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REDEFINING OTHELLO: A STUDY OF CHARLES MAROWITZ AN OTHELLO

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ABSTRACT

The writings of Shakespeare occupy a position of great importance. If Shakespeare is the most quoted of writers it is because he has seen, experienced and portrayed life in its entirety. There is no aspect of man that his dramatic genius has not captured for posterity. The great classics have all undergone intertextual paradigm shift. But Shakespearean appropriations have become more popular than most others, significantly, because of the element of universality which is embedded in his works.

Contemporary drama is concerned with the plight of man living in an age of technology and industrialisation. The modern sensibility is far removed from Shakespeare's as Shakespeare's was from the ancients. Though Shakespeare's views cannot be challenged, contemporary writers like Bond, Stoppard, Marowitz etc felt the need to alter them to suit the changing times. By doing so they ended up by helping to re-establish his cultural supremacy.

An inescapable strand of racism runs throughout *Othello*. But though contemporary knowledge of racial conflict is not directly reflected in the play, one doubts whether the play does speak to racial issues today. Marowitz was only too aware of the contemporary relevance of the play. In *An Othello* he explores the problem concerned with the black man in a white society.

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Shakespeare's significance can hardly be over emphasized as a repository of a great culture. But more important is the fact that on account of the wisdom born out of rich humanity and his universal humanism, he has carved a permanent niche for himself in all great literary traditions. The permanent contemporaneity of Shakespeare's work has been hinted at more than once by Shakespeare himself. In *Julius Caesar* he writes:

How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over

In states unborn and accents unknown. (III.i.128-30)

Shakespeare's works are not limited to expressing the concerns and interests of a narrowly confined historical period. They have in them the potential for generating new meanings in successive epochs. Michael Bakhtin argues that there is something contradictory in the way certain works exist in ages far removed from the time of their composition. In effect, the works outgrow the meanings and functions for which they were intended and achieve new significance.

We may say that neither Shakespeare himself nor his contemporaries knew the 'great Shakespeare' that we know today...The treasures of meaning invested by Shakespeare in his works arose and accumulated over centuries and millennia - they were lurking within language, and not just literary language, but also in those strata of the popular language, which prior to Shakespeare, had not penetrated into literature...Shakespeare, like every artist, constructed his works not out of dead elements, not out of bricks, but out of forms already heavy with meanings, filled with them. (Bakhtin 4)

Shakespeare is a possession we share with the world. His authority is connected to the ability of his works to symbolize the intricacy of social time and value in the successor cultures of early modern England. One of the significant aspects common to these successor cultures is the way individuals and institutions must continuously comply with the exigencies of a market economy. For there is no doubt that Shakespeare is one of the great show business success stories.

A comprehensive study of the complete works of Shakespeare might, however, prove that what lie at the heart of Shakespeare's plays are universal human experiences. The depth and mystery of consciousness that he has spontaneously unfolded in the varied and captivating nuances of his plays have enthralled audiences round the globe for more than four centuries. In fact, each play presents a treasure of endless, unparalleled aesthetic experience.

Yet, as a dramatist his universality is strange as his artifacts are not fixed. Stanley Wells writes:

If Shakespeare is, in Ben Jonson's phrase, 'for all time' this is partly because he demands the collaboration of those who submit themselves to him....this is to some extent a feature of the medium in which he was working....A film, like a naturalistic painting, is closed, final of its age, a period piece. But plays go on growing and developing. They are capable of having a life of their own. (108-9)

Though the text of a play must be placed within the particular historical period in which it was first written, it is not bound to that period in terms of its life in performance. The dramatists do not have a complete authority over what is performed. Hence, dramatic texts are imperfect artifacts as the dramatist has no control over the final product of their drama. Therefore, the textual history of the plays may be different from the performance history.

Works of Shakespeare have been an eternal source of inspiration not only to his contemporaries, the Elizabethans, and immediate successors, but also to post-modern writers. Several adaptations of Shakespeare's plays have made critics try modern, theoretical approaches like post-structural, deconstructionist, psychoanalytical, semiotic, structuralist, Marxist, feminist and cultural materialist criticism. Critics like John Drakakis (*Alternative Shakespeares*, 1985) and Michael Scott (*Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist*, 1988) have tried to trace the influence or rather resistance of these modern writers to Shakespeare.

One of the significant trends of the twentieth century has been a re-use of classical literature. The distinctions between the original source and the adaptations indicate revision of earlier literature and cultural texts in order to relate to the contemporary sensibility.

Among the writers who turned to Shakespeare for inspiration, Marowitz stands apart in his treatment of Shakespeare. He believed "that Shakespeare is matter and matter can be reduced, expanded, transformed or reconstituted" (Marowitz, *Recycling ix*). He adds in his Preface to *Recycling Shakespeare* that "to those who believe that a classic is an entity fixed in time and bounded by text," his book "may be a rough ride"(ix). His views about Shakespeare have evolved from personal experiences with several of Shakespeare's plays and his reflections on these experiences brought him to his present opinions:

One's view of Shakespeare is analagous to one's view of art in general. The way in which one experiences a Shakespearean play is related to the way in which one comprehends life. Some people contend that Shakespearean truth is there to be discovered using the tools of the scholar, the critic and the historian. I would contend that Shakespeare is like a prism in which I discern innumerable reflections of myself and my society and, like a prism, it refracts many pinpoints of colour, rather than transmitting one unbroken light.(ix)

“What I love best in Shakespeare,” Marowitz continues “are the facets of myself and my world that I find there”(ix). He admits to hating the friends Shakespeare has made over the past one hundred years. Marowitz is yet to reconcile himself to the paradox that he can love the work of a writer whose champions are abominable.

Charles Marowitz is one of the few theatre critics who have successfully managed to combine careers both as a stage- director and playwright. He does not claim to be a dramatist, instead, he admits to being first and foremost a director, and secondly, a dramatic critic. He is the author of over two dozen books, mostly works of criticism and instruction. He also has several plays to his credit. His free styled adaptations of Shakespeare, anthologized in *The Marowitz Shakespeare*, are by far, the best of the lot and performed worldwide. Founder of The Open Space Theatre in the UK and one-time co-director with Peter Brook of the Royal Shakespeare Company Experimental Group, he is currently a member of the Artistic Directorate of the Shakespeare Globe Theatre in London, and Artistic Director of the Malibu Stage Company.

Charles Marowitz has been shocking the British theatre audiences with his radical adaptations of Shakespeare for the past two decades. What promoted Marowitz to the forefront of the English experimental theatre scene was his 80-minute collage of *Hamlet*, rearrangement and addition of contemporary scenes to *The Taming of the Shrew* and renditions of *Measure for Measure* and *The Merchant of Venice*. These plays also provoked outraged delight. Kathleen Dacre avers in her review of Marowitz about the philosophy behind his collage versions of plays:

I would say that the restructuring of a work, the characters and situations of which are widely known is an indirect way of making contact with that work’s essence. We get what we expect, and we expect what we have been led to expect, and it is only when we don’t get what we have been led to expect that we are on the threshold of having an experience. (3)

Michael Scott in *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist* asserts that Marowitz was mainly concerned with freeing Shakespeare from the fetters of narrative. But his versions prove that he actually derived his interpretation from his own narrative reading of the plays. The thrust of his attack was not on Shakespeare, but on the straitjackets that envelope his work. Probably, that is why when Marowitz began his adaptations, he felt the tragedies to be more suited to his methodology. However, with Shakespearean tragedies he wins over the tragic genre through satire.

Lionel and Virginia Tiger state in their introduction to the play:

An Othello is really about how Sammy Davis Jr got to hug Richard Nixon centre stage before the 1972 election in their country, and it also demonstrates how sensible William Shakespeare was to take old stories and bring them up to date. Charles Marowitz’s point is that Othello the Moor has become more and more vulnerable these hundreds of years and so Iago becomes a Black Power Agent –more the enemy because he’s like the Moor. Furthermore, Marowitz brings Desdemona back to life, and for the finale we leave her about to party it up with the honky officers who’ve protected the public’s peace... Othello’s corpse is dragged off-stage left, never to rise again...Othello’s jealousy is more than male, more than vain, it is institutional. Marowitz has heated up the ingredients of the play so much a new alloy comes out of it.(*An Oth.*255)

Marowitz in *An Othello* explores the problem concerned with the black man in a white society. A reading of Shakespeare’s *Othello* makes him ask himself questions that seem to logically flow from the narrative.

What is this black general doing at the head of a white army fighting Turks who, if not actually black, are certainly closer to his own race than his Venetian masters? Why is he the only black in the play? Are we to assume he is some kind of splendid oddity in an otherwise white society? That no racial tension exists in the state inspite of miscegenation, senatorial bigotry and wars waged against nonwhites? These are not historically based speculations but a series of false hypotheses created by the desire to stretch old material into new shapes for no other reason than to see them hang differently. Pure perversion. (Marowitz, *Being*173)

These questions are given fictitious answers by Marowitz himself. He supposes that Othello is an awe-inspiring Uncle Tom who must have worked his way up to the position of General. A racial traitor alone could

have accepted the ideals that Othello has had to reach his lofty position. He believes that a black celebrity is a tool of white society to pacify the antagonism of the black masses. His success is like a clear white light in a bleak, black world. The assignment of one black man into the elite area of white society dismantles the revolutionary momentum of a thousand black traitors(173).

Marowitz in *The Act of Being* gives us his reasons for writing the play:

I felt a great frustration always seeing *Othello* from a contemporary standpoint—that is to say, bringing to it contemporary anticipations—and never having those anticipations satisfied. The nature of the experiment was to see whether it was possible to take the anticipations that are engendered by Shakespeare’s play and work them out in another fashion. (164)

An Othello is certainly crude when compared with *Othello*. And in Lionel’s and Virginia Tiger’s words, “So are the times the respective plays are about, and so are the issues these times generate.” In *An Othello* the artfulness of Othello’s supporting characters is lost - “all the various psychologically elegant gestures of the Cassios, Iagos, Roderigos” These subtleties are burned away by the heat and their absence taunts us. “What remains striking is the muscular contemporaneity of Shakespeare’s ideas about Moors, about fathers of white girls, about rich fathers, about the feckless passions of the socially deprived...”(255).

The play is set in an American world, so are many disasters these days. Probably, that is why Marowitz lives in England despite being an American. The problem that keeps reiterating historically is one that shakes the areas around the ghettos and another that makes a “ghastly community of humans so immune to subtlety as to be blinded by skin colour, even at night”(256). What drives Marowitz’s *An Othello* is this unsubtlety of racism.

When Marowitz began writing *An Othello*, he was very particular about working out a contrast between the Shakespearean play and his play. He wanted to incorporate as much hip contemporary language as he could, to distance it from the traditional Shakespearean verse. He agreed that there should not be any one set style, nor a simple combination of modern situations and classical situations. In his own words:

One was trying to say something about the black political conflict in America, one was trying to say something about conception that people have of Shakespeare’s character Othello, and how that related to contemporary political concerns. And one was also trying to say that the characters themselves from Shakespeare’s play, as a result of being around for almost four hundred years, have now detached themselves from their original context, so they’re in a sense roaming free in a kind of cultural terrain, and therefore they can be appropriated and put into a new context, although all the resonances from the original play will still be part of those characters. (Marowitz, *Being*186)

Even Laurence Olivier shrewdly reconstructed the behaviour of a black and implanted it on to the Moor. It did not matter that the Moor was not the same as a contemporary Negro. Marowitz believed that there was no great relevance in reviving *Othello* today without incorporating the black revolutionary spirit unreasonably lodged in an audience’s expectations that made him want to handle it. By handling it he meant by-passing Shakespeare’s original designs and taking in only what he needed to achieve his own purposes.

A much-debated question is why Shakespeare chose a black man, Othello, as the hero of one of his greatest tragedies. Whether Shakespeare and his contemporaries had any direct contact with black people, nobody knows. There is no way to know his response to the prevailing stereotypes of race and religion. These are issues that have become more important since the 1980s because our society is more sensitive to issues of racial identity and equality as also of gender equity.

Post-colonial criticism addresses these questions in two ways. The first surveys how Shakespeare’s plays can be linked to the social codes and conventions by which early modern Europeans defined non-European and non-Christian people and races they confronted. The second examines the more recent history of the reception of Shakespearean drama within non-Western societies and settings such as in Africa, India, the Caribbean and Latin America. Therefore, post-colonial criticism of a play like *Othello* lures our attention to Renaissance attitudes towards Moors, Africans and Turks among others. It also investigates how the play may have been interpreted and performed in countries engaged in recent colonial and post-colonial struggles like in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. This was, rather, a very complex process. Shakespeare was on

the one hand, an export to the colonies of European Literature and language as a part of their policy of cultural domination. But on the other it also enabled the colonized groups to revise and remake Shakespeare's plays in ways which linked them to their own social conditions.

The primary groundwork for post-colonial criticism was laid in the 1960s and the 1970s by the de-colonisation movements in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America. It was during this period that Europe's former subject began to free themselves from political rule as well as from the cultural colonisation that they had experienced. Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, the African novelist, essayist and activist has written voluminously about how English literature served as a mode of domination during British Colonial rule in his country, Kenya. Hence, when Africans like him questioned the cultural domination after de-colonisation, they referred to Shakespeare's role as a paradigm of English education for Africans under British rule. Jyotsna Singh quotes in her essay on "Post-colonial criticism": "...as Ngugi recalls: 'According to the English teachers in Kenya,' he writes, 'William Shakespeare and Jesus Christ had brought light to darkest Africa'. Ngugi's humorous look at the colonial definition of Shakespeare as 'one more English gift to the world alongside the Bible'" (493) characterises the way in which non-Europeans from the former colonies began to have second thoughts about their relationship to the works of Shakespeare.

The critical reviews of *An Othello* have varied. Some think it to be a terrible and powerful play, while others feel that black power and jealousy do not go together. However, the Duke sums up the theme of the play in these words:

"Do you reckon a black man is the equal to a white man in all things?Can a black man be as tall as a white man? ...Can a black man be as strong as a white man? And can he be as proud, as fierce, as cunning', as happy as a white man can be?...can a black man be as white as a white man is?" (283-4).

Marowitz successfully alienates Othello from audience's empathy. Hence Othello no longer deserves our sympathy because he is no longer tragic.

A question worth asking is what Shakespeare would have chosen as themes for his plays had he been alive today. Would he have chosen race? Probably not. But Lionel and Virginia Tiger conclude their introduction by stating:

The moral issues surrounding it are so plain and the wretchedness so indiscriminate that the race question is not really a question, not really a problem but almost a phenomenon like cancer, the common cold, dirt under fingernails, fatigue, traffic accidents. So much is it a condition of life now that more or less only blacks or reds or yellows write about it, as they suffer, while the powerful whites get so tired listening they don't hear, except Sammy Davis on the stereo – in one ear, out the other. (257)

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