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"To Love the Moor": Postcolonial Artists Write Back to Shakespeare's Othello

Claire Chambers

ABSTRACT:

In this essay, I consider the issue of 'writing back' through the case study of how William Shakespeare's tragedy Othello *has been adapted and challenged by global writers. I begin by exploring Salih's parody and inversion of* Othello *in* Season of Migration to the North, *through which he not only exposes Mustafa's colonized anger towards his white lovers, but also calls into question Shakespeare's depiction of the 'noble Moor' (III. iv: 26). In doing so, he is participating in what literary critics term intertextuality; in other words, he creates a web of references to other texts. Later postcolonial writers have fashioned full adaptations of* Othello *or 'written back' to the play. I scrutinize Toni Morrison's 2012 play* Desdemona, *which is accompanied by music from the Malian singer Rokia Traoré. Morrison brings Desdemona centre stage and suggests that her individual beauty and purity were partly facilitated by an almost-silenced*

figure in the play, her attentive African maid, Barbary/Sa'ran. For the essay's second half, I examine a group of Indian artists writing back to Othello. *Vishal Bhardwaj's* Omkara *(2006) is the second film in a twenty-first-century Bollywood trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations. In* Omkara, *issues of caste and bi-racial identity in colour-conscious India replace Shakespeare's interest in the people then known as blackamoors. Finally, I engage with comic novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee's short story 'Othello Sucks', in which his characters are critical of Shakespeare. Their irreverence towards the play in the context of New India is entertaining and instructive.*

Keywords: writing back, postcolonial, William Shakespeare, Othello

Introduction

In the late summer of 1600, Moroccan ambassador Abd al-Wahid bin Masoud bin Muhammad al-Annuri came to London. Along with his entourage of more than a dozen people, he resided in England's capital city for six months. Some believe that he provided inspiration for William Shakespeare's *Othello*, first performed soon afterwards in 1604 (Harris 23-30), although this is contested by such scholars as Gustav Ungerer (102). Al-Annuri's presence in England arose from Elizabeth I's dream of creating a durable and mutually benefi-

cial alliance with the unfamiliar Muslim world. In 1570, Elizabeth had been excommunicated by Pope Pius V for her Protestant beliefs and for reinstating the reformed church established by her father Henry VIII. Following this ostracism from Catholic Europe, the Queen began encouraging trade with Turkey, Persia, and Morocco. Protestants saw reflected in Sunni Muslim religious practice their own antipathy towards idol worship and veneration of a holy book. In his new monograph *This Orient Isle,* Jerry Brotton rightly highlights the financial shrewdness that lies behind some Elizabethan Englanders' belief in a mirroring between their Protestantism and the Muslim religion. Brotton remarks that Islam was viewed as "a faith with which [England] could do business" (np.). Yet Elizabethans misunderstood Islam and refused to accept the religion on its own terms. The English imposed on Muslims anything other than their correct name: they were 'Mahomedans,' 'pagans,' 'Turks,' 'Ottomites,' 'Moriscos,' 'barbarians,' or 'Saracens.'

Such lexical deviation chimes with the inconsistent treatment the Moroccan delegation received in England. At first, Elizabeth fêted the 42-year-old al-Annuri and his team with pageantry, jousting, and lavish meals. She had already become addicted to Moroccan sugar, the cause of her famously ruined teeth. The queen now gave sweeteners to the North Africans in the hope of fostering trade, political ties, and a military alliance against Cath-

olic Spain. In contrast, the English masses became increasingly hostile towards these Moroccan visitors. Following frequent food shortages in the 1590s and a failed coup by Robert Devereux, Second Earl of Essex in 1601 (Younger 591), the jittery London public turned against the strangers, the first Muslims that most of them had ever seen. Rumours abounded that the delegation comprised spies rather than envoys, and a moral panic developed over stories that they had poisoned members of their party on the Strand (Brotton np.). In response, Elizabeth made a declaration of protection for "her own natural subjects," whom she described as being "distressed" in these times of scarcity. She disingenuously expressed alarm at "the great number of Negroes and blackamoors which (as she is informed) are carried into this realm since the troubles between her highness and the King of Spain" (Elizabeth I np.). Echoing the "great annoyance" of her subjects about the lavish honouring of her visitors, the queen went further to criticise them as "infidels having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel" (Elizabeth I np.). Recommending their immediate isolation and swift deportation, she resorted to the device, still popular today, of making political capital from attacking immigrants. Wisely deciding that the time had come to leave England, al-Annuri and his followers went back to Morocco in February 1601.

In 1605 William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* was first performed. It featured a rich-

ly dressed man, the Prince of Morocco, who tries to woo the beautiful and witty heroine Portia. He is the first of the playwright's 'Moors,' since *The Merchant of Venice* is thought to have been written in the late 1590s. In the play, the Moroccan is eloquent and handsome; he is described as "a tawny Moor all in white" who cuts a striking figure (II.i: stage direction; emphasis in original). Just as his outward appearance is designed to impress, so too is he seduced by opulent surfaces. He fails the test set out in Portia's late father's will, whereby her potential husbands have to choose correctly from three caskets of gold, silver, and lead. Of course, the Moroccan selects the gold casket, concluding that "so rich a gem" as Portia could not possibly be "set in worse than gold" (II.vii.55). He thus loses Portia's hand in marriage. Fortunately, her preferred suitor Bassanio is willing to "give and hazard all he hath" for Portia, as dictated on the inscription to the humble lead casket that he chooses (II.vii.9).

Whereas in *The Merchant of Venice* Shakespeare is working within the popular but stereotypical 'Turk play' of his era, in his tragedy Othello – on which my critical gaze is primarily focused in this paper – he transcends this genre's limitations. *Othello* is a play that has always been receptive to adaptations and postcolonial rewritings. As the Pakistani novelist Zulfikar Ghose observes in his book *Shakespeare's Mortal Knowledge*, Othello is a truly noble man, in contrast to the calumny

of "lascivious Moor" with which Iago taints him (I.i.125). In fact, if Othello has a fault, Ghose suggests that it is his "sexual frugality" (82), which leads him to make too great a distinction between body and spirit. This enables evil Iago to work on both Othello's jealousy about his wife and on the "base racial instinct" (75) the villain shares with his fellow white Venetians. The consequence is that a "beast with two backs" is created – not through sexual union but the conjoining of Desdemona and Othello in death (Ghose 73–103). With its Molotov cocktail of false friendship, cross-cultural love, racism, military confrontation, and extreme sexual possessiveness, *Othello* proves irresistible to many artists from postcolonial backgrounds.

This essay explores some of the most notable global reconfigurations of *Othello*, through the lens of Ashcroft et al.'s notion of postcolonial writing back. The texts I choose for this purpose include Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*, and Upamanyu Chatterjee's "Othello Sucks." My rationale for selecting these postcolonial rewritings is, firstly, that they are evenly split between Anglophone and non-Anglophone production (*Season of Migration to the North* was originally written in Arabic, while Omkara is a Hindi film). Secondly, each text examines a different aspect of Shakespeare's play. Salih thinks through the play's representations of racism and sexuality, Morrison is similarly interested in rac-

ism but also in its imbrication with gender, Bhardwaj transplants Shakespeare's concern with race onto caste, and Chatterjee's characters are critical of Shakespeare being taught in twenty-first-century postcolonies. The article is divided into two main parts, the first focusing on the African diaspora, with the locations of Sudan, black Britain, and the African-American United States taking centre stage. The next section takes India as a case study, and I scrutinise the history of cinematic adaptations of *Othello* as well as Chatterjee's recent story about the tragedy. The primary methodological technique is close reading of the texts alongside historical documents and critical works on the Indian and African diasporic contexts.

One of the key concerns of postcolonial critics has been to interpret how authors from formerly-colonised countries have "written back" to classic novels from the English literary canon. The phrase is sourced from the title of the book *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), by Australian academics Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Alluding to Salman Rushdie's pun on the *Star Wars* film *The Empire Strikes Back* (Rushdie; Kershner np.), they argue that postcolonial authors question and parody colonial ideas, writing back to the centre to contest accepted truths. In countering imperialist assumptions, the postcolonial writers whom these theorists discuss also remake the English language and recast the form of the novel. However, Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's positioning

of non-Western authors' challenge to colonial discourse actually tethers them to European ideas as the central stake they seek to uproot. Ashcroft and colleagues still accord too much attention to "the West," even if the writers they analyse seek to dismantle its assumptions. Given this and other blindspots, several theorists have interrogated the terms "postcolonial" and "writing back" for their colonial baggage (Dirlik; Ahmad; Dabashi; Hauthal). However, I follow Mike Hill in striving to initiate a "return to 'writing back' in a new and different way" (62) – in my case, in a way that aims at decentring European thought and letters. I want to suggest that postcolonial re-creations of Shakespeare have moved beyond "writing back" to more creative and confident conversations across spaces and tenses.

African Diasporic Rewritings of *Othello*

In 1966, the Sudanese author Tayeb Salih published an Arabic-language novel *Mawsim al-Hijra ila al-Shamal*. It was translated into the English title *Season of Migration to the North* in 1969 and is now a Penguin Modern Classic. In this landmark text for postcolonial literary studies, Salih depicts the cultural conflict that ensues when two rural Sudanese Muslims move to Britain and then return to Africa. Events in *Season of Migration to the North* are related by an unnamed narrator who passed several years in Britain during the interwar period pursuing a higher education. Returning to his seemingly timeless village in rural Sudan, the

narrator meets a mysterious older man called Mustafa Sa'eed. Mustafa had also attended university in the colonial metropole. We are told that during his time in Britain he seduced numerous white women, leaving behind a string of broken hearts, suicides, and one murder.

One of his lovers who takes her life, the married mother Isabella Seymour, is enthralled by Mustafa's exotic blackness. Desdemona to his Othello, she loves his outlandish stories of the landscape, animals and people of Africa. However, Mustafa is alert to the racism underpinning her interest, as when she assumes he is a cannibal. He plays along with her fantasies, inventing fictions about the 'dark continent.' We are explicitly invited to make connections between the novel and Shakespeare's play when Mustafa asserts, "I am no Othello, I am a lie" and later, "I am no Othello, Othello was a lie" (*33*, *95*). Later, during Mustafa's toxic sadomasochistic relationship with the British woman Jean Morris, he suspects infidelity and finds a man's handkerchief that does not belong to him amongst her possessions. In contrast to the chaste and submissive Desdemona, Jean is nonchalant, even defiant, on being confronted with this evidence. She tells Mustafa it is his handkerchief, and when he doubts this, she responds, "Assuming it's not your handkerchief [...] what are you going to do about it?". Before long, Mustafa finds further belongings that are not his – "a cigarette case, then a pen"– and the handkerchief is thus reduced to a small piece

in the larger puzzle of "the tragedy [that] had to happen"(162). Salih thus parodies and inverts *Othello*, not only by exhibiting Mustafa's malevolence towards his white lovers, which stems from anger at his colonial condition, but also by calling into question Shakespeare's depiction of the "noble Moor" (III.iv.22). In doing so, he creates a web of references to other texts through intertextuality[1].

However, whereas *Othello* is situated on the periphery of Salih's text, later postcolonial writers have fashioned full adaptations of or written back to the play. In her important study *Playing in the Dark*, Toni Morrison argues that mainstream white American literature developed its own identity by casting African Americans in a shadow narrative. Morrison maintains that the notion of American individualism flourishes when cast against the stereotypical but inescapable bondage of slaves and their descendants. "Freedom," she writes, "can be relished more deeply in a cheek-by-jowl existence with the bound and unfree, the economically oppressed, the marginalized, the silenced" (64). Through her 2012 play *Desdemona*, Morrison grafts her own comments about the United States onto Shakespeare's seventeenth-century English context. Morrison's play, directed by American Peter Sellars and with music by the Malian singer Rokia Traoré, posits that Desdemona's individual beauty and purity were partly facilitated by an almost-silenced figure in Shakespeare's work: her attentive African maid, Barbary. Desde-

mona was also invisibly aided by Iago's wife, the working-class character Emilia, who in Morrison's play is given lines in which she mocks the entitlement of the titular heroine: "'Unpin me, Emilia'. 'Arrange my bed sheets, Emilia'. That is not how you treat a friend; that's how you treat a servant" (43).Despite allowing several characters to criticise Desdemona, Morrison also intends her play as a womanist attempt to give Shakespeare's heroine a stronger voice. As Joe Eldridge Carney explains, "Morrison's desire to create a more significant role for Desdemona came from her sense that Shakespeare's tragic heroine has been given insufficient attention, particularly in performances, a neglect that can be located in the critical tradition as well" (np.).

In Shakespeare's play, we only learn of Barbary's existence in Act IV, Scene III, when a heartbroken Desdemona tells Emilia that she is haunted by the Willow Song that her mother's maid sang while dying after being jilted by a lover. Morrison assumes that Barbary is a slave name, given that the word means 'Africa,' so in Desdemona she gives the character her original appellation of Sa'ran. Indeed, Sa'ran contradicts her mistress's claim that they shared many experiences as young people and were friends[2]. She tells Desdemona that they shared nothing and that Desdemona misunderstood everything about Sa'ran because she didn't even know her real name:

> Barbary? Barbary is what you call Africa. Barbary is the geography of the foreigner, the savage. Barbary equals the sly, vicious enemy who must be put down at any price; held down at any cost for the conquerors' pleasure. Barbary is the name of those without whom you could neither live nor prosper. (Morrison 45)

Here Sa'ran highlights the silencing and "put[ting] down" of the African presence in the West, while simultaneously drawing attention to the indispensible nature of this presence. Such silencing is partly achieved through violent renaming. The play's very first line is "My name is Desdemona" and the female protagonist continues with a page-long soliloquy on the negative connotations of her name, explaining that Desdemona means "misery". She calls into question nominative determinism, declaring, "I am not the meaning of a name I did not choose" (13). Through this, Morrison signals the importance of nomenclature in establishing identities. In addition, 'Barbary' shares an etymological root with 'barbarian,' demonstrating the racially charged constitution of the English language. By confronting Desdemona and her "problematic posture of alleged 'color blindness'" (Carney np.), Sa'ran forces Desdemona to confront her own racism, especially through the way she names and thereby colonises others, producing the dominant "geography of the foreigner."

In Morrison's 2012 play *Desdemona* is a little old-

er than the teenager envisioned by Shakespeare. She and her former servant as well as Desdemona's murderous husband meet in the afterlife and engage in conversation. By putting her characters in the liminal space between life and death, director Peter Sellars claims that Morrison "create[s] a safe space in which the dead can finally speak those things that could not be spoken when they were alive" (Sellars 9).The white woman admits that in her childhood Barbary was the only person who allowed her imagination to soar by telling her "stories of other lives, other countries" (18). In Morrison's writing back, it is therefore the female companion as well as Othello who inspire the girl with stories of faraway lands and their different customs. Towards the end of the play Morrison's Othello character articulates the rage felt by Sa'ran and him (and by the fictional Mustafa before them) that their story is "cut to suit a princess' hunger for real life, not the dull existence of her home" (51). A self-absorbed character in Morrison's play, Othello criticises his wife and claims, "You never loved me. You fancied the idea of me, the exotic foreigner who kills for the State" (50). But the Nobel laureate also gives Desdemona some devastating lines through which she censures Othello for his violent temper and misogynist views of her, most notably: "I was the empire you had already conquered"(54). Iago does not appear in Morrison's re-visioning of Shakespeare and Peter Erickson points out that this serves to "place[…] the emphasis on Othello and Desdemona as the makers of their own desti-

nies and thus makes them logically the ones in the afterlife who are responsible for coming to terms with their own actions, with no recourse to blaming Iago" (np.). It also has the effect of making Morrison's play more female-centred than Shakespeare's original, with Desdemona and Sa'ran as the pivotal (non-romantic) pairing. Iago exists offstage and is only occasionally mentioned, as when Cassio declares, "Now Cyprus is under my reign. I am the one who decides. Othello gone from life; Iago suffering in a police cell" (53). Much of this dialogue is set to Traoré's ethereal score, with the lyrics projected onto screens and incorporated into the play. The otherworldly music that accompanies Morrison's play intensifies the narratives of competing violence in *Othello.*

When Shakespeare's Iago proclaims, "Men should be that they seem" (III: iii: 133), he is of course dissembling. While gaining Othello's assent to this truism, Iago also sets the general thinking about men who are not what they seem. In this way, he plants doubt in Othello's mind about Cassio and the possibility that he and Desdemona are lovers. More broadly, by creating this white character who is so far from what he seems and Othello, the black man destructively duped by him, Shakespeare shadows forth a great deal about the lie that underpins imperialism. Many black and South Asian writers have pushed Shakespeare's ideas onto updated versions of his plays that reflect on our globalised world shaped by racism and structural inequalities.

Indian Rewritings of *Othello*

Having explored two African diasporic rewritings of Shakespeare's *Othello*, I now turn to what Ania Loomba (2012) has called the "made-in-India Othello fellows." In other words, I am interested in those Indian writers who, from Henry Louis Vivian Derozio (1809–1831) onwards, have looked to this play about love, jealousy, and race for inspiration and critique. In her essay "'Filmi' Shakespeare," Poonam Trivedi defies accusations of "bardolatry"(148) and colonial cultural cringe to trace the history of Shakespeare on the Indian big screen. She shows that this history goes back to 1935 and Sohrab Modi's *Khoon-ka Khoon*, a cinematic re-rendering of an Indian stage version of *Hamlet*. In part because the British colonisers laid emphasis on an English literary education for the Indians over whom they ruled (see Viswanathan), but also in some measure as appropriation and subversion of the colonial furniture, there were many filmic versions of Shakespeare's plays. *Hamlet*'s blend of politics and metaphysical mystery seems to have proven the most popular of the Bard's plays for Indian auteurs. In the early days of Indian cinema, indigenous directors found themselves between the rock of leaving Shakespeare "pure and pristine" or the hard place of making him entirely "bowdlerized and indigenized" (Trivedi 151). By the mid-twentieth century, the most successful adaptations relocated the plays to India in their entirety. Directors "transcreated" the Shakespearean

originals (Lal, Two; Seven), taking ideas from their plots and themes rather than writing back to the plays in an overtly critical way.

The Bengali film *Saptapadi* (Kar) was probably the first piece of Indian cinema to namecheck Othello. In it, a pair of starcrossed lovers –a Brahmin boy and an Anglo-Indian Christian girl – fall in love during a performance of that other text about a relationship transgressing social and racial fault-lines. Then came Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair's *Kaliyattam* (1997), a Malayalam remake of *Othello*. It is set against the backdrop of Kaliyattam or Kathakali, a devotional Keralan form of folk-theatre and dance. In *Kaliyattam*, Jayaraaj shifts Shakespeare's racial concerns onto caste, since the plot revolves around a romantic pairing between a low-caste Theyyam performer and a Brahmin girl. Jayaraaj also changes Shakespeare's somewhat trivial, somatic device of a handkerchief that fuels Othello's jealousy into an opulent cloth that also served as a consummation sheet for the two protagonists. In Ashish Avikunthak's short documentary-style film *Brihnlala ki Khelkali* or *Dancing Othello* (2002), he re-envisions Arjun Raina's dance theatre show *The Magic Hour* (2000). Like *Kaliyattam*, both of these 2000s adaptations use Kathakali, that art form mindlessly consumed by Western tourists to India, as a launchpad to discuss the Shakespearean play that is most concerned with what Graham Huggan (2001) calls "the postcolonial exotic."

The first of two Indian "Othello fellows" whose work I want to discuss in detail is Vishal Bhardwaj. *Omkara* (2006) is Bhardwaj's second film in a twenty-first-century Bollywood trilogy of Shakespearean adaptations. (The other two are *Maqbool* [2003], a remake of *Macbeth*, and *Haider* [2014], which relocated *Hamlet* to the Kashmiri conflict.) In his essay "Theorising *Omkara*," John Milton argues that Bhardwaj remains faithful to Shakespeare's tragedy, but makes it relevant to contemporary Indians. Issues of caste and bi-racial identity in colour-conscious India replace Shakespeare's interest in the people then known as blackamoors. Omkara Shukla (Ajay Devgan) is the son of a Dalit mother and a higher-caste father. Known as Omi, he is repeatedly castigated as a 'half-breed' or 'half-caste.' Raghunath Mishra (Kamal Tiwari), who is father to Dolly (the Desdemona figure, played by Kareena Kapoor), is duly angry about his daughter's elopement with this swarthy gangster. Dolly is contrastingly Brahminical and has a pale complexion. Yet she is unperturbed by the gossip circulating around them as a mismatched couple, declaring, "A crescent, though half, is still called a moon." Othello's status as a general fighting against the Turks is altered in the film so that Omi leads a gang in Uttar Pradesh (Bhardwaj's home province) serving a shadowy political figure known as Bhai sahib (Naseeruddin Shah). This allows Bhardwaj to explore the endemic corruption that would garner widespread attention with the 2011-12 Indian anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare (see Sengupta np.).

The villainous Iago character is Ishwar Tyagi, who is known as Langda ('Lame') because he has a pronounced limp. Langda is played brilliantly by Saif Aif Khan, who frighteningly broods, plots, and swears his way through the film. To adapt Coleridge's famous phrase, if his felonies are not as "motiveless" as Iago's are, he nonetheless exudes pure "malignancy" (315). Langda has a motive for his evil because he is passed over for promotion in favour of a rival, Kesu Firangi (Vivek Oberoi). Omi chooses to replace himself with Kesu (the film's Cassio character) when he leaves his position as an underworld don to get involved with mainstream politics. In revenge for being passed over, Langda works on Omi's jealousy about his ingénue bride. Dolly's father's words, "A girl who can deceive her own father can never be possessed by anyone else," come back to haunt Omi, just as Brabantio's line "She has deceived her father and may thee" is a repeated leitmotif in *Othello* (I.iii:289). The idea that a deceitful daughter will become a wanton wife finds resonance in a South Asia where women and human relations are often held hostage, and sometimes brutalised, in the name of family connections and arranged marriages. Ironically, though, a film that is relatively progressive on caste and gender reverts to ableist stereotypes. Langda's disability is linked with his evil acts in a way that recalls the sinister hunchbacked *Richard III* of Shakespeare's history play. This grotesque stereotype reflects badly on the embodiment politics of the film and that of the society it seeks to entertain. In *Postco-*

lonial Fiction and Disability, Clare Barker reflects on the "invisibility" of disabled people in South Asian biopolitics (140), although it should be noted that in the twenty-first century activists and scholars such as Anita Ghai have acted as staunch critics of normative able-bodied discourse (Ghai, "Millennium").

Omkara presents a range of views on women's rights, from the misogynistic to the progressive. The picture usefully raises the issue of violence against women. There are some powerful scenes, as when we see Langda's sexual violence towards his wife Indu. (In the film *Indu*, unlike Iago's wife Emilia, is also Omi's sister, making Omi and Langda brothers-in-law.) Instead of a handkerchief, the film uses the device of a gold Indian waistband, which has sexual overtones because of its suggestion of a chastity belt locking up a woman's 'honour.' Omi gives this priceless 'kamarband' to Dolly as a wedding gift, but Langda persuades Indu (Konkona Sen Sharma) to steal it, so as to mislead Omi into thinking Dolly has gifted the waistband to Kesu. When Omi sees Kesu's girlfriend, the dancer Billo Chaman Bahar (Bipasha Basu), wearing it, he goes out of his mind with jealousy. He has already been worked upon by Langda's suggestive remarks about Dolly's faithlessness, which he then cleverly appears to disavow, saying, "Me and my filthy mind." The auditory detail of the film's tragic final scene allows for even more pointed critique of men's cruelty to women. Viewers are as-

sailed by the stark creaking sounds of a swinging bed on which Omi strangles Dolly – and this has been foreshadowed by various hanging seats that feature throughout the film. The morbid swinging sound is accompanied by the song "Jag Ja," which contains the repeated lyric, "Oh ri rani, gudiya, jag ja, ari jag ja, mari jag ja." This translates as, 'Oh my queen, my doll, come on wake up now,' spelling out that Dolly has long been treated as a plaything whose puppet-strings were pulled by the men in her life.

Indu, the Emilia character – Omi's sister and Langda's wife – makes a stirring speech near the film's end about how the Hindu scriptures have painted women as temptresses and unfaithful. Going a part of the way with Emilia in her 'proto-feminist' speech from *Othello*, Indu rails against the injustice that "even after holy fires approve us, we're regarded disloyal sooner than loyal." On the other hand, the heroine Dolly has little agency, and when her father lambasts her relationship with Omi she presents it as something over which she had little choice:

> Papa… please forgive me. I can't live without Omkara. Don't trust what your eyes say. Your eyes will betray you. God knows how it all began, how I lost my heart to Omkara. I was in love… before I knew anything. I remember feeling like a blind bird plunging down an empty well. Everything seemed hopeless. And then

> I decided I'll end my wretched life. But then there was no point to it, when who I was dying for didn't even know why. Rajju will marry me dead.[…][L]et me confess… I'm yours and yours only. Put me down in your list of slain.

Here Dolly depicts herself as unintentionally losing her heart to Omi, adding to his "list of slain," and making him the warrior and possessor and she the conquered and the possession. Her only flashes of action are half-heartedly to consider suicide before dismissing this as pointless, and to assert with some spirit that she would rather die than go through with her arranged marriage to fiancé Rajju. *Omkara* is surprisingly explicit for a Bollywood movie, but it is a shame that Bhardwaj did not see fit to allow Dolly to own her sexuality in choosing Omi as her partner. Shakespeare's Emilia stridently criticises men as "all but stomachs, and we all but food." By contrast, in *Omkara* Dolly cloyingly tells Indu that a way to a man's heart is through his stomach. Indu to some extent challenges this, but only to counter with her grandmother's wisdom that the way to keep a man is by keeping him sexually rather than digestively satisfied. That said, Indu does echo Emilia's lines, "They eat us hungerly, and when they are full, | They belch us" (III.iv:99-100), when she states that women should leave their men somewhat hungry, otherwise "the day they get satisfied they'll puke you out like nobody's business." It is nonetheless telling that the seventeenth-century play is more

vocal about women being treated as meat than the twenty- first-century film.

This being a Bollywood film, songs and dances are a routine component. The songs are unusual in being written by Bhardwaj, who is a composer as well as a director, and limited to just two item numbers led by the provocative Bianca character, Billo. The first of these, Beedi (Cigarette), contains the lines, "*Beedi jalaileh jigar se piya | Jigar maa badi aag hai*," which in the subtitles are unromantically translated as 'Light your fag from the heat in my bosom,' and elsewhere as 'Light your cigaratte [sic] from the heat of my heart' (Reddy np.). In Hindi, however, the word used is 'jigar,' meaning'liver.' Although the phrase may be literally translated as 'heat of my liver,' it has connotations of intense, fiery passion. This is because in Hindi and Urdu letters, love and desire is said to originate in the liver rather than the heart. The difficulties of translation are highlighted here, given that the South Asian and Western traditions pinpoint different organs as the seat of passion.

In some ways Omkara may be linked through intertextuality as much to *Kaliyattam* and *Dancing Othello* as to Shakespeare's *Othello*. All three productions use the 400-year old story of jealousy to illustrate caste issues. Like *Kaliyattam*, Omkara alters the handkerchief to a more substantial garment – whereas Jayaraaj used a cloth, Bhardwaj deploys a jewelled waistband as the "net / That shall en-

mesh them all" (II:iii.328–29). One possible reason for this repeated conversion of the handkerchief into more valuable artefacts is that the consummation sheet and waistband are visible metonyms of chastity in the Indian context. Secondly, the handkerchief is no longer seen as a prized possession with sexual connotations as it was in Shakespeare's day, so that Othello's interpretation of it as "ocular proof" of Desdemona's infidelity can seem unconvincing to modern audiences (III.iii.361; see also Smith 4-8). *Omkara*, like its filmi predecessors, is an assured postcolonial adaptation that is neither derivative of, nor obsequious to, Shakespearean dramaturgy. Bhardwaj conveys a sense that Shakespeare belongs to everyone, so his work is open for both homage and critique.

Comic novelist Upamanyu Chatterjee contributed a short story entitled "Othello Sucks" to the issue of *Granta on India* edited by Ian Jack in 2015. In it, as the story's title suggests, his characters are critical of Shakespeare, and their irreverence for the play and its context is highly entertaining. In the very first line of the story, Chatterjee breaks the fourth wall to debate its generic conventions, which owe a debt to non-fiction, radio plays, and "a comic strip in prose." He also knowingly introduces the story's "four principal dramatis personae" (169): Father, Mother, Elder Daughter, and Younger Daughter. The two girls reluctantly study Shakespeare at their "good right-wing south Delhi Punjabi" school (170). Younger Daughter declares

that *Othello* sucks early on in the story, providing the story's title, while Elder Daughter retorts that she was lucky not to read *The Merchant of Venice* as the older sibling was compelled to do. Younger Daughter objects to Othello's wordiness and multiple meanings, and claims that Desdemona sucks even harder than Othello: "No one in fact is sorry to see her strangled. It does improve the play" (175).

Father derides the educators who put Shakespeare on Indian children's curricula, rhetorically asking: "do we want them as adults to speak in iambic pentameter when they apply for internships to *CNN-IBN*?"(Chatterjee170). It is worth noting that Father is not objecting to the privileging of an English-language text over ancient Indian or Bhasha literatures, because *CNN-IBN* is an Anglophone news channel where confident speakers of English are in high demand. Instead he takes a utilitarian approach to education, desiring the inculcation in his daughters of a modern, tech-savvy English that will be useful on the job market. Above all, Father is troubled by what he sees as "the fundamental assumption of the play that Othello is dumb because he is black" (Chatterjee 175). Since A. C. Bradley's 1904 monograph *Shakespearean Tragedy*, many critics have viewed Othello as a "noble barbarian" who reverts to "the savage passions of his Moorish blood" once he has been manipulated by Iago (Bradley 186). If Father is correct about *Othello*'s underlying racism, it is especially prob-

lematic in the girls' multicultural Delhi classroom. There Cheik Luigi Fall (a mixed-heritage "black guy" on whom Younger Daughter has a crush) and the dark-skinned teacher Mrs Dasgupta both come up against "racist and skin-conscious" Indian assumptions (Chatterjee 171, 172).

In the story, Chatterjee reproduces a key quotation from Laurence Olivier's autobiography *Confessions of an Actor* on blacking up for the role of Othello:

> Black all over my body, Max Factor 2880, then a lighter brown, then Negro No 2, a stronger brown. Brown on black to give a rich mahogany. Then the great trick: that glorious half yard of chiffon with which I polished myself all over until I shone ... The lips blueberry, the tight curled wig, the white of the eyes whiter than ever, and the black, black sheen that covered my flesh and bones, glistening in the dressing-room lights ... I am Othello. (qtd. in Chatterjee 175-176)[3]

The quotation is well chosen. In it, Olivier explores his blackface act with relish, providing a detailed description of the layers of makeup he paints on himself and the gauzy material he uses to polish his skin to a shine. The actor's fascination with his own unfamiliar "black, black" colour and stereotypically white teeth empties Othello out of culture and makes his race the primary preoccupation. Just as Olivier reduces the black general he

plays to the colours of foundation and their brand names, so too the thespian makes Othello seem even less human through references to his sheep-like "tight curled wig" and to the act of polishing, which produces a "rich mahogany" like that on expensive furniture. The cosmetics, with their precise shades of "Max Factor 2880" and "Negro No 2," are rendered attractive through the adjectives "shone" and "glistening." Indeed, Olivier-as-Othello seems almost edible in the shape of those unnatural, vivid "blueberry" lips. This is juxtaposed with the "Belgian chocolate" (174) comparison for which Younger Daughter reached when describing Cheik Luigi Fall's skin. The two metaphors expose the racial faultlines both of 1980s Britain from which Olivier writes and the contemporary Indian society "Othello Sucks" is set in.

But, as the lively speech I have already quoted suggests, perhaps the most significant way in which Chatterjee's characters subvert Shakespeare is through their language use. Father frequently code-switches into Sanskrit phrases such as "*Nirbhaya Bhavah*" (180) ('Be free from fear'), appropriates and alters hackneyed phrases ("Hell hath no fury like a man overlooked" (173)), and quotes Shakespearean couplets freely. By contrast, the Daughters fall for an argot of speed: "Communication is possible only by means of SMS, email or sign language" (181). All the Indian characters speak with self-possession in a Hinglish that shows no sign of being brow-beaten or colonised

by Shakespeare's canonical English. Indeed, postcolonial confidence is the key attribute shared by these "made-in-India Othello fellows" and other postcolonial writers, who borrow from the Bard to shed light on the concerns of twentieth- and twenty-first-century Sudan, India, and the African-American United States. They do so very successfully, and it will be interesting to see how adaptations of Shakespeare in general and *Othello* in particular develop and change as we move further into a twenty-first century already scarred by colonialism and its afterlives.

Conclusion

This essay has analysed a few of the most important non-Western reworkings of *Othello* from the last five decades. Adapting Ashcroft et al.'s late 1980s idea of writing back, I suggested that Salih, Morrison, Bhardwaj, and Chatterjee transpose Shakespeare into new contexts in order to create topographies of the indigenous rather than the singular, dogmatic "geography of the foreigner" censured by Morrison's Sa'ran. The paper read multiple postcolonial adaptations/transcreations of *Othello* across diverse locations, cultivating a comparativist approach by investigating different genres, including films, a play, a novel, and a short story. The piece opened with an exploration of Shakespeare's early seventeenth-century context and the visit of a Moroccan envoy to London. The sojourn began well, but ended in ignominy and the

Moroccans' retreat from England in the face of local intolerance. This incident may have provided material for two of Shakespeare's most important plays about cross-cultural encounter: *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. Because *Othello* has proven especially ripe for appropriation by non-white writers, it is this play that garnered the most attention from the present essay.

In the next section, two texts from the African diaspora came under scrutiny: the non-Anglophone novel *Season of Migration to the North* and Toni Morrison's English-language play *Desdemona*. In Tayeb Salih's novel, the British Desdemona figure Isabella Seymour is fascinated by Mustafa Sa'eed's implausible stories about Africa, while Jean Morris taunts Mustafa with his cuckoldry, not least through the loaded symbol of a handkerchief. Toni Morrison likewise criticises Desdemona's exoticisation of Africa, moving Shakespeare's Barbary from the sidelines of *Othello* and initiating discussion of the power of naming by calling her Sa'ran. Unlike Salih, Morrison shows awareness of the intersectionality of oppression by figuring forth Othello's gendered streak of violence as well as Desdemona's white privilege.

Indian rewritings of *Othello* then came under the spotlight, with an overview of three films: Ajoy Kar's *Saptapadi*, Jayaraaj Rajasekharan Nair's *Kaliyattam,* and Ashish Avikunthak's *Brihnlala ki Khelkali* or *Dancing Othello* (2002). However,

the paramount non-Anglophone movie I evaluated was Vishal Bhardwaj's *Omkara*. The essay argued that Omkara is hobbled by the ableist politics inherent in Saif Aif Khan's admittedly bravura performance as the lame villain known as Langda. The film is more ambivalent about feminism; violence against women is roundly condemned, but the ways in which women can and should resist are left unclear. The final text under study was another Anglophone piece: Upamanyu Chatterjee's humorous short story "Othello Sucks." Chatterjee uses the character of Father to satirise Shakespearean pedagogical approaches in twenty-first-century India and the racism that may lurk in Shakespeare's portrayal of Othello as 'reverting to type' once subjected to Iago's poisonous manipulation.

In sum, this essay has charted how non-Western writers, most of them the subjects of formerly-colonised countries, are turning their gaze back on Shakespeare. The decolonisation of the English literary canon is only possible if scholars attempt to recover the voices of the conquered, while recognising, with Gayatri Spivak (104) the fraught, contingent, and incomplete nature of this endeavour. My politicised version of writing back seeks to draw attention to overlooked texts by celebrated authors such as Toni Morrison, to non-Anglophone narratives, and to neglected aspects of novels at the heart of postcolonial literary studies such as Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*. The subject of Shakespeare and his con-

temporaries' relationship with the Muslim world with which I opened this essay has received a great deal of interest of late (see Brotton; Hutchings). What artists like Salih, Morrison, Bhardwaj, and Chatterjee emphasise, however, is the exotic way in which Shakespeare portrays "Barbary" (IV.iii.25) and the Indian who "threw a pearl away" (V.ii.343). This exoticising gaze, as we have seen, is reversed by those who call Africa and India home. By turning back the scrutiny onto the West and its most prized author, these authors demonstrate that another way of seeing is possible. Displacement of Western hegemony and Shakespearean dominance is not likely and nor is it the objective of these authors, but what they do achieve is to offer supplementary valences that change our readings of *Othello* very substantially.

Notes

1. For more on Salih's transcreation of *Othello*, see Harlow; Calbi; Hassan 106–7.

2. Interestingly, an earlier text by Toni Morrison, the novel *Sula* (1973), is all about female friendship on a more equal basis. In interview, Morrison says of this book: "Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*". (Tate 157).

3. I would like to thank my student Elise Robson for reminding me of this section from Upamanyu Chatterjee's short story and for her interesting readings.

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