as an alternative to Caesar’s alleged
authoritarianism. In fact, in a number of ways Shakespeare made Brutus more of an idealist than he was in Plutarch. But, on the other hand, the play also represented Brutus as more gullible and misguided than he was in Plutarch. In showing up the conspiracy as a mixture of misguided idealism and political opportunism and manipulation which can only result in chaos, the play may in fact seem to have upheld the Divine Right Theory. As Harold Bloom puts it,

Against the charismatic consciousness of Brutus, Shakespeare sets the nature of the political failure, perhaps even political crime: to murder Julius Caesar is to strike against the entire tradition of kingship that descends from Caesar, a tradition that includes, however remotely, Queen Elizabeth I herself.

(Bloom 1994: 245-46)

Some of the transformations, “adjustments” perhaps, that Shakespeare effects in his treatment of his material will also, I hope, emerge from the following discussion of *Julius Caesar* in relation to our own times.

What does *Julius Caesar* have for us today, especially in the present Indian political and cultural context? I submit that it speaks to us in a number of very intense and urgent ways. I proceed to draw a series of parallels not all of which will, I hope, sound far-fetched.

Leadership is a central issue in *Julius Caesar*. Cassius’ problem, given his agenda of “dethroning” Caesar—which in the Roman context seemed possible only with killing him but making it appear an assassination rather than murder—Cassius’ problem is to find an acceptable leader, i.e. a leader who will be seen to be acting on high principles rather than out of personal enmity, jealousy or hate. Hence Cassius’ persistent efforts to enlist the services of Brutus. The irony of men fighting against absolutism having to be led by one person of high stature has often been commented on. But what is interesting to us is the recognition, on the part of the republicans, that power is “closely involved with questions of public representation” (Peck & Coyle 1985: 216). In fact, some of the departures Shakespeare makes from his major source Plutarch can be related to this search for an acceptable leader. For example, in Plutarch
Brutus was a usurer—not perhaps as reprehensible an occupation in the original Roman context as in the Elizabethan Christian perception. Shakespeare idealizes the conjugal relationship between Brutus and Portia, not disclosing the fact (recorded in Plutarch) that both of them had been married earlier to others. Shakespeare also suppresses the information that Brutus had applied for and received favours from Caesar.

The search for an acceptable leader, though not necessarily an ideal figure in all respects, is a central issue in any modern democracy, and certainly in India, especially in a pre-election scenario. In fact, the credibility of a party, or an alliance, seems to be determined by its ability to find and field such a leader; if it fails to name a person the other parties or alliances may lose no time in exploiting the failure. Sonia Gandhi’s nomination of Manmohan Singh as Prime Minister—as someone who would be more acceptable than she herself, still liable to be projected as a foreigner by the rivals—proved to be justified in 2004, but he was no longer an obvious choice in 2014. The NDA, having named its own team leader, jumped at the UPA not naming a prime ministerial candidate. Neither the UPA nor the NDA missed a chance to ridicule the attempts to form a third front precisely on the same grounds. In this connection, it is interesting to recall the reason for which Brutus rejects the suggestion for inducting, into the conspiracy, Cicero, as famous and high-minded a Roman as the others: Brutus says Cicero “will never follow anything/ That other men begin” (II.i: 151-52). The same thing was said about some of the partners in the putative alternative front.

What are the means by which the acceptability of a leader can be ascertained? How reliable are these means or devices? Here again, Shakespeare makes a curious departure from Plutarch. As we observed earlier, he magnifies Brutus’ personal nobility and ignores the negative details ascribed to him by Plutarch. But while in Plutarch the anonymous requests to Brutus to accept the Republican leadership are genuinely from the citizens, in Shakespeare it is Cassius who has such letters forged and dropped in Brutus’ house. This constitutes what we would now call the manufacturing of consent or consensus. Thanks to advances in technology, we now have much easier means of ascertaining opinion. Claiming a first in this respect, the Telugu Desam Party chief
Chandrababu Naidu said, in the run-up to the elections in 2014, that his party’s candidates would be selected “by the party workers using the Interactive Voice Response System (IVRS)” (Deccan Chronicle 12 March 2014 p.4). A similar claim had in fact been made earlier by the Aam Aadmi Party. It is of course true that for the first time perhaps, most parties also formally interviewed candidates before announcing their lists. But even as the possibilities of such pre-poll and pre-nomination assessments increased, there was increasing apprehension and mistrust of opinion polls and surveys: how accurate, how objective, how reliable were they? An example of such suspicion and disapproval was the rejection of the report of the Indian Readership Survey by the Indian Newspaper Society.

But when we talk about acceptability, we should ask, acceptable to whom? The question is relevant because there may often be a mismatch. Again, there are interesting parallels. The attitude of the tribunes and senators towards Caesar is clearly at variance with that of the plebians. The BJP’s Prime Ministerial candidate seemed to be more acceptable to the party cadres than to its leaders, many of whom were apprehensive, like the Roman senators, of a contingent autocracy.

If politics is the art of persuasion, then the politics of Julius Caesar is eminently one of persuasion, and of course, its counterpart, dissuasion, and its unsubtle and violent extension, i.e. coercion. Persuasion, or dissuasion, sometimes takes the form of warning. The most famous of these acts of persuasion are of course the speeches of Brutus and Antony after the assassination of Caesar. However, almost from beginning to end, the play consists of a series of attempts at persuasion, not all of them successful, some of them only transiently successful, some of them in fact eventually proving disastrous for the persuaders and/or the persuaded. The opening scene presents two tribunes (one of them in commanding tones) persuading the plebeian artisans to desist from celebrating the victorious return of Caesar after defeating Pompey. The tribunes seem to succeed but we are later told that for their efforts they themselves are “put to silence”. The second scene, set amidst the Lupercal festivities, sees Caesar being persuaded thrice to accept the crown and him declining, each time with less force. The scene also presents the Soothsayer’s
warning to Caesar about the Ides of March. But the major part of the scene shows Cassius initiating his efforts to persuade Brutus to lead the conspiracy. Cassius continues his efforts through the next scenes by various means, including dropping anonymous notes purportedly written by citizens urging Brutus to rise against tyranny. Cassius succeeds in this but fails when he suggests including Cicero in the plot and killing Mark Antony too along with Caesar. Then we have Calpurnia’s vain attempt to dissuade Caesar from attending the Senate against Decius’s successful attempt to persuade him to attend it. Ironically, the very symbolic omens and auguries which Calpurnia uses are re-interpreted by Decius to the contrary effect. Artemidorus cannot even get his message of warning across to Caesar. (Caesar refuses to read it right away with the pompous declaration, “What touches us ourself shall be last serv’d”.) The soothsayer’s repeated warning has no effect either. The Senators go through the motions of trying to persuade Caesar to recant his banishment of Publius Cimber before stabbing him. Then Antony, through a cunning act of persuasion, successfully gets permission from Brutus——against the dissuasion of Cassius—to take charge of the corpse and to make a funeral speech. This is succeeded by the two central orations: that by Brutus, which seems to convince the people of the justness of the assassination and that by Antony which turns the tide against the conspirators and incites the people to violent and even mindless reprisals, as in the attack on Cinna the poet. During the battle Brutus persuades Cassius to accept his own military strategies which turn out to be disastrous for both. While Cassius succeeds in persuading one of his slaves “to search my bosom with my sword” Brutus meets with refusal from most of his followers when he makes a similar request.

The recent political history of India has seen several instances of attempts at persuasion, not all of them successful of course. We may think that there may be nothing new or extraordinary about this since every civilized society, especially a democratic republic, must necessarily change, develop, by means of debate and persuasion. But if the Independence movement itself was an act of persuasion of the colonizer to leave, India, generally speaking, after the declaration of a republic and adoption of a Constitution, would seem to have had a relatively settled kind of life for about half a century and it is only in the last decade and a half that there
have been several occasions when the nation as a whole, or the state, or
groups, what is now called “civil society”, needed to be intensely
persuaded to accept this or that measure. Many of these are of course
legislative measures, like the RTI or the RTE bills, aiming at the growth
of a dynamic welfare state, but these legislative measures are not always
left to be decided within the confines of orderly parliamentary
structures—and they themselves are not by any means orderly any more
or models of democratic persuasion—but in public places and agoras.
The bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh and the movements and
countermovements it evoked are a striking example of parliamentary,
executive, official, semi-official and public spheres crisscrossing, often
clashing with, one another. We will see more about this a little later.

The rhetoric of persuasion, in Julius Caesar as well as in contemporary
India, often consists in reminders and re-enactments of the past, recent
and distant. The tribunes in the first scene attempt to shame the plebians
by reminding them of the homage they had paid earlier to Pompey. Casca
re-enacts Caesar’s ostentatious refusal and his swooning. Cassius re-
enacts the swimming contest he had with Caesar to demonstrate what a
weak mortal Caesar was. The most powerful reenactments in the play
are of course those by Mark Antony in his funeral oration, the first a
reminder of Caesar’s selfless acts (“When that the poor have cried, Caesar
hath wept”) and the second a blow-by-blow re-enactment of the
assassination itself. The account is preceded by pointing attention to an
object that becomes a symbol of Caesar’s heroism and patriotism.

If you have tears, prepare to shed them now.
You all do know this mantle. I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
‘Twas on a summer’s evening in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii.
Look, in this place ran Cassius’ dagger through:
See what a rent the envious Casca made:
Through this the well-beloved Brutus stabb’d;
And as he pluck’d his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar follow’d it,
As rushing out of doors, to be resolv’d
If Brutus so unkindly knock’d or no;
For Brutus, as you know, was Caesar’s angel.
Judge, O you gods, how dearly Caesar lov’d him.
This was the most unkindest cut of all;
For when the noble Caesar saw him stab,
Ingratitude, more strong than traitors’ arms,
Quite vanquish’d him; then burst his mighty heart;
And in his mantle muffling up his face,
Even at the base of Pompey’s statue
(Which all the while ran blood) great Caesar fell.
O, what a fall was there, my countrymen!
Then I, and you, and all of us fell down,
Whilst bloody treason flourish’d over us.

(III.ii: 171-94)

Political campaigning in India at present includes in large measure such
re-enactments of past deeds of violence: with the Gujarat riots of 2002,
the Delhi riots of 1984 or the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 never
being allowed to disappear from public memory. The sixty-year old
history of the Telengana movement too lent itself to such recapitulations
and re-enactments. The visual media keeps staging such reenactments
on a daily and hourly basis. Thanks to TV technology, the re-enactment
can go on endlessly as a side show even as people are asked to comment
on or condemn an incident. The re-enactment may be intended to provoke
people to action, especially if the TV channel is controlled by a party.
Acts of violence are replayed ad infinitum ostensibly with the aim of
rousing people’s conscience and indignation, but they may also have the
effect of inciting people to violence. Antony, claiming to be “no orator,
as Brutus is, But (as you know me all) a plain blunt man”, was of course
a pioneer and path-breaker in many respects: in delivering a hate speech
(which ironically was also offered as a love speech and tribute), in creating
and riding a sympathy wave, in manipulating popular opinion, and so
on. It is an awesome thought, but not very difficult, to imagine what
Mark Antony would have done if he had had access to video cameras,
TV channels, cellphones and of course social networking websites! In a
modernized BBC production of the play, Mark Antony is shown as
storming out of a TV studio after being accused, in Arnab Goswami
style, of inciting mob violence.
Let us look at one more feature of the assassination scene that points to another interesting parallel. What the republicans ask for is a repeal of the banishment of Publius Cimber, who is the brother of Metellus, one of the conspirators, a plea that Caesar rejects. The point to note here is that “power is seen to be bound up with the control and manipulation of legal processes” (Peck & Coyle 1985: 222). This becomes even more obvious in that chilling scene (IV.i) when the triumvirs (Antony, Octavius and Lepidus) sit down to prepare a death list of all those who will be eliminated, letting loose a reign of terror: Lepidus agrees to the killing of his own brother on condition that Antony’s nephew, Publius, will also die.

Consider, in our context, the filing of cases, their relentless pursuit for some time, then their lackadaisical progress and often final closure, when the prosecution suddenly refuses to prosecute! The problems facing the Roman triumvirs are not dissimilar to the dilemmas of coalition governments, what is often euphemistically called coalition dharma. A very recent example is the embarrassment of the BJP in the wake of the release of the separatist leader Masarat Alam by the PDP-led government in Jammu and Kashmir. Even private individuals may not fail to exploit any opportunity of gaining power over legal processes. A few years ago, the late sandalwood brigand Veerappan kidnapped the Kannada actor Rajkumar and gained control of a sort over two States and demanded that legal proceedings against him and a certain group should be terminated. His demand was echoed by one of the emissaries called Nedumaran sent to negotiate with him. Another person, a journalist called Gopal, officially deputed to negotiate with Veerappan, went a step further: there were cases against him filed by the Karnataka government and he saw to it that those were dropped before he stepped into the forest to negotiate with the brigand!

Mark Antony’s reading out from Caesar’s will to the plebians has been commented on as another master stroke in his strategy of persuasion. There are two significant features here to which John Peck and Martin Coyle draw attention. First, it seems to counter the Republican accusations of tyranny against Caesar:
Ironically, the will itself sounds like a piece of democracy, that with Caesar’s death has come a certain liberty for the people—they can walk abroad and amuse themselves as if free men. This, together with Antony’s theatrical readiness to mingle with the crowd, are gestures calculated to suggest that it is Antony and Caesar, rather than Brutus, who are the true representatives of Roman freedom.

(Peck & Coyle 1985: 220-21)

But, after he has succeeded in his immediate aim, Antony, in his meeting with the other two “loyalists”, asks Lepidus (not all that politely!) to fetch Caesar’s will again so that they can “determine How to cut off some charge in legacies”! (III.iii). Peck and Coyle observe “how power involves not just violent physical force but also gaining control of the legal system and the paperwork that goes with it” (p.222).

Having used the will once, Antony now sees the need to rewrite it in order to maintain his grip on the wealth and freedoms Caesar would have given away. In this sense, the world Antony inhabits is much more like our own modern world, where power seems vested in documents rather than in the honour-culture Brutus represents, a culture where oaths bind men in actions for the communal good. To this extent we might conclude that Julius Caesar is not so much about a single idea of power as about a transition between an older order of power where resistance may have been possible, and a new order of things, where what matters is the control of documents and how these are presented to the people.

(Peck & Coyle 1985: 223)

Consider the role that documents (drafts of Bills, Bills, Acts and Ordinances, Court judgments) play in our own times and the roles that people play in creating, transforming, claiming credit for, or destroying them. The power of a document seems to be acknowledged when there is so much resistance to its creation or formulation. The Women’s Reservation Bill, passed by the Rajya Sabha in 2010, has not been allowed
to be taken up in the Lok Sabha even after five years. Quite often, recognizing the importance of the legal authority of documents, but in order to achieve or thwart a particular project, one piece of legislation may be played against another. Look at the twists and turns that the legislation for the creation of Telengana took and the shifts and shufflings that leaders and parties went through. The very measures that may be grudgingly acknowledged as legitimate entitlements by one section are seen by the other as dilutions and attempts “to cut off some charge in the legacies”. Even while repudiating the legitimacy of one piece of legislation enacted by one body, another body insists on the sanctity of its own legislative document.

Immediately after the assassination, the conspirators, ecstatic with their victory, cry out “Peace, freedom, and liberty!” and proclaim exultingly:

*Brutus*   
How many ages hence  
Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,  
In states unborn, and accents yet unknown!  
How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,  
That now on Pompey’s basis lies along,  
No worthier than the dust!

*Cassius*   
So oft as that shall be,  
So often shall the knot of us be call’d  
The men that gave their country liberty.

(III.i.111-19)

The lines have been generally, and rightly, taken to refer to the conspirators’ consciousness of the momentousness of the occasion and the act, so momentous that they are confident they will be enacted on the stage as drama in generations to come. So indeed they have been, with ever so many changes to suit the times and to interpret the play anew.

Soon after the Emergency in India, Alyque Padamsee organised a reading of the play in Mumbai in which a woman, Usha Katrak, read Caesar’s part, thus continuing the practice of using *Julius Caesar* for contemporary political statements.

(Desai xxxvi)
What this paper has rather tried to focus on are not the theatrical enactments of the play but rather the acting out of its themes and personages in the theatre of our politics, in other words the play and the place of Julius Caesar in our midst. The play seems to float free of its Roman and Elizabethan world, enabling us to make connections with it, interpreting its past in terms of our present.

REFERENCES


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