

Different *Othello(s)* and Contentious Spectators: Changing Responses in India¹

Nandi Bhatia

This essay examines audience responses and critical debates on productions/representations of *Othello* in India at four key moments: the 1848 production of *Othello* in Calcutta, the fictionalized representation of *Othello* in *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), *Othello* produced in the Kathakali style of dance-drama (1996) and the first Bollywood adaptation of *Othello*, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara* (2006). The changing, contradictory, and contentious (fictionalized and real) reactions to these varied performances demonstrate the mediations of racial, social, economic, linguistic, class, caste and gendered differences that inform and shape the complex relationship of spectators and critics to Shakespeare. Such multiple responses disrupt the ongoing myth about the authority, "timelessness," and "universality" accorded to Shakespeare, a myth specially kept alive through educational institutions and through an imaginary construction of Indian audiences' love for Shakespeare.

We were so sure . . . thought we always had our Indian audience. . . . The Indian audience would always love us and they did . . . they did . . . they always laughed at all the jokes. Cried at the right places . . . the most wonderful audience in the world. . . . They've changed . . . we've changed too.

Mr. Buckingham in *Shakespeare Wallah*

Critical work on Shakespeare in India has by now established the bard's far-reaching influence through transformation, translation, circulation and production of his plays in multiple languages. From the late nineteenth-century productions of Shakespearean plays by Bhara-

1. I would like to thank Jyotsna Singh and Tina Krontiris for their invaluable feedback on this essay and gratefully acknowledge Nida Sajid for her help with relevant critical materials.

tendu Harishchandra of Benaras and Girish Chandra Ghosh of Bengal, productions by Parsi Theater companies from the 1870s until the 1940s, and amateur college and private stage productions to post-independence political appropriations by playwrights such as Utpal Dutt and ongoing performances by the National School of drama, the Shakespeare industry in India continues to flourish. Shakespearan plays have also experienced wide circulation through Bollywood films such as *Angoor* (1982, based on *The Comedy of Errors*), *Maqbool* (2003, based on *Hamlet*) and *Omkara* (2006, based on *Othello*). Additionally, visits from traveling companies from Europe such as Lewis's theatrical troupe that toured between 1872 and 1876, Herr Bandmann's troupe that staged *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Richard III* and *Othello* in Calcutta in 1882, troupes from London such as those of Charles Allen (1909), Matheson Lang (1911 and 1912), Allan Weekly (1912), Harding and Howitt (1918), and Geoffrey and Laura Kendal's famous Shakespearana group whose story has been recorded in the Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965), have contributed to the dissemination of Shakespeare. Overall, there exists now a massive archive that speaks to the heterogeneous presence of Shakespeare in a variety of languages, genres, and performative modes.²

What does this archive say about the relationship of Shakespeare's plays to audiences in India? This essay seeks to address this question with reference to the performance of *Othello* in India at four specific moments for more than a century: the 1848 production of *Othello* in Calcutta, the fictionalized representation of *Othello* in *Shakespeare Wallah*, *Othello* produced in the Kathakali style of dance-drama (1996) and the first Bollywood adaptation of *Othello*, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*. While *Othello*, as records show, has been staged numerous times, I pick up on these four moments because they have invited controversy, attention, and debate and have complicated "postcolonial" readings of Shakespeare in India. My intention is not simply to trace a genealogy of *Othello* performance/production in India (my essay inevitably does that) but to examine the ways in which changing reception arises from and is reflective of the shifting politics of the moment. The critical discussions and debates that pertain to these different renderings of *Othello* suggest that audience responses were and continue to be segmented along racial, social, economic, linguistic, class, and caste lines, and demonstrate that the relationship of spectators to Shakespeare has been

2. For the most recent survey, see the collection of articles in *India's Shakespeare*, ed. Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz.

extremely complex and constructed. The varied colonialist, alternative, nationalist and commercial investments in “doing” Shakespeare have positioned his plays as suitable subject matter for spectators in order to generate responses that simultaneously sustain, elevate, and deflate Shakespeare, claim Shakespeare as “Indian,” a prized cultural possession, and an object of viewing pleasure that signifies cultural modernity. The changing, contradictory and contentious (fictionalized and real) responses to these particular performances disrupt the ongoing myth about the authority of Shakespeare, a myth specially kept alive through educational institutions in India and abroad and through an imaginary construction of audiences’ singular love for Shakespeare to support notions of “timelessness” and “universality” accorded to Shakespeare. As well, the heterogeneity of responses undoes and complicates the binary of colonizer and colonized that marks the initial entry of Shakespeare in India, as evident in the 1848 performance of *Othello* in Calcutta, to which I now return.

***Othello* in 1848**

In “Moor or Less? The Surveillance of *Othello*,” Sudipto Chatterjee and Jyotsna Singh examine the reception of James Barry’s 1848 sensational theatrical production of *Othello* at the Sans Souci Theater in Calcutta against the backdrop of nineteenth-century colonial relations. The sensation was caused by the casting of a Bengali actor, Baishnava Charan Adhya, in the role of Othello. Chatterjee and Singh analyze the reception of *Othello* in the context of the “disciplining gaze of surveillance” of racialized spaces and attribute the commotion it caused amongst colonial officials to their hidden racial anxieties at a time when colonial relations were beginning to get tense. The opening performance of Barry’s *Othello*, despite being well advertised ahead of time, was “abruptly aborted due to the opposition of a local military commanding officer, who refused permission for his men to play extras in the production” (Chatterjee and Singh 75). Chatterjee and Singh cite a letter published in the *Calcutta Star* on August 12 that describes the crowd that had gathered before the Sans Souci that evening on Park Street in white Calcutta: “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” (qtd. in Chatterjee and Singh 76).

Chatterjee and Singh also argue that the event had serious political implications, which ultimately involved the police upon “having received military notice to arrest the well-known amateurs should they have attempted

to make their appearance" (76), and even surprised the public. A report from the *Bengal Harkaru and India Gazette* throws light on the response of the public to this theater of censorship before official censorship in the form of the Dramatic Performances Censorship Act was legislated in 1876:

The friends of Young Bengal mustered in considerable numbers at the place of recreation, on Thursday night, to witness the long looked for *debut* of a native amateur in the character of Othello. Unfortunately, they were doomed to disappointment—not indeed owing to any defection on the part of the *debutant* or the Calcutta amateurs, but, solely, because the parties who were severally to have played Iago, Brabantio and Emilia, were prohibited from doing so by the peremptory military order of the Brigadier of Dum Dum. A letter to that effect, we understand, was forwarded to the stage manager by half past 6; moreover, the police were in attendance, having received military notice to arrest the well-known amateurs should they have attempted to make their appearance. Many appeared to be greatly cut up at this untoward event, but none more so than poor Mr. Barry who promised to use his every effort to produce the play on Thursday next, and thus far solace those who might surmise—"Othello's occupation's gone!" (qtd. in Frost 97)

Not showing sympathy for the Brigadier's action, when the show played the following week, several notices appeared in support of Mr. Barry. And in a bid to make amends for the show that had been cancelled, the *Bengal Harkaru and Indian Gazette* assured the public that the tickets for the cancelled performance would be valid for the reopening of *Othello*.

In an earlier article that disagrees with Chatterjee's and Singh's analysis, Christina Mangala Frost argues that despite colonial surveillance, "As far as theater audiences were concerned, Baishnavacharan Auddy's debut as Othello seems to have been a resounding success." To support her argument, Frost refers to the following remark made by a reviewer: "if the indulgent applause of the audience is to be taken as a criterion of success, Baboo Baishnavacharan Addy, can have no cause to complain" (97). Discrediting colonialist assumptions and attitudes, Frost argues that Indian viewers loved watching Shakespeare and were in fact willing to pay as much as 30 rupees (a substantial amount) to watch a performance. Yet Frost, like other critics, cannot help noticing that the reviewer who gave an act-by-act appraisal of the play also called the delivery of Adhya "somewhat cramped" and claimed that "under all circumstances, his pronunciation of English was for a native

remarkably good" (qtd. in Frost 97). Even though the popularity of the play with the (English) audience is at odds with the imposition by the military personnel and colonial lawmakers, the reviewer's comment on Adhya's speech cannot be passed off as an exercise in what Frost calls "geniality" or "constructive criticism" (97). Rather, it can be read as an extension of the hidden anxieties of difference reflected in comments on the speech acts of the native.

In order to grasp the meanings of such responses in all their complexity, it is important to look at the conditions under which *Othello* was performed. The Sans Souci theater where *Othello* was performed was founded by an Englishwoman, Mrs Esther Leach, in August 1838. The audience and patronage of the Sans Souci theater was largely European, as was the cast of characters for this play, with Mrs Leach's daughter herself playing the role of Desdemona.³ While from 1839 onwards the Sans Souci produced *The Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*, it is the production of *Othello* that was considered a landmark—primarily because an Indian played Othello for the first time with a group of European actors, a fact that was used as part of the publicity campaign for attracting audiences. The conditions under colonial relations that encouraged audiences to flock to a Shakespearean performance included entertainment for the colonials away from "home," monetary profits through ticket sales and the benefit of closer interaction with Indian middle-class spectators who could facilitate the task of governance in a country where a multitude of languages and cultural traditions posed a barrier. At the moment of expanding political and cultural imperial sway over the colony, the responses of viewers, reviewers, and officials to the 1848 *Othello* confirmed the tensions operating under asymmetrical relations of power. Christina Mangala Frost's claim that Indian spectators were willing to pay 30 rupees for a performance of Shakespeare has to be, therefore, located in the context of the growing theater culture and economy and the socio-political changes that accompanied colonial rule.

But aside from these recorded tensions, Adhya's entry into the British theater may not have been pointless, as it also enabled the native's entry into the world of colonial theater—a world that ultimately was to give rise to

3. The Sans Souci opened in 1839 as a small theater where many interested spectators had to be turned away. During the performance of *The Merchant of Venice* in 1843, Mrs Leach died as a result of her gown catching fire from the footlights. After facing financial and administrative difficulties, the Sans Souci closed down in 1849.

an intercultural and transformed Shakespeare in the colony. The conditions for such transformation had been set in motion through the performance of amateur Shakespearean productions on college stages and the private homes of wealthy Indians even before 1848 and through invitations issued to elite Indians to exclusive British theaters. These theaters saw a gradual increase in the rise of Indian spectators, substantial enough to be noticed by the *India Gazette* in the following words: “It affords us pleasure to observe such a number of respectable natives among the audience every play-night, it indicates a growing taste for the English Drama which is an auspicious sign of the progress of general literature among our native friends” (qtd. in Das Gupta 277). Some of these theaters, such as the Hindu Theatre, which was set up in 1831, the Native Theatre that was initiated in 1833, and colleges such as Hindu College, Sanskrit College and the David Hare Academy routinely began performing the plays of Shakespeare and generated for spectators consisting of Hindus, Muslims, and Europeans the viewing pleasures and “amusements” attached to the plays.

Ultimately, Adhya’s entry in the colonial theater as well as the gradual absorption and integration of Shakespearean drama into the local ethos and the social and material structuring of the local theater companies, which among other plays, also included *Othello* in their repertoire, became moments of transferring the English text to the native context. Once Shakespearean plays came to be performed by local companies in Calcutta, on school and college stages and by the commercial Parsi theaters in Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati, they neither retained the “purity” of the Shakespearean text, nor remained the exclusive domain of the colonial populace. Rather, the rising attendance of the middle-class public at Parsi theaters and other commercial venues ensured the ongoing popularity of Shakespeare’s plays.

In consequence, along with actors, directors, and translators, Shakespeare’s plays assumed many different meanings for the viewers. When Parsi theater companies performed across South Asia, their audiences moved beyond the confines of localities, comprising “British officials, the military, and wealthy Parsi merchants, soon joined by the growing class of educated professionals” (Hansen 130). By the end of the nineteenth century, low prices for tickets attracted an even more heterogeneous viewing public that included textile workers, small traders and artisans (Hansen 130). Some of the productions by these companies seem to have generated various responses that were to affect the image of the actor in popular life. For instance, “A 1903 Gujarati *Othello* became so popular that the male actor [Jayshankar] playing Desdemona adopted ‘Sundari,’ the heroine’s name in

this version, as his permanent stage name” (Chaudhuri 5). This transformation of Jayshankar’s name is an instance of how spectators contributed to the image of the actor impersonating the character by affixing the feminine stage name of the characters to the identity of the actor. In subsequent decades, according to available records, Sundari’s styles and fashions were greatly emulated by women.⁴ Between 1867 and 1915, “The neighbouring language of Marathi saw about 65 versions of Shakespeare—chiefly free adaptations . . . starting with a popular version of *Othello* composed by Mahadevshastri Kolhatkar and acted by the Aryaddharak Natak Mandali” (Chaudhuri 5). And while many “Marathi versions of Shakespeare became classics in their own right . . . The most lasting success was *Zunzarrao*, G.B. Deval’s 1890 adaptation of *Othello*,” which was revived in the 1950s (5).

Othello in Shakespeare Wallah

It is clear that over time Shakespeare came to be complicated by the ideological structures of middle-class Indian audiences, college students, dramatists and theater groups. These groups continued to produce Shakespearean plays well into the post-independence period for primarily urban theater attendees and sought to create in turn a specific kind of audience. For example, in the 1940s the Theatre Group set up in Bombay by Bobby Padamsee, who produced *Macbeth* and *Othello* as part of the repertoire, did so with the following purpose, as described by its President, Deryck Jeffries:

I think that the main function that the Group was performing and is still performing, is to assimilate what is going on in the west and present it to our own people here in this town . . . acting, delivery, every single aspect of theatre is being assimilated by us and presented as far as possible to Indian audiences, who we think, we hope and we have seen being influenced, and being able to, not recreate, but to absorb those influences. (qtd. in Gokhale 207)

From the 1950s onwards, Utpal Dutt, who trained under Geoffrey and Laura Kendal, organized through his Little Theatre Group the plays of Shakespeare for primarily urban audiences. It is to Dutt’s credit that he recognized the futility of playing for “Bengo-Anglians” (Dutt 12) and turned to folk techniques of the Jatra to perform plays such as *Macbeth* for village audi-

4. See Hansen. For more on Jayshankar Sundari, also see Kapur.

ences, which broke out of the proscenium arch conventions and transposed the Shakespearean language into a form of incantation that was familiar to village audiences. According to Dutt, the villagers appreciated the demonic portrayal of Lady Macbeth, which resonated with Indira Gandhi during the 1975 Emergency, and applauded the supernatural elements of the play (Dutt 17-18).

Yet Dutt's easy separation between village and urban audiences has led to an uncomplicated construction of urban audiences on the part of some critics, who present this audience's interest in Shakespeare primarily as an outcome of hegemonic conditioning under colonization. A layered film based on Geoffrey Kendal's memoirs about the experiences of his troupe Shakespeareana in India, *Shakespeare Wallah* (1965) shatters such assumptions by showing the declining interest in Shakespeare among largely urban spectators: schoolchildren, royalty, and army personnel. On one level, the receivers of the Shakespearean text are those ostensibly familiar with Shakespeare and whose knowledge of Shakespeare may be located in the legacy of colonial education and theater that had become prevalent in India by this time.⁵ Yet, in order to make a comment on the dying influence of the Raj with the onset of India's independence from British rule in 1947, the film makers resort to showing an audience for whom interest in Shakespeare is declining, contradicting Geoffrey Kendal's narrative regarding Indian audiences in his autobiography, *The Shakespeare Wallah*. In a nostalgic moment in the film, Mr. Buckingham laments the declining interest in his troupe by recalling to his wife Carla that Indian audiences, who laughed and cried at appropriate places, were the best in the world. To a certain degree, Mr. Buckingham's claim may not be completely off the mark. Central to the process of disseminating Shakespeare through education, memorization and routine performances by traveling companies was the position of the spectator, who was being honed to appreciate Shakespeare in a bid to retain the bard's "timeless" and "universal" appeal. The following comment by Norman Marshall, who toured India in 1948 to perform Shakespeare, attests to this position:

The Indian has an exceptional gift for memorizing. On the one or two occasions when an actor hesitated for a word he was instantly prompt-

5. This argument builds on earlier readings of *Shakespeare Wallah* in my *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India* and in my "Imperialistic Representations and Spectatorial Reception in *Shakespeare Wallah*."

ed by several members of the audience. In the past many Indians began reading Shakespeare merely for practical reasons, because during British rule in India a knowledge of the English language was essential for the young man with ambitions. But a great many Indians who at first studied Shakespeare merely to improve their knowledge of the English language eventually developed a very real appreciation of him as a poet and dramatist. (103)

So, if the Kendals performed for elite audiences, they were probably doing so for a select body of spectators not only familiar or conversant with the Shakespearean text but also conditioned to appreciate the bard as “universal” and “timeless.”

Mr. Buckingham’s construction of the Indian audience in the film is based on the memoirs of Geoffrey Kendal (*The Shakespeare Wallah*), in which Kendal provides a triumphant account of the appeal of Shakespearean drama through a scripting of the audience. He presents an overpowering sense of the popularity of Shakespearean plays performed by his troupe, a claim he supports through statistical data and letters received from locals.⁶ One such letter received from a local theater group in Trivandrum, the “Forward Bloc,” is cited as follows: “We thank you all for having given us so much knowledge about Shakespeare and his plays. . . . Somehow or other a bond has linked the ‘Forward Bloc’ and the ‘Shakespeareana’ together. We pray to God to help us in keeping this tie strong forever. Let Shakespeare keep India and Britain united” (Kendal 89). This letter presents the Shakespeareana troupe as central to the transmission of Shakespeare to Indian audiences who ostensibly become happy recipients of the Shakespearean text. And while it is important not to dismiss the letter he cites or to minimize the viewing pleasures of some spectators, such representation serves to reinforce the pervasive ethos of colonialist representations that imagined the Indian audience’s love of Shakespeare. Here I would like to cite a critical voice, writing about the position of Shakespeare in Bengal in the nineteenth century:

While the English playhouses by their production in English, specially Shakespeare’s plays, created an appetite for theatrical performances, the foundation of the Hindu College in 1816, and the teaching of Shakespeare by eminent teachers like Richardson [who was also a

6. Between June 1953 and December 1956 Kendal’s company gave 879 performances to audiences that included royalty and schoolchildren.

founder of the Chowringhee theater] created in the minds of the students—the intelligentsia of modern Bengal—a literary taste for drama as such, and taught them, not only how to appreciate Shakespeare criticism, but also to recite and act scenes from his plays. This fashion spread to every academic institution. (Bhattacharya 29)

Jyotsna Singh's comments on this quote aptly point out the "blithe" identification by this critic regarding natives' appreciation of Shakespeare as "spontaneous" and "fashionable" ("Different Shakespeares" 450). If the notion that Indians loved Shakespeare was indeed a colonialist legacy, as Singh argues, then the contents of the letter that Kendal cites as evidence of Indian spectators' proclaimed love for Shakespeare are to be located in this legacy. In Mr. Buckingham's claim can be detected a lamentation for the loss of empire and its text and an attempt to reconstruct the idealized authority of Shakespearean drama imagined by critics and routinely claimed by teachers, travelers and theater troupes.

Recognizing this culturally and educationally conditioned love for Shakespeare, Ivory and Merchant convey this through the highly appreciative reactions of the Maharajah of Betawar, who is conversant with Shakespeare and can comfortably quote lines from his plays. Yet it is to negate the falsifying claims of such a legacy that they show an audience response that is fraught with tensions and even contradictory. The staging of the murder scene from *Othello* in the film becomes an important moment that traces an understanding of the spectators' interactive dynamics with Shakespeare. As the scene begins, Manjula, the glamorous Hindi cinema actress in the film, enters the auditorium to watch the play and within a few seconds creates a stir as spectators rise from their seats to look at her, causing a disturbance in the performance. To make matters worse, a photographer rises from amidst the audience in the lower arena and takes a picture of Manjula, ignoring the performance. This alternate response is made visible to the film's audience not just through a snapshot of Manjula (and the subsequent disturbance) but is highlighted through the reaction of Mr. Buckingham (playing Othello), who stops his enactment and directly addresses the audience to become quiet, thus causing a disruption in the staging of the play. The cinematic angles enabled by the camera further play up the disinterest of the spectators in the performance and refuse a valorization of the Shakespearean play. The camera also attempts to destroy the proscenium arch (that keeps spectacle and spectators apart) through its focus on the stage, the proscenium arch, and the spectators in the same shot. The longest space in this shot is, however,

provided to the viewers of the play and to Manjula, who after drawing the spectators' attention and signing a few autographs, leaves the auditorium out of boredom and disgust as Desdemona is murdered on stage. Both the film's spectators and the camera ensure that this particular staging of *Othello* cannot go on.

Aside from this disruption, the *Othello* scene in the film is also interesting for highlighting the representation of race, especially through its focus on Mr. Buckingham's painted face as he plays the role of Othello. On one level, this follows the practice of a White actor playing Othello, who in this case also happens to be the leader of the troupe and therefore the one to play the lead character. Yet it is a moment that is highlighted through camera work which focuses on Mr. Buckingham's painted face in several different shots and which is further enhanced through a double-image as he sits in front of the mirror offstage, after the performance, to remove his makeup. One can only speculate as to whether or not Ivory and Merchant were aware of the 1848 *Othello* in Calcutta where the native actor Adhya's performance as Othello in an English production had sent the colonial world of Calcutta "agog." Yet from the critic's perspective, it allows for a juxtaposition of this scene with the 1848 performance, whose reception amongst English viewers and reviewers reflected "anxiety about the possible cultural and racial contamination of the English stage and society in Calcutta" (Singh, "Different Shakespeares" 446). And while the nineteenth-century performance exposed the racial anxieties of the colonial populace of Calcutta a decade before India was to officially come under the British Crown in 1858, this reversal of the role at the moment of British departure (the film being set in 1947) highlights for the film's audience the racial underpinnings of the ideology that the natives cannot represent themselves. It reinforces the dominant dictum that the natives "need to be represented."

Whether it is the presence of Manjula, Mr. Buckingham's appearance as Othello, or the violence enacted in the murder scene that distracts spectators is not made completely clear. Yet the frenetic energy in the auditorium and the spectators' lack of engagement with the stage performance casts doubts for the film's audience regarding the popularity of a "pure" Shakespeare as imagined by Mr. Buckingham and as propagated by critics. Additionally, the antiquated costumes of the performers (suggestive of the fossilized version of Shakespeare that the Buckinghams want to preserve) stand in stark contrast to Manjula's glamorous clothes and makeup and further highlight the outdatedness of the particular performances given by the Buckinghams. Given Kendal's enthusiasm for his troupe, for Shakespeare and for Indian

audiences, it is not surprising that Merchant and Ivory's *Shakespeare Wallah* made him rather unhappy. Yet the contentious response that the film foregrounds becomes an exercise in what Ralph Yarrow identifies as reception theory that "tries to grapple with how the text is received" and raises our understanding of "what receivers bring with them and what happens to them through interaction with the performance event" (97).

Shakespeare Wallah's representation of spectators' disinterest in the particular version of *Othello* staged in the film was clearly intended to function as a "metaphor" for the end of the British Raj and the nationalistic ideal on the eve of independence, as recalled by Merchant himself, who believed that "the British must leave" (qtd. in Pym 14). In the world of Indian theater, however, Shakespearean plays, including *Othello*, continue to be performed and applauded. Some famous productions include the 1969 Urdu version by Ebrahim Alkazi, a celebrated director of the National School of Drama in Delhi, and Roysten Abel's 1990s *Othello, A Play in Black and White*. Produced by the United Players Guild, a Delhi-based theater company that Abel and Lushin Dubey set up in 1995 and that became known for its experimental Shakespearean plays, Abel's play was performed in different parts of the country, and won the Fringe Award at the Edinburgh Theater Festival in 1999. Unlike the *Othello* we view in *Shakespeare Wallah*, which faithfully follows the storyline, Abel's play, which shows an Indian troupe rehearsing *Othello* under an Italian director, appealed to audiences because it was "only partly about the Black Moor and his jealous, doomed love for Desdemona" and was not "black and white" either. Rather, as its director claimed, it was "about hierarchies that operate at various levels in India, of race, society, and regions" (Sharma). Part of its appeal also emerged from its trilingual dialogues in Hindi, Assamese, and English and its combination of diverse styles ranging from kathakali "to expressionism and school-Shakespeare productions" (Sharma).

Kathakali *Othello*

Other experiments with *Othello* have shown up in Arjun Raina's adaptation of the South Indian dance-drama form Kathakali in a "fusion piece" combining *Othello* and the *Dream* (Delhi, 2001) and notably by the Delhi-based exponent Sadanam Balakrishnan, who produced a Kathakali *Othello* in 1996. The fiercest critique for Balakrishnan's *Othello* came from Ania Loomba who finds a silence on the issue of race, even though it "speaks eloquently about the dynamics of the post-colonial evolution of Kathakali" (155). Says Loomba:

The Kathakali *Othello* inflects the Moor's agonies in a different direction and erases the schisms central . . . to Shakespeare's play. . . . It flamboyantly reshapes *Othello's* tragedy in the language of a four hundred year-old form first devised to perform stories from the Hindu epic Ramayana. Its *Othello* is neither a black nor a moor, but takes the form of a Hindu warrior. (155)

In her article "Folk Shakespeare," Poonam Trivedi rejects Loomba's critique that Balakrishnan's Kathakali *Othello* fails "to account for the presence of racism in the text and for its stereotyping of 'blackness'" (186). She argues instead that most "audiences in Delhi, where it has had several stagings, have responded warmly to this experimentation" (186). Trivedi contends that while the "casting of Iago as a typical katti, that is, black-bearded, red-nosed, vicious character robed in black, was, for some, a loaded stereotyping" (187), the color black does not "signify evil so singularly in a culture of predominantly dark-skinned people whose major deities and demons are both dark-colored. The issue of *Othello's* blackness, therefore, becomes more than a mere black/white evil/good dichotomy" (187).

Trivedi's critique of Loomba arises from a larger vision that demands a "greater critical negotiation" of various Shakespearean forms: folk, *desi*, *videshi*, adapted, and translated (172). She argues that certain kinds of "transculturation, interculturalism, and even indigenization, far from polluting, are in fact, pollinating, enforcing new energy in moribund performative traditions, both Eastern and Western, and generating protean forms of Shakespeare" (172). Trivedi thus complicates "postcolonial" readings of *Othello* that are derived from an examination of racially inflected asymmetrical relations of power to one that accounts for caste and communal politics. To this end, she gives the example of *Kaliyattam*, Jayaraaj's 1998 film based on *Othello*, which she finds as "the most acute postcolonial reworking of Shakespeare into folk theater forms," but one where the transposition of *Othello* into caste and communal politics and discriminations "more pernicious in Indian society, form a more apt equivalent of *Othello's* 'blackness' than an imported notion of race, which remains largely a Western postcolonial dilemma" (187). Emerging at the crossroads of race, caste and gender politics, such points of entry reflect different locational urgencies.

But the Kathakali *Othello* can also be seen as an example of the experimental mode that intensified during this phase which, under the influence of the "theater of roots" movement, was marked by intense experimentation and led to playwrights and directors drawing upon the repertoire of the

regional, the local and the folk, which they combined with urban settings. Such emphasis was specially reflected in the Sahitya Akademy's Nehru Centenary Festival of 1989 where Suresh Awasthi, general secretary of the Sangeet Natak Akademy from 1965-1975, strongly propagated a return to the "theater of roots." The "theater of roots" movement was promoted following India's independence by playwrights and directors who felt the need to break away from colonial models that had influenced theater and sought an autonomous identity for India's drama in the traditional, the folk, and the classical. According to Erin Mee, the "roots" movement can best be understood as "a way of decolonizing the theater, as a politically driven search for an indigenous aesthetic and dramaturgy" (2). Becoming the "most influential theater movement in the fifty years since independence" and officially backed by the Sangeet Natak Akademy (Mee 2), it found its support amongst playwrights such as Girish Karnad, Kavalam Narayan Pannikar and Habib Tanvir. The movement itself, however, invited controversy with some criticizing it as a regressive invention of an "authentic" Indian identity and others praising it for preserving and bringing decaying forms into the urban theater and simultaneously putting urban artists in touch with their "roots" and the realities of indigenous theater. At their best, according to Samik Bandyopadhyay, "the directors interacting with the traditional and/or folk theaters sought to go to the core of these forms, to catch their rhythms or motivating energies, gestural idioms, occasionally formal conventions or devices, and use them to convey a modern sensibility at work" (427). Trivedi's appreciation of the Kathakali *Othello* can also be situated in this moment: "The *Kathakali Othello* is the total immersion variance of folk Shakespeare. It does not consciously seek to reinterpret or retell, but instead provides a powerful alternative experience of Shakespeare's Play. Shakespeare's poetry is enacted by the rhythms and gesture of a dance-drama" (186).

In the return to traditional theatrical forms that marked the "theater of roots" movement can be detected a sense of cultural nationalism, which in decolonized societies foregrounds questions of identity as central to the nation. Yet Fanon also points to the pitfalls of "nationalistic moorings," that can be marked by blindness to internal fissures and result in an erasure of the contradictions of postcolonial nation states through a reinvention of cultural forms and identities in static and cohesive terms. Is the Kathakali *Othello* then a way to evoke a sense of cultural nationalism that sought its energy in the revival of traditional theater forms? To find an explanation, we may return to Ania Loomba's brief description of the Kathakali form and of

the International Center of Kathakali founded in 1960. According to Loomba, the Center “marks the attempt to forge traditional, regional traditions into a national (and perhaps nationalist) conception of the Indian Arts. It is one of the many similar institutions conceived within the Nehruvian ideal of a multicultural yet united India” (15). Amidst the political tensions of the 1990s, seen for instance in Hindu-Muslim discord following the demolition of the Babri Masjid by Hindu fundamentalists, the Kathakali *Othello*, according to Loomba, seeks to erase the fissures within the nation by re-presenting theater in terms of its aesthetics rather than politics. As Loomba argues, “The appropriate context for the Kathakali adaptation of Shakespeare is thus within indigenous performative and intellectual histories rather than in simply the colonial heritage of English literary texts in India” (159).

In this context, the audience’s “warm” response to the Delhi production can be read as being, on the one hand, supportive of the “theater of roots” ideal that rejected, especially during the 1989 Nehru Centenary Festival, the Western presence in urban Indian theater as a slavish imitation of a colonial mindset. On the other hand, given India’s longstanding engagement with European culture, the Kathakali *Othello*, with its accommodation and fusion of the traditional with the Western, can be seen as reinforcing and recognizing the two streams as mutually influencing and inseparable, undoing in the process the binaries of rural and urban, traditional and modern, and colonial and indigenous. In any case, despite Trivedi’s disagreement with Loomba’s reading, their analyses reveal the transformative power of this “local” form of *Othello* both at the level of aesthetics and of a politics that brings questions of colonialism, nationalism and modernity into its fold.

Othello as Omkara

Trivedi’s insistence on the relevance of caste, clan and communal politics as opposed to race provides an important explanation for the popular reception of *Omkara*. Unlike *Shakespeare Wallah* and the 1848 productions, *Omkara* does not speak to racial politics. With Shakespeare’s play providing the master-plot for the film, *Omkara* readjusts the story of *Othello* by locating it in the interiors of Uttar Pradesh in order to speak to clan rivalries and contests over caste and gender. In this film we find *Othello* completely transmuted into the local and made accessible to a public whose daily lives are surrounded by conflicts, local rivalries and power-play in the interiors of contemporary India. To this end, *Omkara* neither fits the paradigm of imperialism nor liberation agendas that may have marked other radical stage in-

terpretations. Displaying little awareness of empire or imperial and racial politics as in the other productions of *Othello*, Bhardwaj transforms its main protagonist Omkara into a godfather type character belonging to the crime genre that now dominates the Bollywood scenario. The popularity of the film lies primarily in its cinematic quality, the particularity of language, its music and all the fare of Hindi masala film it can offer its audience. For example, Raja Sen calls it a “superlative-exhausting work of passion and tribute, skill and style” and then goes on to identify five reasons for this “Spellbinding stuff”: “language,” “loyalty,” “players” (actors), “sights and sounds” and “creativity.”⁷

In advertising *Omkara* as the story of *Othello*, however, the film does use its association with Shakespeare to accumulate cultural capital and relies upon the prior familiarity of spectators with the Shakespearean text for its global success, visibility and marketability. To an extent, one can see the results of such efforts in the global reception of the film. According to reports, “*Omkara* opened with an excellent box office response during the release weekend the world over including major international markets like UK, US, UAE, and Australia.”⁸ In the reviews it received in leading newspapers in the UK, critics framed the discussion mainly in terms of Shakespeare and *Othello*. For instance, Peter Bradshaw wrote the following in *The Guardian*: “Vishal Bhardwaj’s *Omkara* is a flawed but worthwhile attempt to transfer *Othello* to the modern setting of Uttar Pradesh in India and to render the story in a Bollywood style.” Bradshaw also found the adaptation of *Othello* appropriate, because Bollywood, he added, “with its liking for ingenious fantasy and romance, has often seemed to me to resemble in style, nothing so much as a late Shakespearean play.”⁹ The film also received high accolades from Philip French in *The Observer*, who called the adaptation “ingenious” and wrote the following: “Mobile phones are used where Shakespeare employed eaves dropping; an erotic, bejeweled waistband replaces the handkerchief as a compromising device.”¹⁰ If these reviews are an indication, then one notices that while Shakespeare becomes the refer-

7. Quoted in “Why *Omkara* blew my mind,” 18 Feb. 2007. <<http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/aug/02rs.htm>>.

8. See www.erosentertainment.com/boxoffice_reports_for_omkara_worldwide.html for detailed figures and reviews.

9. Quoted in “Foreign audiences flock to *Omkara*,” Arthur J Pais in New York, August 02, 2006, 11:15 IST. 6 Mar. 2007. <<http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/aug/02ajp.htm>>.

10. Quoted in “Foreign audiences flock to *Omkara*,” as cited above.

ence point as these critics locate *Omkara* in the global reach of Bollywood cinema and its technologies, any reference to racial power-play, that is central to the original text, disappears. Perhaps the reference to Shakespeare constitutes one of the reasons for *Omkara*'s popularity in the West. Yet the absence of any reference to race-relations in the post 9/11 milieu that is marked by racial tensions in the West, along with Asians' (carefully documented) history of race-relations in Britain, appears to be a major gloss in the critical reception of the film. One can argue that Bhardwaj's refusal to place race at the heart of his adaptation of *Othello* is to bring attention to other kinds of urgencies that mark the contemporary postcolonial milieu in India: problems and crime related to caste warfare and the violence against women that remains at the center of these crimes, along with lawlessness, clan rivalry and political deceit. To this end, *Omkara*'s achievement lies in establishing, for a global audience, the ability of the Shakespearean play to speak to India's local ethos.

Conclusion

The reception of these varied representations of *Othello* by audiences and critics, as discussed above, highlights the complexities attached to the meanings of Shakespearean drama for Indian audiences and critics. The articles in *India's Shakespeare* show the varying degrees of influence of Shakespeare across languages, regions, localities and genres, and attribute the reasons for the multiple reworkings of his plays to a number of factors ranging from fascination for the storylines to the need for increasing commercial appeal for audiences. Rajiva Verma, in tracing the presence of Shakespeare in popular mainstream Bombay cinema from its early phase to the present, argues that Shakespeare's presence is "not as a cultural icon but as a resource to be exploited for characters and situations, often with our acknowledgement. They point to a greater complexity in the relationship between metropolis and periphery than postcolonial theory would seem to allow" (270). According to Verma, "an audience brought up on a diet of Bombay films would find Shakespeare's plays, if it could read them, full of echoes from the films" (287). For the Parsi theater too, which was the source for Shakespeare's entry into the world of Bombay cinema, performing Shakespeare was "less a matter of taking over a world-view or moral vision and more of one professional playwright borrowing plots and situations and other tricks from another" (Verma 272). Instead of sticking to "faithful" versions of plays, playwrights such as Agha Hashr Kashmiri

(1879-1935) and Mehdi Hasan "Ahsan" rejected Shakespeare's "tragic vision" and "poetic imagination," which, in their view, did not sit well with Indian audiences.¹¹

Numerous examples of such shifts can be found in adaptations, performances and translations of Shakespeare's plays in India. This, however, does not mean that readings that emphasize the links between Shakespeare in India and colonialism and its "civilizing mission" are to be dismissed. Even Poonam Trivedi (her critique of Loomba notwithstanding) admits: "it cannot be denied that it is with the development of postcolonial theory in the west that the postcolony as a whole has found a space and a voice with which to interrogate and debate its own cultural history" (22). And if we pay close attention to the 1848 *Othello* and its critical reception, the fictional representation of the audience response to *Othello* in *Shakespeare Wallah*, the meanings of the Kathakali *Othello*, and also to *Omkara*, what we find is a critical negotiation with the original text that promotes what Trivedi identifies as an enabling interculturalism and "pollination." Such transformations, however, cannot dismiss the colonial connection to Shakespeare. Rather, what we find is that the performances of "Shakespeare," as opposed to the dissemination of his work to reading audiences through schools, colleges, and universities, are accompanied by different sets of assumptions and investments. Unlike the educational curriculum that constructed Shakespeare as a harbinger of cultural authority, a trend that continues in the academy,¹² the deviation from the "original" through varied performative modes and practices seeks to forge an interpretive relationship with audiences that complicates the binaries of colonizer and colonized.

*University of Western Ontario
Canada*

Works Cited

- Awasthi, Suresh. "Theater of Roots: Encounter with Tradition." *TDR* 18.4 (Winter 1989): 48-69.
- Bandyopadhyay, Samik. "Theater: From Metropolis to Wasteland." *Independent India: The First Fifty Years*. Ed. Hiranmay Karlekar. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. 419-28.

11. According to Verma, Agha Hashr Kashmiri is quoted as saying that he did not like the "idea of the audience going home in tears at the end of a show" (272).

12. See Harish Trivedi, "Shakespeare in India".

- Bhatia, Nandi. *Acts of Authority/Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004; rpt. Oxford University Press, 2004.
- . "Imperialistic Representations and Spectatorial Reception in *Shakespeare Wallah*." *Modern Drama* 45.1 (Spring 2002): 61-75.
- Bhattacharya, S.K. "Shakespeare and Bengali Theater." *Indian Literature* 7 (1964): 26-39.
- Chatterjee, Sudipto, and Jyotsna Singh. "Moor or Less? The Surveillance of Othello, Calcutta 1848." *Shakespeare and Appropriation*. Ed. Christy Desmet and Robert Sawyer. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. 65-82.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta. "Shakespeare in India." 10 Sept. 2007. 1-7. <<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/Criticism/shakespearein/india6.html>>.
- Das Gupta, Hemendra Nath. *The Indian Stage*. Vol. 1. Calcutta: Metropolitan Printing and Publishing House, n.d.
- Dutt, Utpal. Interview with Samik Bandopadhyay. *Contemporary Indian Theater: Interviews with Playwrights and Directors*. New Delhi: Sangeet Natak Akademi, 1989. 11-21.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- "Foreign audiences flock to *Omkara*." Arthur J Pais in New York, August 02, 2006, 11:15 IST. 6 Mar. 2007. <<http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/aug/02ajp.htm>>.
- Frost, Christine Mangala. "30 Rupees for Shakespeare: A Consideration of Imperial Theatre in India." *Modern Drama* 35.1 (1992): 90-100.
- Gokhale, Shanta. "Rich Theater, Poor Theater." *Bombay: Mosaic of Modern Culture*. Ed. Sujata Patel and Alice Thorne. Bombay: Oxford University Press, 194-209.
- Hansen, Kathryn. "Making Women Visible: Gender and Race Cross-Dressing in the Parsi Theater." *Theatre Journal* 51.2 (May 1999): 127-47.
- Kapur, Anuradha. "Impersonation, Narration, Desire, and the Parsi Theater." *India's Literary History. Essays in the Nineteenth Century*. Ed. Vasudha Dalmia and Stuart Blackburn. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003. 87-118.
- Kendal, Geoffrey. *The Shakespeare Wallah: The Autobiography of Geoffrey Kendal*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986.
- Loomba, Ania. "Local-Manufacture made-in-India Othello Fellows: Issues of Race, Hybridity and Location in Post-Colonial Shakespeares." *Postcolonial Shakespeares*. Ed. Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin. London: Routledge, 1998. 143-63.
- Marshall, Norman. "Shakespeare Abroad." *Talking of Shakespeare*. Ed. John Garrett. London: Hoddon and Stoughton, 1954. 91-111.
- Mee, Erin B., ed. *Drama Contemporary: India*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press (A Paj Book), 2001.
- Omkara*. Dir. Vishal Bhardwaj. 2006.
- Pym, John. *The Wandering Company: Twenty-One Years of Merchant-Ivory Films*. London: British Film Institute/New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1983.
- Shakespeare Wallah*. Dir. James Ivory. Prod. Ismael Merchant. Perf. Geoffrey Kendal, Laura Liddel, Shashi Kapoor, and Madhur Jaffrey. Ivory and Merchant/Fox, 1965.
- Sharma, Sanjukta. "Half of Shakespeare & all of India." *Indian Express*. 23 Oct. 1999. 10 Sept. 2007. <<http://www.indianexpress.com/indianews/ie/daily/19991023/ile23019.html>>.

- Singh, Jyotsna. "Different Shakespeares: The Bard in Colonial/Postcolonial India." *Theatre Journal* 41 (1989): 445-58.
- Sisson, C.J. *Shakespeare in India: Popular Adaptations on the Bombay Stage*. London: Oxford University Press for The Shakespeare Association, 1926.
- Trivedi, Harish. "Shakespeare in India: Colonial Transactions." *Colonial Transactions: English Literature in India*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995. 10-28.
- Trivedi, Poonam. "'Folk Shakespeare': The Performance of Shakespeare in Traditional Indian Theater Forms." *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation and Performance*. Ed. Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004. 171-92.
- Trivedi, Poonam, and Dennis Bartholomeusz, eds. *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation and Performance*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004.
- Verma, Rajiva. "Shakespeare in Hindi Cinema." *India's Shakespeare: Translation, Interpretation and Performance*. Ed. Poonam Trivedi and Dennis Bartholomeusz. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2004. 269-90.
- "Why *Omkara* blew my mind." 18 Feb. 2007. <<http://www.rediff.com/movies/2006/aug/02rs.htm>>.
- Yarrow, Ralph. *Indian Theatre: Theatre of Origin, Theatre of Freedom*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001.
- www.erosentertainment.com/boxoffice_reports_for_omkara_worldwide.html