Othello in India

Shakespeare's influence is not only momentous in English society but found to be ingrained in cultures outside of England as well. Of those, India, a country with such a rich history of storytelling through Sanskrit Theater, Parsi Theater, Bombay cinema, and Bollywood has had an influx of British literary influence through British colonialism. Since then, Shakespearean works have not only influenced Indian entertainment but has taken a life of its own in the various ways they have been reimagined. In this paper, I will describe what kind of course the specific Shakespearean play, *Othello*, took through the evolution of performance in India and analyze two Bollywood films, *Kaliyattam* (1997) and *Omkara* (2006), through the lens of cultural adaptation.

British Influence in India

Figure 1: An English grandee of the East India Company depicted riding in an Indian procession, 1825-1830. Photograph: Print Collector/Getty Images

British colonization of India from the mid-1700s to the early 1900s (Blackwell) introduced a lot of British culture to India, especially emphasizing English literary education (Chambers). Even when Britain withdrew its political power over India in 1947, the influence of

English literature—and particularly Shakespeare's works—in Indian colleges and universities

remained (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 1). In fact, the admiration of Shakespeare became its own

industry of sorts that employed teachers, annotators, examiners, printers, publishers, booksellers,

translators, adaptors, producers, alike (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 1). Though its influence reached

outside the literary circle to inform the greatest leaders of the society (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 5),

the Western lens has remained the dominant lens by which Indian dramatic culture is observed.

Sanskritists with English-language education all studied Shakespeare in college and held

Shakespeare in such high regard that they applied Shakespearean criticism and values to even

their appreciation of Sanskrit drama such as the works of Kalidasa (V. Raghavan 109).

Figure 2: Performance of Subhadra Dhananjayam Kuttiyattam by the students of Kerala Kalamandalam

Indigenous dramatic traditions in India, such as Sanskrit theater, were on the decline in the

eleventh century, but even sparse folk and traditional performances started to disappear "by the

eighteenth century due to the lack of patronage" (Thakur 4). This cultural void was quickly filled

with English theater, which, as articulated by Sudipto Chatterjee, seemed to distinguish a new

cultural identity among the educated elite in Bengal:

> *"The Bengal Renaissance was the outgrowth of the grafting of a foreign culture onto a more-than-willing native culture. For the Bengalis their response to what was imposed by the British was a search for a cultural identity that could, at some level, set them on a par with their European overlords" ("Mise-en-(Colonial)-Scene" 20 quoted by Thakur 2).*

The meeting between a culture longing for art and a culture imposing art spurred the birth of "Modern" Indian theater. Starting in 1831, theater buildings opened everywhere in Calcutta, the capital of British territories at the time (Thakur 2). The early productions were very similar to the common "English theater" with a "proscenium stage, box sets, carefully chosen costumes, and well-rehearsed dialogues in English" (Thakur 2). This was a stark contrast to the typical Sanskrit theater that used detailed narration and implied, not physical, props and sets (Raghavan 41-42). In fact, the Calcutta play houses were "catered exclusively to English audiences," having English ushers and doorkeepers as well as mostly English casts (Thakur 2-3). The introduction of English theater, therefore, was not simply foreign content, but an incursion of a new form of theater experience.

Figure 3: THEATRE ROYAL: This is where Lewis's Theatre Royal stood at 16 Chowringhee next to Grand Hotel Arcadia. Photographer: Unknown

Figure 4: View from the stage in 1918. Photographer: Unknown

English productions shed light on how a culture of anti-black racism affected perceptions of native performers. A record from 1848 tells "of a native Bengali actor Baishnav Charan Adhya (aka Addy) performing *Othello* in an otherwise all-English cast at the *Sans Souci* theater in Calcutta" (Thakur 3). However, the casting decision may have been made based on the color of his skin more than his histrionic talents (Thakur 3). In an English newspaper, Addy was called a "real unpainted nigger[1] Othello," an epithet that speaks to English culture's willingness to elide anti-black and anti-brown racism. It also alludes to both the fact that the character of Othello was often played in 'blackface' by white actors and commented on for his "blackness" (Sanders 12). In fact, the character was played by white actors with painted faces until late in the 20th century (Sanders 55). Beyond this practice, the sense of racism came from a demeaning of Indian actors such as the review in *The Englishman* remarking, "taking it as a whole, we consider the performance wonderful for a Native" (Thakur 3). The statement points to the cultural-elitism of the English, judging native performance and art by English standards and neglecting the colonial privilege by which it was asserting superiority over Indian culture.

As different cultures have different values and are often drawn to different topics, Indian culture was drawn to the stories of *Othello* and *Hamlet* more than other Shakespearean plays. The reason may have been that *Othello,* in particular, addressed tensions around "race," which is easily relatable to the tensions around "caste" in India (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 2). The Indian affinity for these two specific plays may also be born out of the similarities between Shakespearean stories and Kalidasian stories, such as *Othello*'s "tragedy of the 'lost

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[1]As Randall Kennedy explains, the n-word is connected to "many of the worst episodes of bigotry in American history [including] innumerable lynchings, beatings, acts of arson, and other racially motivated attacks upon blacks"; the n-word should be seen as an epithet with potential to do profound harm. The word is quoted in this paper with the purpose of presenting history plainly without embellishment or concealment of racism's comoness in discussions of *Othello*, cross-culturally, into the late twentieth century.

handkerchief' and [...] *Sakuntalam*['s], the tragedy of the 'lost ring'" (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 4).

Interestingly, Shakespearean adaptations in India "are more intended for the study and less for representation on the stage" (S. Gupta's thesis on Shakespeare in India' (1924) quoted by K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 2), and this allows more room for analysis and experimentation without the constraints of accuracy. In some adaptations, "translators have sometimes given even a Shakespearean tragedy a forced 'happy ending', following the notorious example of Nahum Tate's version of King Lear" (K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar 3) where both Lear and Cordelia survive to reestablish an empire of "peace and plenty" (Hardman 915). In fact, Greek tragedies were nearly non-existent in Sanskrit dramas because of the principles in Hinduism that "suffering and all varieties of human misery are illusory" (Bhattacharji 14). This worldview is essentially incompatible with ideas of moral redemption and the finality of death more familiar in later European theater influenced by the Greeks (Bhattacharji 15). Therefore, changing the endings of Shakespearean tragedies can be understood as a tailoring to the values of religion and culture.

During the time of increasing British control over India in the 18th to 20th century, government authority passed legislation that promoted their literature over Indian tradition. A seemingly benign legislation, "the 1853 Act[,] which introduced competitive examination for civil servants included English literature and language as optional subjects which included Shakespeare's plays" (Thakur 4). Therefore, natives who aspired for more stable financial situations or for higher levels of education were more likely to be exposed to Shakespearean works. It is important to note, however, that this association encouraged the educated Indian middle-class to attack folk and traditional performances as "being 'licentious,' 'immoral,' and 'degraded,'" convincing them of a need to "cleanse" traditional performances (Thakur 2-3). Similarly, English-educated Indian translators were said to prefer reading Shakespeare in

English because reading a Hindi or Telugu translation "was admission of one's inferior status" (S.K. Das49 quoted by Thakur 5), in other words, a sign of less education. Fluency and articulateness in English became a measurement of one's intelligence and status. The force by which English influence turned native people of India against their own culture poses the question whether Britain's revival of performing arts in India acted as a form of preservation or destruction.

Shakespeare in Sanskrit Theater

Towards the end of the 19th century in India, Shakespeare was often translated to Sanskrit by being turned into prose versions of the plays, many examples of which were published in the Sahridaya, a leading Sanskrit magazine of the South during that time (Raghavan 110). Shakespearean works being translated into prose rather than a script indicates they were meant to be read rather than performed, which supports the previous claim that literary analysis of Shakespeare plays were more popular than production. Prose versions of Othello were published in Sahridaya but also outside of it: "Rajaraja Varma of Trivandrum, reputed Sanskrit scholars of those times, wrote his own prose version of Othello under the Sanskritised title 'Uddalakacarita'" and "M. Venkataramanacarya of the Sanskrit College, Vizianagaram, wrote 'Shakespeare-nataka-Kathavali' which was a Sanskrit version of Lamb's Tales from Shakespeare, where 19 stories were presented (Raghavan 110-111). Observing that these translations not only popularized Shakespeare but added to the repute of Sanskrit scholars attests to the intellectual rigor Shakespearean works were attributed with in India.

Figure 5: Cover of Sahridaya Sanskrit Journal: Sri Vani Vilas Press, Srirangam, 1924

Often, translation would mean the lines of the script would be converted into "verses of the long Sardulavikridita metre" without omission of any ideas from the original (V. Raghavan 112). Although many translators may have the intention of being faithful to the text, cross-cultural translation requires arduous parsing of figures of speech and culturally specific references. Some compilers attempted to decrease the awkwardness of translation by substituting parts of the play with "well-known passage[s] from Sanskrit [theater...] as close as possible to the one in English" (V. Raghavan 112). Some compilers went further, however, to not only familiarize the references but also familiarize the form. Krishnamacharya, a gifted writer who edited the *Sahridaya* magazines, often added Prakrit form for the lower characters in line with the Sanskrit form, a method traditional to Sanskrit drama. He also gave character names and location names "an Indian turn," and while he kept the number of acts the same, got rid of any scene divisions within acts by the common Sanskrit practice (V. Raghavan 113). Although these works are regarded as translations of Shakespeare, the intentional artistic choices of the translators make them additionally worthy of independent merit.

Shakespeare in Parsi Theater

Sohrab Modi's *Khoon Ka Khoon* (1935). Modi's films carried strong influences of Parsi theatre.
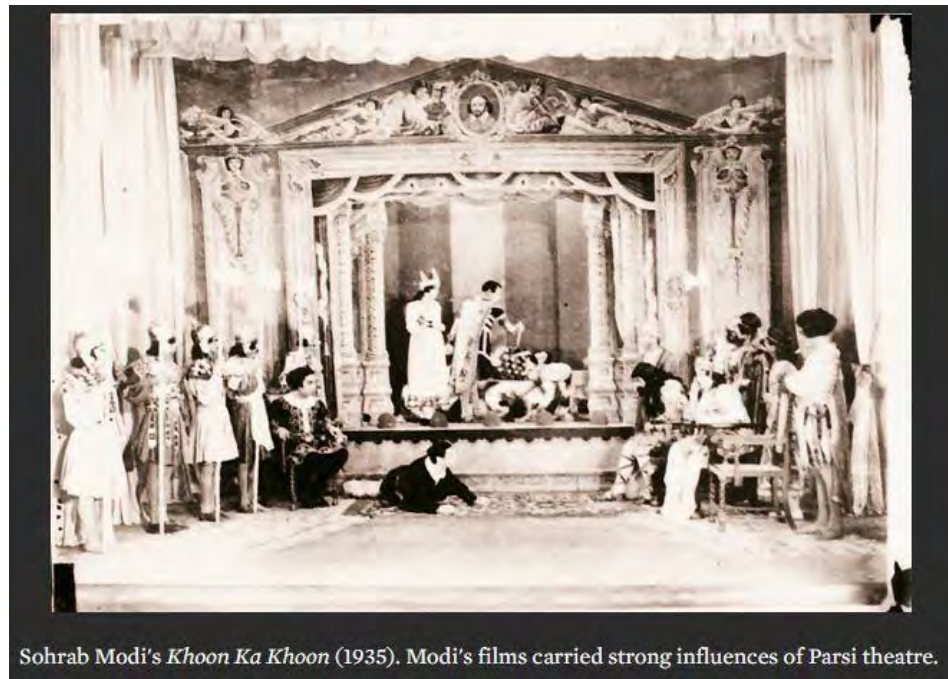
Figure 6: Source: Unknown

Between the 1870s and 1920s, amid India's independence movement, was the rise of Parsi

Theater, a form of Bombay performance characterized by "melodramatic plots, their emotional

appeal, expansive sets and costumes, and wonderful stage effects" (Thakur 5). The form,

representative of popular theater in mid-nineteenth century London—also influenced by German

playwrights Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller—was unsurprisingly well-catered to Shakespearean

works. It was popular among Parsi playwrights to adapt Shakespeare, by crafting narratives

around the existing plays. Themes that may not resonate as strongly with Indian audiences such

as "father-daughter incest" were dropped and replaced with themese such as betrayal of a king.

In some productions, even genres were flipped. Due to "the absence of tragedy as a genre in

classical Indian theater and in folk theater," many tragedies like King Lear were given happy

endings such as Cordelia being reunited with Lear and being crowned (Yajnik 171 quoted by

Thakur 6).

The creative flexibility allowed for the palatability of Shakespeare among Indian audiences and the growing popularity of Shakespearean works in India. Well known Shakespearean adapters include "Agha Hashr Kashmiri, popularly known as 'Shakespeare-e-Hind,' Narain Prasad Betab, Ahsan Lucknowi, Edulgi Khori and Mehdi Hasan" (Thakur 6) and in 1934, there were documented to be at least two hundred Parsi adaptations of Shakespeare in Indian languages (Thakur 6). The freedom to adapt had allowed for a much greater appreciation and permeation of Shakespeare throughout Indian performance. It also changed Shakespeare's plays from being subjects of academic admiration to sources for new creative ambitions. In some ways, the change in regard of Shakespeare may have been a part of reclaiming power of a colonized culture.

In Parsi Theater, music was a large and important part of the productions. The audience would be given "opera books" with lyrics so that they could sing along to their favorite songs (Thakur 6). The songs would be a mix of Indian classical music and Western music, and the songs would contribute to the narrative as scenes themselves.

However, as time went on, Parsi theater became increasingly commercial, causing theaters to compete with one another (Thakur 7) and for the form to be pushed further away from Sanskrit drama. The professional rivalries resulted in the transition from the early colonial style theater of Bombay with limited props and furniture into the painted curtains, stage spectacles, and dazzling costumes (Thakur 7). Some of the spectacles they put on were stage effects such as "storms, seas or rivers in commotion, sieges, steamers, [and] aerial movements" (Thakur 7) which attempted to bring diegetic naturalism, a practice discouraged in the Natya-sastra, a treatise on Sanskrit theater by the sage, Bharata. Bharata reasoned that "the art of drama and representation on stage have their own limitations and that it is better to devise a technique based on this realization, than to attempt the impossible— the reproduction of natural conditions on the

stage" (Raghavan 41). Therefore, Parsi theater was breaking away from traditional values in Sanskrit theater and started to look more and more like Western theater in form, dramatic theory, and experience. In fact, the theaters started to use playbills to advertise the spectacles being offered, promoting "celebrated painters like Hussain Buksh" (Thakur 7) to draw in more crowds. Though Shakespeare was not the only influence, it definitely played a large role in these vast changes. When the camera started to be more widely used for photography in 1840s Calcutta and the began to be used in vast scales of commercial productions by the 1930s (Mahadevan 42), Shakespeare also made its way into India's world of cinema.

Shakespeare in Bollywood

With the rise of films and Indian "auteur" directors, mid-twentieth century adaptations of Shakespearean plays dealt with the problem of either "leaving Shakespeare 'pure and pristine' or [...] making him entirely 'bowdlerized and indigenized'" (Chambers). The differences in cultural values and social issues bring into question who was in the audience for the films; whether they would appreciate a foreign or familiar story. Most films, keeping the Indian audiences in mind, took "ideas from [Shakespeare's] plots and themes rather than critically writing back to the plays" (Chambers). In other words, they were not recreating Shakespeare but retelling it.

However, the largest shift in Bombay cinema occurred in 1998, when "the Indian state finally recognized film as an *industry* 'proper'" (Mehta 135) and was finally "eligible for the infrastructural and credit support given to other industries" (Mehta 136). This meant that funding for films would be more standardized and the film business would be elevated to a more "respectable" status. This also meant that the state would have more control over the content of the films, using it for political motivations such as pursuing the Indian diaspora as a source of revenue (Mehta 136). The two films I will be discussing are both adaptations that translate themes of class and gender for Indian audiences, but one, *Kaliyattam* by Jayaraaj Rajasekharan

Nair, was made in 1997, and the other, *Omkara* by Vishal Bhardwaj, was made in 2006. These

films, nearly ten years apart in release, are evidence of how Shakespearean adaptations at the

turn of the millenia and the turn of the industry uniquely approach adapting *Othello* to address an

Indian audience.

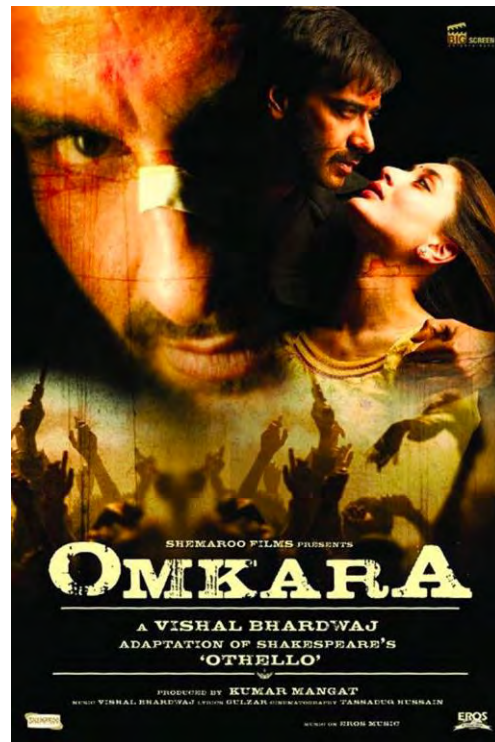*Figure 7: Commercial poster for* Kaliyattam *(1997) by Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair*

Figure 8: Commercial poster for Omkara *(2006) by Vishal Bhardwaj*

Kaliyattam (1997) by Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair

Kaliyattam is an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* that takes place around the time of

the putative "Aryan invasions" in Ancient India. The Othello-character, Kannan Perumalayan, is

a *Theyyam* performer (Sadasivan). *Theyyam* is a ritual performance among people in the North

Malabar region of Kerala that belong to castes excluded from the temples (Sadasivan). The

people of those castes therefore created their own shrines to perform rituals, and the art was later

integrated into Brahmanical temple structures (Sadasivan).

Kannan being a "pockmarked lower caste *Theyyam* performer" puts him at a different

social status than the upper caste Desdemona-character, Thamara, and Jayaraaj uses this caste

tension as a narrative device, equivalent to racial tension in *Othello*, to feed Kannan's

insecurities of not being worthy of Thamara. This is an example of substituting original plot

elements with culturally equivalent elements, which dates back to the early practices for Parsi

theater. The film effectively uses the narrative framework of *Othello* for social commentary on

the difficulties of cross-class marriage within Indian society.

The film's choice to make the character of Kannan a Theyyam performer allows

exploration into the irony within the role of a performer. Jayaraaj explained that "when the artist

dons the makeup, he is considered as God [...] When he removes the makeup he becomes a man

once again" (Sadasivan). Kannan, therefore, switches between the highest to the lowest level of

respect constantly throughout his days. This context brings complexity to the murder scene when

Kannan, with unfinished makeup, approaches the sleeping Thamara. In that moment, Kannan's

identity is torn between that of a god and that of a low-caste (Sadasivan), calling into question

whether his authority to kill his wife for adultery comes from godly justice or jealous insecurity.

This mirrors the question posed in *Othello* regarding the intentions for murder, but brings the

story into deeper cultural and religious relevance.

Omkara (2006) by Vishal Bhardwaj

Omkara is a more recent adaptation of *Othello* and takes place in the modern age where

the Othello-character, Omkara "Omi" Shukla is the leader of a political gang. Though most of

plot's structure is similar to *Othello*, the Iago-character, Langda, is both Omkara's brother-in-

law and potential successor of the gang; the film also deviates where Omkara's marriage with

the Desdemona-character, Dolly Mishra, doesn't come until near the very end of the film.

The "stolen handkerchief" of *Othello* is replaced with a gold Indian waistband,

heightening the "sexual overtones because of its suggestion of a chastity belt locking up a

woman's 'honour'" (Chambers). Both *Omkara* and *Kaliyattam* make the stolen object more sexual, *Kaliyattam* making it a silk blanket the couple consummated their marriage on, and therefore make its displacement more accusatory and scandalous than that of a handkerchief.

In *Omkara*, Dolly's situation is slightly different from other tellings of *Othello* because she is not married to Omkara until the end. Rather, she was expecting an arranged marriage and preparing to commit suicide before eloping, and her intimacy with Omkara outside of wedlock prevented her from ever honorably going back to her family. At the moment when she is about to be killed by her husband, she does not fight for her case but rather submits to Omkara and pleads for forgiveness. This differs from Desdemona's claims to innocence. With these changes to the story, Bhardwaj "raises questions of [Dolly's responsibility and agency], [re-centers] her tragic fate in ideals of honour," and poses the idea that "she is being coerced to accept, normalize, and romanticize the violence under the guise of marital responsibility" (Dhanot).

The Emilia-character, Indu, is set to be both Omkara's sister and Langda's (Iago-character) wife, giving her more power in the situation to bring up feminist ideals (Dhanot). Her line, "My grandma always told me to keep these men slightly hungry. Else the day they get satisfied, they'll puke you out like nobody's business!" comments on how men treat women as nothing but objects of sexual pleasure. It is a moment where the film seems to look at itself and its glamorization of "sexy women" and "womanizers" all throughout its beginning. It is interesting that though those accusations toward a misogynistic society are dropped in, the film itself still relies on those sensual themes for promotion and profit. Indu's other line, "when the scriptures themselves have sullied women [...] we're regarded disloyal sooner than loyal," points out the culture of accusing women not just among men but in the religion and worldview of their society. These ideas take the story of Othello and apply them in a way that is applicable and reflective of the current Indian culture. Arguably, the film effectively draws in that younger

audience and addresses important problems that could be improved with the next generations.

Conclusion

Figure 9: Othello and Desdemona painting by Daniel Maclise from the 19th century

Figure 10: King Dushyanta proposing marriage with a ring to Shakuntala. Chromolithograph by R. Varma.

As Indian theater, since the imposition of English literary culture, has evolved from Sanskrit Theater to Parsi Theater to Bollywood Films, Shakespeare's play, *Othello*, has been approached in many different ways. Through translation into prose and Sardulavikridita metre, performed at Calcutta with the audience singing along to the lyrics, or adapted into films about crime gangs and domestic abuse, the play has touched the hearts and minds of generations of those in India. Though the concern of British cultural imperialism and bardolatry of Shakespeare may continue spurring discussion, the pronouncement of the story's influence on Indian culture is clear, and the responsibility of future influence on culture is ever present.

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