

Othello Recontextualized as Kaliyattam : A Critique of Shakespeare Reloaded

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ABSTRACT

Shakespeare plays have always exerted great influence on subsequent writers of all generations and nations. This paper is an attempt to analyse the political ramifications involved when *Othello* was transplanted from its roots to an entirely different setting in the state of Kerala as the movie *Kaliyattam*. This study tries to unravel the motives that govern the production of a cinematic version of a Shakespeare play and the meanings that are transmitted by the new production. The director, Jayaraj has uprooted the play *Othello* from its source culture and placed it in a completely alien cultural environment which is unfamiliar with racial politics. The stereotypical notions about an African, a soldier and an unfaithful wife is resorted to by Shakespeare in the construction of the tragedy of Othello. One can find a political unsuitability when the same is applied to the Kerala context in the late twentieth century. The patriarchal ideology in the original text gets proliferated in the modern adaptation too. The gender stereotyping is endorsed in the adaptation as well. The play *Othello* has rich subversive potential. Attempt will be made to investigate whether the movie was able to explore it.

KEY WORDS: Shakespeare Adaptation, Canonisation, Decanonisation, Gender Stereotypes

INTRODUCTION

The paper is an attempt to analyze the manifold mechanisms of ideology which construct the “subject” when the master canon of Shakespeare is received by a completely alien culture and environment. Adapting Shakespeare has almost become an industry. The present attempt is to scrutinise the attempts at decanonising Shakespeare and see whether Shakespeare gets destabilized. On a very close investigation one finds that most of the adaptations get co-opted into the already existing hierarchy of ideology. The title of the paper points to how the patriarchal ideology in the Shakespeare play *Othello* is reloaded in disguise in the Malayalam film *Kaliyattam*. The covert ways in which power operates will be unravelled in the analysis. When transplanted into an entirely different postcolonial erstwhile colony in the twentieth century one expects that the dominant male-centred perspectives will be recognized. However, what happens is an assertion of the ideology. Shakespeare’s portrayal of subjectivity gets universalized firmly. The adaptations too get canonized thereby canonizing Shakespeare further. The stereotypical notions about an African, a soldier and an unfaithful wife is resorted to by Shakespeare in the construction of the tragedy of Othello. One can find a political unsuitability when the same is applied to the Kerala context in the late twentieth century. The gender stereotyping is endorsed in the adaptation as well. The play *Othello* has rich subversive potential. An attempt will be made to investigate whether the movie was able to explore it.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Shakespearean plays have been adapted into films all over the world. Such cinematic adaptations are of two categories. One which follows the original to the maximum and the other which changes the form and methods of the original play to the culture and language of the place of reception. Shakespeare adaptations grant acceptance and praise to the makers. India too has a plethora of Shakespeare receptions.

Around 1775, the colonial masters imported Shakespeare to Bombay and Calcutta to entertain the English residents. By 1848, Indians started appropriating Shakespeare to the native context. *Othello* was staged at the Sans Souci Theatre in Calcutta by Barry Lewis. An Indian named Baishnav Charan Auddy performed the role of Othello along with a white woman, Mrs Anderson as Desdemona. The necessity to nativise Shakespeare was strongly felt by the writers.

Shakespeare has largely been indigenised. The Indian adaptations employed Indian plot, names, songs and dances. The Parsi theatre almost rewrote the Shakespeare canon. Such adaptations were popular. "Though entirely driven by commercial interests and in effective collaboration with the colonial order, Parsi theatre was profanely subversive of the elitist English-language Shakespeare prescribed by the colonial regime - one reason, perhaps, for its popularity among ordinary people"(Gillies et.al 259). The Indian state Kerala too received Shakespeare enthusiastically. There have been Kathakali versions of *King Lear*, *Othello* and *Julius Caesar*. An abundance of film adaptation also is there. A new term 'Keralan Shakespeare' has been in use in the last decade. This shows how films based on Shakespeare have established themselves as a distinct genre.

CHARACTERISTICS

A keen probe into the heart of the film *Kaliyattam* reveals that though uprooted from the source culture, the canonical Shakespearean meaning gets reconstructed in the movie. Kaliyattam (The Play of God) transformed the original play to the local traditional theatrical art of Kaliyattam or Theyyam. It is a form of god worship performed by the people of North Malabar on the Kerala border. The word "Theyyam" is a derivative of "Daivam" which means God. The one who performs Theyyam is believed to transform into a divine figure once he wears the mask and headgear. When the Theyyam deity speaks, his utterances are considered holy.

The notion of a singular human essence gets reiterated even in the transcultural adaptation. The unique historical reality of the source culture which brings about the meanings is not paid attention to. Though nativised, universalisation of the meanings conveyed happens. The meaning of *Othello* moves around the pivot of the contrast between the white Europeans and the Moorish General. The hierarchy of the social order gets transgressed when Othello, the Moor marries the daughter of a Venetian Senator. Shakespeare surmounted Othello's racewise inferiority by attributing him with insurmountable valour and mastery as a soldier. In order to transplant this theme is the alien Kerala culture Jayaraj chose a protagonist Kannan Perumalayan of the lower stratum of the society. He is a Theyyam performer and hence superior to the aristocratic class when he assumes the god status as part of the ritualistic performance. Perumalayan performs Ottakkolam which elevates him to a position of reverence. Ottakkolam is a fire jumping performance for which the performer must observe continence for a period of twenty one days. The prefix 'Peru' in Perumalayan means great in Malayalam. The title is granted only to revered Theyyam performers.

The visual art of Theyyam includes comic characters too. They will be wearing a spathe-masque when they perform. Gulikan, Paniyan, and Pootham are typical comic characters. Jayaraj has replaced Iago in the film with a comic Paniyan character who is named as Paniyan itself in the film.

The role of Kannan Parumalayan, the counterpart of Othello is enacted by the veteran actor Suresh Gopi. His acting is in the indigenous Indian style through the expression of various rasas in accordance with the emotions. The progression from "Srīngara" to "Bhayanaka" and from "Raudra" to "Karuna" is commendable. The director has thus subverted the conventional Eurocentric pattern of acting by making the actor perform the Shakespearean role in the indigenous style. It is worthwhile to investigate the extent to which the film has been radical in re-righting Shakespeare. Catherine Belsey argued that the very medium of film acts as a seemingly innocent transmitter of ideology. Graham Holderness has quoted Belsey's opinion, "It arrests the play of possible meanings and presents its brilliant rectangle full of significance to and from a specific place, a single and at the same time inevitable point of view" (208). Let us probe into the changes made by Jayaraj and see whether the film has been able to subvert the ideology embedded in *Othello*.

Othello's blackness is erased by Shakespeare by portraying his bravery and mastery in battles. Thus Othello is positioned as superior to the white Venetians. The most ordinary Perumalayan is elevated to the status of feudal lords because of his divine status as the Theyyam artist. The divine aura of the protagonist is highlighted by the English title of the movie "The Play of God." Othello is characterised as a heroic and exotic soldier. He entices Desdemona through the narration of his heroic deeds. He tells her that he has experienced "hair breadth 'scapes, redemption from slavery, hills whose heads touch heaven, cannibals, anthropophagi, and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders (I.iii.129-45) Perumalayan also has a stock of strange heroic story of survival. He lost his entire family to smallpox. He was almost dead. People thought him dead and threw him into the funeral pyre. But he survived heroically. The narration of his hardships evokes sympathy in the mind of Thamara, the counterpart of Desdemona. Othello projects his bravery as a sufficient quality to raise himself to an equal status with Desdemona's racial superiority. He wins her with the magic of his exotic otherness. Desdemona is enamoured by his cultural and religious difference and adventurous exploits. Perumalayan too resorts to a similar trick to win the heart of Thamara. He details his heroic deeds as well as sufferings.

This portrayal leads to the deep entrenchment of the conventionally received notion that manly exotic deeds and heroic agonies can evoke intense admiration and sympathy in women's minds. This is in fact a fear which the occident had about the orient, that the animalistic strength of the black men lure and seduce the white women. When Jayaraj applies the concept to the Indian scenario it turns out to be an overt generalisation that women everywhere and at all times have the same mind for strange experiences, maybe as a wish fulfilment desire. Ruth Cowhig states that Desdemona "is more attracted to the exotic myth of otherness than to the real man"(13). The Elizabethans considered the Moors as suborn, bestial and intolerant, like a barbarian. *Othello* is a manifestation of the patriarchal construction of the image of women as either a virgin or a whore. Othello is portrayed as a sexually potent black male who feels inferior to the racially superior Desdemona and hence suffocates her in revenge.

Male anxiety about the inscrutability of the chastity of women is proved universal. Iago insinuates that as a woman of Venice Desdemona will surely be sexually promiscuous. He says, "In Venice they do let God see the pranks/They dare not show their husband's" (III.iii.206). Venice was notorious for enacted or suspected adultery. The women of Venice were blamed for an excess of sexual licence, easy virtue and loose morals. Scholars like Gordon Williams, William Thomas, Andrew Hadfield, David McPherson etc. have elaborated on this picture of Venetian women. Andrew Hadfield writes, "Iago manages to undermine Othello's faith in his wife's virtue by suggesting that Venice is a permissive society in which adultery is tolerated, even encouraged....(9). Mc Pherson comments "Iago is a true son of his native land, or at least of the negative stereotype of his native land. Because his own mind is so inveterately pronographic, he is able to use pornography to manipulate others (87). In this context it is comprehensible that Iago employs sexual jealousy as a ploy to ruin Othello.

Paniyan resorts to the same weapon in Perumalayan's "Ekarajyam". The substantial validity of this representation requires an enquiry. Even though the play is shifted to a new culture the film provides Paniyan with a similar comment about the women in Ekarajyam. The text of *Othello* is political and is determined by the ideology of its source culture. When the same ideology is projected in *Kaliyattam*, the conception that women's chastity is never trustworthy gets a universal status. Shakespeare had historical reasons to create Iago's strategy. But there is no such circumstance in Kerala to prompt Paniyan to use the same strategy of sexual distrust.

Paniyan performs the comic role in the Theyyam performance. He does not even have a personal name. His name is that of the role performed by him. He is the butt of ridicule everywhere. His own guru taunts him. He is mimicked even by little kids and they throw stones at him. Perumalayan performs the Daivakkolam which is the chief Theyyam performing the role of the deity. He receives the honour and admiration of all. On the contrary, Paniyan is humiliated by everyone. Paniyan is the equivalent to Iago who is jealous towards Othello. The white lieutenant Iago is jealous of the black moor who is the commanding general. Othello is his rival. Moreover, the black moor is loved by the 'angel' Desdemona and she elopes with him to the shock of Iago. Iago considers this as an affront to his race and he aims at ruining Desdemona who is like a whore in his eyes. Iago's wrath is incurred by Desdemona's "perceived identification with the alien" (Dollimore 157). In the place of Othello's blackness Perumalayan has a pock-marked face which horrifies any onlooker as Thamara's father says. Paniyan is jealous of Perumalayan because of the dignity that he receives from playing the Theyyam and also because he wins the hand of the noble Thamara. He is dangerously jealous to the extent of ruining Perumalayan.

Traditionally Shakespearean women characters are seen as stereotypes. The women were the representations of a male writer's concept. When Jayaraj adapts *Othello* into the modern Kerala context, Thamara could have been presented differently. But she is framed exactly after Desdemona as the site/sight or object of exchange between men. Her subjectivity is one which was already designed by Shakespeare. According to Mulvey, woman stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions, through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not marker, of meaning"(112).

There has been an argument that Desdemona is doomed for listening intensely and talking volubly. Othello is claimed to have seduced Desdemona by rehearsing "The story of my life" (I.iii,129). He says that Desdemona displayed "a greedy ear" to "devour up" his discourse (I.iii.149-50). She has a desire for voice which is denied to her as a woman. She gives expression to her desire for voice when she faces the Venetian senators. Howard and O'Connor argues that Desdemona's desire "threatens a white male hegemony in which women cannot be desiring subjects" (152). Speech gets equated with desire in *Othello*. When Othello murders Desdemona, her breath and speech are suffocated. It is the victory of masculine silencing.

At the beginning of *Kaliyattam*, it is narrated that Thamara is bold, like Desdemona, and that she elopes with Perumalayan. When she appears in the film for the first time her image is a very docile and timid one befitting the conventional image of an ideal woman. Her head is bowed almost all the time. Her reasons for the choice of Perumalayan

as husband are similar to the speech of Desdemona. There are not many occasions where Thamara has a voice of her own. She is a more yielding character than Desdemona. Desdemona is shown to engage in coquettish conversations which might have been normal in the Venetian scenario. Thamara is not presented in any such light.

Iago's cunning strategies become successful with Othello because of the warning by Brabantio about Desdemona. Brabantio says, "Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. She has deceived her father, and may thee" (I.iii.290-91) *Kaliyattam* retains the father's warning to Perumalayan thereby giving the impression that the nature and fate of women all over the world is the same. Ania Loomba suggests that the Jacobean drama punished female disobedience as a warning to the women readers not to harbour any such intentions. Loomba explains the situations further: "We need to see how institutionalised readings of Renaissance tragedy work. In this body of drama, female transgression, both real and imagined, is repeatedly and ruthlessly oppressed by the family, state, church and judiciary (39). This highly politicised act of silencing is attributed to Thamara thereby committing the violence of imposing universalized models. Female passivity in the concept of love is also propagated. She must assume a male positioning" (117). When an Indian woman views *Kaliyattam* the same situation happens.

Perumalayan seems to be gripped by the fear of being destroyed by the "female" power. Jayaraj reiterates this Western notion with added emphasis in the Indian context which believes in the power of "brahmacharya" and the power of the female to destroy it like the myth of Menaka and Vishwamitra. Perumalayan cautions Thamara about the necessity of her purity for the success of his performance which is called "Theechamundi". Paniyan having sown the seeds of suspicion in his mind, Perumalayan observes that Thamara's hands are "wet" which suggests sexual infidelity. There is one song in the film which powerfully tells the story of a woman who waits faithfully for the husband who has gone for a battle. Desdemona or Thamara, women remain as a backdrop to men. Cinema is potentially more voyeuristic than theatre. *Kaliyattam* objectifies the character of Thamara more than the play objectified Desdemona. Thamara is framed, literary and dressed for the male hero to fix his fantasies upon. A mode of eroticism is integrated into the narrative through the close-ups of her face. She is isolated frequently by the camera thus glamorising her sexuality. She is a mere object of the spectator's look as well. The beautiful songs in the film surely cater to entertainment but are filled with overt sexual connotations.

Sexuality is given more emphasis in the film than in the play Jayaraj introduced a red silver silk in the place of the napkin in Shakespeare's play. The silk is an inheritance through generations and is believed to have some magical power. He gifts it to Thamara on the very first day of their marriage. He instructs her to keep it forever as its loss may result in the shattering of their relationship. This representation of the silk like a talisman is an integral part of oriental exoticism. The silk is presented as a symbol of their sexual union as well as her chastity. The loss of the silk becomes symbolic of the loss of her chastity. Thamara is conscious of its significance and is worried when she finds that she has lost it. In *Othello* the napkin has no such significance. Desdemona does not give this much of an importance to the napkin. Her losing the napkin is only a chance happening, Emilia gets it accidentally, though Iago had prompted her many times to steal it. In the film Cheerma deliberately steals the silk. Though initially she does not yield to Paniyan's demand to steal it, she does it when he makes her believe that the silk has power to help them beget smart boy children. There is an element of fate/ chance which brings about the success of Iago's plan. But in *Kaliyattam* it is not there. Paniyan is typical of the masculine jealousy which ensnares women including his own wife or his selfish motives.

In Act II scene i of *Othello* Iago says that he is quite unhappy about Desdemona's choice of a black man when white men like him were there. He feels insulted. He says, "Now, I do love her too- (Not out of absolute lust..." (II.1. 274&275). Ania Loomba argues that this love Iago expresses towards Desdemona is a racial and patriarchal emotion wherein he feels the need to protect all white women from black men. He wishes to ruin not just Othello but Desdemona who has cheated the white race.

Paniyan does not have any such motive in his intention to crush Perumalayan who demeaned him by giving him the comic character and also by giving Kantham the power over their territory instead of him. This is similar to Othello elevating Cassio above Iago. For Paniyan, Thamara is a mere vehicle to destroy Perumalayan. She is commodified by Paniyan as bait. The film presents the objectification of women as a normal and universal one. Paniyan's wife Cheerma too is merely a pawn in his hands. Her wifely devotion and her desire to have children is mercilessly exploited by him for his selfish evil motives. When Cheerma cheats her close friend the film capitalizes on the patriarchal desire for a baby boy to which she yields very easily.

Othello has deep-rooted racial inferiority feelings, which, leads to his tragedy. There has been a discourse which projected the possibility of a black husband being cheated by a white wife. Othello gets interpellated into this discourse unawares. In spite of his mastery as a soldier he is very conscious of his racial inferiority and thus falls a victim to the racial discourses that he had internalised. Alan Sinfield says, "So in the last lines of the play, when he wants to reassert himself, Othello recognizes himself as what Venetian culture has really believed him to be : an ignorant barbaric outsider

- like, he says, the base Indian who threw away a pearl” (806). His pock-marked face and inferior caste makes Perumalayan feel inferior to Thamara, but only when insinuated by Paniyan. Paniyan has no political or ethnic reasons for his jealousy. Paniyan focuses on the general premise that women in general are not trustworthy and are very capable of unnatural transgressions. Hence the film presents women in a negative perspective.

Critics are of the opinion that it is Desdemona’s ignorance and not her innocence that leads to her tragedy. As there was a notoriety about the character of Venetian women, noble families kept their women cloistered and hence they were naive. Desdemona was no exception. She does not have any idea of masculine jealousy and so keeps arguing to Othello in favour of Cassio. Thamara does not have any such historical reasons to be ignorant. However, the film presents her so. The only explanation for her ignorance is the traditional notion that women are brainless and incapable of thought and reasoning. Thamara is sanctioned a cloistered existence in the film. The house is in an exotic setting with no neighbouring houses. Even before Paniyan instigates jealousy, Perumalayan is very possessive of Thamara. He does not allow her to talk even to women and small boys. The old woman named “Uduppelamma” and Cheerma are the only human beings to whom she has any contacts with. She is under his constant surveillance and Thamara seems to enjoy being possessed as per the conventional image of women. *Kaliyattam* reasserts the age old masculine suspicion about the nature of women. Set in a different time, age and cultural background the patriarchal injunction that disorderly women will be punished is highlighted. The theme has got universalised. Sinfield has commented on *Othello*, “Among other things, *Othello* invites recognition that this is how people are, how the world goes” (1995, 821). A similar function is served by *Kaliyattam* too. Diane Elam, the famous feminist critic, has asserted that the story of women is not universally one story. It is injustice to present one story as capable of speaking for all women, of all time and places.

Ania Loomba argues that Othello’s blackness is pivotal in the power structure of the play. The erasure of this factor is a transgression. *Kaliyattam* commits the violence of this transgression as well as the compulsion to internalize the patriarchal injunction for wilful obedience. The film reproduces and reinforces society’s ruling images of sexuality and sexual hierarchies. It functions as a re-hash of the ideology which produced *Othello*. It enlivens the meta narratives of gender and domestic violence. Shakespeare does not grant any words to Desdemona to defend herself. Similarly Thamara’s embodied innocence does not defend her. Both Othello and Perumalayan demand ocular proof which is the privilege of patriarchy.

OBSERVATIONS

To conclude, the discourse presented in *Othello* has not been unsettled by *Kaliyattam*. It has never been on the director’s agenda. One reason for the popular successes of the film is its endorsement of the dominant patriarchal construct of femininity. The film did not take up the mission of contesting the popularly accepted ideology probably because of the awareness that acceptance is easy when the rooted ideology is not tampered with. Thus, one may surmise that *Kaliyattam* is Shakespeare reloaded in a strange culture.

SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Only one Shakespeare adaptation has been chosen for the study. Further research can be done in the field by selecting more adaptations.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None

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