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Desdemona’s Death in India

ADHIKARY KAKALI *

Introduction:

During 2006, the International Centre for Kathakali in New Delhi adopted Othello in the Kathakali style that is over two hours long. Like Japanese Noh and Kabuki, Kathakali is a highly formal dramatic style in South India with heavy costumes and makeup like masks. The performers of Kathakali speak to the audience with very complex ‘mudras’ or gestures using their faces, eyes, and hand movements (Zarrilli 1984). For the first time, it was performed in the Kathakali dance format. It contained only five scenes of the original play but the performance would have taken more than 12 hours if the original play had been fully staged by strictly following the form of Kathakali dance.

In this essay, I would like to analyze the way Indian directors have dealt with Othello in local Indian Kathakali stage. In this article, I shall also briefly discuss how Shakespeare’s works have been transformed and appreciated in social, cultural, and political milieus in the last 100 years in India by a large section of her vast population.

India was under British rule for 190 years (1757–1947), and due to this colonial administration, Shakespeare’s presence in India is older than in any other part of the world outside Britain. During the Indian Renaissance from the mid 19th century to the early 20th century, Indian society was under the massive influence of Western culture, and Shakespeare stood as the biggest literary institution. Many states’ local cultures in the vast Indian sub-continent absorbed Shakespeare as a commodity in a comparable manner while Western culture crept into India. Especially in the context of the British Empire, as Richard Burt says, “Shakespeare was a token of Englishness used to legitimate Britain’s imperial power” (17). Shakespeare was treated as an icon of high culture, or a “cultural trophy” (Rothwell 168) in Indian society for centuries.

We must again remember that Shakespeare came to India with the British merchants. The Indians adopted him while learning English to serve the colonial power in its language. We may remember that the concept of ‘One India’ also developed due to British colonial rule and that English was the language through which the Indians from different parts of the sub-continent started communicating with each other. But being a foreigner, Shakespeare became most familiar to the Indian audience only for his timeless universal quality. His plays address such a wide range of experiences, such as love, lust, jealousy, hatred, greed, revenge, and so on. Othello mainly deals with jealousy but jealousy is not a literary theme; it exists in a myriad of different situations in the real world. It is the hardest and most complicated emotion to understand in that it “always converts human nature into chaos and liberates the beast in man” (Scott 465).

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Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the Moor:

Shakespeare wrote *Othello, the Moor of Venice* around 1603 and it was performed a year later. It is commonly believed that Shakespeare borrowed his plot from Cinthio’s tale, ‘the third tale of the seventh decade of Hecatommithi’, a collection of tales by Giovanni Battista Giraldi that was published in Venice in 1566. We can find the name of Desdemona in Cinthio but Othello is merely called a Moor from the beginning to the end. Cinthio’s opening phrase is *Fu gia in Venezia un Moro*, “There was in Venice a Moor.” Shakespeare also introduced him as a Moor in the opening scene of the play, and until the third scene, the audience does not know his name. There must be a difference between the two writers, but according to the critics, Shakespeare is closer to the source in many parts. Othello’s wooing of Desdemona or her wooing of him and the crisis caused by the Turkish attack on Cyprus is Shakespeare’s own creations. Cinthio says merely that the Senate made a routine change when they sent the Moor to Cyprus. Shakespeare made many alternations but the basic elements of the action are found in the original story, so it would appear that Shakespeare had read carefully ‘the third tale of the seventh decade of Hecatommithi’ before he began to write his own tragedy about the Moor.

Apart from Portia’s suitor from Morocco in *The Merchant of Venice*, there are only two black Moors in Shakespeare’s plays: Aaron, the evil Moor in *Titus Andronicus* (1593–4) and Othello, the noble Moor of Venice (1604). To the early modern audience, the word ‘Moor’ must have meant both Muslim and black. But Aaron and Othello are different in their characteristics. Aaron is portrayed as a villain, whereas Othello is a complex character mixed with nobility and violent jealousy. To the Jacobean audience, the term ‘Moor’ might be exemplified as Othello’s ‘otherness’, marking him as an outsider both culturally and racially. Even Othello himself often refers to his blackness and his status as an outsider. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia’s suitor, the Prince from Morocco says, “Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnished sun” (2.1.1–2) about his complexion. This is a paraphrase of the *Song of Solomon*: “Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me” (1:6). He (Portia’s suitor) continues with pride:

> “I would not change this hue,
> Except to steal your thoughts, my gentle queen” (2.1.11–12).

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, we also see Cleopatra boasting that she is “with Phoebus’ amorous pinches black” (1.5.28). Shakespeare’s Cleopatra and Othello are portrayed as powerful characters proud of their long lineages but they always remain outsiders on the Jacobean stage. Henrik Schück does not mention anything about Othello’s race but calls him “African”, which indicates his blackness (293). On the other hand, Per Meurling says, “Of course the Moor is not black and he should not be acted as black. He is quite simply an Arab. The Duke says to Brabantio, ‘your son-in-law is far more fair than black’. *Othello* is brown like a sheikh” (200). In this regard, Ben Okri’s observation is more genuine, “even if *Othello* was originally not a play about race, its history has made it one” (qtd. in Loomba 150).

During the Elizabethan period in England, skin colour began to be questioned and that is reflected in Shakespeare’s play. As Elderd Jones says, during 1601 Queen Elizabeth considered it a problem that a number of “Negroes and Black Moors” had “crept into” London. The Queen appointed a merchant from
Lubeck, Caspar Van Zeuden, to transport them out of England. As Jones (1971) covered this long lost event,

by the end of century, in fact, Queen Elizabeth had begun to be ‘discontented’ at the ‘great numbers
of Negars and Black moors which …. are crept into realm’, and issued two edicts, one in 1596 and a
stronger one in 1601, in which she complained of the influx of the black population and appointed a
certain Caspar Van Zenden (Zeuden), a merchant of Lubeck, to transport them out of the country. (20).

Jones again says, “Shakespeare and his follow dramatists did not know what Moors and Negroes
looked like ....” (1965, 12). Shakespeare’s audience might think about the lineage connection of Moor
“with the long history of Christian interactions with various kinds of Muslims – the Saracens of the Holy
Crusades, the Arab Moors of Spain, and the Turks whose growing empire threatened Europeans, as well as
the Moroccans, Indians....” (Loomba 2002, 45). In Titus Andronicus, Aaron’s son by the white Tamora
is the only child of an interracial couple on the early modern stage in England. It is a 400-year, long-term
question as to whether Othello is a Negro or an Arab but the most important thing is that he is human being
with love, hatred, and jealousy.

Shakespeare in India:

According to the history of Othello’s performance in India, during the early stage, the language was
English and directly performed from the original play. But with time passing, the play was designed with
the local context added to it. However, each of these adaptations asserts loyalty to Shakespeare where
the protagonist is black and suffers the same fate as Othello. As Rushdie says, “It is normally supposed
that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately to the notion that something can also
be gained” (17). Shakespeare gets Indian colour and his works are blended with the Indian fragrance
and cultural elements ranging from Bharatnatyam to Kalarippayattu and even Jattra and Manipuri dance.
The audience sees him in English, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Tamil, Marathi, Malayalam, and other Indian
languages.

Shakespeare came to India with the British traders whose only concern was business and not with a
gigantic, premeditated plan to colonize the country. However, due to internal political intrigue and turmoil
and the external invasion, especially from the Maratha Burgis (bandits under the warlords from modern
Indian state of Maharashtra) and North Indian states, it was almost impossible for them to continue their
business there. The situation forced them to become involved in local politics and in the process; they
successfully made India their colony by intrigue, treachery, and battle in collusion with the local leaders
against the ruler of the Bengal Presidency.

During World War II, Shakespeare completely disappeared from Japanese archives and bookstores
while Britain was Japan’s enemy. Between 1964 and 1977, Shakespeare was also treated in the same way
in China. During this period, there was a obstruction on foreign cultural influence in China. As a result,
“Shakespeare’s plays were removed from the libraries and bookstores. . . . translated films and stages
versions were banned. . . . [and] Shakespeare’s name was vanished from the lips of a population of nine
hundred million people” (He 157). But Shakespeare has ruled the Indian mind more vividly and deeply
than the colonial rulers ever could. Records show that Shakespeare has been the most popular subject among Bengali students since English Literature was introduced at the Hindu College in Kolkala (currently Presidency College) in 1817. In this regard, Nirad C Chowdhury tells us, “I do not know if any other country or people in the world have ever made one author the epitome, test and symbol of literary culture as we did with Shakespeare in the nineteenth century” (197).

**Othello in India 1848:**

Among Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Othello* is the most frequently performed play in India. The earliest record shows that *Othello* was first performed in 1780 at the Calcutta Theatre in Calcutta (Kolkata), the then capital of British India (until 1912). An advertisement was published in the Bengal Gazette no. 49:

“23–30 December 1780. *Othello; Calcutta Theatre.*” In *Calcutta Essays on Shakespeare*, (in Bose ed.), Pallab Sen Gupta said, “the Managers of the Theatre having generously offered to give a Benefit play to Mr. Soubise, towards the completion of his Management, Mr. Soubise will appear on that night in the character of Othello.... .The part of Iago will be attempted by the Author of The Monitor and Desdemona by Mr. H –, a gentleman of doubtful character.”

Shakespeare’s plays have the voice to speak religiously, politically, or psychologically. As Russell Brown says, “In a politically conscious world, Shakespeare’s plays can speak politically, in an anxious world psychologically, in a religious world religiously; in a closed world of theatre-making they can become gentle or hectic fantasies of minimal mortal or political interest” (13). Brown’s words become true for James Barry’s production of *Othello* in the Sans Souci Theatre during August 1848 in Calcutta. This production is considered as a significant landmark for *Othello*’s journey in India. For the first time, a Bengali actor Bhaboo Baishnave Charan Adhya was cast as Othello among a group of British actors. The audience and the British officials were keenly waiting with anxieties about the race mixing in the performance because Mrs. Anderson, the daughter of Esther Leach, founder of the Sans Souci theatre played the role of Desdemona. The main interest was in the point of physical proximity of a native actor to a white Desdemona on the stage. The audience was keenly waiting for the final moment of the play. The question was ‘Could the native actor hold and kiss the white Desdemona on a public stage as it is depicted in the play?’ On 12th August, the *Calcutta Star* published a letter about the presence of the audience in Adhya’s performance in Sans Souchi that evening on Park Street: “At last we crept on inch by inch and people began to wonder if their seats were kept for them. How full it must be – By Jove, Barry and the Nigger will make a fortune” (Mitra 199).

On the colonial stage in Calcutta, *Othello* had a more complex identity than on any Western stage. As Mitra says, “Othello’s entry was greeted with a hearty welcome.... but, under all circumstances, his pronunciation of English was for a Native remarkably good” (205–6). The reviewer focused on the difference between the colonizer and colonized segment by denoting Adhya as ‘a Native’. According to the *Hurkaru* reviewers, his performance in the third act was very poor but his utterance was combined with passion in the passage, “Farewell the neighing steed and the shrill trumpet.....” (3.3.365). “The act was more or less relieved by the vitality infused into the part where Othello seizes Iago by the throat and
shortly afterwards by the energetic full-toned declaration of: Arise black vengeance.....!" (3.3.451) (qtd. in Chattergee and Singh 77). The English Man says, “Taking it as a whole, we consider the performance wonderful for a Native” (Mitra 210). Both Bengali and English reviews veered between the praise of a Native actor and the lack of merits in his performance.

The Moor and the Bengali combined in Adhya’s performance as if he was the real Othello. The Calcutta Star described his racial difference as “a real unpainted Nigger” (Bharuch 8) on stage but Adhya’s identification with Othello and Othello’s blackness became clearly complicated because of “caste, communalism and class” (Kapadia 95).

Adhya’s performance created prevalent anxieties among the British rulers. Due to colonial prejudice of the British Raj in India, he did not become a celebrity like Ira Aldridge, the African American actor who played the role of Othello. In fact, Adhya’s first performance of Othello was cancelled in the Sans Souci on instruction from high-ranking British officials because they did not want a native Indian actor would perform with a British actress in public stage (Singh 64). On 12th August, the reaction of audience was published in the same in Calcutta Star when the show was cancelled: “No play, said the stout gentleman – What? Said the multitude, Othello sick!! He isn’t painted! [.....] Desdemona inebriated! Barry drunk! Iago not come – one gentleman in a white choker roared out, how could expect him when his very mane tells you Aye a go?” (Mitra 200). Adhya’s performance in Othello could not bridge the racial divide (Singh 79) but was a reflection of the relation between the British Raj and their Indian subjects. His portrayal of the Moor was more localized because of racial, ethnic, and colonial issues. Nevertheless, because of Adhya’s performance, Shakespeare’s drama started to transfer into the native context with local ethos and social structure.

Kathakali Othello:

Before starting the discussion of Othello in Kathakali format, I want briefly to discuss the Kathakali dance performance. Kathakali is a highly formal theatrical style in India, like Japanese Noh or Kabuki. Kathakali is perhaps the most distinctive colourful dance drama. It originated 400 years ago in the southwestern state of Kerala, in a town named Travancore in India. Literally ‘Katha’ means ‘story’ and ‘Kali’ means ‘dance’.

The performers also use various colours and make-up with different shades to make the audience understand the basic nature of the characters, such as Pacha, Kathi, Kari, and Minnukku. ‘Pacha vesham’ is the green make-up that signifies the performer is playing the noble or divine character, like Rama or Nala. ‘Kathi Vesham’ is also green make-up but with streaks of red on the cheeks. This make-up indicates that the character is of high birth but has shades of evil, for example Ravana. ‘Kari vesham’ is the black make-up used for the female demons. Minnukku Vesham is bright yellow make-up that defines the woman’s character or an ascetic one. According to Zarrilli,

The performers use highly elaborate ornate and colourful customs and a very complex make-up which covers the entire face, enhancing the articulation of muscles and eyes with plastic expressiveness. Each make-up and costume is codified by type so that the audience is able to recognize immediately
During 2006, the International Centre for Kathakali in New Delhi performed *Othello* in the Kathakali style. It was directed by Sadanam Balakrishnan who also played the role of Othello, while Leela Samson played Desdemona. The production marked the first time a foreign subject was chosen for portrayal in traditional Kathakali dance. *Othello* was performed with its powerful emotions in strict Kathakali choreographic dances and gestures accompanied by conventional costumes and traditional music. About his choice in the traditional Kathakali performance, the writer, director, and chief actor Sadanam Balakrishnan said, “unlike many other plays, *Othello* fits very well with Kathakali – it is a very emotional story of a warrior. ... Even though Kathakali does not have tragedy that is death as an end, it does allow tragic emotion, therefore doing Shakespearean tragedy is not different or alien” (Trivedi 92)

The performance took 2 hours but would have taken more than 12 hours if all of Shakespeare’s original fourteen scenes had been reproduced in the Kathakali dance format. They performed only five scenes from Shakespeare’s *Othello*: Rodrigo and Iago’s initial meeting; the senate scene; Othello and Desdemona’s meeting in Cyprus, a very long scene woven by Cassio’s meeting with Desdemona, her pleading for Cassio with Othello; Iago’s snatching of the handkerchief from Emila and planting seeds of suspicion in Othello’s mind; and finally the bedchamber scene. (Loomba 1998, 151)

*Othello* was acted as a heroic noble ‘Pacha’ character with a green face and black arms and face. His dress was blue so that put him in the same category of traditional Kathakali heroes, such as Rama and Nala. Othello’s green make-up and blue dress have made him very much ‘noble moor’, the valorous but gentle soldier. On the other hand, Iago was performed as a vicious ‘Katti’ character with a black painted face and red nose. His intrinsic evil was metamorphosed into a powerful satanic villain.

The love scene between Othello and Desdemona was tender, passionate, theatrical, and realistic as the characters departed slowly, dancing in harmony with arms linked in close embrace. Their passion rose near to the divine sanction – Othello enraptured Desdemona, as Lord Shiva entranced Parvati. Like Sati, Parvati’s earlier incarnation Desdemona defies patriarchal authority to follow her love, and like divine lovers, they remain together forever. Their love possessed a cosmic pattern, and Shakespeare’s lovers achieved the mythical sanction through the Kathakali performance. In the last scene (bedchamber scene) of the performance, a symbolic darkness covered the stage. The Chenda and Maddalam (traditional south Indian drums) played in the background to create the divine atmosphere that kept the audience at the edge of their seats. Like Lord Shiva’s ‘Rudra’ (anger) aspect, here Othello became both lover and destroyer. He moved slowly towards Desdemona’s bed with a flickering lamp and strangulated her. After Desdemona’s murder, his own hands grasped his own throat, which is foretelling about his suicide. (Trivedi 185)

Traditionally Kathakali drama has always focused on the battle between good and evil, and the killing is in the right place of the stage. According to the local classical belief, good women are never killed or the murder of a female is not allowed on the stage, so Desdemona’s murder created some problems for the production. Othello is depicted as a prototypal good man and he cannot do any evil. But by killing Desdemona, he has committed a sin which any repentance cannot rid. Though after Othello’s suicide,
again the curtain was removed from the stage and the audience saw that Othello rose to confess his sin and beg forgiveness to the gods by performing a “Mangalam prayer” (prayer for goodness) through a silent soliloquy. (Trivedi 186)

The Kathakali Othello is neither a new significant interpretation nor an anti-colonial production. It has its own complex context where the Moor’s agony is represented in a very different way. The director tried to erase the problem of race from his production and succeeded partially but “it was not possible to do it all,” (Trivedi 186) he said. He did it because most of his audience were dark skinned and their major deities and demons would be dark coloured too. As Loomba says, “its Othello is neither a black man nor a Moor but takes the form of a Hindu warrior” (2002,155) Balkrishan strived to localize Shakespeare in this production (in Kathakali format) by staging two cultures together in a satisfying manner and the audience did not feel the loss of Shakespeare’s words or images in the performance. In Kathakali Othello, Desdemona’s murder represents Othello not as a Turk or a Moor or an outsider in European society. It is a reflection of a stereotypical masculine being who always tries to dominate woman folk in society, either east or west.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare’s universality is the reason for the directors to return to him over and over again. W. B. Worthen says, “Shakespeare is an unusually prominent element of globalized theatre, at once the vehicle of an international theatrical avant-garde . . . of intercultural exchange . . . of global tourism . . . and of postcolonial critique” (117). Shakespeare wrote for the early modern English audience but it seems his works deliver not only Elizabethan culture, but he is a guarantor who delivers universal themes to maintain intercultural connections. The iconoclastic director Suzuki Tadashi says he does not find Shakespeare a foreign text. For him Shakespeare is “rather the heritage of human race” (qtd. in Carruthers 217). Shakespeare’s plays, due to their sensibility, become the motive of translation and adaptation more frequently than any other playwright does. In different parts of India, Othello has been presented and received in a variety of forms, from Kathakali to the local stage. Various factors were responsible for this. India is a multicultural society with over 40 major languages in diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and as such, some used Shakespeare as storyline, some tried to present it keeping in mind the commercial benefit and adjusting it to suit it accordingly, and some even tried to attract audiences to Shakespeare’s works as their own high dramatic performances and cultural achievements. Shakespeare’s presence is not confined to the curricula of the universities and serious academic research but he becomes the harbinger of cultural authority in India. All these are because of Shakespeare’s universal status, which has an interpretative relationship with audiences that “prepares us for the new world of industrial and scientific changes” (Muliyil 82)
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Maddalam: The maddalam or madhalam is a drum made out of the wood of the jackfruit tree. It has two sides for playing which is made out of leather and has different kind of sounds on each side. The maddalam is a heavy instrument which is hung around the waist of the person playing, and the player stands all the while to perform. The maddalam is a vital instrument in traditional Kerala percussion ensembles like Panchavadyam, Keli and Kathakali performance. Maddalam is considered as a DevaVadyam (sound of god) and it represents Lord Shiva and Lord Parvathi by its sound. It is believed that, structurally Maddalam really resembles the "ShivaSakti swaroopa", in which the right hand side of the Maddalam resembles Shiva and the left hand side resembles Parvathi.

The Chenda: The Chenda (Malayalam: ചെന്ദ) is a cylindrical percussion instrument widely used in Kerala, Tulu Nadu of Karnataka in India. In Tulu Nadu it is known as Chande. The chenda is mainly played during the Hindu festivals in Temples and as an accompaniment in the religious art forms of Kerala. The chenda is used as an accompaniment for KathakaliHYPERLINK "http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kathakali" (Koodiyattam, Kannyar Kali, Theyyam and among many forms of dances and rituals in Kerala. It is also played in a dance-drama called Yakshagana which is popular in Tulu Nadu of Karnataka. It is the traditional and unavoidable musical instrument in all form of cultural activities in Kerala.
Othello is the most frequently performed Shakespearean tragedy in India; a story of love, hate, jealousy and misfortune where the East and the West are mingled together in its sets and situations. Shakespeare has become the essential part of history in Indian literary transformation during the last century. The journey of Othello in India started in 1780 in Calcutta, and it has been staged numerous times. No doubt, there are differences between the attitude of 19th century and 20th century Indian audiences of the Shakespearean play where uncontrolled male emotion caused heartbreak, turmoil and murderous violence to a loving wife. My paper analyzes the way of Othello’s adaptation into the traditional Indian Dance Kathakali. Many elements of the play, e.g., the elopement and marriage against father’s will, once appeared eccentric to the basically conservative Indian sensibility but now become acceptable to the audiences due to the globalization. It will also discuss the Indian audience’s appreciation of Shakespeare’s works in the transformation of social, cultural and political milieu of the centuries.

Desdemona’s Death in India

Adhikary Kakali