

Othello(s) in East and West: A Comparative Study of Shakespeare's Othello in Literature and Film

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Abstract

When a Shakespearean play (re)presented anywhere either in opera or theatre or film or any other mode of performance, it needs to address the social and ideological concern of that public if the performance attempts to anything more than of historical interest. This presentation may uphold or subvert in order to make it relevant to new audiences. Through the close examination of adaptation both from Europe and India, a greater degree of transculturation is to be found in those media in which a number of semiotic codes are simultaneously in operation, such as in theatrical, cinematic or musico-dramatic performances, where verbal, visual and musical codes come together. As Bakhtin and Sartre argue from their different theoretical premises, a work of art is always addressed to some kind of reader or audience has in mind, and even the most individual minded adapter would have to place his work in a socio-cultural matrix, so some kind of transculturation is bound to happen in the process of adaptation.

Keywords: Different Othello(s), Translation, Adaptation, Acculturation, Transculturation.

Shakespeare's plays have been adapted in cross-cultural context from the 19th century to the present, specifically in Europe and India, through the media of opera and film. There are significant parallels between European and Indian adaptation of Shakespeare. Despite the different culture and political histories of the two regions, Shakespeare plays reached out to local audiences only when they were modified in order to make them relevant to the cultural and ideological concerns the new audiences that were far removed from Shakespeare's own. Both European and Indian translation is greater when Shakespeare is adapted in media that involves performance.

Shakespeare, the quintessential English poet and dramatist, has been read, acted, translated, adapted and alluded to so often, and in so many different cultures, that his global reach is now generally assumed to be greater than that of any other author. As Ben Jonson states "he is not of an age, but for all time" (1.43) (To the Memory of My Beloved, the author, Mr. William Shakespeare), his words have been taken to imply Shakespeare's transcendence in both historical and cultural terms; indeed, these latter words seem true to the point of being a cliché in the present day. As Gary Taylor has observed, "Shakespeare provides the best specimen in English and one of the best specimens in any language for investigating the mechanisms of cultural renown". Another critic Dennis Kennedy has pointed out, bardolatry, the canonization of Shakespeare's popularity in other countries as an example of his "universal appeal". Such critics have generally focused not on the ways in which Shakespeare's plays have been recast over the ages, but on either the closeness of an adaptation to Shakespeare's original, or as Edward Pechter puts it, "the consistency of the response record" to Shakespeare (8, emphasis on in the original). On the other hand, some other critics such as Gauri Viswanathan have shown the imbrication of colonial rule, English education in the colonies, and the way in which Shakespeare was used in the colonies as an important tool of cultural

Hegemony. Yet to understand Shakespeare's cultural capital within the binary logic of either his "universal appeal" or colonial instrumentality is to oversimplify the trajectory of adaptation of Shakespeare's plays in non-English context, and to avoid examining Shakespeare's reception in the receiving cultures on their own terms.

Different Othello(s) in West and East: Translation and Adaptation

In 1966, the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih published an Arabic-language novel *al-Hijra ila al-Shamal*. It was translated into English *Season of Migration to the North* in 1969 and is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Here, Salih depicts the cultural conflict that ensues when two Sudanese Muslim move to Britain and then return to Africa. We are explicitly invited to make connections between the novel and Shakespeare's play when Mustafa (Othello Character in the novel), "I am no Othello, I m a lie" and later, "I am no Othello, Othello was a lie". Toni Morrison through her 2012 play *Desdemona*, grafts her own comments about United States onto Shakespeare's 17th century English context. Morrison's play posits that Desdemona's individual beauty and purity were partly facilitated by an almost silent figure in Shakespeare's work. Despite allowing several characters to criticize Desdemona, Morrison also intends her play as a womanist attempt to give Shakespeare's heroine a stronger voice. Al-Maghut (1934-2006), poet, playwright and political activist, uses as a subtext in his political play *al-Muharay (The Clown)*, a kind of dark comedy that criticizes the political corruption, and repression in his native country, Syria and in other Arab political system.

Shakespeare's Othello in the 17th century, the play was translated, adapted, and parodied in the Dutch literary and theatrical culture. Firstly, in 1787 M. Nieuwenhuijzen published his classist adaptation *Desdemona*. This adaptation was soon replaced French translation of Othello by Joan Francois Ducis and this translation was later also onto Dutch. Portuguese translation of Othello was ou o Mauro de Veneza, by Simao de Melo Brando. Othello was possibly the first Shakespearean play to be translated into Portuguese strongly indicates the popularity of the play in Portugal.

In the East, especially in India, Shakespeare's Othello has been translated and adapted in many languages like- Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, Malayalam etc. There are first of all, four story versions of the play Othello in Hindi- *Kapat ka Bure Parinam* (1884) by Kashinath Khattri, *Othello* (1912) by Jai Vijay Narain Singh Sharma, *Othello* (1914) by Ganga Prasad, and *Uthello* (1950) by Usha Khanna. *Shaheede Vafa* (1894) by Manshi Mehdi Hasan, originally written for Parsi stage and put into Nagri script by Shiv Ramdas Gupta. Superior to its predecessors is Lala Sitaram's *Othello or Jhuta Sandeh* (1915) with original names and allusions and following the original very closely. In 1959, Harivansh Rai Bachchan, the well-known Hindi poet brought out his translation of Othello.

In 1874, Taranicharan Pal translated *Othello* in Bengali and staged it under the name *Bhimshingha*. A few years later, in 1890, Govind Deval translated *Othello* in Marathi. A year later, Marathi prose company Shahungarvasi Mandali staged this as *Zunzarao*. Another notable adaptation of Othello hails from Assam, namely Ranjit Sinha by Sailadhar Rajhowa. The Royal company of Maharaja of Mysore translated and adopted Othello in Kannada to *Surasena Charite*. The Bengali film *Saptapadi (Kar)* was probably the first place of Indian cinema to name check Othello. Then came Jayaraaj Rajsekharan Nair's *Kaliyattam* (1997), a Malayalam remake of Othello. It is set against the backdrop of Kaliyattam or Kathakali, a devotional Keralan form of folk theatre and dance. In Ashish Avikunthak's short documentary-style film *Brihnlala ki Khelkali or Dancing Othello* (2002), he re-envision Arjun Raina's dance theatre show *The Magic Hour* (2000). Like Kaliyattam, this adaptation also uses Kathakali. Recently, comic novelist Upmanyu Chatterjee contributed a short story entitled "Othello Sucks" to the issue of Granta on India edited by Ian Jack in 2015.

***Othello* in the West: A Film Version of Oliver Parker**

Parker offers a conventional, but convincing and well-done film, which approaches Shakespeare's text with due respect. He avoids protagonism by means of his good, effective, though not defiant direction. There are no spectacular effects in this production, just an elegant and sober setting. It is all in all, a well-made film where nothing outstands but everything is important; a fascinating production of the deep feelings and passions present in Shakespeare's drama.

The motif Parker uses in his production is a chessboard, a very powerful metaphor, because both Othello and Desdemona are the chess-pieces, Iago is playing with whenever he appears as a narrator of what is to come, in the director's successful attempt to give him the foretelling function the chorus had in Greek tragedies and Shakespeare also used in other plays, as in Henry v for example, Parker's Iago can foretell fate because he controls all his figures movements and he plays with them at will.

Issues of race and colour were important to Shakespeare's Othello in the 17th century and have remained ever since. "Blackness had been associated with sin and death in a tradition extending back to Greek and Roman Times and in mediaeval and later religious paintings of evil and devils were regularly depicted as black" – S. Well (Shakespeare: The Poet and his Plays). Othello is the sympathetic black character in English literature and the plays emphasis on prejudice must have had particular in London.

Othello's place in the society of Venice plays an important role in his downfall. As Brabantio's response to Desdemona's marriage makes clear, Venice is a closed society, racist in its distrust of Othello. There is also historical implications for this distrust. In 1570 the Turks had attacked the Venetian protectorate of Cyprus and conquered in the following year – once more the religious confrontation between infidels and Christians; and in the play, the rulers of the city appoint precisely a Turk as general of the Venetian forces and send him to Cyprus. Iago is the proof that not everybody in Venice agreed with that paradoxical choice.

The racial prejudice of Shakespeare's Venice is important. Brabantio's belief that Desdemona could not love "the sooty bosom/ of such a thing" (Act- I, scene- ii,71-72) is based on the racist assumption that such a love would be "against the rule of nature" (Act- I, scene-ii,101). Iago and Roderigo have stimulated Brabantio's rage labels such as "old black ram" (I,i,88), "Barbary horse"(113), "Lascivious Moore"(126), association race with animals, sex and the devil, characteristically racist connotations, even today. No one disputes Brabantio's statement that Desdemona has subjected herself to general mock by marrying a black man; this prejudice is plainly widespread in Venice.

Shakespeare certainly expected Othello to be played by a white man in make-up and that is precisely what Orson Welles presents in his production; but in the last decade of the 20th century, the social pressures of an increasingly multiracial society are making it less likely that this will happen as Oliver Parker proves, by choosing one best the actors of our time, Laurence Fishburne, who plays an extraordinary, flexible and even moving Othello.

Parker's production relies on his characters when it comes to express feeling of hatred, ambition and revenge. Parker opens with the happy image of Othello and Desdemona (Irene Jacob) hurrying to their marriage by boat along the canals. Next, we see Iago (Kenneth Branah) offended because Othello has chosen to promote Cassio (Nethaniel Parker) instead of him – peeping through the church's lattice to see with his own eyes- his heart flooded with rage and thirst for revenge- that Desdemona is really marrying the Moor – which also hints at the possibility of his secretly being in love with her. From that moment onwards, we witness how Iago's mind and intuition work overtime as he intrigues to bring about Othello's downfall.

There is rich visual surprise in Parker's filmic production, in the end of Act-iii, scene-iii, when Iago and Othello establish a complicity pact. In the Shakespearean text, the stage direction suggests

that the characters kneel before exchanging their vows. In Parker's Othello, the characters not only kneel but establish a blood pact, which is a strong visual imagery. Othello is not only giving his words to Iago, cut his hand with sword, shedding his blood. Then Iago does the same, when Othello says, "I greet thy love" (470), they touch hands establishing their blood pact. The tie they establish at this moment is stronger than Othello and Desdemona's marriage. Moreover, the blood pact of the characters fit perfectly to Iago's last line, "I am your own forever" (480). These strong visual imageries added by Parker are also remarkably present in the seduction moment, which as aforementioned, happens in scene-iii, Act-iii, of the Shakespearean text. Here in this scene Parker allows the spectators see clearly the moment poison enters Othello's mind and transforms him in a mistrustful man. The seduction moment happens in three different places: it starts in the yard of the castle, then it moves on to the weapons room and finishes in Othello's room.

In the final scene, Othello kills Desdemona and then finds out the truth, he commits suicide. And the shot shows a beautiful scene, with two lovers on the bed, Emilia also lying dead beside her mistress and Iago, the villain lying at their feet. After that we find a boat slowly sails towards a red sky – a symbol of the lovers passion, but also of the dusk of their lives- and interrupting its progress, we see the Venetian sending Othello's and Desdemona's corpses, forever joined with garlands and flowers, to the depths of the sea – as it became great generals- in a final show of love and respect for them.

So, we may say that, this is a play of contrast: Iago's cynicism is opposed to Othello's idealism. And it is precisely to the emotions generated by these contrasts – its capacity to arouse pity as well as terror through the pathetic suffering of Desdemona and the tragic corruption of Othello- that the play owes its enduring popularity over the centuries. Ignoring the homosexual love of Iago towards Othello in Shakespeare's play, Parker shows the heterosexual love of Iago towards Desdemona in the film. This is possibly because he wanted to show the traditional societal norms of heterosexuality in London and contemporary society.

Othello in the East: Vishal Bhardwaj's Omkara:

One of the "Othello fellows" (a term by Ania Loomba) Bhardwaj's *Omkara*(2006) is the second film in 21st century Bollywood trilogy of Shakespeare's adaptation. The other two are *Maqbool* (2003) and *Haider* (2014). In his essay "Theorising Omkara", John Milton argues that Bhardwaj remains faithful to Shakespeare's tragedy, but makes it relevant to contemporary Indians. Issues of caste and bio-racial identity in colour conscious India replace Shakespeare's interest in the people known as black moors. Omkara Shukla (Ajay Devgan) is the son of a Dalit mother and a higher caste father. Known as Omi, he is repeatedly castigated as a 'half breed' or 'half caste'. Raghunath Misra (Kamal Tiwari), who is the father of Dolly (the Desdemona figure, played by Kareena Kapoor), is duly angry about his daughter's elopement with swarthy gangster. Dolly is constructing Brahmanical and has a pale complexion. Yet she is unperturbed by the gossip circulating around them as a mismatched couple, declaring "A crescent, though half, is still called moon". (Chand agar adha bhi ho to chand hi kahlata hai). Othello's as a general fighting against Turks is altered in the film so that Omikara leads to a gang in Uttar Pradesh serving a shadowy figure known as Bhaisahib (Naseeruddin Shah). This allows Bhardwaj to explore corruption that would garner widespread attention with the 2011-12 Indian anti-corruption movement. The villainous Iago character is Iswar Tyagi who is known as Langda (lame) because he has a pronounced limp. Langda is brilliantly played by Saif Ali Khan, who frighteningly broods, plots and swears his way through the film. Langda has a motive for his evil because he is passed over for promotion in favour of a rival, Kesu Firangi (V. Oberoi, the films Casio character) when Omi leaves his position as an Underworld don to get involved with mainstream politics. In revenge for being passed over, Langda works on Omi's jealousy about his bride. Dolly's father's words, "A girl who can deceive her own father can never be

possessed by anyone else”, come back to haunt Omi, just as Brabantio’s line, “she has deceived her father and may thee” (Act-I, scene-iii, line-289). The idea that a deceitful daughter will become a wanton wife finds resonance in south Asia where women and human relations are often held hostage and sometimes brutalized, in the name of family connections and arranged marriages. Ironically, though, a film that is relatively progressive on caste and gender reverts to ablest stereotypes. Langda’s disability is linked with his evil acts in a way that recalls the sinister hunchback Richard III of Shakespear’s history play. This grotesque stereotype reflects badly on the embodiment politics of the film and that of the society seeks to entertain.

‘Omkara’ presents a range of views on women’s rights, from the misogynistic to the progressive. Instead of handkerchief, the film uses the device of gold Indian waistband which has sexual overtones. Omi gives this priceless ‘kamarband’ to Dolly as a wedding gift, but Langda persuades Indu to steal it, so as to mislead Omi into thinking Dolly has gifted waistband to Kesu. When Omi sees Kesu’s girlfriend, the dancer Billo Chaman Bahar (Bipasha Basu), wearing it, he goes out of his mind with jealousy. He has already been worked upon Dolly’s faithlessness, which he clearly appears by saying “me and my filthy mind”. The auditory details film’s tragic final scene allows for even more pointed critique of men’s cruelty to women. Viewers are sailed by the stark cracking sounds of swinging bed on which Omi strangles Dolly. The morbid swinging sound is accompanied by the song ‘Jag Ja’. The song translates as “oh my queen, my doll, come on wake up now” spelling out that Dolly has long been treated as a plaything whose puppet-strings were pulled by the men in her life.

Indu (Konkona Sen Sharma), Langda’s wife makes a stirring speech near the film’s end about how the Hindu scriptures have pointed women as temptress and unfaithful. Going apart of the way with Emilia in “proto-feminist” speech from Othello Indu rails against the injustice that “even after holy fires approves us, we are regarded disloyal sooner than loyal”. On the other hand, heroine Dolly has little agency and when her father lambasts her relationship with Omi she presents it as something over which she had little choice:

“Papa... please forgive me. I can’t live without Omkara.... God knows how it all began, how I lost my heart to Omkara.. I was in love before I knew anything. I remember falling like a blind bird...”(16:07).

Here Dolly depicts herself as unintentionally losing her heart to Omi. Omkara is surprisingly explicit for a Bollywood movie but Bhardwaj did not see fit to allow Dolly to her own sexuality in choosing Omi as her partner. Shakespeare’s Emilia stridently criticizes men as “all but stomach and we all but food”. By contrast in Omkara, Dolly cloyingly tells Indu that a way to man’s heart through his stomach. Indu to some extent challenges this but only to counter with her grandmother’s wisdom that the way to a man is by keeping him sexually rather than digestively satisfied. That said Indu does echo Emilia’s line, “They eat hungrily, when they get satisfied, they will full, they belch us” (Act-iii, scene-iv, line-99-100). It is nonetheless telling of 17th century play is more vocal about women being treated as meat than the 21st century film. Here Bhardwaj alters handkerchief to a more substantial garment- ‘Kamarband’. Two possible reasons for this conversion are –

- (1) Waistband is visible metonyms of incarceration of female body in Indian context
- (2) The handkerchief is no longer seen as a prized possession with sexual connotations

The film is more about feminism: violence against women is roundly condemned, but the ways in which women can and should resist are left unclear. Finally, we may say that Bhardwaj conveys a sense that Shakespeare belongs to everyone, so his work is open for both homage and critique.

In comparison to Perker’s Desdemona, Bhardwaj’s Dolly is much inferior character. On the other hand, Bhardwaj’s Indu is even stronger character than Perker’s Desdemona. Apart from the

class difference as they belong to the first world (Desdemona) and third world (Indu), Indu is more powerful character than Desdemona in response to her characteristic virtues as a woman of the third world. Desdemona being a woman of first world is unable to fight against the injustice towards her. On the other hand, Indu being a woman of third world fights against the injustice towards women and even kills her own husband. So, we may assume that Bhardwaj made Indu's character stronger as in the third world context the character of Indus is more prominent than Dolly (Desdemona). There are very few Dollys (Desdemona) in third world context. This may be the possible reason for highlighting Indu's character in Bhardwaj's film.

Thus, all the translations and adaptation of Shakespeare's Othello in the West and East are different according to their socio-cultural norms. In other words, we may say that in western Othello racial issues are very much present which in east Othello the caste issues are represented. But very essence of Shakespearean theme ever remained in these translations and adaptations, even though they are different in socio-cultural context. So, we may say that the two different film versions separated in time and space, are capable of making Shakespeare's timelessness transcend and make modern spectators aware of the fact that the human artistic capacity is able to cross imaginable limits of creativity and transforms a great literary art in a great (filmic or theatrical) spectacle.

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