

WHO SPEAKS FOR THE MOOR? INTERROGATING SHAKESPEARE'S *OTHELLO*

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to trace how Shakespeare's *Othello* has been textualized and argue how despite the play's obvious racial/cultural politics considered by the relatively new critical studies very few attempts have been made to unfold the problematics of receiving the text and its creator in the colonial/postcolonial Indian context. This paper will also try to throw light on the fact that how *Othello* has been compelled to endorse the supremacy of the liberal humanist culture by accepting the state distinction between civilized and barbaric, white and non-white, culture and sub-culture. And how the dominant ideology continues to claim its moral and intellectual superiority justifying that it has even placed the "demi-devil" at the heart of a supreme aesthetic manifestation-it has been 'pitying' and 'pitying' the Moor ever since he appeared on the English stage.

Constructing its cultural other has been a dominant practice in Western discourse since the time of the great classical writers. The issue has been taken up remarkably by Edward Said as he attempts to locate the inception of European interest in the Orient in Aeschylus and Euripides¹. Dionysus, as represented in *The Bacchae*, having an explicit Asian connection, destroys Thebes with the strangely threatening excesses of Oriental mysteries. The king Pantheus loses his life for having incorrectly assessed the Dionysus menace. The lesson intended by Euripides is dramatized by the presence of Cadmus and Tiresias, knowledgeable older men who try to rationalize the entire nightmare with the realization that beyond sovereignty these are things like judgment and prudence to size up properly the forces of alien power, and hence, " Oriental mysteries will be taken seriously, not least because they challenge the rational Western mind to new exercises of its enduring ambition and power". (see *Orientalism*, pp. 57)

By using some of these insights, in extension, the argument here that I would like to take up is how *Othello* has been textualized in the same fashion by a genuine creator whose life-giving power of imagination (and adaptation) "represents, animates and constitutes the otherwise silent and dangerous

space beyond (the) familiar boundaries" of his race and culture (see *Orientalism*, pp. 57); and at the end I would try to argue how despite the play's obvious racial/cultural politics considered by the relatively new critical studies (Ania Loomba, Alan Sinfield, Srabani Chowdhury), very few attempts have been made to unfold the problematics of receiving the text and its creator in the colonial/postcolonial Indian context. Shakespeare was writing in a period when the age-old European interest in the Orient and the far distant lands was increasingly cropping up largely because of the discovery of the trade routes to the East and the Virgin territories. Renaissance Humanism, too, had a great role to play in this connection; it had opened up an entirely new horizon in thought and culture as far as the parameters of Western civilization were concerned. The ethos of Humanism rendered Europe's claim to be culturally affluent and potent because it was conditioned in a rapidly changing historical milieu marked by secular learning and knowledge. Because of the newly found epistemology the normal enterprises of civilization provoked such out-wardly directed activities as travel, conquest and new experiences of "knowing" the alien lands and their inhabitants.

An impressive number of travelogues- such as Richard Eden's (1521-76) *The Decades of the New India* (1550), *The Art of Navigation* (1561) and *The History of Travel in the West and East Indies*

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Vintage Books, New York 1978

(1577); and *Principal Navigations, Voyages and Discoveries of English Nation* (1589) by Richard Hakluyt, the first professor of Modern Geography at Oxford and a very close associate of some of the Queen's most influential advisers (Lord Burghley, Sir Francis Walsingham and Sir Robert Cecil) – were available to Shakespeare; and it is very likely that he would relocate and restructure these descriptions of the alien in characterizing Othello² The account of the cannibals and the “men whose heads/grow beneath their shoulder” (1,3,143-40) given by Othello were also to be found in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* translated by Philemon Holland in 1601; in

Mandeville's *Travels* (rediscovered and popularized during the Elizabethan era) and also in *The Discovery of the Empire of Guiana* (1596) by Sir Walter Raleigh. The notable aspect of this account is that it pleases not only Desdemona's father who “oft invited me/ Still questioned me the story of my life”, (1,3,127-8) but it woos Desdemona as well – “it was strange, it was passing strange/It was pitiful, it was wondrous pitiful”. (1, 3, 159-60).

Ania Loomba has very aptly argued that Desdemona's undaunted fascination for the Moor may indicate her desire to break the claustrophobic patriarchal confines by acquiring knowledge of the exotic lands and a pleasure of freedom and adventure derived via her lover's series of tales.³ Perhaps the dramatist knew that the experience would suit an outsider like Othello more than anyone else. They might be implausible in a normal Venetian structure of thought but quite conceivable in case of Othello. Sinfield has substantiated how Othello is tolerated and attended by the Venetians when he keeps playing on his strangeness, dramatizing his otherness.⁴

The entire white civilization becomes not only the spectator but the director and judge of every facet of Othello's behaviour. Now one can draw an obvious analogy between the fate of Othello in the

play and that of the Orient, when Said argues that the existence of the Orient was not only displayed but was fixed in time and place for the West through highly impressive textual successes of the Orientalists- the Orient is what Europe knew; Othello is what the play dramatizes; his cultural history is what the playwright accumulated from a number of sources. Othello with his exotic otherness amuses the exclusively white European characters and audience as well, in a way similar to that of the Barbary ambassador to the Queen (from August 1600 to February the following year), Abdel- Ouahed-bin-Messaoud with his sixteen delegates used to draw attention (and sarcasm) of Londoners with their indigenous dresses, customs and behaviour. Sometimes, the ambassador himself, “a bearded, hawk-faced, cunning Arab complete with turban, flowing robes and elaborately ornamented scimitar” annoyed Her Majesty too.⁵

Nevertheless, the native identity of the central character of the play is surprisingly conflated. Sometimes he is associated with the Negroes and black Moors, sometimes with the Turks or even with an Indian. The opaque identity of Othello makes it unambiguously clear that the dramatist fails to provide any definite genealogy of his “hero”- as if his monstrosity is taken for granted; he is what the dramatist gathers from various sources. Another intricacy, a far more dangerous one, implicated in this identity construction is the fact that all of Othello's associations are used in humiliating and derogatory terms only to denigrate his nativity-“blacker devil”, “lascivious Moor”, “Barbary horse”, liar, Turk, base Indian among many more. The scope of constructing the cultural other in European discourse has been inextricably connected with an insular desire to disregard, essentialize and divide the humanity of different cultures, peoples and geographical locales. Othello's case is no different from this as far as the indefinite representation of his cultural/social identity is concerned.

The critics who have been engaged in ennobling and idealizing the Moor and his rhetoric⁶- not necessarily by concentrating on the history that

2. For further discussions on Othello's race, *Othello* Editor-Norman Sanders, New Cambridge CUP 1997.

3. Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, OUP 1992

4. Alan Sinfield, “Cultural Materialism, Othello and the Politics of Plausibility” in *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism: A reader*, Edited by: Kiernan Ryan, London 1996

5. Norman Sanders, *ibid* pp 11

6. T. S. Eliot, *Shakespeare “the Stoicism” of Seneca* (1927), *Selected Essays*; Wilson Knight, “The Othello Music” *The Wheel of Fire*, 1930; Helen Gardner, *The Noble Moor*.

makes the text but by valorizing the text itself would raise the obvious point that Othello is given somewhat a prominent place among the Venetians. My argument here would be that Othello is admired and even moderately accepted largely in the political society of Venice. The whole issue becomes highly proleptised the moment he enters the Venetian civil society by marrying Desdemona (the distinction between political society and civil society has been drawn from the Gramscian definitions of the two- the former is controlled through direct political coercion and the latter through the cultural leadership of the intelligentsia⁷). Venetian civilization is in imminent danger of losing the propriety of its culture as the Othello-Desdemona couple would produce hybrids “For if such actions may have passage free/ Bondslaves and pagans shall our statesmen be” (1,2,98-99). Again Othello is found to have wrongly assessed the code of conduct of that civil society a fact repeatedly emphasized by Iago saying that he knows the Desdemona and his country’s disposition well. Othello speaks sophisticated English- but only to ‘curse’ himself and his otherness, not his “Englishness” that teaches him the language. He recognizes himself as what the Venetian culture really believed him to be- an unwise, ignorant, barbaric intruder but one possessing an excess of strangely threatening mysteries that may unsettle the unwavering architecture of the humanist construction and undermine the fixed tropes of white European civilization (this is the equation between the Dionysus syndrome and Othello).

Therefore the threat needs to be rationalized and the mysteries have to be overcome by Othello’s self-destruction at the end and the dramatist’s immediate intention to essentialize it with the help of the grand frame-work of tragedy ostensibly re-emphasizes the creator’s/director’s as well as the audience’s overwhelming grip on the alien being. The “blacker devil” ceases to pose any threat to the supremacy of the liberal humanist culture by being transformed into a great work of art (Said’s remarkable textual success). This heavy act with heavy heart/ would be told and retold to the state and its subjects. The apparent subversion/ disruption that has germinated within the state

because of Othello’s presence is ultimately co-opted and the dominant ideology re-establishes its legitimacy and authority by re-adjusting and redefining its potentials. Because despite their power and control, dominant ideologies are always, in practice insecure, under pressure, striving to substantiate their claims to superior plausibility in the face of diverse disturbances.⁸

Hence Raymond Williams’s observation that ideology has always to be produced: “Social orders and cultural orders must be seen as being actively made; actively and continuously, or they may quite quickly break down.” (Williams’s *Culture*, quoted in Sinfield). At the end (and beyond it) Othello has been compelled to endorse the supremacy of the liberal humanist culture by accepting the state distinction between civilized and barbaric, white and non-white, culture and sub-culture. And the dominant ideology continues to claim its moral and intellectual superiority justifying that it has even placed the “demi-devil” at the heart of a supreme aesthetic manifestation-it has been ‘pitying’ and ‘pitying’ the Moor ever since he appeared on the English stage.

This kind of political reading, a reading *against the grain*, as Terry Eagleton puts it, is always contested and more than often disregarded by the increasing popularity of the mug-books outside the classroom. Ania Loomba has given a very analytical account of her disappointment when she discovers the growing tendency of banking on mug-books among students across India.⁹ But at the same time she has acknowledged the fact that after all these books (Ramjis and Shamjis) are nothing but a lucid and accommodating replacement of the conventional pedagogy/criticism founded by Coleridge (in case of Othello, Iago’s “motiveless malignity”), institutionalized by Bradlian metaphysics and then carried on by triumphantly for years by T.S.Eliot, Wilson Knight and Helen Gardner among others. And when Othello is set in examination papers these issues are revived, sometimes in a round about way or in a rather horizontal and docile manner (imagery, characterization/domestic tragedy, sexual jealousy/tragedy of the noble Moor, tragedy of a handkerchief/self dramatization, etc.).

8. Sinfield, *ibid*

9. Ania Loomba, “Criticism and Pedagogy in the Indian Classroom”, *The Life of the Land: English Literary Studies in India*, Edited by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, OUP 1991.

7. Antonio Gramsci *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*. Translated and edited Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Noel Smith, New York, International Publishers, 1971.

The problem has been deepened because our students enter the classroom with a preconceived notion that the ‘wily bard’ is unquestionable, unputdownable, and unchallengedly supreme irrespective of time and place. Indeed, he has been mythicised, idealized, ever since he secured his place in our literary curriculum, way back in 1830s. We have generally failed, some exceptions notwithstanding, to unfurl the problematic aspects of the cultural appropriation of an alien artist who was usually transported to India along with their colonial goods, to be consumed gratefully by the colonized intellectuals. “The Indian engagement with Shakespeare” wrote Prof. Sisir Kr. Das, “that began almost from the initial phase of the Indo-British encounters and which continues still today – is not simply an issue of literary history involving the problematics of influence and impact, reception and survival, but an integral part of larger questions of politics and culture in a colonial situation”.¹⁰ And after Gauri Viswanathan, Jasodhara Bagchi and Jyotsna Singh it is needless to expose the cultural politics of British apotheosization of the bard and the growth of an English educated community that uncritically accepted European hegemony transmitted through English canonical texts.

My contention is that what we have, for the most part, bypassed the obvious cultural and political ramifications of a Shakespeare text, for instance *Othello*. Even today’s powerful post-colonial studies are desperately trying to appropriate *Othello* as the hero of the oppressed/suppressed¹¹. They are, of course, attempting to challenge the Eurocentric hegemony that considers Shakespeare as an exclusively Western canonical writer¹².

But in the process they are also acknowledging the unchallenged preeminence of the bard. And hardly

10. Sisir Kr. Das, “Shakespeare in India”, *Jadavpur Journal of Comparative Literature*, Vol 35, 1997.

11. Ania Loomba, “Local manufactured made-in-India *Othello* fellows”, *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, Edited by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, Routledge, London and New York, 1998

12. Partha Chatterjee, talks of the predicament of post-colonial resistance to white hegemony; because colonialism has left our imaginations forever paralysed as far as the language of resistance is concerned. *The Nation and its Fragments; Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton NJ, PUP, 1993.

any endeavour has been made to observe ‘the preposterous and perverse’ arrogance of the life-giving power of his imagination to completely disregard the history and culture of the so-called ‘othered hero’ and thus reducing him to a mere entertainer for the white audience. In conclusion it would be pertinent to refer to an obscure intellectual of the late 19th century Bengal who expressed the same sort of anger and frustration when he read *Othello*, as Chinua Achebe when he read *Heart of Darkness*.¹³ Very little is known about this man. He was born in 1844 in a village of 24 Parganas (now West Bengal, India) and graduated from Presidency College perhaps in the late 1860s: began his career as a school teacher and subsequently became a school inspector. The man, Purnachandra Basu, had repeatedly revealed his anxiety over the massive worshipping of Shakespeare in the literary as well as socio-cultural arena of 19th century Bengal. The following lines written by this forgotten intellectual, a hundred years before Loomba’s lament in her *Gender, Race and Renaissance Drama*, are still relevant today.

তম- ম্‌ক্‌ক্‌বি চাঁড়বি তঁ‌ব্‌ল বঁ‌ন, তম- ম্‌ক্‌ক্‌বি ইঁ‌পি তঁ‌ব্‌ল - তম
 GBifc nZ`ve`vcvfi Avb>` cvBtZv, তম ইঁ‌পি GKRb
 KòKvq gjtK IBifc wb`q cvgi ifc mPwZ KitZ etov
 Avtgv` jvf KwiZ| তম- ম্‌ক্‌ক্‌বি ইঁ‌পি ইঁ‌পি বঁ‌ন,
 ZLbKvi Kvtj i ইঁ‌পি IBifc mQj; BsiVR RvtZi ইঁ‌পি I
 cèYZv GKRb gjtK IBifc mPwZ t`wLtZ etov Avtgv`
 jvf KwiZ| AvRI GB ইঁ‌পি cwiPq Avgiv mgtq mgtq
 cvBqv _vK|

mwnZ`i Np (1895)

Translation: “In Shakespeare, it was not a fault of talent, in Shakespeare it was a fault of taste – a taste that found joy in such murderous acts, a taste that derived great pleasure in depicting a dark-complexioned Moor as such a heartless vile creature. This was not merely Shakespeare’s taste, this was the taste of the times, the taste and proclivity of the English race found a great deal of delight in perceiving a Moor depicted in such a manner. Even today, we find examples of this kind of taste from time to time.” Shahityer Ghhoon (1895).

This passage sums up the argument and once we take into account the unceasing exchange between

13. Chinua Achebe, “An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*”, Edited by Robert Kimbrough, Norton, New York, 1986.

the history that makes the text and the text itself the ostensible rigidity in the whole set of colonial binaries – civilized-barbaric, culture-primitive, white-nonwhite – gets weakened at each and every point, thus exposing the fractures in the “philanthropic” concern of the civilizing mission of English colonialism.

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