Re-interpreting the Bard, From Kathakali to Kathaprasangam: Cultural Revisionings, Orality, and Theories of Spectatorship

Shilpa Sajeev

Abstract: Non-English performative adaptations of Shakespeare have continually ruptured the notion of a perceived universality in Shakespearean works often creating texts not frozen in time but malleable, and with distinctly local and contemporary flavours. My paper examines the curiously inter-genric and polyphonic nature of Shakespearean narratives adapted in India, particularly in Kerala. These sites of 'transcreations' and adaptations not only destabilise the cultural complex associated with Shakespeare but also conceive new forms of spectatorship and highlight, for example, the role of the 'rasik' through Indian aesthetics. How, for example, do these performances offer an almost erasure of textuality and veer into the realm of the oral and what is the changed role of the spectator in such transfigured spaces are some questions that will be explored. It will also take note of the process of "adaptation" reflecting upon its dual nature- firstly the act and process of adaptation itself and secondly the formation of the hybrid cultural product. The paper will also try to address the problems of intersemiotic translation when a primarily Western text gets translated into an Eastern language like Malayalam and when the literary work gets further adapted to the stage by analyzing how Shakespearean narratives get woven into forms as diverse as Kathakali and Kootiyattam to Kathaprasangams. The analysis will also take into account the myriad conditions that shaped the cultural milieu of the original, like questions of race and gender, and the concerns of the adapted work, factoring in the problems and anxieties about the original that have to be contended with in the process of 'domestication'.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Kathakali, Kathaprasangam, performative, orality

Ben Jonson, in his Preface to the First Folio (1623), said of William Shakespeare, seven years after the Bard of Avon's death, "his work was not of an age, but for all time". The Shakespeare industry, thanks to the persistent teaching of English Literature in schools and universities, has continued to thrive albeit evolving constantly through its negotiations with hybridity and plurivocity. I use `hybridity` to refer to the condition of crossbreeding or interaction between two things, which could be as complex as two cultures, that might seem disparate and distinct at first glance.

Although Shakespeare's influence on the cultures and literatures of the world has transcended both time and space, the Bard owes his universality partly to the hegemony of the English language. In the last 400 years, critics have time and again, questioned the 'timelessness' attributed to the works of Shakespeare, highlighting that non-English adaptations of the Bard that have imbued this universality with new meanings that are polyphonous and culturally moulded. Shakespeare, therefore, seems to have become for 'all time', not quite in the sense of Jonson's words, but enmeshed in discourses of hybridity and plurality.

The Shakespearean text, thanks to educational policies and other cultural interventions, becomes an inherited text that works itself into the cultural, literary, and artistic fabric of the receiving society. The inherited texts come to us in a certain way and the discourses surrounding their reception are also handed down to us. These texts and the discourses, if taken as *a fait accompli,*disallow the "fecundity of expression" with the illusion of pregiven meaning created by suppressing their historical and embodied state. This paper takes a look at the transition of this inherited source from the canon of literature, and drama to the realm of performance. This necessitates a close look at the performance, not from the perspective of a dramatic text, whose focus is on plot and characterisation, but at the conception of performance with its emphasis on "nowness", body, and presence. But the instantiation of the performance is an act of resignification. To borrow Merleau-Ponty's words, "[N]o established meaning of a term ever exhausts its meaning. Expression is never total but must always be sought for anew" and "as in the case of flesh and the expressive gestures which our common world of carnal inter-subjectivity emerges from, the universal forms of signification in language do not arise from theoretical constructions or reside in dictionaries" (Merleau Ponty xxii). Through its creative vision, every performance suggests a resignification of meaning and a "continuous birth". The

plot works merely as a source text, and the emphasis on the performative idioms that characterise the performance of these texts. I try to illustrate this through my analyses of Kathakali Othello and Sambasivan's Kathaprasangam performance,

Non-English and performative adaptations of Shakespeare have regularly subverted this notion of universality in Shakespeare's works to create texts not frozen in time, but malleable and distinctly local. These Shakespearean adaptations, far from being culturally frozen objects, arrested in time, can be viewed neither as discrete nor autotelic. To quote Margaret Jane Kidnie: they are not already-knowable objects "against which one can take the measure of its theatrical [or other] treatments," but rather " dynamic process(es) that evolves over time in response to the needs and sensibilities of its users" (Kidnie 2). They are to be approached as constantly evolving categories, located in the interstice between text and performance, script and drama, and arising out of the seams of the script-drama dyad[1], as identified by Richard Schechner.

A recent memorable attempt at a reinterpretation of The Tempest was Abhilash Pillai's Talatum that uses circus and other 'subaltern' forms to narrate its story. Talatum, with its minimal use of multi-lingual dialogue, places the body as the key-text in the performance. Not only debunking the hegemony of 'text' (in its Aristotelian sense) in performance, this writing away from the centre is also, in a manner, a disavowal of the cultural authority of both Shakespeare and English. Sycorax, the mother of Caliban and a native of the island, an unseen character in the Shakespearean text, is represented as a huge puppet. Her presence looms large

[1] Richard Schechner's work tries to, very effectively, deconstruct the non-neutral loaded notions of "script", "theatre", "drama", and "performance', that remain fundamental to any study of the larger umbrella-term performance. While "drama" refers to what the writer writes, the script makes for the interior map of the particular production that can be transmitted time to time and place to place. The "theatre" refers to the set of specific gestures performed by performers at any given point of time. And finally, the performance, an all-encompassing constellation of events includes the audience and performers and anybody who enters or exits the field of performance.

throughout the performance, spotlighting questions on ownership, authenticity, and cultural appropriation.

My paper examines the cultural underpinnings involved when Shakespearean narratives get adapted in India, particularly in Kerala, and the inter-genric and polyphonic nature of this process. These new sites of transcreations and adaptations not only destabilize the cultural complex associated with Shakespeare but also conceive new forms of spectatorship, highlighting the role of the 'rasik' is an interesting case in point, through Indian aesthetics. The classic definition of adaptation, "the process of change by which an organism or species becomes better suited to its environment" can be applied to texts as well as the text changes to suit different conditions. Sisir Kumar Das writes:

> The reception of Shakespeare in India, here deep and pervasive, there scanty and spare, is as complex and problematic as the story of the Western impact on Indian literature itself. We do not know the precise number of translations of Shakespearean texts in different Indian languages. … These translations which also included adaptations of various kinds, coincided with the growth of a new narrative and dramatic literature in different Indian languages. Some of them were inspired by a growth of a *new* theatre distinct from the performing traditions of precolonial India. In other words, the Indian encounter with Shakespeare is an essential part of the history of Indian literary transformation in the last century" (Das 47).

This is especially true of Kerala whose literary and dramatic sphere in the late nineteenth century was heavily influenced by Shakespeare, and a plethora of translations and reworkings of the Bard appeared. Shakespearean plays like TheTaming of the Shrew were adapted to the Kerala

stage as *Kalahinidamanakam* by Kandathil Varghese Mappillai. Following which other translations of Shakespeare like *King Lear* and *Hamlet* by A Govinda Pillai appeared. The Merchant of Venice came to Malayalam as Portia Swayamvaram in 1884 and The Tempestas Sunanda Sarasaveeram by D. Govindan. As Andre Lefevere suggests in his work "Mother Courage's Cucumbers: Text, System and Refraction in a Theory of Literature",

> the degree to which the foreign writer is accepted in the native system will be determined by the need that native system has of him in a certain phase of its evolution". These works gain new understanding and meaning, through the "refractions"[2] and "rewritings" that transport literature from one system to another (Lefevere 23).

These performances served as reworkings of the originals rather than translations, for they evoked the unique flavour and sensibility of Kerala. Thus, the "adaptation" functions on two levels - firstly the act and process of adaptation itself and secondly the formation of the hybrid cultural product.

Similarly, education imparted largely through English colleges ensured changing cultural idioms. With the setting up of courts in every district, and clubs ushered in a new class that read and discussed Western literature and read European novels. Plays like Ibsen's Ghosts, Rosmersholm, The Power of Darkness, The Rivals, Oedipus were translated into Malayalam, helping breathe new life into Malayalam drama. Shaping a new literary public sphere and the renaissance of Malayalam literature, as E V Ramakrishnan and others pointed out happened largely through the process of translation. He suggests that "the radicalisation of literary discourse during this phase of Malayalam literature was largely achieved through the agency of

[2] Andre Lefevre uses the term "refractions" to talk of adaptations of one work of literature into another. He suggests that they work as a compromise between the two systems and serve as an indicator of the constraints of these systems.

translation" (Ramakrishnan 1).

The adaptation of Shakespearean texts into the lexis of Kathakali offers interesting insights into the way the Bard has been hybridized and projected on the Indian stage. My paper analyses Sadanam Balakrishnan's production of Othello *(1989),* which was one of the foremost attempts at narrating a 'videshi' (foreign) story through the aesthetic language of Kathakali. As Ania Loomba suggests, while considering a site specific, reconfiguring Indian production as *Othello* in the Kathakali style of dance-drama, "any meaningful discussion of colonial or post-colonial hybridities demands close attention to the specificities of location as well as a conceptual re-orientation which requires taking on board non-European histories and modes of representation" (Loomba 144). A brief outline of Kathakali, one of the more famous artistic modes of representation, is necessary for a better understanding of the hybridization of Shakespeare in post-colonial India.

Kathakali as an art form emerged in the sixteenth and seventeenth century and was performed in the temple precincts of Kerala. Historically, Kathakali has been perceived as an elitist art form rooted in feudal regimes. The performances in this dance-drama tradition are usually versions of episodes from the Indian epics (Mahabharata and Ramayana) or stories from the *puranas*. In the words of Phillip Zarrilli:

> Rather, kathakali 'exists' as a set of potentialities inherent in the complex set of practices, texts, discourses, representations, and constraints through which it is constantly negotiated and (re)created by means of 'tactical improvisation' (Jenkins 1992:51), both within the 'tradition' and outside it (Zarrilli 11)

As one would know, a connoisseur of Kathakali does not attend a Kathakali performance

to 'know' the story of say, Kalyanasougandikam or a Kiratarjuniyam, for the stories are familiar to most of the audience. But these are well-loved tales that are made anew through performances by the maestros. The performance achieves fame through the distinctive elements lend to the story by the performers in their veshams and hence, a Karnan by Kalamandalam Gopi, a Nalan by Krishnan Nair, or Keezhpadam Kumaran Nair's Bali becomes memorable. Each performance of the same story is made unique through elaboration, individual technique, subtleties in music and costume. This scope for elaboration, whether performative or narrative, is owing to the literary richness in the *attakatha*s, which are often studied for their poetic and literary merit.

Over the past years, Kathakali performances have displayed experimentation in both content and technique, be it in the staging of the art form outside its traditional setting or in the use of unconventional texts, including the production of iconoclastic pieces like The Killing of Hitler, Gandhi's Victory, or People's Victory[3]. This kind of experimentation can also be located in the context of the theatre of roots propagated by Suresh Awasthi, Kavalam Narayana Panikker, and Habib Tanvir in the 1960s. The *thanathunadakam* or indigenous mode of drama by Kavalam Naarayana Panikker and C N Sreekantan Nair was developed with the aim of creating a new lexis for Malayalam theatre, separate from the heavily Western influenced idiom that Malayalam theatre was used to. This "going back to the roots" integrated Kerala's traditional forms like Padayani and Theyyam and martial art forms like Kalari Payattu.

To return to the postcolonial adaptations of Shakespeare, the 1989 Kathakali production

[3] These pieces, most notably *People's Victory* which was hugely popular with the audience, were conscious attempts at politicizing Kathakali and countering its imperialist roots. Produced by left-leaning fronts such as the Kerala Kalabhavan, these productions were overtly political in nature. Aricatasumedharan, a critic reads "the production(s) as bringing kathakali 'down' from the lofty place of appreciation among Kerala's high-caste traditional patrons ('the palaces of rajas and kings' … to 'the common people' such as the workers of the Communist Party and members of the Agricultural Workers Union, etc. (Zarrilli qtd Aricatasumedharan 196).

King Lear, for example, byKeli (Paris) and Kerala Kalamandalam can be read as an act of intercultural communication: an attempt to familiarize the Eastern art form to a Western audience, while keeping the technique and structure intact. The experimentation, with Annette Leday and some prominent Kalamandalam artistes, sought to make accessible the form of Kathakali to Western audience, who were familiar with the Shakespearean texts. According to LeDay and McRuvie, "kathakali's 'rich means of expression and its intensity of effect' seemed an appropriate performative means through which to 'find a theatrical expression for the larger-than-life dimension and explosive power of the play' (Zarrilli qtd in LeDay and McRuvie 1989184). The performance also led to several controversies such as the propriety of the '*kathi'* vesham, instead of the *pacha* role assigned to King Lear. Similarly, to portray his final wretchedness and his absolute 'nakedness', Lear removes his crown or *kireetam* on-stage, something unthinkable in the lexis of Kathakali leading one to wonder whether the performance could have done without this particular nuance. Thus, this daunting inter-cultural task of transforming a non-Indian, non-epic text into an Indian classical art-form is compromised by the bindings of structural and cultural conventions. The Kathakali artiste is situated not in a cultural vacuum but carries with him the "paradigmatic past", that is present as "he approaches any important role on stage" (Zarilli 190).

Diane Daugherty, speaking of *KingLear* in Kathakali, claims that the first step in such a production involves "transforming the abundant narrative of a Shakespearean tragedy to the focused intensity required of a kathakali plot" (Daugherty 57). This transformation, apart from the aspect of practicality and convenience, is an active act of interpretation. Scenes that represent a universalist aesthetic discourse are selected for dramatic effect and the performance is mostly devoid of the political underpinnings of the original text. Through the careful dilutions of the

material and social conditions that were characteristic of the Western text (Eagleton 284-85) what emerges is a stark storyline whose *stoff* s or themes are passion, ambition, and jealousy.

This adaptation generates inflections that are starkly different from the original, liminally located at the interstices of the inter-cultural communication —neither *videshi*, nor entirely *desi*. One, then, needs to reformulate the lens through which such a performance with intercultural underpinnings is viewed. Kathakali works on the premise of good and evil and each character has to fit into a pre-determined mould. Kathakali performances generally use mythological characters in the natyadharmi mode. The *natyadharmi* or the 'conventional' mode of acting is the presentation of a play through the use of stylized gestures and symbolism and was considered more artistic than realistic. *Lokadharmi* (realistic), meanwhile, involves the reproduction of human behaviour on the stage and the natural presentation of objects. Showing deaths on stage is unusual in traditional Indian theatre, but when Othello, the 'noble' prince murders the virtuous heroine on-stage, the princely Othello is transformed into an ordinary human being—a husband consumed by rage and jealousy—delineating the *lokadharmi* element of the performance. This perhaps is also a marker of the very evolution of the art form of Kathakali: the response of a traditional art form to the colonial narrative. But this version of Othello does not seek to dramatically restructure or even retell, but perhaps actualise through the gestural and the facial grammar of a four-hundred-year old art form, a non-Indian narrative.

This adaptation and revisioning suggests a shift from the word to the gestural through this pre-dramatic form. But this is not uncomplicated in its conceptions. In the inter-genric context, it becomes an essaying of the emotional, and an evocation of *rasas*, rather than of the undercutting currents of racism and class relations. Othello, in the Sapanam Balakrishnan's version becomes a *pacha* character modelled after the warrior prince Nala of Nalacharitha. In this interesting

encounter between a centuries-old foreign text and an even older classical art form like Kathakali, what emerged was a curious inter-cultural hybrid that go beyond boundaries of convenient binaries like black/white, traditional/modern, or colonial/indigenous.

Transposing the postcolonial concerns from a western dialectic might not be useful in fruitfully engaging with the language of Kathakali, a pitfall that can be observed in Ania Loomba's reading of the Sadanam Balakrishnan's version of Kathakali, where she misses the resonance of the `outcast` that replaces the moor of the original, as pointed out by Poonam Trivedi and Rustom Bharucha. Any such analysis, while taking into account the myriad conditions that shaped the cultural milieu of the original, must concern itself with the specificities of the adapted work and the target language, and factor in the problems and anxieties about the original that need to be contended within the process of adaptation.

How, then, does the inter-semiotic adaptation work while using the performative lens of a traditional form? What does it mean for Othello's character to be essayed in the role of a Nala-like character? How does an Othello fit into the idiom of the Kathakali performance? What happens to his Moorish status? Or does a form like the elite Kathakali, ironically enough, erase the inherent racial hegemonies that were present in the original form for the playing out of individual agonies in the aesthetic space?

Rustom Bharucha points out that "the debate on caste as race is beginning to enter the political discourse of the Indian subcontinent, but it has not yet entered the hermeneutics of traditional performance." The production, however, is not entirely ignorant of Othello's blackness, for his hands are painted black. However, one cannot discount the fact that the notion of blackness in India is very different from the Western perception of blackness. The accent on

the blackness cannot be thus seen as entirely hinging upon the issue of race. One might argue that in the symbolic repertoire of Kathakali, the blackness of his hands that replaces Shakespeare's 'sooty bosom', could forebode the impending horrific act (bhayanaka-inducing) he is going to commit.

The Kathakali repertoire usually relies on the binaries of good and evil (gods and demons), and characters usually essay roles as either heroes or villains. One has to agree that the Kathakali performance is highly depoliticized. While neutralising the concerns of race, and class, present in the original text, on the one hand, Othello becomes a *nayaka* of nobler qualities, a *pacha* Hindu warrior prince character whose murder of Desdemona is a crime of passion. Phillip Zarrilli explains:

> Literally, 'green,' this class of make-up/characters includes divine figures like Krishna and Vishnu, kings like Rugmamgada, and epic heroes such as Rama and Bhima. The most refined among male characters, they are upright, moral, and ideally full of a calm inner poise— 'royal sages' modelled on the hero (nayaka) of Sanskrit drama whose task is to uphold sacred law (Zarrilli 248).

Here, Othello turns out to be neither 'moral' nor 'upright', and falters from upholding the sacred law as his jealousy makes him commit the heinous crime of murdering his wife. Iago, on the other hand, becomes a *kathi* character. Even while sticking to archetypes of the *pacha* and the *kathi*, the journey of the character's transformation is delineated through the complex of *bhavas* (expressions) manifest in the crescendo leading to the final murder scene, the murder of a

minukku nayika[4] by a *pacha nayakan*, something extremely alien to the Kathakali idiom. The words of Desdemonas's father in the Senate, "thathane chathichaval pathiyeyum chathikkum" (The one who betrayed her father, will betray her husband too)", rings as a portent of the tragedy that is to befall them. The action on-stage is supplemented by a singing that draws on the Carnatic style of music. The *attakkatha* (an enacted story), narrating the story, is thus sung in Sanskritised Malayalam in accompaniment to the *chenda, maddalam*, and edakka[5].

To shift the focus from the politics of the narrative to its aesthetics, a*bhinaya*, which literally means to 'carry forward', is a bridge between performer and audience that helps deliver the appropriate essence (*rasa*) to the audience. *Rasa*, 'that which can be tasted', is what is generated as the outcome of the complex interplay between the "*vibhava* [stimulus], *anubhava* [involuntary reaction], and *vyabhicari bhava* [voluntary reaction]" (Bharatamuni 54). *Abhinaya*, through its intricate complex of gesture, movement, and expression becomes a crucial element in the theatrical efficacy of the performance and an instantiation of body memory. As Schechner succinctly puts it, "an aesthetic founded on rasa is fundamentally different than one founded on the 'theatron,' the rationally ordered, analytically distanced panoptic." It is therefore pointing towards a methodology of understanding Performance in terms of patterns of "doing" rather than modes of "thinking"; the form becomes more important than content, particularly in the Eastern context. Schechner writes:

> Rasic performance values immediacy over distance, savoring over judgment. Its paradigmatic activity is a sharing between performers and partakers (a more accurate

[4]A minukku nayika is a heroine of noble qualities, usually chaste and blameless. Here Desdemona is presented as a virtuous woman. Her death becomes problematic for two reasons, firstly for the depiction of death, and that too of a woman on stage, and secondly because of her death at the hands of the hero.

[5]They are various types of drums used in Kathakali and other folk music forms traditional to Kerala.

> term than “audiences” or “spectators,” words that privilege ear or eye). The rasic performance event is more a banquet than a day in court (Schechner 31).

The form of Kathakali perhaps cannot fully articulate the different accents of *Othello*. As Ania Loomba notes, one might wonder if a form like Kathakali can fruitfully engage with Shakespearean texts and use it to its full potential (Loomba 162). However, what should also be remembered is that the pre-dramatic form of Kathakali relies on a different text, the text of the body to spin its own narrative, and evincing how the form itself has evolved and taken its place in the postcolonial moment.

An interesting parallel to the Shakespearean adaptations in Kathakali is V Sambasivan’s use of the Bard’s text in his Kathaprasangams, which are more democratic and vibrant in their encounters. Kathaprasangams have a unique position as one of the few forms of oral traditions that have survived into the twentieth century. ‘Katha’- ‘prasangam’, literally meaning story-speech, traces its origins from the Harikatha or Ramakatha, forms of devotional story-telling, before it became more secular and vernacular. While the general structure of the performance resembling a congregation with one man addressing the crowd has been retained, the themes of these performances have moved away from the religious and the didactic to occupy more secular themes. They are exemplars of oral artistry narrating stories where a single performer enacts all the characters in the story, irrespective of age or gender. They are a unique blend of music and story-telling, usually performed for hundreds of people at fairs and festivals.

This form of storytelling instantiates the oral origins of theatre and the performance is punctuated with both songs in accompaniment to musical instruments like the Tabla and the cymbal for the highpoints in the story. Minimalist props are used, with little or no costume

changes excepting simple devices like a hand towel or a handkerchief to distinguish between characters. The performer uses “sookshma-abhinaya”, minute but varied gestural and facial techniques to essay the characters, as Sanju Thomas notes in her piece “The Moor for the Masses”. It is also a re-instantiation of memory that is so fundamental to oral narratives. The performer, for example, is not prompted from the wings unlike what might happen on an Elizabethan stage.

Sambasivan has adapted the Shakespearean texts like *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet* into the oral form of Kathaprasangam.Through these Kathaprasangams, the Shakespearean texts spilled out of their traditional proscenium theatres to be juxtaposed with a form of oral ballads that was familiar to village audiences. Thus, creating an aesthetic democratic space and dismantling the hegemony of the figure of authority that was Shakespeare. Drawing from the repertoire of stories ranging from doyens of Malayalam literature like Thakazhi and Kesava Dev to Chekhov and Shakespeare, Sambasivan’s recitals not only took Malayali literary figures to the public but helped familiarize foreign literatures to the masses. In fact, his influence and popularity was much so that Director Jayaraaj, whose National-award winning film *Kaliyattam* which was a retelling of Othello, credits Sambasivan for having introduced him to Shakespeare. Thus the *videshi* Shakespeare becomes the *desi* Shakespeare, known and beloved by the audience. One can witness here, as Rustom Bharucha points out, a playing out of the performative energies between the Asian traditions and the ‘Elizabethan Playhouses’ (Bharucha 2).

How do these performances then offer an almost erasure of textuality and veer into the realm of the oral? What is the changed role of the spectator in such transfigured spaces? Oral traditions have always permeated the performative landscapes of Asia, right from the pre-literate

times and have continued to survive into the twentieth century, evolving and transforming while assimilating the zeitgeist. As Poonam Trivedi notes, "As a matter of fact, all the three stages of orality as identified by Walter J. Ong in Orality and Literacy, "primary" of preliterate cultures, "residual" of the transitional stage and "secondary" of the contemporary age of electronic media dependent on print, may be traced in India in different parts of the country, existing, at times, simultaneously.[7]" (Trivedi 7) The performative, the narrative, and the musical articulations, issued forth by the body become instantiations of memory. Bardic singer-poets have been a ubiquitous presence, ranging from the Manganiyaars of Rajasthan to Bauls of Bengal to the Paanans of Kerala, nomadic singers who sing popular ballads. She also suggests that in this context, Sambasivan may be seen as a "modern version of an ancient rhapsode". She writes:

> Sambasivan's primarily aural performance was able to stitch together the orality and music of the katha tradition to Shakespeare's words and poetry, unifying and harmonising these diverse elements for his audiences. With no distraction of movement or visuality, the oral dramatization and singing concentrated greater attention on the words and their intonation, pitch and emotion with which they were inflected (Trivedi 10).

In Kerala, forms like the kathaprasangams have co-existed with the traditionally temple-art forms like Kathakali and Kootiyattam. Unlike the detailed nuances of Kathakali, whose understanding requires a prerequisite level of the aesthetic tradition, the aesthetic space of kathaprasangam is distinctly democratic in its appeal and has also been used as a vehicle of social propaganda to mobilise masses. These performances can, then, be seen as a reclamation of Shakespeare's appeal to the masses. For in the colonies, he would be seen as a figure of cultural authority but when in fact, Shakespeare has been a playwright of the hoi polloi, in the non-

pejorative use of the term.

While the performances introduced Shakespeare to the suburban masses, they also played a pedagogic role, much like the *jatra* performances of Shakespeare by Utpal Dutt. Tapati Gupta in "From Proscenium to Paddy Fields" writes of Dutt's productions:

> Dutt attempted to further develop the performance of *jatra* and initiated, by subtle means, a change in the taste and education of the rural and *mofussil* (suburban) audiences. Therefore, one may well presume that his Shakespeare jatra demystified Shakespeare for non-elite audiences, making this folk form more sensitive to more subtle localised nuances. (Gupta 165)

And much like Utpal Dutt, one can argue that Sambasivan's performances too had a socio-economic accent, whose conceptual framework was distilled out of his Leftist ideologies. Thus, by reclaiming Shakespeare's mass appeal, Sambasivan not only "demystified" the poet but also made it accessible by affording an element of contemporariness to the performances.

Sambasivan's Othello is more or less a faithful translation of the Shakespearean text. Lasting a little over an hour, the performance is interspersed with song, and is an apt mix of colloquial and poetic Malayalam. This classic mélange has perhaps aided in endearing his performances to the masses. With impeccable comic timing, he infuses both wit and humour in the performance, drawing many a chuckle from the audience. One might argue that the heaviness associated with watching a tragedy like Othello is ostensibly made lighter through Sambasivan's characteristic brilliance. His leftist progressivism shines through his performance, as Trivedi notes:

> His progressivism is seen in the open sympathy for the women in the play: not only is

> Desdemona beauty and perfection incarnate and Emilia, the loyal and sensible one, Bianca too is elevated and dignified. She is compared to Vasavadutta, the lovelorn courtesan heroine of Malayalam poet Kumaran (sic) Asan's well-known poem of the same name, who falls in love with the client/hero (Trivedi 14).

Further, through this recalling of the popular image of Kumaran Asan's Vasavadatta, Sambasivan is tapping into the psyche of his Malayalam audience, actively reinterpreting and adapting the Western narrative to the local idiom and flavor of Kerala. Similarly, Sambasivan does not shirk away from addressing the issue of race. Othello's otherness is established at the very outset of the play as he sympathetically narrates Othello's former life as a slave and his struggles through his rise to power. Brabantio on finding Othello after Desdemona's elopement, addresses him as a 'karumban' (a black man), who ought to be hanged. Desdemona is praised as the epitome of virtue and of whose "radiance he marks sympathetically and poetically as "Amavasi" versus "Purnima", "moonless night" juxtaposed with the "full moon night" in comparison to Othello (Trivedi 14).

The text undergoes alteration at different levels—Shakespeare himself derived his stories from various sources—from English language to Malayalam, from verse to prose, from high culture (in a postcolonial sense) to popular art. Thus, this intersemiotic process[6] demonstrates that through specific configurations of selective suppression, a story set in a different time and distant place converses with the essential local milieu. These adaptations and appropriations range from the dance form of Kathakali to oral forms like the thullal and Kathaprasangams delineating the different modes of receptions in the postcolonial moment.

[6]The passage of the literary text from one sign system to another.

Such revisionings seem to be sceptical of the notion of ‘modernity’ which is as a Western import, and explores the question of what ‘modernity’ really means in the Indian context. To quote Ania Loomba:

> One of the paradoxes that most defines colonialist regimes is the fact that despite the colonizers efforts to ‘civilize’ their ‘others’, and to fix them into perpetual ‘otherness’, the works of foreign art thrust into the consciousness of the colonized themselves catalyse and generate crossovers (Loomba 144).

They delineate the complexities of the revisionings in terms of borrowings with differences, and not merely a dislocation of texts resonating Partha Chatterjee’s argument of the complicated nature of our nationalisms. They are negotiations with the different notions of modernity that have seeped unevenly into the fabric of the modern nation-state. They are responses to the very specific demands of the locale.

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